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Fragile Selves

edited by
Giulia Baquè and Rossella Roncati

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Forward to the Special Issue *Fragile Selves*

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Summary 1 The Fragile Self Among Circassian Forced Migrants (1850-2000). – 2 Contents of This Special Issue.

In March 2022, I gave a keynote address at the PhD Symposium on *Fragile Selves* at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The focus of my talk was to examine the extraordinary efforts of Circassian forced migrants to maintain their culture, their language, and their traditions, during their involuntary migration to new lands. Although I did not use the term 'fragile', what I was examining was indeed a delicate balancing act to identify and maintain what many regarded as special and evocative of their native land and culture. The act of trying to maintain the sense of self, the traditions and cultures rooted in a land that had to be given up was not only a measure of vulnerability, but also a stance of resistance (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016). Resisting the destruction of a culture and way of life was also an act of agency. Pushed too far and it could be destroyed. Always under threat and vulnerable, however, did not mean 'weak'. The process which held this delicate balance between remembering the past, resisting temptation which might damage collective cultural memory and moving forward to new places and spaces was the power and strength of the individual. Thus, the fragile self could also be seen as a source of strength, and resistance though easily broken or damaged. This process sometimes became brittle as vulnerable social groups hung on to traditions that, over time, were no longer practiced among the social

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group left behind. The vulnerable and fragile selves became more traditional than those remaining in the motherland. The Transcaucasian fragility, resilience, and brittleness are worth setting out briefly below before introducing the nine papers which make up this special issue.

1 The Fragile Self Among Circassian Forced Migrants (1850-2000)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, borders and frontiers were fuzzy and movement was rarely restricted in what I shall label 'the Ottoman encounter with ethnic diversity and multiculturalism'. However, a counter movement of nation-state creation gained significant backing during this same period, undermining the political structure of the empire and resulting in significant conflict and mass forced migration, ethnic cleansing, ethnic genocide, and the homogenising of the subjects, the imagined community of new nation-states (Anderson 1983).

The nineteenth century political project to create homogenous nation-states resulted in the dramatic upheaval and forced migrations of over 4 million people from Central Europe, Crimea, and Transcaucasia. Over a period of 100 years, Imperial Russia and the Ottoman Empire fought six wars. Each war resulted in the redefinition of borders or the carving out of 'homogenous' new modern nation-states. First, Greece was carved out of the Ottoman Empire in 1832. After the Ottoman Empire lost its effort to protect its northern European lands, some of the people living there were forced to leave creating fragile and vulnerable selves in these new political contexts. Following on from another lost war, Thessaly (1881), Crete (1908) and Macedonia (1913) were added to the Greek Kingdom. New selves were being shaped, some identities were destroyed and new, vulnerable ones, created.

With the creation of each new nation-state in this part of Ottoman Europe – the Balkans – there was massive flight of Ottoman Muslims and Jews into the remaining southern Ottoman territories.

Despite the dangers to their identities, their cultures, and traditions, what acted to reinforce their resilience was the very nature of belonging in the Ottoman Empire. These forced migrants were all members of the Ottoman *millets*. Belonging in the Ottoman Empire was based not on physical birthplace alone, but specifically included the social community, the ethno-religious community of the *millet*. There were three *millets* in the Ottoman Empire: the Muslim *millet* which included Arabs, Kurds, Albanians, Turks, and Kosovars; the Christian *millet* which included Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Serbians, and Bulgarians; and the Jewish *millet* which included Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Bukhari, and Arab (Mizrahi) Jews. These *millets* were social

communities with religious hierarchies dispersed throughout the Empire and not in one particular physical space. Thus, social groups expelled from the only homes they had ever known and forced migration into the unknown indeed rendered them vulnerable, and fragile, but their belonging to a *millet*, provided 'inner' strength from which resilience could grow and resist the powers working to destroy their cultural and socially constructed sense of selves. Creating social places of belonging in new physical spaces then became less threatening.

Of the six wars that the Ottoman Empire fought with Imperial Russia, which was trying to push its frontiers west into Central Europe and south into Eurasia, the Ottomans won one. This was the Crimean War of 1853-56.[1] Although the Ottomans won and were able to see Russia pushed back to its pre-war borders, Russia was still able to insist on Crimea coming under their orbit. 500,000 Muslim Tatars from Crimea left their homeland and moved south into what remained of the European Ottoman Empire. They were followed by another 500,000 Cossacks (Georgians, and Ukrainians). These million or so Tatars and Cossacks faced particular difficulties in maintaining their culture, their language, and their traditions. The fragility of their distinctiveness was easily broken and damaged and within a short period of time, they were assimilated into the local populations where they sought refuge. Very little is known today of these social groups post their arrival in new physical spaces. Perhaps the proximity of their languages, as well as the lack of any government effort to assist in the re-homing of these groups contributed to their vulnerable, fragile cultural and linguistic differences being unable to resist, being absorbed and forgotten in their newly created homelands.

This was not the case for the Transcaucasians who were largely forced to migrate starting in the early 1860s. These groups became the concerns of the Sublime Porte of Constantinople (a metonym for the central government). The question was not how do we stop these numbers from arriving, but how do we integrate and resettle them? In other words, how do we make best use of them for the benefit of the empire? Although these words were not used, the Sublime Porte looked to turn these fragile and vulnerable peoples with a heritage of military prowess into strong and capable subjects of the empire. Instrumentally used by the Ottoman Empire to meet the needs of the

1 It was a war fought over the right to the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Ottoman sultan offered the keys back to France, which had been granted the capitulation over all things Catholic as early as the reign of Francis I and Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century. Nicholas I of Russia was outraged because he felt he should have the keys to protect the Orthodox Catholics. He then invaded the Danubian provinces of the Ottoman Empire and sank much of the Ottoman naval fleet in the Black Sea. Britain, France and Sardinia rushed to the Ottomans' aid, fearing its possible collapse in the face of a much stronger Russia.

state, the Sublime Porte also protected their fragility and promoted their resilience and resistance to cultural destruction.

The state took a decentralised approach to dealing with these huge number of dispossessed, vulnerable, and fragile peoples. First and foremost, they set about dispersing them as quickly as possible to underpopulated parts of the empire (the southern Arab provinces). Most belonged to the Muslim *millet* and so there was little conflict in terms of religious identity. This policy of integrating and permitting groups to maintain their languages, their cultures, their traditions, and their religion appealed to the Transcaucasian forced migrants.[2]

In 1857, the Ottoman government instituted the Refugee Code (also referred to as the 'Immigration Law'), whereby 'immigrant' families and groups were given plots of state land with:

a. exemption from taxes;
b. exemption from conscription obligations for six years if they settled in Rumelia, the European part of the Ottoman Empire, or for twelve years if they continued to Anatolia and Greater Syria.

This Ottoman resettlement policy towards the Transcaucasians forced from their homeland in Transcaucasia spoke particularly to their vulnerable sense of self, and fragile identities. The Ottomans set out to use the militarily strong reputations of these Transcaucasians to pacify areas where local groups were in constant conflict. Such roles gave many of the deeply traumatised and fragile Transcaucasian tribal groups an opportunity to re-establish their self-worth, and strengthen their resilience and resistance to powers undermining their differentness. The Ottomans sent many of these groups to create frontiers between warring indigenous settlements, especially in Greater Syria, along the *Ma'moura*, between the desert and the sown.[3] In the area around Damascus, Transcaucasians were given land in Marj – where the sultan pastured his household horses – and in the surrounding orchards, to build villages and to protect Damascus from attacks by Bedouins. Further south in the Jaulan, the sultan encouraged Circassians to farm and to build villages so that they might separate warring Kurds and Bedouins as well as Druze and Bedouins. These roles, which emphasised the military prowess of the Transcaucasian tribes, were significant in increasing the resilience of a people who had been shattered by the loss of their homelands.

2 The 50,000 Jewish forced migrants from Bulgaria and Serbia arrived only in the 1880s, when state support for the new refugees/immigrants was well established.

3 The *Ma'moura* is that strip of land running east from Aleppo south to Amman which can be both farmed or used for pasture running.

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They were able to resist the pull to assimilate, by maintaining their languages, and customs. But they remained fragile and in the effort to maintain their traditions, they became brittle and unchanging. Over time they became more Transcaucasian in their adherence to custom than those back in the homeland, who adapted their culture to changing circumstances and times.

These Transcaucasian social groups were an ideal community for the Ottoman state. They created a barrier between local enemy groups and eventually won the respect of the local population. Initially viewed as brigands and fierce warriors by the hosting communities, they came to be not only tolerated but also admired for their industriousness, and mastery over agricultural works often introducing new machinery and innovative practices that were then adopted by the general rural population.

The Ottoman Empire's immigration and refugee policy, initially set up to assist Transcaucasians, evolved during the nineteenth century, but remained fairly liberal, generous and open. Economically, it was used to populate underpopulated agricultural areas and to create agricultural tax surpluses. Politically, it was used to defend frontiers, to revive the military with new officer classes of Circassians, Chechnyans, Poles, and Hungarians. Environmentally, it used these new immigrant refugees to drain swamps. As a result of this policy, these migrant groups resettled and transformed their new territories; they turned previous swamp areas plagued by malaria into zones of production for farming and therefore taxes. This was probably the first instance of direct, prolonged, and rational state social planning in the Muslim world, probably the first of its kind in the world to regulate immigration and devise a settlement policy that understood the vulnerability and fragility of the incoming social groups (Karpat 1985).

First, there was a flow, then a flood of Muslim Transcaucasians (Adyghe) unwilling to live under Russian Orthodoxy or fearing forced conversion. Abaza, Abkhaz, Chechnyans, Kabarday, Shapsugh, and many other Transcaucasian arrived. By the 1880s more than 3 million fled and entered the Balkans and the southern Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The first wave of Circassians to move south, beyond the *Ma'moura* of Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, sought land to settle in that resembled their own in Circassia. This was the Jaulan.[4] With the encouragement of the Sublime Porte, they built their villages in the same red tile style as they were back in their homeland. They were also encouraged to express their faith and build their places of worship as they wished. Here, the Circassians were faced with

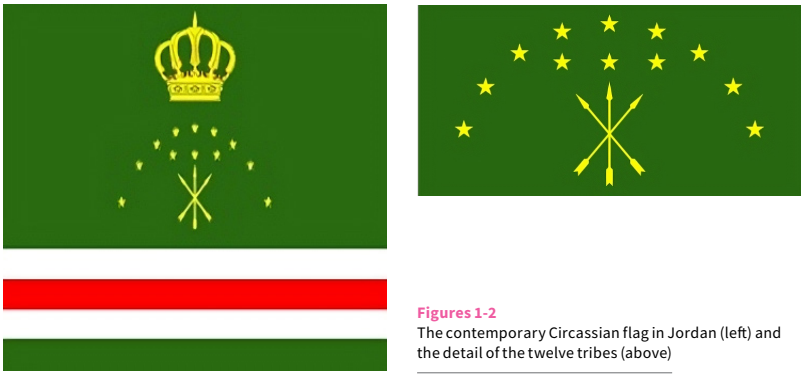
4 The Jaulan (sometimes transliterated in English as 'Golan') is that upland range of hills in southwest Syria which most resembled the mountainous Transcaucasia. It was conquered by Israel in the 1967 Arab–Israeli War.

a dilemma. Being all Muslims, they were expected to build mosques in the local architectural style to worship in. But in their fragile and vulnerable state, they needed to also express their differences from the surrounding hosting community. Thus they built their mosques in the 'Byzantine' tradition of their homeland, where historically many Byzantine churches had been turned into mosques and then reconsecrated as churches depending on the changes in eras and faith.

These Transcaucasian communities, renowned as fighters, formed important *mulitas*, military units, and gave many members to the gendarmerie. They had succeeded in preserving their fragile culture and traditions, in new physical spaces within the Ottoman Empire, by adopting a brittle approach to change. After the end of World War I, with the defeat of the Ottoman army in the Levant, most Transcaucasians decided to take off their Ottoman uniforms and stay put. Two forced migrations in less than fifty years were too much for a social group that had faced cultural destruction several decades earlier. As a group, instead, they offered their services to the new emir of Transjordan, Abdullah I.

These vulnerable groups had protected their fragile culture and traditions by integrating but not assimilating. These were acts of agency and mastery. This was clearly articulated in the creation of a flag in the modern state of Jordan representing the twelve Circassian tribes. The flag was adapted from the Adygea flag of the Circassian Imamate of 1834. The twelve stars on the Circassian flag symbolise the individual tribes of Transcaucasia; the nine stars within the arc symbolise the nine aristocratic tribes of Adygea, and the three horizontal stars symbolise the three democratic tribes. The twelve tribes are: Abzakh, Besleney, Bzhedug, Hatuqwai, Kabardian, Mamkhegh, Natukhai, Shapsug, Temirgoy, Ubykh, Yegeruqwai, and Zhaney **[figs 1-2]**.

Today we see a small, still vulnerable non-Arab Muslim tribal group with representation in Parliament in Jordan. Originating from the Caucasian region of West Asia, they were pushed out of Russia's southwestern border into Anatolia and the Arab provinces during the nineteenth century. They carried their fragile culture, languages, and traditions with them as they sought safety. Both resistant to assimilation and resilient in the face of many adversaries, they managed to unite with the majority (Muslim) religious social groups in the Levant, while maintaining their differences. Unlike many other social groups forced from their homeland, the Trans-Circassians managed to situate their vulnerable and socially constructed places in new physical locations. Yet their fragility remained, and continuous effort was required to maintain their social identity over the 150 years since their expulsion into the fourth and fifth generation in exile. They created new social places, so as not to be assimilated into the larger mainstream culture of their hosts. Vulnerability and fragility are here clearly relational and social, rather than ontological.



Figures 1-2
The contemporary Circassian flag in Jordan (left) and the detail of the twelve tribes (above)

2 Contents of This Special Issue

I have briefly summarised the Transcaucasian forced migrations and fragility of their socially constructed culture and traditions to emphasise the various ways in which such vulnerable constructions are closely associated with resistance. As Butler maintains, vulnerability may be viewed as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016). Resilience is the partner to resistance. In the face of extreme stress, resilience is often expressed via agency, mastery, and solidarity. Resistance to being changed or transformed by greater powers, the significance of resistance to transformations of language, ethnic identity, sexuality and gender identity, of materiality, and architectural expression are all elements that we will meet in the chapters which follow. The fragile self is always in danger of being destroyed, or damaged. Yet that fragility, that vulnerability, is often one of the conditions of resistance. It often masks an underlying strength, which expresses itself in resilience to carry on as well as resistance to efforts to force change. The fragile self may be vulnerable, may be delicate, but often has an inner core of agency, mastery, and strength. That is what the chapters in this special issue show us.

The special issue opens with an article by Phillips, which addresses the power of fragility through an examination of Martha Graham's modern dance interpretation of *Clytemnestra* on Broadway in 1958, at the height of the Cold War. Her interpretation of this role was seen as fragility in strength and masterful simplicity in overcoming the Russian enemy. Clearly, any performance is vulnerable to attack. But here Martha Graham's fragility is transformed in its simplicity as a powerful non-verbal dramatisation of the American strength in its fight against communism.

This is followed by two articles, which examine other forms of fragility and resistance in contemporary China through the lens of cinematic production. Reynaud's article examines Vivian Qu's articulation

of female vulnerability and resistance in her film *Angels Wear White*. Framing this work in Butler's ontological discussions of the concept of vulnerability in resistance, Reynaud elaborates on the way in which Qu puts forward a special treatment of violence and the subversion of the state's authority and legitimacy. The film director also addresses social inequalities, economic precariousness, corruption, and the construction and performance of femininity through the optics of vulnerability, fragility, and resistance to state power. In another article, Ceccarelli examines film and film-making in contemporary China by addressing the fragility of film directors' authorship. Given the current wave of main melody films largely imposed on the market by the power of the state, art house directors' authorship is extremely fragile and vulnerable. Art house cinema and its directors have been able to show some agency by adapting some mechanisms of resistance to preserve their space from the hammer of state policies, and the strength of the commercial market which advertises and promotes main melody films, cultural products approved by the state, and state film regulators. Ceccarelli looks closely at three art house film directors and examines their vulnerable position with film censors and distributors, and finally their last resort of resistance, exile abroad.

Focusing on Taiwan, Pan examines the Taiwanese Historical Films of the 2010s as an expression of post-colonial identity politics. Nationality in Taiwan has always been fragile and contradictory, as expressed vividly in its cinema. The 1980s was a period when the 'new cinema' with a particularly narrative style emerged. This was followed by several decades of film-making which could be described as post-colonial and post-modern. But not until the 2010s did Taiwanese cinema adopted alternative narratives of 'nationality' (non-community), mirroring the plurality and evolution of identity which remained often fragile and inconsistent. Through an analysis of films of the 2010s, Pan reveals how these new historical films produce a text which is part cultural production, part history, and part political society.

Vulnerability and fragility are addressed through the lens of sonic production in Lovell's article. Loudness, loss of self, and sonic social control in Mao's China are analysed. Lovell describes Mao's China as a panaural state in which the Maoist soundscape – represented by loudspeakers, bells, and constant announcements and speeches on the radio – caused individuals to feel vulnerable and in danger. Using Foucault's concept of the Panopticon (1979) as a starting point for analysis, Lovell argues that individuals were conditioned by Maoist soundscape and exhibited great fear from loudspeaker announcements, public trials of spies and counter-revolutionaries, as well as the danger of eavesdropping. He also highlights how such danger and fragility could at times also be accompanied by individual resistance.

Fragility at the level of the state is addressed in Cărbune's article, which looks at Japan during the Meiji Era (1868-1912). The late nine-

teenth century was a period of immense social, political, and cultural unrest felt throughout Japanese society. The shogunate government, which lasted more than 250 years, was overthrown. The new emperor, Meiji, was in a truly vulnerable and fragile position. Meiji oligarchs needed to legitimate the new government. Cărbune examines how the new government disseminated political myths surrounding the imperial family, and invented political rituals promoting the sacredness of the emperor and the inviolability of his person.[5] But in the poems and editorials approved by the government, the Japanese people were asked to worry about his health, eliciting sympathy and cooperation. The Meiji oligarchs, as custodians of the imperial image, manipulated the public persona of the emperor between two poles: sacrality and strength on one side, and fragility and vulnerability on the other. The close relationship of fragility with strength and resilience with solidarity were then used to unite the Japanese people into one nation.

The final three articles of this special issue focus on a diverse set of concerns that engage with issues of subalternity, fragility, and vulnerability: activism around material representations of cultural history in public statues; the particular vulnerability of transgender people in times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and the extreme fragility and vulnerability of the self under neoliberal capitalism. D'Angelo presents a post-colonial reading of the subaltern and space-making as subjective. Drawing on Mbembe (2021), D'Angelo examines the theme of political space and resistance as illustrated in the subaltern activism and decolonial interventions which resulted in the removal or toppling of public statues. For some, the statues can be read as vulnerable and fragile objects at the mercy of unstable memory. In the main interpretation, however, it is the subaltern activism on statues which is viewed as a series of decolonial interventions that address questions of representation and democracy. Gamberton addresses another subaltern community, the transgender social groups that have been most deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Gamberton notes increasing attacks on transgender people through social media and through some legislations in the United States, Hungary, and Japan over a two year period between 2020 and 2022, and elaborates on the rapid growth of hostility against these communities during this time frame. Gamberton puts forward several new concepts of, first, trans precarity as a vulnerability not experienced by cis (non-trans) persons, and cis person fragility, which is the defensive reaction to trans precarity. The argument put forward in this article is that transphobia and the championing of 'traditional gender roles' are intended to function as a distraction to the mis-

5 These are the "invented traditions" which Hobsbawm defined so clearly for other imperial courts (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983).

management of pandemic responses, as well as an attempt to create national cohesion by casting the transgender peoples as subverters of the natural health and order of the body. And finally, Batalla examines the fragility of the individual under late neoliberal capitalism. Building on Mbembe (2001; 2003), Batalla looks at the 'invisible' extinctions that define late neoliberalism. Here neoliberalism is seen as a force able to modify the individual to the point of losing subjectivity and becoming bound to the laws and logic of capitalism. The individual, as a vulnerable victim and fragile vessel of the extensive ideology and control of neoliberal capitalism, is extinguished as a subject. The age of extinction due to capitalist logic then becomes the 'Necrocene'.

Fragility and vulnerability, resilience to rapid transformations in space and place, resistance to oppression, subalternity, and political systems are all themes that emerge from this special issue. The power of fragility, the vulnerability in strength, and negotiations with threats of extinction, are all addressed with sophistication, and rich ethnographic illustration. Spanning Western and Eastern continents, and focusing on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of society, the articles in this special issue are thought-provoking, frequently reversing the subaltern gaze. It is a rich collection of articles on the diversity of fragility and its interpretations.

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The Power of Fragility
Martha Graham, *Clytemnestra*, and United States Cold War Propaganda

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Abstract Martha Graham's modernist dance work, *Clytemnestra*, opened on Broadway in 1958. Celebrated as "a blazing swatch of emotional colours", its Cold War political import became immediately apparent as it toured for the US government. *Clytemnestra* demonstrated not only the cultural sophistication of the US; the dramatisation of emotions in an American modern non-verbal language engaged international audience and diplomatic "hearts" in the US bid for "hearts and minds" in its fight against communism. As a powerful artist, Graham brought her fragility to the stage, which represented the nation in what the government called "the translation effect".

Keywords Cold War cultural diplomacy. Modern dance. United States. Emotions. Power. Fragility.

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In order to work, you have to permit yourself to feel, you have to permit yourself to be vulnerable. When a dancer is at the peak of his power he has two lovely, fragile, and perishable things. One is the spontaneity that is arrived at over years of training. The other is simplicity, but not the usual kind. It is the state of complete simplicity costing no less than absolutely everything, of which T.S. Eliot speaks.
(Martha Graham, *Blood Memory*, 1991)

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Quick now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.
(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

1 Introduction

When modernist Martha Graham's three-act ballet, *Clytemnestra*, opened on Broadway in 1958, it was celebrated as "a dramatic canvas with a blazing swatch of emotional colors" (Kisselgoff 1992). As the season continued, the import of Graham's work as an "epic" dance evening of "giant stature", "a masterful piece, poised, authoritative, communicative [...] overpowering" accelerated (Martin 1958a; 1958b). *New York Times* critic John Martin had been setting the modern dance canon with his reviews since 1927, yet by 1958 he had expressed reservations about Graham's choreography and her performing career: Graham's solo breakthrough work, *Lamentation*, was performed by Graham, born in 1894, and celebrated in 1930. The woman and the art followed the trajectory of artistic modernism from ground-breaking during the interwar to "classical" or even "old-fashioned" by the late 1950s. Yet with *Clytemnestra*, Graham broke with modern dance protocol, which presented evenings of episodic pieces or "ballets" presented in "acts" with intermissions, allowing the audience to experience several pieces in an evening from a biblical tale, an abstract piece, or a Greek myth, usually followed by a tale of the United States frontier. As Martin (1958c) wrote,

> With *Clytemnestra*, Graham has broken all the rules, left all the definitions limp, pursued her self-determined course with merciless integrity, and opened up not so much as a footpath that anyone else can follow.

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With rave reviews from critics at the *Herald Tribune*, *Newsweek*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Women's Wear Daily*, *Variety*, and continuing accolades from the *Times*, the Broadway run was extended to accommodate audience demand and sold-out houses.[1] The Cold War political import of *Clytemnestra* and the emotions it evoked became manifest when Graham and *Clytemnestra* left the United States.

1.1 The Dance of Cold War Diplomacy

Within weeks after the Broadway run, the Graham company left for Israel with *Clytemnestra* to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the new nation (Eshel 2021). In 1962, John F. Kennedy's State Department chose the work as the centrepiece of a goodwill tour to Cold War hot spots Turkey, Greece, and "behind the Iron Curtain" to Soviet bloc nations (Phillips 2020, ch. 4). As the personal became politicised during the Cold War, Graham's import cannot be overemphasized. She would become the only artist whose company represented every Cold War US president globally, from Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1955 through a planned tour under George H.W. Bush in 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the US Cold War quest to establish itself as a soft empire, its bid for 'hearts', imagined as containing fundamental and 'universal' human emotions, Graham was a preeminent cultural ambassador because she brought these timeless emotions to the stage with an innovative modern language derived from the body

While numerous historians, including myself, have argued that the US used "the modern dance" as a cultural export to fight the Soviet empire, promote the power of capitalistic modernisation, and assert the cultural sophistication of the United States, all in the context of class, gender, race, and soft empire, the power of emotions inherent in genre has remained understudied.[2]

During the twenty-first century, the history of emotions has become as fundamental to some historians as race, class, and gender, yet this study applied to the history of public diplomacy is a relatively new field.[3] In 2021, the *American Historical Review* published an extensive roundtable on the history of emotions (Eustace et al. 2012), and numerous international institutes have been established at re-

1 Terry 1958a; Lloyd 1958a; 1958b; *Newsweek* 1958; *The Christian Science Monitor* 1958a; 1958b; *The New York Times* 1958; *Women's Wear Daily* 1958.

2 Mills 2017; Croft 2015; Barnhisel 2015; Purkayastha 2014; Prickett 1999; 2010; Morris 2001; Prevots 1998; Caute 2003.

3 Diplomatic practitioners have primarily used the study of emotions to understand efficacy. See Hall 2019; Markwica 2018. Historians of emotions have explored the causal effect of emotions on diplomatic outcomes (Ghalehdar 2021).

nowned universities.[4] Joseph Nye's study of soft power places "attraction" at the centre of power relations (2008). The sub-field has been extended to the realm of diplomacy because they share the pillars of power, practice, society, culture, and morality (Gienow-Hecht 2009; Graham 2014). The study of emotions in public diplomacy has drawn from diverse fields, including International Relations, Communications, Diplomatic History, Political Theory, and Public Relations, all based in their own theoretical paradigms.[5]

In the case of Martha Graham and the export of *Clytemnestra* as the exertion of soft power, the category of gender in the history of emotions and public diplomacy becomes vital.[6] While women as diplomats have been explored as agents of imperialism, particularly as missionaries and wives, and studies of masculinity and sexuality have informed studies of the Cold War, this work demonstrates the way in which power becomes framed in the context of fragility when transmitted by a woman as a socially constructed human characteristic that can represent a new empire to promote friendship, compassion, empathy, and thus enable diplomacy. Graham's "indelible, un-ironic language of angst [that] plumbs psychological depths" in *Clytemnestra* demonstrated not only the power of the US; the dramatisation of emotions in an American modern language of non-verbal communication – from rage to guilt, power, and fragility – engaged international audiences and diplomatic "hearts" in the US bid for "hearts and minds" in its fight against communism. Vulnerability and fragility, expressed by a woman, engaged with power relations and enabled Nye's "attraction" through empathy and a bid to "universal" emotions in times of love and international conflict (Boddice 2018; Franco 2014).

4 E.g. The Cambridge History of Memory and Emotions Workshop (MEW), University of Cambridge, UK; The Queen Mary Centre for the History of Emotions, Kings College, London; Center for the History of Emotions, London; Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin (Germany).

5 Fisher 2010; Fisher, Bröckerhoff 2008; Hayden 2007; 2011; Cull 2008; Ross 2013; Fitzpatrick 2007; Habermas 1985.

6 Note that future studies must include the potent issue of race in the performance of *Clytemnestra*: Mary Hinkson, the first African American dancer to be taken into a mainstream modern company by Graham in 1951, Pearl Lang, a Jewish American dancer, and Yuriko, a Japanese dancer hired by Graham from an Internment Camp during World War II, all played the lead role. Graham's casting decisions brought her declaration that "Clytemnestra is every woman" into high relief, particularly in twentieth-century America.

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1.2 The Dance of Cold War Diplomacy: Graham as "The Master" Ambassadress

By 1958, Graham and her works had been defined in the short historiography of modern dance as a representative of the democratic West and its values. Noting the demise of the early, foundational 1920s and 1930s German expressive dance forms after World War II, the author of the first book to codify the modern dance and its leaders declared, in 1949,

> That the American modern dance has shot way past the Central European may be partly imputed to America's escape from war's effect. More is the modern dance ascribable to the bright land of its birth – a land where freedom and democracy are ideals [...] a land of mighty projects. (Lloyd 1949, 21)

Because modern dance was free and born of the individual, its foundation in a non-fascist environment seemed self-evident, despite the birth of the form in Germany, its development in Japan, and the lagging interwar American entry into the genre. However, with Graham's post-war status affirmed as a "ground-breaking" choreographer and performer, she became useful as a Cold War ambassador under the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration. By 1958, Graham had become a trusted global Cold War US messenger. In US-sponsored international press, she had been anointed "the Picasso", "the High Priestess", and "the First Lady" of modern dance on tours for the international public. And with *Clytemnestra*, she became reified as "The Modern Master" (Martin 1958b).

Despite her stance as an apolitical artist, which suited paradoxical US Cold War propaganda requirements that demanded a separation between the state and its artists, Graham knew her politics and used its horrific history of war to fuel her works. During the opening scene of *Clytemnestra*, "Rape of Troy", Graham had coached the women on how to move:

> She told a horror story of World War I that was the basis for the painful movement through the groin. She told us that during the war soldiers who were plundering and raping the women took cornstalks and soaked them in fuel – raped the women themselves and then raped them with the cornstalks which were set afire.[7]

Graham brought the experience of wartime female vulnerability and fragility to the stage, which represented the redemptive power of

7 Box 10, folder (14).

World War II Axis democracy, and the humanity of the US. When ideology was embedded in art for export, US government strategists called it "the translation effect". Graham could simultaneously portray power and fragility and cajole audiences to the side of the US, a soft empire, through empathy for those who suffered under the fascists and the power of redemption under the Western watch.

Although vulnerability was politicised in *Clytemnestra* when presented by the State Department as a representation of the US through its artistic empathy, the genius of Graham's artistry as a political message derived from her passionate drive to represent herself. She believed that by digging into herself, finding the raw essential emotions, the movement vocabulary and choreography that emanated from this quest would thus express a 'universal' human experience. Thus, as a masterwork, *Clytemnestra* contained elements of Graham's biography that she used for her art.

2 Location, Location, Location

For the US, the State of Israel had become an important hot spot. After having toured Asia and the Middle East for Eisenhower between 1955 and 1956 to rave reviews, the company concluded its run in Israel under private funding, but with the full assistance of the State Department, United States Information Agency, and the US embassy in Israel (Rottenberg 2018). Indeed, many dancers and critics did not know that the performances were not US-sponsored, because the support remained seamless when the company left Iran and entered Israel (Phillips 2020). The suspension of direct US funding for the diplomatic tour, combined with covert domestic funding support that was paradoxically visible internationally, speaks to the complex nature of US-Israeli relations in the early Cold War.

The production of *Clytemnestra* demonstrated how US cooperation with artists in the Middle East could lead to the expression of raw emotion and human "truths" through the deployment of the modernist lens. The commissioned score by an Egyptian composer demonstrated these cultural possibilities through cooperation. As the *New York Times* noted, that the gripping score by Halim El-Dabh was an "enormously effective [...] theatrical collaboration" (Martin 1958a). Martin continued, "the orchestra groans and shrieks and mutters and throbs, in timbres as odd as that of the movement on stage and in melodic snatches as inhibited" (Martin 1958a). The State Department representatives in the New York audience surely spotted the possibilities of a cultural-political "translation effect" echoes as diplomatic strategy.

The use of the Greek myths, and particularly Graham's use of Euripides in *Clytemnestra* after World War II, would have resonat-

ed in Israel. There was historical precedent. In 1940, Albert Camus had used the myth of Sisyphus to write an essay about France as it fell to the Germans, He underscored the "unreasonable silence" of "the universe in response to tragedy" (Zaretsky 2013). The work was translated into English the year before Graham started working on *Clytemnestra* (Camus 1955). In 1944, Jean Anouilh wrote about his adaptation of Antigone, performed in Nazi-occupied Paris. Anouilh asked: "Was not Antigone an incarnation of the spirit of resistance to tyranny, if not coded encouragement to the French resistance?". He explained that "under the influence of post-modern humanism" coded messages could be embedded in Greek drama (quoted in Krane 2012). In 1947, Primo Levi examined his experience in the Nazi concentration camp through the *pathemathos* in Greek drama (1947). These artists' modernist approach to Greek myths allowed them to proclaim social and political beliefs in timeless humanistic terms that used emotion to draw the audience to anti-Nazi sentiment in war-torn France, or elicit pro-Western sympathies during the Cold War. Graham followed these modernist writers and dramatists.

After touring in Israel, *Clytemnestra* remained in the company repertory. With critics having gushed that the artist-choreographer-dancer could speak of "unspeakable human truths", the John F. Kennedy administration sent Graham and her company on a tour of Eastern and Western Europe that featured Graham in *Clytemnestra* (Martin 1958a). Of particular import was the tour's emphasis on humanistic themes rather than on the propagandistic promotion of America through what the government called 'Americana' during the Eisenhower tour.

Numerous authors, including myself, have argued that Graham's work for the US government was a part of a larger demonstration of US power and empire through cultural exports and soft power, particularly with *Appalachian Spring*, the work set on the Western frontier that promoted freedom and democracy with a Pulitzer Prize winning score by Aaron Copland based on the folk refrain "'tis a gift to be simple; 'tis a gift to be free" (Croft 2015). Yet as demonstrated with the US propaganda strategy towards neutral and non-aligned nations, defined by seductive cultural offerings in place of explicitly pro-American or anti-Soviet products like *Appalachian Spring*, the government strategies became complex, even nuanced during Kennedy's propaganda Cold War, if not in his actions including the Bay of Pigs invasion. Particularly when arriving in nations that had been colonies of the British, European or Russian empire, the US paradoxically took a stance of "we are like you" as it promoted itself as a new, modern, and softer power embedded in "universal" human history and used its own former position as a British colony that had sought and found freedom through democracy. The State Department and United States Information Agency fought regionally based on analyt-

Maurizio Nardi and Katherine Crockett performing Martha Graham's. Photo by Paul B. Goode

ical research, polls, and used other strategies learned from Madison Avenue's advertising agencies that were then applied on a local level to promote US values as universal desires, seemingly untethered to politics.[8] Like all good advertisers, the officials looked to strategies that would tap emotions to bring "hearts" into the fold by tapping into emotions. Frailty has been an overlooked emotion in the history of diplomacy that has traditionally emphasized studies of dominance and assertive power when considering the US as a rising Cold War global player.

8 Advertising Council (1) [Project 101] 1947-1948 Part 1_NARA II RG 59 Entry P 226 Box 1 F 10 Part 1(Pages 2-4).

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Pei-Ju Chien-Pott as Clytemnestra. Photo by Brigid Pierce

3 "Universalism": Greek Mythology, *Clytemnestra*, the Modern Mind, and the Modern Dance

Graham's *Clytemnestra* is a non-linear evening-length three-act work with a prologue and epilogue based on the Greek myth as interpreted by Euripides. To follow the narrative, Graham's three-act structure demanded some audience familiarity with the classical story if they intended to follow the full story: the start of the Trojan War; the sacrificial murder of Clytemnestra's daughter Iphigenia to enable Agamemnon's army to sail to fight for Helen, her sister; Cassandra's foretelling of doom (and role as Agamemnon's lover); the subsequent murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus (Agamemnon's cousin); the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes and Electra. To complicate matters further, in Graham's original work one man played two leading roles.

In Graham's *Clytemnestra*, the woman becomes the central character, like almost all Graham's works that featured the woman as protagonist with "center stage" wherever Graham was. Graham typically used fractured narratives and in this work the chronology is reversed: it opens with the death of Clytemnestra. Justifying the mod-

ernist narrative move, Graham referenced poet T.S. Eliot in her own writing, asserting the power of the end as the beginning. Eliot wrote in his Four Quartets, "We shall not cease from exploration | And the end of all our exploring | Will be to arrive where we started" (Eliot [1943] 2001; cf. Jones 2009; Siegel 1975). The *Clytemnestra* programme notes informed the audience before the curtain rose that the heroine would experience forgiveness and a rebirth from the ashes of war and personal tragedy (Austin 1975, 398).

In Act I, the curtain opens and Clytemnestra is seated in the underworld; she asserts her case to King Hades by reliving the events through memory. As the non-linear, nightmarish drama unfolds, Clytemnestra calls up images of the Trojan War in the "Rape Scene"; she then recalls the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia by her husband Agamemnon. In the next episode, she foreshadows events and depicts Orestes and Electra plotting to murder her as they seek vengeance for her murder of their father, Agamemnon. This is followed by Agamemnon's return from war with Cassandra, his lover and the prophetess. The Furies anticipate the horrors to come, as yet another memory loop-back encircles the audience. Then Aegisthus plants the seed of Agamemnon's murder in Clytemnestra's mind. Electra welcomes her father home, and watches as Clytemnestra seduces Agamemnon into stepping on to a red cloth, reserved for the Gods. As Cassandra foretells of the murders, they take place, again making memory from the present. Helen of Troy laments. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have their drunken celebration.

In the next act, Clytemnestra is haunted with drunken nightmares. Agamemnon's ghost then inspires Electra and Orestes to avenge his murder. In the final scene, The Messenger of Death takes his place in front of the curtain. In the epilogue, gold bands separate on stage and Clytemnestra is escorted behind them. By acknowledging her guilt through the narration of her memories, Clytemnestra "gains remittance from her dishonour among the dead", according to one critic who added, "but the regal motions of the dance suggest not only a rebirth, but a coronation [as] Graham dismantles the elements of the myth and reconstructs it to create the ground for her own footing" (Austin 1975, 397).

New York Herald Tribune's Walter Terry (1958b) equated the dance with such great theatrical tragedies as "the great *Oresteia*", and Strauss' *Elektra*. He wrote that the "nightmarish" quality of Graham's drama derived from her fracturing of the linear story into episodes, flash forwards, all supported by the tenets of Jungian psychology and the "modernist" approach to the mind through psychotherapy (Herzog 2015; Ffytche, Pick 2013; Beer 2008).

Despite the highbrow intellectual knowledge required by an audience to read the episodic narrative presented by Graham in Clytemnestra, Graham set out with the intention that only required

Martha Graham. Photo by Martha Swope

the audience to understand human emotional "truths", saying, "Clytemnestra is every woman" (1991, 26; cf. Thoms 2008; Phillips 2013). According to critics, she succeeded: "*Clytemnestra* is a timeless ritual in which the artist searches through the archaic mind for the remote psychological roots of human savagery and its conquest" (Martin 1958b). As an artist "dealing with the body of established human truths", Graham offered audiences "terrifying emotional revelation" (Martin 1958b).

With the physical, codified dance technique taught by Graham, the vocabulary used to tell the Clytemnestra narrative explained dur-ing lecture- demonstrations on government tours and pre-circulated to the elites through a taped film production, Graham embraced the vulnerability of the human body and used this as power to fuel the technique founded on the principles of the individual body, her own. The Graham Dance Technique, as opposed to other modernist techniques named for their founders José Limón or Merce Cunningham, is based on the contraction and release, the movement of the breath inhale and exhale, or of sexual peak and supplication (Bannerman 2010b; Dance Spirit 2009; Merce Cunningham Trust 2022). Perfecting the highly codified Graham Dance Technique allows the dancer to appear out of control as she shakes with fear or jealousy, in angst or passion. Graham wrote: "The awakening starts in the feet and goes up. Through the torso, the neck, up, up, through the head, all the while releasing energy" (1991, 122). With the perfection of the technique, the story of human life is told because, as Graham repeated again and again, "movement never lies" (122). Through the torso, the neck, up, up, through the head, all the while releasing energy" (1991, 122).

As Cold War propaganda, the Graham Dance Technique worked in opposition to the French-Soviet ballet, developed and perfected by

the imperial courts, in which the female body is never out of control. Indeed, high physical balletic control often signals narrative despair. From the dance of the Wilis in Giselle to the swans in *Swan Lake*, trapped women show physical precision, particularly in arabesque, poised on one leg. Of the classical ballets, one of the few times a ballerina hits the stage floor is during dances of death, as in Giselle's "mad scene". Yet in Graham's works, there are few ballets that do not include falls forward, back falls, or rolls on the floor. Thus, power is offset and framed by its opposite, vulnerability and human frailty. Indeed, always the self- proclaimed thief, Graham borrowed from ballet. Always the apolitical politicised chameleon, Graham stated on diplomatic tours to Soviet bloc nations that her technique "expanded" on classical technique.

4 The Woman as Archetype: Biography and the Making of *Clytemnestra*

Graham used herself and life as she approached all her archetypes in dance. She had been in Jungian therapy and read his works, using the idea of archetypes to connect her own life to a universalised human experience through therapy, which she used in her choreography, and the Graham Dance Technique. She wrote: "Whether it was a dance of consuming jealousy [...] or one of tender love [...] it came so close to real life that at times it made me ill" (1991, 200). Like the individualistic tenets of artistic modernism, the psychoanalytic technique of unpacking the individual mind was anathema to theories of communism, particularly because the individual exploration would lead a universal. The practice of psychotherapy has a nuanced history in the USSR (Marks, Savelli 2020; Miller 1998). Yet Graham's absolute proclamation of the individual experience as the key to the universal, whether through myth and the mind or dance technique and the body, spoke unabashedly to the US assertion that democratic freedom began with the power of the individual.

When Graham choreographed *Clytemnestra*, her professional and personal life were in turmoil. In 1957, after Graham started choreographing *Clytemnestra*, she was invited by the State Department and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, to open Congress Hall in Berlin with a performance of her solo, *Judith*. As a cultural diplomat for the United States, Graham represented the power and freedom offered to the creative individual, and women, as she performed on stage, for the press, and at embassy parties. However, as opposed to ticker tape parades for the star and the Martha Graham Dance Company while on tour for Eisenhower in 1955, in Berlin Graham was received cordially as a solo performer alongside numerous other women who also took the spot-

light, including the African American soprano Ethel Waters, choreographer and legendary Hollywood icon Agnes de Mille, American film star Lillian Gish, and the glamorous Broadway writer, ambassador, and wife of Time-Life magnate Henry Luce, Clare Boothe Luce.[9] In addition, Graham's performance did not receive her usual standing ovation until she was joined on stage by the German dance pioneer, Mary Wigman, who had been written off inthe literature of the field of modern dance in 1949 by the American critics. In Berlin, reviewers complained about Graham's dramatic, old-fashioned modernism. Graham saved her ticket stub for Wigman's company performance that same week, which received critical raves (Phillips 2020, ch. 3). Her partner, Bertram Ross recalled: "When Martha came back to the States – her working rhythm was broken – Martha was going off the deep end".[10] During the making of Clytemnestra, Graham's state caused Ross (her Agamemnon), as well as other dancers, to claim that they had essentially created the masterpiece. Ross concluded: "It took quite a while for things to get back on the track – if they ever did".

On a personal level, Graham's body was failing her as a dancer and she consumed more and more alcohol. At the age of sixty-three, Graham was playing young heroines on stage from the bride on the American frontier in the group work *Appalachian Spring*, to the seductress Judith in the solo she had performed in Berlin. Most dancers would have retired at half her age, but Graham persisted as choreographer, company manager, and star. While on tours, Graham's fatigue and excessive drinking had been noted in government reports and her dancers' private letters home. Graham would later admit that when she was faced with crisis, she relied on alcohol.

With failures in her personal life and facing sure retirement, she admitted, "I stayed home alone, ate very little, and drank too much" (237). However broken, she continued to work on her first and only full-evening three-act ballet, *Clytemnestra*, putting herself centre stage as the wronged princess of Sparta in scenes of jealous rage aimed at the seductive young women, and posited Clytemnestra's lapse into alcoholic tremors, nightmares and guilt, following her own trajectory.

Graham struggled with envy for the young dancers she had trained to become the beautiful Helen of Troy, Cassandra, or Electra. She referred to the loss of her performing abilities, "the circle of Dante's Hell omitted". She wrote: "My dependency [on alcohol] increased when I began to feel my powers as a dancer leave me"; and concluded: "I turned to alcohol, perhaps more than I should have…" (237-8). Indeed, Graham was often late for *Clytemnestra*'s rehearsals, or did

9 Box 13, folder (1).

10 Box 10, folder (14).

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not show up at all. The company rehearsed in secret if she did not appear. One dancer recalled that when Graham showed up, "sometimes she would rehearse and get lost. Or sometimes she would rehearse, and it would work. You just didn't know" (Marni Thomas, interviewed by the Author, 2004). While struggling never to show a hint of frailty, Graham announced, if called, that she had been on the phone to "Washington", or that her dishwasher was broken. Dancers close to her knew she had never cooked a meal in her Upper East side apartment full of antiques and trinkets collected from the Asian and Middle Eastern tours. Bertram Ross stated plainly, "it was very difficult to rehearse because she would come so drunk" (1994).

5 The Personal Becomes Political: Graham Steals from Herself

Despite the rumours and allegations that Graham had not choreographed her greatest work, *Clytemnestra*, I join other dancers who cite her proclamation: "I am a thief, but I only steal from the best". She rattled off names: Picasso, Jung, adding, "... and Bertram Ross". The fact that she relied heavily on her dancers' movements to stage *Clytemnestra* demonstrates her genius as director and choreographer; she was the impresario who could put the masterpiece together and assemble the pieces from the movement to the set, costumes, music, and herself.

Two scenes were consistently praised by critics as capturing the individual passion that could be understood by the "everywoman" and thus the "everyman" in the audience: the murder of Agamemnon, and the following "Drunk Scene" after the murder between Clytemnestra and her lover followed by her nightmares. In both episodes, Graham drew heavily on herself. As an artist, surely Graham herself would not contest a personal-to-archetypal reading of *Clytemnestra* as self-thievery. Graham called herself "doom eager", defining it as "the ordeal of isolation, the ordeal of loneliness, the ordeal of doubt, the ordeal of vulnerability which it takes to compose in any medium" (1991, 118). And Graham herself equated her artistic power with fragility: "When a dancer is at the peak of his power he has two lovely, fragile, and perishable things" (7). In this rumination on this power of human fragility, she made reference to mythology, as she had with her role in *Clytemnestra*:

> The Greek myths speak of the spindle of life resting on the knee of necessity, the principal Fate in the Platonic world. The second Fate weaves, and the third cuts. Necessity to create? No. But in some way to transcend, to conquer fear, to find a way to go on. (7)

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Graham certainly 'stole' and borrowed from artists and her dancers. With her red sheath that she used during the guilt scene, she "stole" from the modernist painter Wassily Kandinsky. Yet the brilliance of the two iconic scenes in *Clytemnestra* speaks to her creative period of distress and personal frailty which brought the Greek myth to the stage as a masterwork.

Graham readily admitted that she knew rage, which fuelled Clytemnestra and her staging of Agamemnon's murder. Regarding the scene, Graham said:

> Clytemnestra is every woman when she kills. Why this is so I do not really know, except that I am a woman. I know that in a woman, like a lioness, is the urge to kill if she cannot have what she wants. (26)

In her past relationship with men, the anger, jealousy and pain Graham expressed had been inspired by her ex-husband's departure a decade earlier (237-8). Although she took numerous other lovers, she wrote letter upon letter to her Jungian psychiatrist expressing that she could love no one like her former husband, who had left her for younger male lovers. With professional disappointments and a direct confrontation with her own aging body, Graham knew rage.

Of herself, and her legendary temper Graham wrote: "I was capable of great violence [...] I had a very bad temper, very bad. I still have it, though I do not use it often. I've learned not to allow myself to indulge in it" (82). Yet she described her own behaviour backstage:

> Some anger seized me – and I took one of the bottles and smashed it against the mirror, which shattered into a thousand pieces. I said nothing. [Others] said nothing. I simply gathered my belongings and moved to another mirror. (82)

Graham was known to lash out at dancers verbally, physically punch them, and even seed hatred among cast members in order to create theatrical truth for stage performances. As an artist she said, "I can use my temper, if need be, on occasion" (82).

During the build-up to the murder of Agamemnon in *Clytemnestra*, scenes choreographed by Graham edged on physical violence between the dancers. Ross, as Agamemnon, wrote:

> I spun around to face Clytemnestra and her left hand in the shape of a claw struck out at me, like a tigress striking out with its paw. I did the same with my right hand. The rhythm of our walk was no longer an even pulse of side, back, side front. It was erratic like two wild animals stalking each other. Moving forward and then away from each other, feigning blows and clawing at each other jockey-

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> ing for positions of power. We finally got together and she clawed me in the chest. I writhed and caught myself in the net while Martha stepped forward and did her "I, Clytemnestra" dance.[11]

During the murder scene,

> The red and purple curtains would open, Martha would strike my chest with the huge barbaric bejeweled gold collar with the tip of the blade, I would do my silent scream and reaction, and the curtain would close and open and I would be in a different position and Martha would strike my back and I would react violently and the curtains would close.

After the murder, the curtain opens on the set with what dancers call the "Drunk Scene".[12] Graham admitted that the loss of her own husband had driven her to drink excessively (1991, 237-8). Regarding Clytemnestra, Graham wrote in her *Notebooks*: "Victim. I, too, a victim" (1973). The scene opens as Graham and her lover share a single over-large golden chalice of wine during the duet. Peggy Lyman, a dancer who Graham coached in her role, recalls:

> They abandon themselves in this sort of not really stagger – but there's an abandonment about it. You know looseness about it that you. Being a little tipsy. And out of control. That kind of sense of, "I know I've had a little too much to drink but I don't want anyone to know it". You know how you are very careful and you're walking and your gestures, and that's that kind of exaggeration that's in that scene. It's not a full out [drunk], there's... there's an exaggeration – there's still a sense royalty and power.

Lyman added, "I think one might have had to have experienced themselves" (Peggy Lyman, interviewed by the Author, 2021). Indeed, Graham's tours had been what the diplomatic corps referred to as the "cocktail circuit of diplomacy", and Graham had been an early and effective social ambassador, although she had started to abuse alcohol with increasing personal challenges. The balance between drinking at a cocktail party, yet over-drinking and attempting to retain diplomatic composure would have been a reality for Graham.[13] Although Lyman saw the effects of the alcohol as a metaphor, saying, "I always felt that Clytemnestra was more drunk on power, and the

11 Cf. Bibliography, "Archival Papers": Ross "Hand-written notes, undated", b10, f17.

12 Miki Okihara, interviewed by the Author, 2015; Peggy Lyman, interviewed by the Author, 2021.

13 Sichel 2016; Peter Sichel, interviewed by the Author, 2022.

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success of ending", Clytemnestra drunkenness as both truth and allegory would have worked ideally in the personal-as-political Cold War. The experiential power of the scene gave the political metaphor its human quality.

Following the "Drunk Scene", the curtain opens on Clytemnestra and her lover passed out on the set, with Clytemnestra wrapped in a red sheath. Regarding the colour, Graham recalled a Wassily Kandinsky painting with a streak of red through it writing: "Someday I will make a dance like that". She wrote: "[Modern] dance followed modern painters and architects in discarding decorative essentials and fancy trimmings. Dance was to be real (1991, 62)" (cf. González García 2020; Bannerman 2010a). Red was Graham's colour of erotic passion, anger, and jealousy, yet noted that in order to dance the colour, you had to have "vulnerability". As she recalled, "for *Clytemnestra* I spent many evenings on the studio floor placing great pieces of red material around me" (1991, 62). On colour and abstraction, Graham declared: "Every time you drink a glass of orange juice, you're drinking the abstraction of an orange. That's an abstraction to me: the whole effect" (231-2). On alcohol, she said: "I don't want to dance the spirit of champagne, I want to drink it!" (62).

Reeling from the alcohol and draped in the red cloth, Lyman explains, "Clytemnestra is having a nightmare, and she's wrapped in this blood and the death and her sins". Clytemnestra writhes, and then begins to tremble, like alcoholic-induced tremors. Lyman says: "That movement is very spastic. Clytemnestra has to appear to be surrounded and encased in that blood whole time. You can't separate from the terror or drama or [self] hatred". Like a post-drunken, inebriated night, the nightmares consume the woman's mind. And like the symptoms of alcoholism, experienced by Graham at this late stage of her life, Clytemnestra's physical state, resembles the tremors of advanced stage withdrawal that can occur within hours (cf. Burlison 2016; Nutt 2020). Lyman continues: "She goes into those convulsions. It's a little, little sharp it's just an exaggeration of contractions. And it's very quick sharp exhalations, and... and contractions have a lot of different muscle groups at the same time". Although Graham had used the tremor and red cloth in other works such as the tale of Medea, Lyman asserts, "[Clytemnestra's] tremor and the shaking is larger than in other works and it goes on a little bit longer" (Peggy Lyman, interviewed by the Author, 2021). In Ross' archive, one hand-scrawled scene in a spiral notebook chronicled his discovery of Graham's near-dead drunken body at home in bed after he broke into her apartment.[14] Graham put her jealousy, rage, and alcoholism on stage to tell the mythic tale of Clytemnestra

14 Cf. Bibliography, "Archival Papers": Ross "Hand-written notes, undated", b10, f17.

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as an everywoman. Of *Clytemnestra*, Graham wrote, "saddest of all, I'm my own victim" (1973).

Despite her later proclamation "to stop drinking was easy for me", after coming close to death with alcohol poisoning, she battled with alcohol for years, perhaps a lifetime. Told that if she continued to drink hidden glasses of whiskey she would die in her seventies, she admitted a desire for a small glass of champagne for the remainder of her life through 1991 (Mikhail Baryshnikov, interviewed by the Author, 2017).

Yet Graham's own fragility as an aging and alcoholic dancer served her artistically in the making of *Clytemnestra* as she stole from herself to tell a human story. Graham borrowed from the masters, as well as her dancers, but most notably, herself. This self-referential 'stealing' can be seen in Graham's moments of genius in *Clytemnestra*. Despite the high-modernist theatrics of the work, even the twenty-first century post-modern audiences have been gripped by the staging.

6 The Continued Political Import of *Clytemnestra*

Although Graham would never again be hired to perform for the State Department as a dancer after appearing as Clytemnestra in 1969 in Portugal, she and her company remained a staple export through the end of the Cold War.

In 1969, she retired from the stage, and almost died in an alcoholic coma, succumbing to Dante's forgotten circle. Yet Graham and her company rose together like a Phoenix in 1974, with another State Department tour to Asia planned under Richard M. Nixon, who had been Eisenhower's Vice President during her first heralded tour in the 1950s. She became a diplomatic spokesperson and "Classical Modernist" elder as her young dancers performed. As such, Graham maintained a persona of high command, which represented the possibilities for women in the United States as agents within the capitalistic democracy. Yet her works demonstrated human vulnerability and fragility, thus making power seductive, even "attractive". In 1975, a critic wrote of *Clytemnestra*:

> Must we think politically in order to follow her choreography? Well, Yes and No. Martha Graham disclaims political intent in her dances, but her *Notebooks* reveal a politically active mind. In her notes on *Clytemnestra*, we find quotes from various scholars, George Thompson for example. "The art of tragedy was the product of democracy", she writes [...] But the dance is no manifesto of a burgeoning democracy, rather an introspective exploration of a woman's guilts, desires and compulsions. And yet, if by politics we mean the art of balancing the claims of the individual

> against those of the community, then her Clytemnestra is a political dance. (Austin 1975, 381)

In 1978, *Clytemnestra* launched the Martha Graham Dance Company as the first modern dance troupe to perform at Lincoln Center's Metropolitan Opera House alongside the grand classical opera and ballet companies which toured globally, including the revered Soviet Bolshoi Ballet. *Clytemnestra* appeared in the Cold War centrepiece of the US performing arts complex that established New York as the "culture capital of the world".8 According to C.D. Jackson, Eisenhower's equivalent of a Propaganda Minister and a Director of Lincoln Center, "culture is emerging as a great element of East-West competition. Culture [...] is a word of immense world- wide political significance" (Stern 2012; Janz 1997, 232). De-gendering the word yet acknowledging culture as a part of the women's sphere, Jackson added, "culture, ladies and gentlemen, is no longer a sissy word" (Janz 1997, 232). Graham's *Clytemnestra* was fragile, and certainly also no "sissy", like the grand artist herself.

Clytemnestra's continued political import as an apolitical work of art that spoke to "hearts and minds" came into high relief when the famous Soviet ballet defector Rudolf Nureyev would later assume the leading role of Agamemnon in Graham's work, declaring he had come to the West to find artistic freedom (Foulkes 2002; 2007; Franke et al. 2021).Throughout the Cold War, critics wrestled with the personal versus the political, while Graham's brilliance was the seamless merging of the two in her dance works, seemingly overwriting the paradox of the artist in service to the state.

7 Conclusion

Clytemnestra has continued to be revered into the twenty-first century, despite the company's decision to cut the evening-length work into a single act, to surtitle the events for public consumption (including the use of the quirky phrase "Generational Homicide" to explain the Greek myth), and to even give a short lecture before raising the curtain to explain the story (Martha Graham Dance Company 2022). The pedantic offerings by the Martha Graham Dance Company, and even the 2009 online competition for the best *Clytemnestra* remake, does not rob Clytemnestra of its power to demonstrate Graham's understanding of the human frailties that bond people over time, space, and nationality.[15] Although excerpted and subtitled in-

15 Sitting in the audience with both Mary Hinkson and Pearl Lang in 2009, two former Graham dancers who played Clytemnestra, offered the Author a perspective on

to a twenty-first century twenty-minute shadow of its former three-act whole, the most critically noted scenes discussed in this article remain in the work over fifty years after it was crafted by Graham. Detractors and celebratory critics alike have called the reset work, "magnificent" with "immediate pertinence", that showed "spontaneity and immediacy".[16] It was Graham's use of her own vulnerability that allowed her power as a diplomat and performer, and charged the choreography with enduring power. She borrowed from those around her, and herself. Graham and *Clytemnestra* have come to define the canon of twentieth-century modernism, and earned her power as a diplomat and performer.[17]

During the Cold War, the messaging about US hegemony within the modernist language of dance was not a story of absolute power, despite the classic American and frontier references in some works. In a battle for "hearts and minds", "hearts" cannot get seduced by the Western side, cajoled, or in the words of Nye, "attracted", without a demonstration of vulnerability. Through cultural offerings, particularly by a powerful female artist, the US government could claim a fundamental humanity as integral to the democratic modern society and culture, even the culture of capitalism, attached to the pathos of freedom. For Graham and the US diplomats, the personal was political, and the apolitical was political, because both relied on human understanding and communication: power came from the fragility and vulnerability of the individual creative and diplomatic act.

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the original format in the context of the cut and subtitled excerpts. While the twenty-first century rendition of *Clytemnestra* encouraged Lang to characteristically shout out at dancers during the production, Hinkson's disappointment included her opinion that the best scenes had been kept, and she singled out those analysed in this article.

16 Jowitt 2009; Macaulay 2009; Greskovic 2009; Kourls 2017.

17 Gardner 1993; Chioles 1993; Van Steen 2002; Yaari 2003.

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The Panaural People's Republic: Loudness, Loss of Self, and Sonic Social Control in Mao's China

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Abstract Perspectives on the establishment of social control have long been shaped by theories concerning visibility and observation, such as Foucault's concept of the Panopticon. In Mao era China, however, sound and hearing had a greater impact on citizens becoming self-disciplined. Reflecting on a variety of sources, with a particular focus on memoirs, this article details how the Mao era soundscape helped to fashion a new form of disciplinary society. This disciplinary society was chaotic, however, and sites of resistance remained, in which some individuals fought to retain their sense of self, even amid all the tumult and violence.

Keywords China. Sound. Noise. Soundscape. Radio. Loudspeaker.

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1 Introduction: The Panaural State and Discipline

Italo Calvino's collection of short stories *Under the Jaguar Sun*, contains three narratives concerning the senses: taste, hearing and smell. The collection as planned would have been called *The Five Senses*, and would also have included stories on sight and touch, but Calvino died before completing his work.[1] "A King Listens", the story concerning hearing, describes a king sitting on an 'isolated' throne in his palace, who fears the possibility of rebellion, and uses his hearing to detect whether or not a plot is stirring against him (Calvino 1988). The king uses attentive listening to decipher the meaning of the palace soundscape, scrutinising audible signs, or "signals", to use R. Murray Schafer's term, which are "foreground sounds […] listened to consciously" (1994, 101).

In Calvino's story, the palace is a "weft of regular sounds" which are "always the same, like the heart's beat" (1988, 43). These are "keynote" sounds in Schafer's soundscape concept, those that act as an "anchor" against which other sounds take on their "special meaning" (1994, 100). The palace in which the king resides is used as a metaphor for various things. It is a "clock", it is "a great ear", and it is the "body of the king" (Calvino 1988, 37-8, 43). Because of Calvino's use of the second person, and these metaphors of the palace, two of which are anatomical, readers are provoked to consider the ways in which sounds impact on the body ("your body sends you mysterious messages, which you receive with fear, with anxiety. In an unknown part of this body, a menace is lurking, your death is already stationed there"; 1988, 43), and how the ear, in times of great anxiety, is employed to disentangle both complex codes/signals and regular sounds/keynotes in order to avert possible danger. As "A King Listens" shows, this sort of auditory auto-surveillance, or paranoid attentive listening, can take hold of anyone, no matter their position in society, in moments of tension and fear, and in times of violence and political uncertainty.

In this article I will examine the ways in which sound organised people's daily routines during the Mao era, how certain sounds caused fear and anxiety for people, how people worried about being overheard, and how in combination such experiences led to a form of sonic conditioning in which individuals were, to a degree, disciplined by the soundscape in which they lived. I will examine the range of themes concerning sound, listening, and the body that inspired "A King Listens", to address the sonic aspects of the internalisation of obedience in the Mao era, and the early developments of contemporary China's "disciplinary society" (Foucault 1979).

1 This article has been adapted and subtantially reworked from my dissertation, *The Maoist Soundscape: Sonic Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1976* (Lovell 2022).

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The sources I examine primarily pertain to the early stages of the Cultural Revolution period (1966-76), when the connections between sound, fear and discipline were most pronounced, though I also refer to earlier PRC sources that detail the burgeoning relationship between sound and the internalisation of obedience. This article does not suggest that there was such a thing as a uniform soundscape that existed nationwide in China throughout the Mao era, but instead focuses on numerous individuals' emotional and affective sonic experiences in order to examine a range of issues concerning sound and everyday life in the Mao years. While this article makes quite extensive use of memoirs, it takes into account the understanding that an individual's recollection – especially during moments of trauma – is often imperfect. As Seán Street explains, however, "there is something much more profound about the function of memory than simply a facility for storage and retrieval" (2014, 20), and memory can also be considered "more a crucible of meaning than a vessel of truth", (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, Levy 2011, 311).[2] It is through using memoirs – in conversation with contemporaneous sources (such as articles from the *People's Daily* [*Renmin ribao* 人民日报], the mouthpiece newspaper of the Party, and documents from the British Foreign Office), as well as a few oral interviews,[3] secondary literature and sound studies theory – that I attempt to understand the place of sound in the broader meaning of the Mao years, both as lived and as remembered, by Chinese citizens as well as foreign visitors.

In examining the experiences and legacies of sound, fear and discipline in the early PRC's soundscape, I will engage with Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, and its later adaptation to address the role of sound and music in a "disciplinary society", a form of social structure which I argue followed a path of development in modern Chinese history which was unique, and notably different from the disciplinary society described by Foucault. The Panopticon theory, originally associated with Jeremy Bentham, and later developed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*,[4] concerns a prison design that has a central room from which a supervisor can observe all prisoners in their peripheral cells at any given moment. The prisoners are unable to tell when or whether or not they are being observed, because they cannot see out of their cells that surround the central observation room. Visibility becomes a "trap" for the prisoners, "he is seen, but he does not see", and "this invisibility is a guar-

2 This sentence is also quoted in Street 2014, 20.

3 The three oral interviews I reference in this article were carried out as part of my research for my PhD Dissertation (cited in the Bibliography).

4 In this article I cite from the 1979 English version, translated by Alan Sheridan (cf. Foucault 1979).

antee of order" (1979, 200). This type of power relation, as Foucault details, could be repeated in any other institution as well, as long as the "see/being seen dyad" is established (1979, 202).

In recent years, scholars influenced by Foucault's work on discipline have modified his theories to consider the role of sound in guaranteeing order and compliance. Christiane Lenk, for example, in her chapter "Audibility Is a Trap: Aural Panopticon in *The Lives of Others* (2006)" from *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century*, examines the latter years of the German Democratic Republic (the GDR, also known as "East Germany" [1949-90]), detailing how the film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*) reflects the "permanent sound control" under which the citizens of the GDR lived (Lenk 2012, 128).[5] Lenk argues that this could best be described as a "panaural state", owing to the widespread practice of audio surveillance and spying (128), and an extensive network of informants, whose existence was common knowledge, which caused citizens to internalise obedience (126).

The Mao era PRC also constituted a panaural state, as I will explain, albeit a lower tech and far less cohesive version of the type delineated by Lenk.[6] This panaural state – a concept I use more broadly to refer to the internalisation of obedience caused by both enforced listening as well as the fear of being overheard – was, I contend, an early form of contemporary China's surveillance state. My arguments throughout build on Foucault's Panopticon concept, and his broader viewpoints on discipline, but not merely to suggest that Foucault's original theory was "ocularcentric" (a term explored in Jay 1988), or that sound has also been crucial in the growth of surveillance states, though both of these points are true. As this article outlines, the development of the panaural state in China differed from the evolution of Foucault's "disciplinary society", in one crucial way. Similar to what Takashi Fujitani describes in *Splendid Monarchy*, the rise in this form of modern society in China, as in Japan, did not coincide with "the decline of the monarchy, or at least of 'monarchical power'" (1996, 27). Owing to the existence of a sovereign or sovereign-like power in China, Mao (the cult of whom was at its peak in the Cultural Revolution period, but began to grow in the 1950s),[7] punishment was not as managed or regulated as it would have been in Foucault's vision of a disciplinary society.

5 Another work in which the Panopticon concept has been re-examined according to aural matters is Rounthwaite (2008, 193-207).

6 Andrew F. Jones outlines the challenges the CCP faced in rural broadcasting (2020, ch. 2).

7 Chang-tai Hung has explored how the "growing deification of Mao" was expressed in the National Day parades of the 1950s (2007, 419).

According to Foucault, the "gentle way in punishment" (1979, 104) that was advocated by prison reformers led to a system in which punishment became, as David Garland explains, "a reflection of the crime itself, as when work is used against idleness, shame against vanity […] and so on" rather than "arbitrary, the capricious expression of the sovereign's will" (1986, 856). As various anecdotes in this article elucidate, however, the "capricious expression of the sovereign's will" was still imbricated with punishment and discipline during the Mao years, especially during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, and in other politically unsettled periods. The sovereign's will was enacted through the people, who were encouraged to rebel and crush counter-revolutionaries, which meant that arbitrary forms of punishment continued to exist alongside the maturing disciplinary society. This chaos was also exacerbated by malfunctions and aberrations in both the organisation of controlling functions in society and the meting out of disciplinary measures, which led to sites of resistance or ways of avoiding discipline, co-existing with especially violent punitive measures (which were particularly evident in the early years of the Cultural Revolution).[8]

2 Acoustic Timetables, Discipline and Conditioning

Acoustic timetables – including broadcasting schedules, as well as time-marking keynote sounds such as bells – impacted on peoples' minds and bodies in everyday life in the Mao years, and certain scheduled sounds led to the internalisation of obedience, as I explain in this section. According to Foucault:

> [The] principle that underlay the time-table in its traditional form was essentially negative; it was the principle of non-idleness: it was forbidden to waste time, which was counted by God and paid for by men; the time-table was to eliminate the danger of wasting it – a moral offense and economic dishonesty. Discipline, on the other hand, arranges a positive economy; it poses the principle of an ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting from time, ever more available moments, and, from each moment, ever more useful forces. (1979, 154)

The timetable, Foucault argues, in combination with "a system of prohibitions and obligations, continual supervision, exhortations, [and] religious readings" helped to draw prisoners "towards good" and

8 Garland argues that Foucault overlooked the possibility for such kinds of malfunctions in his study of the penal system (1986, 873).

"away from evil" (121). E.P. Thompson, in "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", like Foucault, draws a connection between the conception of time, and how it ought to be utilised to its fullest extent in the workplace, with Christian morality ("the Puritan ethic"). Christian moralists wrote about "the brevity of the mortal span" as well as the "husbandry of time" in everyday life in the workplace, and in combination with "the division of labour; the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives […] new labour habits were formed, and a new time-discipline was formed" (Thompson 1967, 87-8, 90).

While the Christian moral basis of "time-thrift" did not apply to the PRC, I believe that there was a similar drive towards making workers internalise the concept of "time-thrift" in Mao's China, and that it was also connected with a moral dimension that extended beyond the mundane reality of daily life in schools, villages and factories. Acoustic timetables reinforced the connection between time-thrift and the morality/ideology of model citizens, which led to the internalisation of discipline. Loudspeakers, radios, bells and other amplified sounds marked routine in many people's daily lives during the Mao era. People were conditioned to respond to these sounds, and these sounds forced individuals to be cognizant of state-decreed conceptions/apportioning of time – i.e., time had to be considered in relation to a campaign period, the build-up to National Day, or its place within a five-year-plan –, all of which encouraged model behaviour.

Broadcasting systems in schools helped with the organisation and administration of school life, and they could also be used for a certain level of conditioning. To be clear, the conditioning of children in their education via public address systems or bells is not unique to the Mao years or China. In the United States and elsewhere we are "conditioned in time discipline by primary schooling" for our future as workers, as David Graeber states, and this is something that could be achieved even without specific acoustic signals (2018, 92). In the Mao era, however, the acoustic signals that children were expected to obey and follow ingrained within them a different sort of time-discipline, as time was apportioned/designated by the Party and the children's bodies and minds needed to be disciplined for the good of the Party and the new nation. Basic time-discipline was imposed on children/teenagers, but within the daily schedule, the presence of the state was felt in certain acoustic symbolism, or in the instructions that children/teenagers were given. For example, in Beverly Hooper's *Foreigners Under Mao: Western Lives in China, 1949-1976*, Western students who studied in the PRC during the Mao era give an account of how their days were structured by various acoustic signals:

> The students' day was punctuated by bells and loudspeaker broadcasts relayed across the campus. They were woken at 6 a.m. by a rousing rendition of "The East Is Red", followed by the daily political broadcast ('the news') and the morning exercise music. At 7 came the breakfast bell, followed by bells to start and finish class, punctuated by more exercise music at 10, the bell for lunch – and so on for the rest of the day. Wristwatches were still a relative luxury for Chinese students even in the early 1970s and there was a need for reminders, even though they 'made us feel like Pavlovian dogs', in the words of one British student. At 10 p.m., dormitory front doors and the high entrance gate were usually locked. (2016, 200)

It is interesting to consider that this British student used the term "Pavlovian", referring to Pavlov's famous experiments on conditioning, and that school life was deemed to be similar to life in a barracks. It should be noted that this student was studying in a nation that was a Cold War adversary, when concerns about Pavlovian conditioning/brainwashing by the Soviet Union and the PRC were rife, and foreigners would presumably have not felt like "Pavlovian dogs" when responding automatically to bells and loudspeakers in Western schools, but this is not to say that the observation was wholly unfounded. In terms of the presence of Mao and the Party in the daily soundscape, they were symbolically intertwined with the acoustic timetable owing to the enforced listening of "The East is Red" and the "daily political broadcast" (the news).

Acoustic signals within the soundscape, when intensely and regularly repeated in everyday life, caused some children and adults to be conditioned to respond appropriately. Such automatic responses were also usually linked to some form of behaviour that would be of benefit to the nation. For example, Rhoda Stockwell, an American who went on a tour of primary schools in several Chinese provinces in 1974, describes certain "eye exercises" being performed in time to loudspeaker music:

> At the sound of another bell, the children happily returned to classrooms but soon became quiet. Music came over the loudspeaker, and I very much expected what I have seen often in lower primary schools in the USA, that each child would rest his head on his desk for a quiet period. To my great surprise, the children did not do that at all but, rather, sat straight in their seats and rubbed their eyes. Watching more closely, I could see a definite pattern to the hand motions. The children were massaging certain muscles and stimulating acupuncture points we were told. The children were doing their eyes exercises. They do these twice a day at school, to protect their eyesight. (1975, 234)

Stockwell explains that the physical development of the children was as important as their moral and intellectual growth, but does not explicitly connect it with national goals in her article. The connection between physical exercise, in time to broadcast music and instructions, and national goals, is attested to in various other sources, however, especially for the practice of broadcast led calisthenics or "radio gymnastic exercises" (*guangbo ticao* 广播体操), which all of my oral interviewees recalled taking part in and often enjoying in their schooldays. A *People's Daily* article from June 1952 explains how radio gymnastic exercises were an effective way to improve the health of the people, and that the extensive practice of radio gymnastic exercises was improving "efficiency" in workplaces and the "mood" for studying in schools (*Renmin ribao* 1952).

In factories (and other workplaces) there was a similar connection between acoustic timetables and discipline, and the timetable was also punctuated by propaganda messaging or soundscape signals that encouraged model worker behaviour. The Swiss photographer and reporter, Walter Bosshard (1892-1975), in "Stern Discipline in Communist China: Impressions from Peking" (originally published in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 1 March 1955) relates the usage of loudspeakers in the "continuous process of teaching and enlightenment", giving an example of a typical broadcasting schedule at a building site:

> [As] early as five in the morning the loudspeakers started to blare out directions to the workers lodged in barracks on the site of the building. A paternal friendly voice repeating the same words three or four times reminded them that it was now time to get up. A new day had started. Chairman Mao Tse Tung once more expected them to overfulfil their norms. There followed explanations on the importance of physical hygiene. These invariably ended with the exhortation to remember to wash their faces and hands. In much the same way during the course of the day further instructions on how to work, how to behave, how to rest, how to share your meals with your comrades, were given. (Foreign Office Files for China 1954-55, 26)

Bosshard details all of this as a way of explaining his main thesis, that the continuous process of education and enlightenment (via the radio and loudspeaker) had brought about stern discipline to the extent that "a stage has almost been reached where people react much as automatons and adapt and subordinate their own free will to the orders which issue from the radio or loudspeaker" (26). He supports this argument by explaining how a foreign diplomat who lived opposite the building site and was exposed to the daily repetition of this broadcast eventually

> became so obsessed with the whole business that at the end of one month he began to feel a sense of guilt if he still remained in bed after the loudspeaker across the road had for the third time ordered everyone to get up. (26)

This early Cold War-era article is reminiscent of the sensationalist accounts of "brainwashing" and loss of agency detailed in the American journalist and propagandist Edward Hunter's then recent work *Brain-Washing in Red China* (1951), and certainly overstates the sinister effects of the broadcasts. It is true, however, that factory broadcasting was often used intensely to spread the new political culture, and to both motivate and shame workers (Lovell 2022).

Factory broadcasting encouraged greatly increased production around each National Day (1 October), and during the early stages of Great Leap Forward (1958-62), which was regularly reported on in the pages of the *People's Daily*.[9] Although the true success of these pledges is difficult to ascertain, it is evident that the broadcasts allowed for the restructuring of workers' daily and yearly schedules according to the Party's needs and its new political culture, with its attendant new customs and rituals. At times, naturally, employees were unwilling or unable to behave as model workers, however, and they ignored factory loudspeakers and bells, effectively neutering the Party's attempts to effect control via sonic means.[10] Also, even in the cases of relatively successful factory broadcasting efforts recounted in the pages of the *People's Daily*, the Party often encountered obstacles in attempting to ensure productive daily broadcasts that could engage and inform workers.[11] In these instances, workers were not heeding the dictates from above, and although the level of true resistance in such actions is difficult to ascertain, these were clear examples of the system of control malfunctioning.

9 To give one example, in a *People's Daily* article from September 1959, it is claimed that after the broadcast of the communiques and resolutions of the Eighth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee (known as the "Lushan Conference"), steel workers in Zhejiang, in "high fighting spirit", introduced new targets for the Leap Forward. After listening to the broadcast, the workers of Zhejiang's biggest steel factory held a mass meeting and resolved to fight to overfulfil their quota. By midnight of 26 August, the workers had, five days ahead of schedule, completed their steelmaking duties for August, increasing their daily output 19.5% from the previous year (*Renmin ribao* 1959).

10 Frank Dikötter describes the ineffectiveness of CCP's propaganda techniques a few years after the Great Leap Forward had started, by which time the movement was an obvious failure, and starvation was widespread. Dikötter writes, "the deeper the country sank into famine, the greater the shirking became", and "cadres simply did not have the means to control every worker and punish every disciplinary breach" (2010, 209), and though "loudspeakers might be blaring exhortations to work" and "propaganda posters might extoll the model worker who overfulfilled the plan […] apathy more often than not governed the factory floor" (208).

11 As detailed in Lovell 2022.

3 Fear and the Internalisation of Discipline

3.1 Amplified Sound at Public Trials and Struggle Sessions

Amplified sound, through loudspeaker usage at large-scale public events and live radio broadcasting of such events elsewhere, when combined with organised listening, was a powerful propaganda[12] tool for the CCP (Liu 1975; Li 2020; Huang 2013; Jones 2020), as it also was for the autocratic regimes of the Soviet Union (Lovell 2015) and Nazi Germany (Birdsall 2012). These tools were similarly effective, if not more visceral and potent, in conveying warnings to the people, regarding the consequences of any anti-Party actions. The PRC's sonic infrastructure enabled the Party to ensure that public punishments of supposed wrongdoers were no longer merely the spectacles that they would have been in earlier centuries around the world, but were instead events whose impact could be experienced intimately, widely and as they happened. In this way, loudspeakers and radios were employed to create the maximum amount of fear and anxiety in listeners, so that they would internalise discipline and learn not to challenge the Party.

A *People's Daily* article from May 1951 details a broadcasting conference/public trial that was set up to denounce supposed counter-revolutionaries. At the end of this denunciation meeting, held at a stadium in Shenyang, the Municipal People's Government accepted the people's "request" to execute the accused, according to the article (*Renmin ribao* 1951). This was a large-scale event attended in person by over 30,000 people from "all walks of life", which was broadcast via radio to over a million people, the article claims. On the day when the event was held, schools were shut and businesses were closed so that citizens could gather around over 300,000 radios to listen in to the "blood and tears" accusations made against the counter-revolutionaries. The meeting began after a "stirring" singalong of a song from the opera *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nu* 白毛女) and when the counter-revolutionaries were brought onto the stage, the whole venue became a "racket", and the crowd's cry of demand that the "heinous" counter-revolutionaries be shot "resounded across the heavens" (*Renmin ribao* 1951).

What is striking about this account is the representation of a kind of people's justice, the emotion-raising nature of the event, and the role of sound and technology in the proceedings. The article presents

12 I use the term "propaganda" here broadly to refer to both its more neutral original sense of "disseminating information" as well as the more negative connotations of its modern usage. See Kenez (1985) for a more detailed explanation of the historical shifts in the term's usage, and Bao (2015, 300-6) for the nuances of the word's meaning in modern Chinese history (the term for "propaganda" in Chinese is *xuanchuan* 宣传).

the guilty verdicts and death sentences as being the righteous culmination of the people's anger, and it asserts that the Party was merely listening to the people, and carrying out their clearly expressed wishes. The voice of the people, what was called for and the sentiments expressed, was unanimous, according to the article. The people called out "Long live Chairman Mao!", and "Long live the victorious suppression of counter-revolutionaries!", and the article presents these slogans as emerging spontaneously and as if delivered by one voice. The atmosphere of the event was emotional and almost carnivalesque at times as well, as dancing (*yangge* 秧歌) and drum and gong beating accompanied the sounds of the gunshots which struck the accused after they had been taken away from the stadium.

This denunciation broadcast was similar to emotion-raising events described by Elizabeth Perry (2002) and Yu Liu (2010), in terms of the managed communal outpouring of a wide variety of potent emotions, but the integration of broadcasting technology into the proceedings, and the halting of everyday life elsewhere as broadcasts were being relayed, shows how the Party carefully made full use of sound-reproducing technology to achieve their purposes. There was also recirculation across the mediascape to ensure that the maximum propaganda potential was wrung from the goings on at the Shenyang stadium. The event itself lasted three hours, ostensibly owing to the "impassioned masses", and the general crowd sounds as well as specific accusations were broadcast over the radio. As specific members of the audience, those that would best elicit sympathy (a "grey-haired old lady", a "thirteen-year-old orphan", and a mother whose children had been killed), "poured out" their "bitter complaints", people who were listening in on the radio were reported to have made telephone calls, and sent letters and money in order to show support for the victims and for the imposition of death sentences on all of the accused (*Renmin ribao* 1951).

During the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, similar public trials (also known as "struggle sessions" or "denunciations", *pidou dahui* 批斗大会) occurred, some also within public stadiums, and some at smaller locations, without the sonic infrastructural set up for radio broadcast elsewhere. An anecdote from *Ten Years of Madness: Oral Histories of China's Cultural Revolution*, Feng Jicai's collection of short memoirs on the period, vividly recounts one such event:

> Once during the movement, we were assembled in a stadium for a public sentencing. The audience was assigned spaces according to their work units. We stood in rows, facing an ad hoc stage that was set up with wooden planks. On the stage were some loudspeakers and microphones. When the criminals – altogether twenty-two of them – were led onto the stage, the noises from the handcuffs and shackles were magnified by the loudspeakers and heard

> throughout the stadium, sending shivers of fear to everyone in the audience. Then the crimes of those criminals were read. One of them was charged with writing "counterrevolutionary" articles and journals. The most lenient sentence that day was twenty years imprisonment. Most of the accused were sentenced to death. The one who wrote "counterrevolutionary" articles was sentenced to life imprisonment. (1996, 2)

This account, unlike the *People's Daily* article detailed above, gives a sense of what it would have been like to be an audience member in the stadium, and what the specific effects of amplified sound were. The microphones and loudspeakers amplification of the noises from the stage caused "shivers and fear" in the author, Feng Jicai, and "everyone in the audience", he presumes, because they allowed audience members to establish a connection with the criminals on the stage. Feng could hear the movements of the shackles and handcuffs, sonic details that would have been lost on the audience without technological amplification. If the accused were remote figures who could not be heard in any way, it would not have been as easy or automatic for audience members to identify with them in any respect, to internalise fear and, we can surmise, discipline.

3.2 Slogan Shouting and Targeted Sonic Harassment

Jacques Attali argues, in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, that "noise is the source of power" and that "in noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men" (1985). Of the examples introduced so far in this article, of instances in which aspects of the Mao era soundscape caused the internalisation of fear and discipline, Attali's view has been borne out. When people were denounced and verbally abused, those in the crowd witnessed and heard (owing to amplification) the power relations between the various figures within the trials/struggle sessions. The noise of castigations and the noises of handcuffs and shackles vividly attested to who was the subjugator and who was subjugated. Sound, both amplified and unamplified, was frequently wielded to harm and torment individuals at various stages of the Mao era, especially in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Slogan shouting and other targeted noise attacks were sometimes combined with physical attacks, or other forms of torture (depending on where such events took place), but sound/noise was also used without accompaniment, as a form of no-touch torture (Cusick 2006, 4), or a method of psychological warfare.

Ji Xianlin's *The Cowshed: Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (2016), is an account of his downfall from respected linguist and professor at Peking University to imprisonment in a "cowshed"

(*niu peng* 牛棚), a makeshift prison for "bad elements", staffed by Red Guards, for being a supposed capitalist roader.[13] In his memoir, Ji describes several instances of people using the tactic of aggressive slogan shouting to struggle against those who stood accused of some form of crime. He witnessed and heard many struggle sessions, and was the subject of many too once his persecution began. According to Ji, a typical struggle session ran as follows:

> Someone would read from Mao's sayings, and then the leader would call for ***, the capitalist-roader, to be brought to the front. The unfortunate individual would have his arms twisted behind his back with two Red Guards pushing down on his head as they led him onto the podium. Then the crowds would go wild shouting slogans: 'Long live Chairman Mao!'. Someone would make a speech, and whatever was said was by default true. All the capitalist-roaders had committed the same crimes: they opposed the Party, socialism, and the Great Leader. The masses could pin any label they liked on their unfortunate victims. They would always ask the capitalist-roader whether he admitted his guilt. If he hesitated, they would beat him savagely. It was unclear what the struggle sessions achieved, except to torment their victims. Some in the audience were completely earnest, others found it good fun, and still others took sadistic pleasure in the torture. (2016, 32)

As this passage shows, "noise" – a term that I use here in the general sense of "sound that is at a high volume" –[14] was one of several means used to attack an individual in these part-ordered, part-chaotic events. The beatings would, we can presume, mainly have been administered by those who were physically close to the struggled against individual, but the slogan shouting allowed everyone present to participate. Through Ji's graphic accounts of the numerous struggle sessions he endured, it is possible to gain an understanding of the strengths and limitations of slogan shouting as a method of torture.

The noise of slogan shouting was something that energised the crowd and whipped them up into further violence. As Ji explains, "they would begin with deafening slogans, followed by speeches and a bit of punching and slapping if the crowd became animated" (101). A "successful" struggle session appeared to require sincere and full-throated slogan shouting (101). Inadequate slogan shouting was a

13 Cowsheds were "makeshift detention centers" that "sprung up in many Chinese cities" in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. Those that were incarcerated in these cowsheds were made to perform manual labour and frequently "[recite] tracts of Mao's writing". The cowshed guards inflicted various kinds of "physical and psychological violence" on convicts (Ji 2016, 7).

14 For a more in-depth exploration of the term see Novak, Sakakeeny 2015, 125.

sign of a mediocre, or failed struggle session, as Ji details elsewhere: "The slogans were halfhearted, there was no kicking or punching, and I barely held the airplane position at all. The speeches were 90 percent nonsense and 9 percent lies, with 1 percent remaining as a grain of truth. If I were grading struggle sessions, this one would fail – I couldn't give it any more than a 3 out of 10" (64).[15]

When the slogans were more impassioned, louder and relentless, they could be severely disorienting, as Ji illustrates:

> People in the crowd began to throw stones at me, hitting my face and body. I was aware of being kicked, punched, spat on, and yet I was unable to fight back. Despite having lived near campus for nearly twenty years, I couldn't tell where the truck was going. I felt like a sailboat lost at sea or a fox surrounded by hounds. The slogans were making me dizzy, and I gave myself up for lost. (57)

In this brutal account, Ji claims that the yelling of slogans made him "dizzy", to the extent that he became unaware of his very familiar surroundings. As Ji stated in his outline of a typical struggle session quoted above, exactly what was being shouted was not especially important ("[the] masses could pin any label they liked on their unfortunate victims"), so it is possible that it was the sheer loudness of the experience that caused his loss of bearings, and to some extent the loss of his sense of self. This could be explained by the phenomenon Michael Heller terms "listener collapse", which occurs when

> loud sound dissolves the ability to distinguish between interior and exterior worlds, especially in regard to sound and self. Sound does not only touch, it saturates and fills mental and physical consciousness, eliminating the possibility of detached listening. In a sense, listener collapse acts as a forced imposition of the type of sonic experience proposed by [Jean-Luc] Nancy; it is a moment in which penetration erases our ability to distinguish between exterior/sound and interior/self, bringing both together in a single inescapable vibration. (2015, 45)

To some extent, however, as Ji explains when describing later struggle sessions, he learned to detach himself from both the sounds he endured, and the other forms of torture inflicted upon him:

15 Jan Wong describes a similar struggle session in *Red China Blues*, which took place in the latter part of the Cultural Revolution period, in which the distinct lack of noise and energy also signified its failure (1997, 114).

> After half an hour in the airplane position, I was often sore all over and drenched in sweat; before long, I would grow light-headed and sway slightly, my ears ringing. To keep myself going, I sometimes repeated a Mao saying to myself: 'Make up your mind to fight without counting the costs, overcome all obstacles, and strive for victory!'. Or in my case: 'Make up your mind to ignore the pain, overcome all obstacles, and strive not to collapse!'. This generally worked. As I persevered, the slogans and speeches began to sound faint and faraway, like thunder on distant hilltops. (2016, 65)

Later on (123), Ji describes a similar sort of disassociated response to being struggled against, and on other occasions, despite his ears ringing with slogans and having fists raining down upon him, he reports being merely "bored" and even "amused". Heller explains, quoting the work of Elaine Scarry on torture, that "experiences of extreme pain work to dissolve the most basic concepts of self and world. For the body in pain, neither self, nor world, nor choice exist, as torment becomes the only perceivable content of consciousness" (2015, 46). Ji describes detached listening almost as if he has lost his sense of self, and as if what he was experiencing was not truly happening to him. This suggests that there were limits to the effectiveness of loud struggle sessions, and that human beings can find audile techniques (Sterne 2003, 23-5, 92-5) to endure extreme loudness, at least when it is occurring. Or perhaps, more negatively, that the struggle sessions effectively destroyed Ji's sense of self.

Being targeted with extreme loudness can also cause trauma in the long-term, as evidenced by Ji Xianlin (in his descriptions of his post-Cultural Revolution life), and as seen in another description of a targeted sonic attack. Xing Lu, in her work on early Cultural Revolution-era rhetoric (2004), recounts the abuse her family suffered when her father was labelled a bad element:

> [We] endured humiliation and fear inflicted by a loudspeaker, which was placed outside our apartment building and constantly repeated at high volume: "Down with Lu Rong"; "Lu Rong is a capitalist running dog"; "Down with all the cow ghosts and snake spirits". The loudspeaker also broadcast revolutionary songs and announced public denunciation rallies. The projected noise was so loud and terrifying that Mother got into the habit of going to the toilet every time she heard the loudspeaker, and to this day whenever she hears a loudspeaker she has to urinate immediately. It would seem that Mother's bladder was totally conditioned by the terror of the Cultural Revolution. (2004, 20-1)

From this story we get a sense of the long-term impacts of extreme loudness, and the power of amplified sound as a tool for oppression,

persecution and possible conditioning. The family's private space was invaded with projected noise that could not be shut out, and which they had to endure throughout the day. The extreme loudness caused long-term trauma, or conditioning, recalling the arguments made in the second section of this article. Here, however, the conditioning was linked to a traumatic and protracted period of time, rather than the everyday regularity of the soundscape, suggesting something of the particularly affective power of loud noise and targeted harassment.

Heller argues that loudness, "especially at extreme levels […] draws its force from an oscillation that flattens and/or transgresses several perceptual binaries: interior/exterior, self/other, presence/meaning, individual/social, physical/reflective", and it disorients us by "disrupting our most basic perceptual apparatuses" (2015, 54-5). Extreme loudness, in these early Cultural Revolution-era denunciations, was also coupled with the tactic of continuous broadcasting – or "acoustic bombardment", to use Suzanne G. Cusick's term – when loudspeakers were employed. Similar to the US military's usage of heavy metal music in the siege of Fallujah in Iraq in November 2004, the constant loud sounds, and the way in which they could reverberate, was disorienting. Regarding the Fallujah siege, a psyops spokesman said at the time, "it's not the music so much as the sound. It's like throwing a smoke bomb. The aim is to disorient and confuse the enemy to gain a tactical advantage" (Cusick 2006, 3). In cases where similar techniques were employed in Mao era China, the aim was also to psychologically weaken and destroy individuals as well, and remove to some extent their sense of self, no matter how much they fought against the ordeal.[16]

One important aspect of the psychological destruction experienced by struggled-against individuals in the early years of the Cultural Revolution is that it was primarily young people, the Red Guards, who were the protagonists of these events. These youngsters, who were shaped by the education system described above, constituted the crowds that verbally and physically assaulted Ji Xianlin, who frequently mentions the youth of his attackers in his memoir (2016, 32, 41, 60, 75). These youngsters were the prison guards of the cowsheds, and their life trajectories throughout the Mao era, from children raised within the PRC's education system to young adults encouraged to punish those they took for counter-revolutionaries, perhaps speaks best to the development of the chaotic disciplinary society in this period.

16 In the context of struggle sessions and interrogations, this tactic was known as "exhaustive bombardment" (*pilao hongzha* 疲劳轰炸). This method for forcing confessions is detailed in Cheng 2010, 20, 297.

3.3 Eavesdropping, Bugging and Being Overheard

In this section I will outline a few instances concerning the dangers of being overheard, and the fears that individuals had of eavesdropping. I argue that although the PRC did not have access to sophisticated bugging and wiretapping technology (as detailed by Lenk [2012] in her exploration of the East German panaural state in the 1980s), or the means to apply any such comparable technology widely across the nation, the citizens of the Mao era still lived within a form of "panaural state", owing to a more generalised fear of being overheard.

In a number of Mao era memoirs, authors have written about either their fears of eavesdropping, or of the actual negative consequences of being overheard in some way that marked them as being against the Party. In his memoir concerning the early years of the PRC, *Escape from Red China*, Robert Loh describes the chilling effect on intersocial relations brought about by the strictures on freedom of speech that were becoming more and more apparent in daily life. On one evening when Loh was with his friends (the Chans) and their wives, the topic of military conscription came up, when his friend (Charlie) declared: "What a pity I am over thirty years old, and thus do not have a chance to be conscripted as I wish. I regret that I miss this chance to serve my country and my people". The rest of the group was "shocked" at hearing "group-meeting talk in a private living room" (Loh 1962, 173). After this, Loh writes:

> Charlie's wife then said quietly, "you are in your house with your family, Charlie. You needn't speak like that to us".
>
> But she was wrong, and we all knew it. I think each of us was picturing in his mind what would happen if one of us were found unacceptable to the regime. If we were then to save ourselves we would have to denounce him and use our knowledge of him, acquired from years of close friendship, to betray him. Instinctively each of us in that group realized that the others represented his greatest danger. For months, although we outwardly seemed unchanged, our conversation together had been the most inconsequential "small talk" interspersed with such 'safe' ideas as Charlie had automatically expressed. I know also that when Charlie made his comment each of us experienced a new depth of despair, but we were afraid even to show our anguish. Instead, we returned to meaningless chatter. (173)

This anecdote touches on a number of things about how the "panaural state" developed in the PRC. First, according to Loh, the constraints on what individuals should and should not talk about in public, even with close friends, had taken hold imperceptibly before that evening's get-together. Second, the panaural state, in which people felt

that they were being listened to, was not reliant on wiretapping or bugging, because saying something that could be construed as anti-Party to anyone, friend or enemy, could potentially bring about trouble at any point in the future. Third, the circulation of propaganda in the soundscape, and in the broader mediascape, all caused people to know by heart what talk represented pro- and anti-Party (or Mao or Marxism-Leninism) sentiments. It should be noted that this is an early Cold War-era memoir produced for a Western audience, but the situation related does chime with numerous other accounts that document either fears of being eavesdropped on, or of betraying other people – including family members – upon overhearing something compromising about them, in order to show greater loyalty to the nation, the Party and Mao.[17]

In Ji Xianlin's aforementioned memoir, the dangers of being overheard and of not internalising discipline on what could and could not be spoken publicly is quite apparent. In fact, the event that sealed his downfall was being overheard. As Ji explains:

> I read a poster criticizing an essay of mine called "Springtime in Yanyuan". The Red Guards claimed that springtime represented capitalism, and celebrating the spring amounted to celebrating capitalism. I was bewildered. If anything, spring has always been the sign of new life – since when had it been appropriated as the emblem of capitalism? […] At that point, I was still a true believer. But I knew perfectly well that the springtime I wrote about had nothing to do with capitalism and everything to do with the change of seasons. As I read the poster about my essay, I couldn't help snorting audibly. The enemy's eyes and ears were everywhere […] this single snort would later be used against me. (2016, 13)

This single snort was used by Ji's enemies to destroy his life, which is not surprising when we take into consideration the fact of the quotas on rightists/bad elements during the Anti-Rightist movement of 1957 and in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution[18] as well as the whole range of signifiers denoted as bourgeois or anti-Party sentiments in this latter period.[19]

17 Two examples of the innumerable accounts of such matters can be found in Nanchu (2001) and Ye, Ma (2005). Both memoirs describe the "fashionable" trend of reporting on one's own parents and Nanchu's memoir also delineates her fears about her house being bugged (2001, 21).

18 In these two movements, quotas were set for people considered to be either rightists or other sorts of bad elements – 5-10% in both cases –, so people were required to find 5-10% of their peers to have been guilty of something or other (Yang 2021, 86).

19 Numerous objects, customs and past-times were considered "bourgeois" at various stages in the Mao era. The Cultural Revolution saw widespread destruction or confis-

In the course of everyday life, however, when political campaigns were not ongoing, would people have been justified in assuming that others were eavesdropping on their conversations? The exact extent of public security/intelligence work at the grassroots of daily life in the Mao era is not known, and the domestic intelligence history of Mainland China has not been extensively researched. In one of the few academic works on this subject, *Spying for the People: Mao's Secret Agents, 1949-1967,* Michael Schoenhals argues that "widespread – but not necessarily efficient – use of agents was made by the competent governmental authorities in the urban People's Republic up to 1967 in counterintelligence and in compliance-oriented surveillance of status offenders (that is to say of 'class enemies')" (2013, 234).

As Schoenhals relates, a "Belgian correspondent for Agence France Press wrote in the early 1960s" that he had not yet met someone "who has actually discovered a microphone in his Peking home or office", but it is also true that the "neighborhood watch" or "social eyes and ears (*shehui ermu* 社会耳目)" could well have been gathering information on those "people deemed of interest", even if such people were not actually being bugged (51). This justified people's sense of being listened to at any given moment, by anyone around them, and caused many individuals to have a fear of being overheard, and to feel as if they were living within something akin to a "panaural state". Such a sense of paranoia naturally led to some people becoming self-disciplined about speaking in public, about who they would speak with, and even what non-verbal sounds they might make when in company, though as I explain in the following section, not everyone shared this anxiety.

4 Repetition

So far in this article I have explored the concept of a panaural state by examining the ways in which amplified sound usage in everyday life, struggle sessions, noise, and the paranoia of being overheard, caused citizens of Mao era China to internalise obedience and develop feelings of fear and anxiety, most notably in urban areas in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. To fully examine the "panaural state" notion, however, it is important to also consider flaws and aberrations in the sonic propaganda system in China during these years, and how even in situations where the Party was able to establish a robust sonic infrastructure, and regular broadcasting, with the type of content

cation of such bourgeois things as: ornamental plants and flowers, rockeries, goldfish ponds, cats, racing pigeons, articles of worship, luxury items, foreign books, concealed weapons, foreign currency, old land deeds, etc. (Dikötter 2016, 146).

and messaging they wished to deliver, they were still not always capable of obtaining the desired reaction from their listening audience.

In this section I consider repetition in the Mao era soundscape.[20] I argue that although recorded sound's capacity for repeatability was of value to the Party, repetition was not, by itself, able to ensure the success of Party propaganda due to two main factors: first, messaging was repeated too often, so that it became either irritating or easier to tune out, and second, messaging could be rendered ineffective if it was contradicted by what was being heard elsewhere in society – the hidden transcript (Scott 1990) – or by first-hand experience. Repetition was productive as a propaganda tool when there was some restraint in its usage, but at many points in the Mao era when the leftist wing of the Party (headed by Mao) was in the ascendancy over the non-leftist wing (represented by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping; Liu 1975, 8), repetition was overused in mass persuasion efforts.

The Nazi party also favoured the usage of repetition in their propaganda work. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels contended, however, that excessive repetition had an adverse effect, as Leonard Doob explains:

> On the one hand, Goebbels believed that propaganda must be repeated until it was thoroughly learned and that thereafter more repetition was necessary to reinforce the learning. Such repetition took place over time – the same theme was mentioned day after day – as well as in the output of a single day. An anti-Semitic campaign, for example, continued for weeks, during which time "about 70 to 80 per cent of our broadcasts are devoted to it" (366). On the other hand, repetition could be unnecessary or even undesirable. It was unnecessary when "the material thus far published has completely convinced the public" (386). It was undesirable when "the theme became boring or unimpressive". (1950, 435)

From many accounts of life in the Mao era it is apparent that the CCP did not adhere to this logic when conducting their own propaganda campaigns. There was excessive repetition of both musical and linguistic themes, particularly during the early Cultural Revolution period, and also a superabundant amount of amplification in the soundscape (Clark, Pang, Tsai 2016, 248). One notable musical example of extreme repetition is the song "The East is Red", a piece of music that Andrew Jones describes as

> the most widely known and frequently broadcast song of the [1960s], saturating the quotidian life of nearly a quarter of hu-

20 An attribute of recording technology whose history is explored in detail by Katz 2010.

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> manity to an extent undreamed of by any entrant to the Western hit parade, including the Beatles. (2020, 2)

The ubiquity of this song is made especially clear in Rae Yang's memoir *Spider Eaters*:

> The east is red. The sun rises. China […] Mao Zedong […] Oh. Miserable! Just as I was about to fall asleep, this damn song starts. At five thirty! Every day. Seven days a week […] Never gives anybody a break […] I hate this song now! I used to love it […] Things change into their opposites […] Red Guards. Class enemies […] I wonder if any counterrevolutionary can match me in hating this song. It's not music. It's torture! Pouring out of a loudspeaker in a pine tree just outside my bedroom window. It drives me crazy! (2013, 157)

Rae Yang goes on to detail how much she despises the loudspeaker outside her window, and how she wishes she could destroy it. As propaganda from sound-reproducing tools became ever-present, on the streets, on public transport, in workplaces and elsewhere, it is apparent that many people during the Mao era were able to develop audile techniques (Sterne 2003, 23-5, 92-5) to shut out sounds that did not apply to them, but could quickly shift to paying attention to messages that directly affected them. In my oral interviews, and in other accounts, it is clear that people were exposed so often to various forms of political messaging, and were therefore made to understand very clearly their own particular place in the society of New China (as a member of a certain class, or as someone with a specific type of desirable or undesirable background), that they were able to recognise very quickly whether a particular message from a loudspeaker pertained to them or not. If not, they learned to ignore the propaganda.

One interviewee, who worked on a farm in Jiangxi from the late 1960s until the late 1970s, confirmed that loudspeakers could often be ignored quite easily, and that they had much less of an impact on the productivity of workers than the actual presence of a team leader. He described how workers would frequently sleep if team leaders were not around, but would make sure to look busy if they came by. Loudspeakers were merely for political propaganda, he said, which was particularly irrelevant when times were especially arduous, such as during the Great Famine (Interview One 2019). A British Foreign Office report from 1952 relates a similar instance of people learning to ignore excessive everyday noise: "On the trains […] loudspeakers intermittently blare songs of hate and lectures of vilification […] but the passengers by and large seem to carry on their conversations, reading, and throat-clearing with encouraging indifference" (Foreign Office Files for China 1952). This depiction gives the distinct impression that the passengers on the train were used to this sort of noise

in public spaces, and that neither the volume nor the content of the 'lectures' and 'songs' surprised them or particularly bothered them.

Even among youths, whom Mao believed to be the most receptive to mass persuasion, and who would have been exposed to repetitious political ideology from a very young age, there existed a hidden transcript that was at odds with the official soundscape of the Party. One collective listening event from 1963, described in an archival document,[21] shows the ways in which mass campaigns sometimes met with resistance, and Party propaganda efforts, over the long-term, were not wholly effective. This collective listening event involved the broadcast of a speech given by Premier Zhou Enlai to graduating high school students in Beijing. The document details the audience reactions to the re-broadcasting of the speech in various middle schools in Shanghai. Though the content of the speech itself is not reproduced, we can infer from the reactions to the speech that the topic concerned sending urban youths to the countryside. This was in some respects a precursor to the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" (*Shang shan xia xiang yundong* 上山下乡运动) movement in the Cultural Revolution.

As the document makes clear, some students did not receive news of the education policies well, and the listening event/speech was not sufficient in itself to address their misgivings. Some students supposedly had "fantasies" about the policy, and thought that as long as they had a "hard" attitude to the arrangement and distribution of work then they would not need to comply; they could just persist in not going where they were instructed to go. Some students were vocal in their opposition to the policy. One said: "I want to stay in Shanghai, it's fine if you call me a reactionary, I will still stay in Shanghai. The next time we have one of these kinds of political movement, I will not attend". A number of students also had particular issues with the possibility of being sent to Xinjiang. There were several "rumours" that students had questions about. Students made the following comments: "Xinjiang is full of soldiers, they're all old soldiers, in their thirties or forties, and they want to marry, they want female students to go there to marry them"; "The ethnic minority people there all carry knifes on them, they're very scary people"; "Xinjiang has very little water, in your lifetime you can only shower three times (when you're born, when you marry and when you die)"; and "Xinjiang is very close to the Soviet Union, now the Soviet-Chinese relationship is very tense, is there a chance of war breaking out?".

That these 'rumours' circulated in society, and bore an influence on the youngsters growing up in the PRC, shows something of the difficulties the Party had in imposing their propaganda system, and in ful-

21 Cf. Shangai Municipal Archives B105-8-107-38.

ly establishing a form of sonic social control. It is true that the political rhetoric of the era – especially during the Cultural Revolution – was circulated in a relentless fashion, so that students could easily regurgitate 'correct' interpretations of history or the 'correct' attitudes towards any given situation or current event, but as this document indicates, there were also ways in which the 'official transcript' of the Party's propaganda soundscape was undermined in everyday life. Significant resistance against the Party during the Mao era was also evidenced by the great amounts of letters from the people (*Renmin lai xin* 人民来信), which criticised corruption and the disastrous consequences of certain Party's policies, as well as by numerous acts of protest and petitioning, narrated in works such as Zhou Xun's (2012) documentary history on the Great Famine (1958-62). People were not always afraid to be heard, and as this section has shown, these instances of courageous speaking out served, in part, to subvert the official soundscape. As this section has also shown, the Party's intense efforts at homogenising the soundscape, even when they were achieved, did not always yield their desired results anyway, because extreme repetition of musical or linguistic themes often caused propaganda to become stale, deeply irritating, and unproductive.

5 Conclusion

In this article I have examined the various ways in which sound and listening caused fear and anxiety which led, to some degree, to the internalisation of obedience in the Mao era. My focus has been purely on sound, in terms of noise/loudness; listening, in relation to eavesdropping; acoustic timetables, enforced listening, and repetition; but it is important to bear in mind that the loudspeaker was also a tangible object and a visual symbol. Loudspeaker broadcasts also often encouraged, directly or indirectly, behaviour that other citizens could observe, and perhaps use as information if it was deemed counter-revolutionary. As Brian Larkin argues,

> the loudspeaker displays a meta-reflexive desire, that is, the desire to be *seen* relaying a message as well as simply relaying a message […] a loudspeaker is a visual device as well as an aural one, drawing attention to itself as a medium of relay. (2014, 990)

In the early PRC, the loudspeaker was a visual representation of the Party and Mao's voice, and people needed to comport themselves in a manner appropriate to the content being broadcast. Naturally, this also contributed to the internalisation of obedience and compliance. For example, in Ming Fang He's *A River Forever Flowing*, a memoir that documents the experiences of three women from their child-

hoods in the time of the Great Leap Forward (1958-62) to their lives in Canada as adults and academics, He documents her friend Wei's recollection of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution:

> Everywhere I went, people were parroting slogans and grabbing Chairman Mao's Red Book to worship Chairman Mao with the loudspeaker announcing the latest instruction from Tiananmen Square. Whenever Chairman Mao's speeches were broadcast through loudspeakers, people would stop and look excited with tears in their eyes. I had tears in my eyes too but for different reasons. (2003, 30)

We can surmise that at least some of the people within earshot of the loudspeakers would have been compelled to behave according to what was expected of them, rather than being genuinely tearful. This is not to suggest, however, that no-one behaved in a natural way in these situations, because of the imposition of the loudspeakers, or that people had no agency or support for the Party. The loudspeaker was an imposition, however, on those that did not genuinely share in the emotions that were obviously required of them. For example, when Mao died, because of the loudspeaker broadcast of the news of his death and the mourning music that was played everywhere, two people I spoke with recalled having to look "serious" and having to cry in public, though they did not truly care about what had happened (Interview Two 2020; Interview Three 2019).

Returning to the Foucauldian framework of the modern disciplinary society, in this article I have argued that sound was crucial to the internalisation of obedience, and that during the Mao-years China – the urban PRC at least – could be considered, to an extent, a panaural state, albeit a low-tech one. Audibility was as much a trap as visibility, as it also was in the later GDR (Lenk 2012). However, the PRC's divergence from Foucault's vision of a disciplinary society was not just because of this difference, but also because of the continued significance of a sovereign type will throughout society (Mao's will), which resulted in a generally more arbitrary and chaotic forced internalisation of obedience, in which discipline and punishment were often meted out loudly, publicly and in disorder, as much as they also occurred within the bounds of institutions, and were carried out in a more regulated fashion. China today may have entered into the "age of infinite examination", to use another of Foucault's terms (1979, 189), with its very high prevalence of sophisticated surveillance equipment,[22] but

22 Two forms of mass surveillance that are particularly pervasive in China today are digital surveillance through social media and the Internet, and video surveillance in public areas, which also incorporates digital capabilities, such as facial recognition. These forms of surveillance have been widely covered in the Western media in recent years, for example: `https://www.npr.org/2021/01/05/953515627/facial-`

the early stages of this disciplinary society were built on audibility perhaps more than visibility.

As this article has shown, however, the Party often faced great difficulties in attempting to promulgate its messaging everywhere, and even in the circumstances where it could achieve intensely repetitious propagandising, an appropriate reception could not be guaranteed. As various accounts in this article have elucidated, though noise and ubiquitous broadcasting or slogan shouting certainly caused a great amount of fear, anxiety and lasting damage to many individuals in the Mao era, some people were able to develop audile techniques that could be employed to shut out the targeted or constant noise in order to fundamentally protect their selves. It was in these small acts of resistance – "internalised disobedience", it could be termed – that many were able to endure the chaos and destruction of the latter years of Mao's rule.

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Other Sources: Oral Interviews

Note: The oral interviews listed here are part of a larger set of interviews conducted for the Author's PhD Dissertation (cf. Lovell 2022). The interview numbers assigned here differ from those assigned in the official text.

Interview One (2019). Man; born in 1951; spent the entire Mao period in Jiangxi Province; became an agricultural worker in 1967. Interviewed on 29 October; follow up interview by phone on 7 December.

Interview Two (2020). Woman; born in 1944 in Tianjin; worked as a doctor in Tianjin from 1969. Interviewed on 26 September.

Interview Three (2019). Woman; born in 1951; grew up in Tianjin; sent-down youth from 1968 to 1975 in Inner Mongolia. Interviewed on 27 December.

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The Fragility of Authorship for Film Directors in Contemporary China

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Abstract Despite its progressive liberalisation and development, the Chinese film industry is still subject to strict control from the China Film Administration (CFA). Laws and regulations evolved since the 1990s, but they leave large space to interpretation, opening the door to a long process of negotiation that can alter the vision of the directors. In the early 1990s, the Sixth Generation of directors changed the canons of Chinese art-house cinema, adopting a gritty neo-realist style, investigating the darker sides of Chinese society, and working outside the official studio system. Despite recognition in the international festival circuit, which deprived them of national distribution, they decided to return to the fold. The negotiation process with the CFA makes their authorship fragile, and the necessity to continue to be present in the festival circuit risk to put them in a double occupancy position. This article will analyse what are the factors that fragilise the authorship of contemporary Chinese art-house directors and what are the countermeasures adopted by some of them to preserve their authorship.

Keywords Art-house cinema. Authorship. Negotiation. Fragility. Marginalisation. Censorship. Marketisation.

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> If you're an artist working in China, you become aware that there are things you have to give up in order to practice your art. For the most part, you know what they are.[1]
>
> Jia Zhangke, 2013

1 Introduction

The Chinese film industry has experienced remarkable growth and transformation over the past few decades, emerging as a prominent player on the global cinematic stage. However, beneath the surface of this rapid development lies a complex web of laws, regulations, and competitive market conditions that have profound implications for the artistic freedom and authorship of contemporary art-house directors. In this article, we delve into the nuanced environment of the Chinese film industry and examine how it has created a delicate ecosystem in which the autonomy and creative vision of directors are increasingly vulnerable.

China's film industry has undergone significant shifts since its liberalisation in the 1980s, transitioning from a heavily regulated state-controlled system to a more market-oriented model. While this transition has provided newfound opportunities and commercial success for many film-makers, it has also posed challenges for those seeking to create thought-provoking, artistically daring works outside the mainstream. One of the primary factors contributing to the fragilisation of authorship is the negotiation required under the laws and regulations that govern the Chinese film industry, which often pushes directors to make compromises, leading to diluted narratives or self-censorship to ensure their works comply with political and cultural sensitivities. Furthermore, the highly competitive market conditions within the Chinese film industry add another layer of pressure on art-house directors. With the dominance of commercial blockbusters and the relentless pursuit of box office success, artistic films often struggle to find adequate funding, distribution channels, and screening opportunities.

This article aims to shed light on the multi-faceted challenges faced by contemporary art-house directors in China. By examining the interplay between the legal and regulatory landscape, the influence of censorship, and the commercial demands of the market, we seek to deepen our understanding of how these factors collectively erode the authorship and creative agency of film-makers. Ultimately, this article aims to provoke critical reflection on the delicate balance between artistic freedom, market forces, and regulatory frameworks

1 Cf. Johnson 2013.

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within the Chinese film industry. By illuminating the challenges faced by contemporary art-house directors, we aspire to contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding creative autonomy, cultural production, and the preservation of diverse cinematic expression in the global film-making landscape.

The article will first explore the roots of art-house cinema in the cinema of the so-called "Sixth Generation". It will show how their style and poetry allowed them to become icons of the international festival circuit and synonymous with Chinese art-house cinema. We will see how this international recognition put them in a dual position, having to satisfy both festivals to ensure acceptance, as well as appease the censors for a national release in China. The analysis will then focus on the difficulties that Chinese authors face in finding a space in an extremely competitive market under strict control by the authorities. Finally, the article will point out to what are the resources available to Chinese directors in preserving their authorship.

2 The Roots of Chinese Art-House Cinema in the Sixth Generation, Independent, Underground Scene

Art cinema is a global phenomenon that encompasses a diverse range of films produced across different countries and cultures. It is characterised by its commitment to artistic expression, experimental storytelling, and departure from mainstream commercial cinema. Art cinema seeks to challenge conventional narrative structures, engage with complex themes, and evoke emotional and intellectual responses from its audience (Cardullo 2011, 1-4). In China, the film industry was a hostage of the propagandistic structure, and it was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the reform era that it slowly started to regain vitality. The government allowed private initiative and loosened control over production, allowing a new generation of film-makers, known as the "Fifth Generation",[2] to emerge. These directors, like Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 (1950) and Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 (1952), often employed lavish production design, poetic storytelling, and viv-

2 A form of labelling that respects the chronological tradition of dividing the history of Chinese cinema into 'ages': the First Generation represents the forefathers of Chinese cinematography, who were active from the introduction of cinema in 1896 and made their main contributions in the early 1920s; the Second Generation came up during the 1920s and 1930s; the Third Generation is mostly associated with the time span from the founding of the Republic in 1949 until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966; the Fourth Generation was formed just before the Cultural Revolution, which meant they only started working at the end of it; and the Fifth Generation is composed of the first graduates of film academies after the Cultural Revolution, the most prominent of which is Zhang Yimou (Song, Ward 2011).

id cinematography. Their films, such as *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang* 红高粱, 1988) and *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地, 1984), received critical acclaim and played a crucial role in putting Chinese cinema on the map. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a new generation of Chinese film-makers, known as the "Sixth Generation", emerged, going on to represent the new wave of Chinese art-house cinema by revolutionising the associated poetics, politics, and techniques.

This generation of directors focused on depicting the social realities and challenges faced by individuals in contemporary China. Inspired by neo-realism, they moved away from the Fifth Generation's grand historical narratives and critical engagement with tradition and culture, adopting instead a gritty style to represent the controversies and socio-political issues of contemporary China (Lu 2016, 177-8). Unlike Fifth-Generation directors, who often worked within the boundaries of state-funded studios and abided by official policies, the film-makers of the Sixth Generation embraced independent film-making, working without following procedures, and often faced censorship challenges due to their critical portrayals of contemporary Chinese society. Their reflections and explorations of the tensions and transformations within Chinese society offer insightful commentary on issues such as urbanisation, globalisation, and individual identity, helping to establish them as ambassadors of Chinese art-house cinema. Among the ranks of the Sixth Generation, we can find Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 (1970), Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅 (1966), and Lou Ye 娄烨 (1965), who were some of the first directors to establish this new path of art cinema and influenced those like Diao Yinan 刁亦男 (1969) and Ying Liang 应亮 (1977), who emerged later and followed in their footsteps.

Jia Zhangke represents an archetype of the Sixth-Generation independent art-house director. Jia's authorship was first observed in a hometown trilogy, composed of *Xiao Wu* 小武 (1997), the story of a pickpocket, *Platform* (*Zhantai* 站台, 2000), set in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and exploring the lives of the members of a theatre troupe, and *Unknown Pleasures* (*Renxiaoyao* 任逍遥, 2002), which follows three disaffected, aimless young people in the industrial city of Datong. The trilogy offers poignant insights into the lives of ordinary individuals grappling with the complexity and uncertainty caused by rapid urbanisation, political reforms and globalisation, but was not released in China (Mello 2022, 35-57). However, the critical acclaim received by these films allowed the young director to establish himself as an auteur and marquee name of Chinese art cinema in the festival circuit, earning him the support of global art-house cinema lovers. Despite being 'officially banned in China', the films circulated via the pirate DVD market, small cinephile clubs and cafés, and underground film festivals, building a niche audience at home as well. This aspect of national circulation is common for all Sixth-

Generation directors and earned them another label, that of 'underground directors'.

The label of 'independent' is controversial, as it is a borrowing from the American art lexicon, suggesting small-budget productions realised outside of the Hollywood big-budget studio standard. This clashes with the post-socialist conditions of China under reform. On the other hand, the term 'underground' is one that many Chinese film-makers chose to adopt as part of their identity, as it reflected their artistic path as well as the importance of the underground circuit in forming a community of professionals and building a relationship with the national audience (Pickowicz 2006, 3). Private initiative and funding in the film industry were permitted from the late 1970s, when China started to implement reforms and loosen its socialist economic structure. The film industry was trying to recover from the damage of the Cultural Revolution; however, if this relaxation around economic participation allowed these young directors to find international and transnational financers for their early projects, there was not a relaxation of content control or censorship to accompany it. The state continued to strictly monitor all cultural production via the various incarnations of the Film Bureau, which today is called the 'China Film Administration' or CFA (*Guojia dianyingju* 国家电影局) and is under the direct control of the Propaganda Department. Despite policies being changed over the years, they were ratified only in 2016 by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress under the Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dianying chanye cujinfa* 中华人民共和国电影产业促进法), which established that all scripts must be first reviewed to obtain authorisation to start filming, and a final review of the filmed material is mandatory to obtain a distribution license (SCNPC 2017, ch. 2, arts 13, 18). Hence, the independence that Sixth-Generation directors are known for is related more to their disregard of official procedures, as they filmed and submitted their films to festivals without any official permission.

Furthermore, the 'generation' and 'underground' labels are sometimes combined, with these directors also referred to as the 'urban generation'. This underlines the relationship between the subject matter of their films and the socio-cultural changes taking place in urban areas, while keeping the connection with the traditional chronological categorisation used up to this point (Zhang 2007, 3). All these labels, especially 'independent' or 'banned', have been often used as branding strategies on the various platforms where these directors' works were presented (Nie 2021, 380). Although their initial 'underground' works earned them exposure and praise in the international festival circuit, they were renouncing the possibility of obtaining national theatrical screenings. Their return to the fold, best exemplified by Jia Zhangke's *The World* (*Shijie* 世界, 2004), was surely influ-

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enced by the gradual loss of the underground environment that culminated with the 2014 crackdown of the Beijing Independent Film Festival (Lichaa 2017, 302). This caused an impoverishment of the space they had gained through years of screenings on cine-clubs, cafés and small bars, so that many of them, like Jia Zhangke, felt the urge to compromise with the authorities in order not to give up their desire to officially reach a national audience (McGrath 2007, 108).

This turning point marked the beginning of an officially state-approved art cinema. Films continued to circulate at international festivals and obtained licenses for national distribution in Chinese theatres. Although this rendered all previously used labels obsolete, the ethics, poetics and style of the Sixth Generation would influence all new directors that aspired to make art cinema. Following state regulations also meant that directors' creativity and authorship were now subject to censorship, and furthermore, they also had to face the struggle of finding distribution in a highly competitive and profit-oriented market. This twofold negotiation process will be the focus of the following section of this article.

3 Affirmation and Fragilisation of Authorship: International Festivals, Market Forces and Censorship

The director is the 'authority' in all processes of the creation of a film. They direct all involved parties (the director of photography and technical crew, the scriptwriter if there is one, and of course the actors) that work in collaboration to create a filmic product (Truffaut 1954). As decision-makers, directors can impose their vision from pre-production to the screening of the film in theatres. In the case of many Sixth Generation directors, they may also be the scriptwriter, producer, director of photography, art director, editor, or even act in their own films. The role of the director is that of a chief of operations, coordinating the troops to create their vision, style and poetics in the product, obtaining recognition as the 'author' of the film. The directors that will be the focus of the article have all occupied different roles during the production of most of their films. Jia Zhangke was director, scriptwriter, producer, and editor for *The World*, *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人, 2006), *A Touch of Sin* (*Tianzhuding* 天注定, 2014) and other films. Lou Ye acted as both director and scriptwriter in *Mystery* (*Fucheng mishi* 浮城謎事, 2012), *Summer Palace* (*Yiheyuan* 頤和园, 2006) and *Suzhou River* (*Suzhou he* 苏州河, 2000). Diao Yinan occupied the positions of director and scriptwriter for all his films, as did Ying Liang.[3]

3 These details can be found in the credits of all films.

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By occupying these roles, central in the classic debate over authorship, they cement their position as authors. To further justify their supremacy in the creative process, and consequently their authorship, it should be noted that it is the director, although often accompanied by the producer, who pays the price for eluding censorship and violating the control measures imposed by the state. In practice, this involves a fine and a ban on making films for up to five years, as demonstrated by the case of Lou Ye, who was sanctioned first for *Suzhou River*, with a two-year ban for screening the film at Rotterdam Film Festival without an official license (Brody 2023), and again in 2006, for his controversial participation in Cannes Film Festival with *Summer Palace* (*Variety* 2006).

Since during their independent period, these art-house directors were living and working in obscurity and in a hostile environment for their creations, their participation and accolades at prestigious international festivals gained them a sympathetic Western audience and significant foreign financial support, unavailable in their homeland. Even famed film critic Dai Jinhua first learned of their existence from newspapers and journals published abroad and saw their works only at international festivals, foreign embassies in Beijing, and with her friends (Lin 2010, 91-2). The festival circuit clearly played an important role in elevating these directors and their cinema to the status of art cinema. Screening their films and winning awards on these stages allowed them to forge their "brand name", fundamental in establishing them as authors (Jeong, Szaniawski 2016, 4). The exposure obtained first by their being 'officially banned in China' allowed them to draw new attention to the panorama of cinema from the People's Republic of China, establishing their style as the style of Chinese art-house cinema. In fact, starting in the 1990s, the gritty realism and bleak societal critiques of the Sixth Generation took over the vivid images of the Fifth Generation's historic melodrama and pushed their predecessors to adapt to the new trend to remain relevant. Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige also experimented with this trend, the former with his film *Not One Less* (*Tianshang you yige taiyang* 天上有个太阳, 1999), the latter with *Together* (*Heni zai yiqi* 和你在一起, 2002), before returning to their historical dramas and gaining box office success with their martial arts (*wuxia pian* 武侠片).

The Sixth Generation's constant presence in the festival circuit institutionalised their authorship (Jeong, Szaniawski 2016, 5), reinforcing their brand name and symbolic capital. All these factors were instrumental in their return to the fold, as the Chinese film industry and market were searching for official recognition that was not accompanied by controversial labels, recognition that could serve in spreading soft power (Pollacchi 2017, 224).

As previously mentioned, all films that aspire to obtain a release, be it for the national market, the international festival circuit, the in-

ternational market, or even for online distribution via the burgeoning universe of SVOD platforms, like iQIYI (爱奇艺) or Tencent Video (*Tengxun shipin* 腾讯视频), must undergo the scrutiny of the CFA (SCNPC 2017). Despite the market liberalisation that began in the 1980s (allowing private initiative to invest in the film industry, with the import of foreign films authorised in 1994), cinema is still a highly controlled cultural industry. The 2016 Film Industry Promotion Law regulates all aspects of film production and distribution and gives some provisions regarding banned content. As expressed in Article 16, films must not contain the following content:

> [one that] slander the fine cultural traditions of the nation, inciting national hatred and discrimination, infringing on national customs and habits, distorting national history or historical figures, hurting national feelings, and undermining national unity [...] Endanger national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, divulge state secrets, endanger national security, damage national dignity, honor, and interests, and promote terrorism and extremism; [...] Endangering social morality, disturbing social order, undermining social stability, promoting obscenity, gambling, drug use, exaggerating violence and terror, instigating crimes or teaching criminal methods.[4] (SCNPC 2017)

However, instead of providing the industry with a rating system like that of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA),[5] which rates a motion picture's suitability for certain audiences based on its content, the Promotion Law simply gives a list of content that is problematic and, at least theoretically, banned from all motion pictures, forcing directors into a process of constant negotiation. As mentioned, the scrutiny imposed by the CFA starts from the script stage: it must be submitted for preliminary review to the Film Administration before shooting begins; if it receives the 'green light', filming can start. However, if the script is not fully approved, the censor will give feedback and suggest what modifications should be applied, and the process starts again. Once shooting is concluded, all material must be sent for a second review. If certain scenes are deemed to violate the guidelines, changes will be suggested. However, if everything is compliant, the film can then apply for a distribution license or 'Permit for Public Screening' (*Dianyingpian gongying xukezheng* 电影片

4 A translated version of this law is available on the China Law Translate website: https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/film-industry-promotion-law-2016.

5 The MPAA rating system is a guide for parents to determine the appropriateness of a film's content for children and teenagers. More information on the rating system is available on the MPAA website: https://www.motionpictures.org/film-ratings.

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公映许可证), also referred as the 'dragon sigil' (*longbiao* 龙标) for the logo that appears at the beginning of all approved films.

One of the main points that triggers CFA attention is the depiction of violence. An art-house film that encountered problems for this reason is Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*. The film blends Jia's traditional predilection for realism and slow-paced camera shots with brutal and bloody violence *à la* Tarantino, in a four-chapter anthology of social criticism and harsh satire. The stories represented by the film are all based on true events: Hu Wenhai, a peasant vigilante who killed fourteen villagers in Shanxi in 2001; Zhou Kehua, a fugitive who carried out a series of armed robberies in 2012; Deng Yujiao, a pedicure worker who stabbed a customer and local government official to death when he attempted to sexually assault her in a hotel in Hubei in 2009; and the wave of suicides of Foxconn employees, who jumped off the factory's buildings to their deaths in 2010 (Xiao 2015, 24).

Despite its sensitive subject matter, the film was allowed to participate in the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Best Screenplay Award. Following this, Jia and the censors agreed to a national release in October 2013. However, although at first the censors' board agreed to distribute the film, the director was contacted shortly after the festival and notified that the national release date had to be postponed, as the violence depicted might influence people to resort to violence in an already tumultuous time for the country. The film therefore fell into a kind of limbo. Despite the dragon sigil for distribution, it was never allowed to be officially released, ending up on the pirate market and P2P websites. It was however authorised for international release, but this was not enough for the film to earn back its production costs (Berry 2022).

Another director who encountered issues related to the use of violence is Lou Ye, for his film *Mystery*. Lou was already accustomed to suffering censorship repercussions for his films, having received two bans from film-making. However, this was his first authorised film for which he carried out all negotiation processes. This neo-noir melodrama follows the story of a married woman who discovers that her husband is having an affair with a younger woman. The trio of protagonists' private drama takes place against the backdrop of a corrupt society, echoing some of contemporary China's own problems, such as corruption, obsession with money, ambiguity, and morality.

The film was shot legally, having obtained all the authorisations for filming, and had been approved for international co-production with the French group Les Films du Lendemain and funding from the Centre national du cinéma. It was also green-lighted for festival participation. As stated by the director, the negotiation process for approval of a film that wanted to engage with such delicate themes was long and the outcome was not the one expected. The prolonged dis-

cussion with authorities ended up pushing him to change some scenes that were deemed too violent. The crew agreed to modify them and dim the lights in the murder scenes in order to mitigate the violence depicted (Pedroletti 2012).

While art-house films often encounter difficulties for their use of violence, on the other hand it is common practice to witness brutal and bloody scenes in propaganda main melody films (*zhuxuanlv dianying* 主旋律电影).[6] Recent examples can be found in *Railway Heroes* (*Tiedao yingxiong* 铁道英雄, 2021), a film that follows the story of a counter-Japanese underground armed force of the Communist Party in Shandong during the Second Sino-Japanese War. In their raids against Japanese goods trains and support actions to other guerrilla groups, the heroes engage in bloody clashes, with many conflicts ending with limbs taken away by bullets. Another example can be found in *Home Coming* (*Wan li gui tu* 万里归途, 2022), which tells the account of the evacuation of a group of Chinese citizens from a fictional Arab country. With civil war ravaging the country, the audience is confronted with graphic post-bombing scenes, where the camera often dwells on the mutilated bodies of wounded soldiers and civilians.

Chinese regulations leave space for interpretation on content conformity and negotiation between the parties. According to Article 42 of the 2001 Film Regulations, the state reserves the power to, "under special circumstances, decide to suspend distribution, screening or release" (State Council of the PRC 2001). While this was the case for *A Touch of Sin*, it was not the case for *Railway Heroes* and *Home Coming*, as in both films the controversial nature of the violence was instrumental in elevating the Chinese protagonists as heroes. The whole negotiation process forces art-house directors to bend their vision, limiting not only their agency in the creative process but also their space in the market, making them more fragile in their own field and putting them in a precarious position that is also related to the impossibility to earn money and cover production expenses or invest in future projects.

Issues relating to national unity have always been central in Chinese political discourse, and there were concerns that liberalisation of cultural industries and a lack of control over content would result in favouring the spread of spiritual pollution even before the Tiananmen Incident of 1989 (Chu 2002, 46-9). Not surprisingly, Article 16 of Chapter 2 of the 2016 Promotion Law clearly states that films must not offend national honour, endanger social morality, disrupt social order or undermine social stability.

6 "Main melody films" are characterised by their focus on promoting the core values and ideologies of the CCP and reflecting the themes and narratives endorsed by the government (Su 2016, 21).

One director that was accused of offending national honour and disrupting social order is Ying Liang, with his 2012 film *When Night Falls* (*Wo hai youhua yao shuo* 我还有话要说). Inspired by real events, this film adopts a semi-documentary form to tell the story of the controversial arrest of a young Shanghainese man for the murder of six policemen who harassed and abused him during his arrest (Fisher 2019).[7] Filmed and distributed on the festival circuit without having sought authorisation, the film won Ying the prize for Best Director and Nai An (耐安) that for Best Actress at the Locarno Festival (Brody 2012). The film was also presented at Jeonju Festival in South Korea, where such a depiction of public authority did not pass unobserved. It was during his stay in Korea that Ying was contacted by his mother, who informed him that the Chinese police had pressurised her to contact him and push him to withdraw the film from the festival. At the same time, the festival was also contacted by the Chinese authorities, urging them to revoke the director's participation and withdraw the film. Intimidated by all this, Ying Liang decided to exile himself to Hong Kong, a city where he was already working as a professor at Hong Kong Baptist University (Zeng 2019).

The social importance of cinema and its educational function has been always significant for the communist regime. The election of Xi Jinping to the leadership of the Party and the country in 2012 and 2013 was accompanied by the China Dream (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) promotional campaign, aiming to affirm China as a leading global power in all areas, from economy to cultural production (Klimeš, Marinelli 2018). Thereafter, the focus on national narrative and content censorship was further accentuated with the celebrations for the Seventieth Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic in 2019 and the centenary of the CCP in 2021. The Chinese leadership demanded a greater focus on the 'educational' function of cinema, and this resulted in favouring the production and distribution of main melody films (Wang 2021). Furthermore, with the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Chinese Film Industry (*Shisi qu zhi Zhongguo dianying chanye fazhan guihua* 十四五冶中国电影发展规划) released in 2021, the CFA expressed a new focus on the importance of social over economic benefits (CFA 2021b), resulting in

7 The film depicts the controversial story of Yang Jia, arrested in Shanghai in October 2007 for riding an unlicensed bicycle. During the interrogation, Yang endured beatings and abuse from the officers involved. Despite his attempts to report the mistreatment he suffered during his arrest, his complaints fell on deaf ears, leading to further harassment by the authorities. Frustrated, desperate, and enraged, Yang launched an attack on a police headquarters in Shanghai, resulting in the deaths of six police officers. Once arrested, he was subjected to a hasty trial under dubious circumstances, and ultimately sentenced to death. Meanwhile, Yang's mother, Wang Jingmei, was unjustly sent to a mental hospital and detained for a shocking 143 days, preventing her from providing assistance to her son (cf. Bandurski 2008).

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an even stricter control and censorship over the content and circulation of art cinema.

If censorship can be defined as the hammer, then the market has become the anvil for every film production. Since the 1980s, after the Reform and Opening-Up period, the film industry has seen growing participation from private stakeholders. The downfall of the "Iron rice bowl" system, supported by the state's total ownership of all means of production, opened the door to liberalisation, private initiative and competition, always under rigorous scrutiny from the controlling apparatus (Zhu 2003, 105). In the decade from 2011 to 2021, an average of 696 films were produced every year, with a peak of 902 in 2018 and the lowest point in 2020 with only 531 films, due to the obvious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while the previous year Chinese studios produced 850 films (Lai Lin 2023).

In addition to the competition represented by the extensive number of domestic film productions, art cinema faces significant structural challenges. The reforms implemented following China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) brought about a fresh impetus for private initiative in the distribution and screening sectors. According to the official state definition, theatre chains are required to be established based on capital or film supply. In order to acquire copies of films, theatres need to form partnerships by signing contracts which unify the theatre chain's brand, movie release schedule and management. These alliances can take three different forms: an alliance between movie theatres, a collaboration between a film distributor and movie theatres, or a partnership between a film producer and movie theatres. If a cinema chooses not to join a theatre chain, it has no chance of obtaining copies of films from distributors. Consequently, theatre chain companies serve as intermediaries between distributors and cinemas. Despite the rising significance of privately-owned theatre chains in the market, state policies continue to favour state-owned media conglomerates, which possess a competitive advantage through 'vertical integration' supported by the state's resources and backing. This strategy aligns with the Chinese government's objective of promoting a "socialist market economy" wherein public ownership retains a dominant role, while diverse forms of ownership co-exist (Lu 2016, 208-10).

With such fierce competition, accompanied by a market that tends to favour commercial cinema and a distribution chain superseded by the state, the space for art-house directors is extremely marginal. Lou Ye's 2012 *Mystery* is one of several reported cases of art cinema that, despite being distributed in China (after six months of evaluation of the final cut), was given only one week of screening time before having to make space for commercial films and imported blockbusters (Célérier 2013). Furthermore, it is also informally known that distribution in theatres is assigned for a limited time frame. This pe-

riod can be prolonged based on the film's box office performance in the first week of screenings. However, if a film does not achieve the expected earnings within this time span, it will not continue to be screened in the following weeks, and it can even be withdrawn early if it flops in the opening days.[8]

Another practice that should be considered when analysing the characteristics of the Chinese film market is mandatory screenings. This phenomenon sees schools and work units being given tickets to attend screenings of certain films, mostly main melody, and has an obvious, but difficult-to-calculate impact on ticket sales and box office results (Zhang 2004, 286). A further symbol of the CFA's power over distributors, and how the state can intervene in the programming of state-owned as well as private theatres, can be found in a circular issued on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of the CCP. This document, released on 10 March 2021, states that all distribution units should prepare to screen "excellent films celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP". Theatres were instructed to prepare for no fewer than two screenings per week, and those belonging to the 'People's Cinema Line' (*Renmin yuanxian* 人民院线) and 'Art Theater Alliance" (*Yishu yingyuan lianmeng* 艺术影院联盟) at least five screenings per week. In the same document, it is stated that all units, distributors, and theatres should prepare to promote the screenings of great classics by all means necessary, including preferential ticket prices, allowing people to receive education in patriotism and revolutionary traditions (CFA 2021a).

With such difficult and precarious conditions in the national market, dominated by commercial and propaganda films, resonance on the international circuit is crucial for the success of Chinese art-house cinema, as success on this stage could lead to a domestic release date. However, this puts the directors under additional pressure and aggravates their double occupancy, a position caught between two masters: the first embodied by the CFA's authority, which pushes them to alter their vision and authorship in order to obtain the necessary authorisation and licenses, and the second represented by international festival directors, who expect dissidence and resistance from the film-maker (Elsaesser 2016, 26-7).

Either way, this can influence the position of representatives of Chinese art-house cinema in the international festival circuit. Not complying with the CFA will automatically sabotage their requests for a national release, causing Chinese art-house films that are shown at festivals to be absent from national programming (Shackleton 2022). On the other hand, if they lean too much into the expectations

8 This is an unwritten rule, which the Author was able to learn through his work on the festival circuit and meetings with film professionals.

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of festivals, they will exoticise their authorship (Elsaesser 2016, 26). Furthermore, the special measures imposed on distributors by the CFA, such as those witnessed during the Party's centenary celebrations, further fragilise the symbolic capital these movies can use to find a space in national cinemas. These measures shrink the already small space for art cinema, as they represent an incursion by the field of power on all cinematic fields and sub-fields. By pushing cinemas and distributors to change their schedules to make space for more propaganda screenings, all other films are placed in competition with each other for the remaining slots (Nakajima 2016, 86-101).

4 Strategies and Countermeasures to Preserve Authorship

Despite all these obstacles, Chinese authors still have some strategies that they can enact to preserve their authorship and space, both in the market and in the institutional festival circuit. For those like Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, and Diao Yinan, who can count on the recognition gained on the festival circuits, film archives, mass media, academic curriculum, that institutionalised their authorship and the symbolic capital they have earned throughout the years, they can still use their name recognition to help preserve their authorship and prestige.

Lou Ye's career often led him to clash with the authorities, however, this clash reinforced his name brand. *Mystery*, the film that saw his return to film-making, was presented at Cannes Film Festival, but the CFA required changes to allow a national release. The demands were directed at two scenes in particular: one depicting sexual violence and the other featuring a violent murder. For over two weeks, Lou was involved in an intense process of negotiation with the censors, and even posted on Weibo his exchanges with the officers of the CFA and the documents he sent them. This earned him the support of intellectuals and netizens alike (Lu 2012). A compromise was finally reached, and Lou dimmed the lights in the murder scenes to reduce the violence they depicted. However, seeing this as a violation of his authorship, the director also decided to remove his name from the credits of the national release (Makinen 2012).

He took full agency, refusing to identify himself with a product that was contaminated by someone else's intervention, and used this 'scandal' to his advantage in promotion on the international market, to boost his product by using the visibility provided by this act of artistic integrity. In fact, he had his name on the poster for international promotion, and we can argue that this was because the director and his team were conscious of the symbolic power that such an act gave him. It is difficult to evaluate the reasons behind the censors' actions, however, such behaviour is not new, as the cases of Jia

Zhangke's *Still Life* and *A Touch of Sin* demonstrate. The Chinese authorities, at the helm of an aspiring global power, have changed their approach across the years and decided to minimise their intervention, in order to not give rise to controversy around films by internationally renowned directors, but intervene more strictly when it comes to theatrical releases in China (Bertozzi 2016, 77-8).

As Lou Ye's case shows, the support from the netizen community and intellectuals surely demonstrates the strength of the following of art-house cinema in China. While no director wishes to have to face confrontation with the CFA, the name recognition and symbolic capital they acquire over the years can eventually be used as leverage with the censors of a country that wishes to use cinema to spread soft power and compete with Hollywood.

Chinese art-house cinema has always relied on transnational ties; these ties can become a support structure for those that find themselves in a physical condition of displacement and exile, as in the case of Ying Liang. Facing the pressure of the censors for his film *When Night Falls*, the director decided to exile himself to Hong Kong, refusing to go back for fear of facing serious repercussions for his artistic work. However, Ying transformed this move into a tool to reinforce his stance, principles, and authorship, and featured it in his 2018 semi-autobiographical film *A Family Tour* (*Ziyouxing* 自由行). This film was produced by Taiwanese, Malaysian, and other private investors, allowing the director to have as much creative freedom as possible, and to access a transnational distribution market.

The film is filled with references to Ying's real life and revolves around Yang Shu, a film-maker from mainland China who has been living in Hong Kong for several years. Due to her critical views towards the Chinese government expressed in one of her films, she is exiled in Hong Kong. Yang Shu's mother, Chen Xiaolin, is also affected by this separation, as she lives in China under constant surveillance. To reunite with her mother, Yang Shu plans a trip to Taiwan, and organises screenings of her work under the pretext of promoting her films, while her mother will join her with an organised tour from China without raising suspicions. However, the trip becomes emotionally and psychologically challenging for both Yang Shu and Chen Xiaolin. Throughout the film, the characters struggle with the consequences of exile and the weight of their shared past. Yang Shu grapples with guilt, feeling responsible for her mother's situation and the impact her activism has had on their family. Chen Xiaolin, on the other hand, is torn between her desire to reconnect with her daughter and the fear of reprisals from the government (Kerr 2018).

Ying Liang draws from his own experiences as an independent film-maker and the challenges he faced in China due to his outspoken views, depicting his own struggles with censorship and longing for creative freedom in this film. This *mise en abyme* creates a deep-

ly personal and introspective narrative that resonates with themes of identity, sacrifice, and the yearning for a sense of belonging (Zeng 2019). While his colleagues decided to cooperate and accept mediation between the parties, pushing them to endure the double occupancy, Ying's choice to put everything on the line and dedicate his work to denouncing social injustice has made him a unique author with a unique name brand in the contemporary panorama of Chinese cinema.

Diao Yinan is another art-house director who exemplifies the continuing importance of recognition from international festivals. His works demonstrate how blending art-house aesthetics with the narrative codes of genre cinema can produce socially critical films with potential for success on the market. This blend combination allowed him to gain major exposure, nationally and internationally, and differentiated him and his style from his colleagues, making him the new vedette of Chinese art-house cinema. Since his debut with *Uniform* (*Zhifu* 制服, 2003), Diao has shown his predilection for using genre cinema as a mirror to reflect the marginal spaces of Chinese society. His first films earned him the attention and tutelage of Jia Zhangke, who went on to produce and make a cameo in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (*Bairiyanhuo* 白日焰火, 2014).

The film won two awards, including the Golden Bear Award for Best Picture at the 2014 Berlin Film Festival, and was subsequently screened in China from March of the same year. Despite not having the financial backing of any major state group, the victory in Berlin gained the film a domestic distributor and authorisation for national circulation, a much-awaited reward, as the writing process and quest for financers lasted almost six years (Yin 2014, 86). Despite its lack of commercial elements, the box office gross proved surprisingly high, and the state newspaper *China Daily* praised the film as an exemplary art film able to appeal to both film critics and the Chinese audience (Liu 2014).

Diao's film paints a harsh representation of a community of coal miners in North-East China, which becomes the background for a series of murders. The mystery revolves around the central anti-heroic figure of Zhang Zili, an alcoholic policeman who was suspended a few years earlier after carnage was caused by some of his actions. Adopting a non-linear narrative structure, Diao divides the story into two periods: 1999 and 2004. In 1999, Zhang Zili is an experienced detective working in a small industrial town. During the investigation of a gruesome murder case, he falls in love with a key suspect's wife, Wu Zhizhen. However, the case remains unsolved, and Zhang Zili's pursuit of the truth ends in tragedy, leading to his resignation from the police force. Five years later, in 2004, Zhang is now a washed-up security guard. The murders from the past resurface, and victims' dismembered body parts begin to reappear in coal shipments.

Determined to uncover the truth and find closure, Zhang starts his own investigation, despite being warned by his former colleagues to stay away. As he delves deeper into the case, he discovers a complex web of deceit, corruption, and personal betrayals. He reconnects with Wu Zhizhen, who is now working as a dry cleaner. Their paths intertwine once again as they become entangled in a dangerous game of cat and mouse. The film explores themes of guilt, obsession, and redemption. Zhang's pursuit of justice becomes a personal journey of self-discovery as he confronts his own demons and attempts to reconcile with the past. The film's dark and atmospheric tone, along with its gritty portrayal of the industrial landscape, adds to the overall noir aesthetics and intensifies the suspense.

Choosing the codes of genre film helps Diao to attract an audience that is accustomed to the tropes and style of film noir narration. The director follows in this tradition by having crime and violence at the centre of the story, using it as a channel to express his concerns around the condition of society and its development without incurring conflicts with authority, as he does not violate the main tenets of mainstream ideology (Lu 2014, 49). Furthermore, the violence present in the film may be read as one of the conventions of film noir, and the choice to set the narrative in the past might guarantee a certain distance and avoid being perceived as critical towards the present. Nonetheless, the use of naturalistic photography typical of art-house cinema opens up alternative readings of the film that surpass the oversimplistic definition of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* as a noir film (Pollacchi 2017, 221).

In fact, as declared by Diao, his film was not aimed to be a simple depiction of violence and abuse. A key to understanding Diao's purpose is hidden in the Chinese title of the picture, which translates as 'Daylight Fireworks'. Fireworks are traditionally used to ward off evil ghosts, but here they represent a "cathartic way of warding off the harsher side of the real world. A catharsis that Chinese people so desperately need today" (Rayns 2014). Diao's ambitions are not limited to obtaining critical acclaim – reaching the audience is also extremely important, as he says:

> I do want to impress the audience! What I want to imply here is our ability to make moral choices. I am calling on people to be prepared to act decisively. When they act, they are making choices – not blindly following orders without questioning the instructions they are given. (Rayns 2014)

If the market and the theatres tend to give more space to commercial films, art-house film-makers can find a refuge and an audience of connoisseurs in the Nationwide Alliance of Art-House Cinemas or NAAC (*Quanguo yishu dianying fangying lianmeng yingyuan* 全国艺术

电影放映联盟影院). In October 2016, on the initiative of China Film Archive in partnership with Huaxia Film Distribution, Wanda Cinemas and EDKO Films, NAAC signed agreements forming a union between 2,914 theatres with 3,489 screens in 308 cities. The members of the alliance commit to screening at least three art-house films per day and reserving ten primetime slots for art-house films selected by the NAAC (NAAC 2022). However, all films that will be projected will necessarily need to have received the CFA sigil of approval. The NAAC will grant no space to 'independent' or 'underground' films, as after all, it still is a creation of a government body (Fan 2019). However, the mission of the NAAC is to create a space for art-house cinema inside the country. The alliance organises debates and Q&As with directors to boost the participation of the art-house fan community (NAAC 2022). While on the one hand, this can be seen as recognition of the symbolic capital and importance of art cinema for the country's cultural development, on the other, it is a move to control community discourse in clear opposition to the underground circuit.

As expressed previously, the festival circuit is central to the development of art-house directors' name brand and is consequently tied to their authorship. As expressed in the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Chinese Film Industry issued in 2021, cinema is held in high consideration for the overall affirmation of China as a leading world force. The directors, indicated in the plan as talents, are tasked with the significant responsibility of conveying socialist values while creating high quality films that can inspire the people but also elevate the name of the film industry abroad. To allow them to improve and affirm themselves on the global stage, the CFA will subsequently need to facilitate their development (CFA 2021b). While the plan expresses the CFA's will to contribute to the development and training of new generations of film-makers and talents, it should also focus on the development of the national festival circuit. In fact, the Chinese festival circuit has started diversifying itself and consequently enriching the panorama of Chinese cinema thanks mainly to the Xining FIRST Film Festival (*FIRST Xining dianying jie* FIRST 西宁电影节) and to the Pingyao International Film Festival or PYIFF (*Pingyao guoji dianyingzhan* 平遥国际电影展). FIRST is an art-house festival created in 2006 who focuses on discovering new directors by giving them a space on an internationally established platform (FIRST 2023). PYIFF was founded in 2017 by none other than Jia Zhangke himself, with the collaboration of another important name in the international festival circuit, festival curator Marco Müller, with the aim of discovering new talents and allowing cooperation between the Chinese and international film industries (PYIFF 2023). While Jia's institutionalisation on the international circuit made him the most prominent art-house director from China, he is now moving to the other side of the barricade, with the help of his name brand and

the symbolic capital gained from his authorship, becoming an institution that will allow others to build their authorship. This is another of his contributions to the promotion of Chinese art-house cinema; however, the creation of PYIFF is not only beneficial to the industry, but also to him and his authorship, as it reinforces his position and symbolic capital in the eyes of both the national and the international community.

Another space that can't avoid being mentioned in considering Chinese art-house films distribution is the Internet, as it can also help art-house directors to reach a broader audience and establish themselves and their authorship within national borders. While distribution in theatres is extremely competitive and market forces often marginalise art cinema, the Internet can provide not only a different space, but also different promotional tools that can help the cause of Chinese art cinema. In fact, while the trends of the past few years have given more prominences to commercial and propaganda films, the audience can still influence the production and success of films and, as showed by Guangchao (2017), studios are trying to profit from new technologies to intercept new trends and audiences' taste. Aggregators, online review portals, and cast star-power have all proven to be factors that can motivate the audience to attend screenings and therefore influence the success of a film, hence pushing producers to repeatedly use the most successful model. Another factor of success can be found in the cultural relevance of a filmic work – adaptation of a successful novel or depiction of cultural heritage can determine the success of a film. Since the Internet is becoming more and more important in this sense, with Big Data analysis becoming a fundamental tool in understanding consumer behaviour, it is plausible that despite the system being highly influenced by its own regulators, it will always have to come to terms with audience taste (Guangchao 2017, 659-72). One of the earliest examples of the use of the Internet for promotion can be found in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, which used Big Data and social media platforms to promote the film, thus allowing the expansion of the film's audience (Tang, Liang, Wang 2015, 107).

Online SVOD platforms are another important resource in spreading art cinema. Though they are subject to the same content regulations as any other distributor, their business model requires them to attract the higher number possible of subscribers. Therefore, the niche of art-cinema fans represents an important market that would otherwise be diverted to piracy.[9] Scrolling through the libraries of iQIY and Tencent Video, users are presented with a rich and genre-diversified catalogue, despite the fact that the main pages do not feature art-house films (at least at the time of writing). To find them,

9 For a complete understanding of the business model of SVOD platforms, cf. Lotz 2022.

we need to use the search bar, which signals that despite art cinema being included in the libraries of streaming platforms, these films are buried by the mass of commercial productions that constitute the major part of these libraries. Therefore, it is not a case of mass exposure. However, presence on these platforms is still important, not only as it erodes the space of piracy, but also because web-based promotional campaigns can redirect a broader audience to content that can be accessed from anywhere and on every portable device connected to the Internet.

5 Conclusion

This article aimed at exposing the dynamics that fragilise the authorship of contemporary Chinese art-house directors. While the continued negotiation imposed by the 2016 Promotion Law and CFA regulations require changes and adaptations to the filmic process and production, the market also plays a role in the marginalisation of Chinese art-house cinema within national borders. The international festival circuit has long served as a platform to present new trends and stars of global art cinema, and it has provided Chinese art directors with a stage to showcase their talent and institutionalise their authorship. Since the 1990s, the neo-realist cinema by directors such as Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye has imposed its canons as characteristic of what is considered Chinese art-house cinema. After using the fame and symbolic capital gained outside the system via the international circuit, they returned to the fold and started to work within the boundaries imposed by the system. The recognition they received for their style necessarily pushed others to follow in their footsteps and helped carry the torch of Chinese art-house cinema. While Ying Liang established himself as the most radical director, preferring exile to compromise with an authority that was using every measure, including extortion and threatening his family, to block his films from being screened abroad, Diao Yinan showed how blending the aesthetics of art cinema with the narrative style of film noir can help push forward the socially engaged discourse of Chinese art cinema.

All the choices that allowed these directors to forge their name brand and find their space inside and outside of Chinese borders, however, risk pushing them into what Elsaesser (2016) defined as "double occupancy", a condition of serving two masters. The first is represented by the government and its controlling bodies – in order to obtain all the necessary authorisations, directors necessarily have to bend their will and risk losing their original creative intention. The second is represented by the international circuit, specifically, the directors of the festivals that institutionalised them. Festivals are still crucial for the circulation of art cinema, however,

working to produce a film likely to be welcomed by these platforms may lead to film-makers having to serve the master represented by festival directors, who expect dissidence and resistance from them.

Despite all the hardships that Chinese art directors must face, there are still some spaces where they can showcase their work and affirm their authorship. Smaller and emerging festivals such as FIRST Festival and Pingyao Film Festival allow the younger generation to access a platform where they can screen their films and meet international experts and industry professionals, laying the foundation for their future careers. The CFA has also had to recognise the importance of art cinema in helping China become a global leading power. Besides allowing these festivals to take place, so as to co-opt the discourse of art cinema once relegated to the underground, it also allowed the establishment of the NAAC. This federation of theatres, producers, and distributors offers both directors and the public the chance to find a place for art-house films to be screened, protecting them from direct rivalry with commercial cinema. Finally, online resources also can help directors to distribute their films. Big data analysis can help direct more spectators to theatres and SVOD platforms have the potential to allow art-house films to reach a broader audience outside the boundaries of cinemas and their slot allotments.

While there is some space for preserving authorship, it must be remembered that the field of power can intervene in all sub-fields, altering the delicate balance that allows art cinema to be created and distributed. As mentioned, the CCP centenary saw the country's leadership push theatres and producers to give more space to propaganda main melody films, showing exactly how, despite the liberalisation of the industry, it is always under the direct control and at the orders of the state and must abide by the request of the leadership. Authorship in China is subject to a lot of variables, but the struggle between the symbolic capital of directors and authority is still the greatest obstacle to their expression, both internationally and in the national market.

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Vivian Qu's *Angels Wear White*: Vulnerable Young Girls and Resistance in Contemporary China

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Abstract Focusing on Vivian Qu's *Angels Wear White* (2017), this paper uses Judith Butler's discussion of vulnerability, resistance, and performativity as a theoretical framework to analyse the film's narrative and directing choices when addressing issues of sexual assault on minors and genders norms in contemporary China. The film's depiction of social inequalities, economic precariousness, corruption, and the construction and performance of femininity demonstrates the way Chinese women are vulnerable to violence – sexual or not – and to gender norms they are expected to conform to, without falling into the trap of paternalism and victimisation.

Keywords Chinese art-house cinema. Feminism. Vulnerability. Resistance. Sexual assault.

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> You see, in this world, there is one awful thing, and that is that everyone has their reasons.[1]
>
> Jean Renoir, *The Rule of the Game*, 1939

> Special attention should be paid to women's unique role in propagating Chinese family virtues and setting up a good family tradition. This relates to harmony in the family and in society, and to the healthy development of children. Women should consciously shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of the old and young, as well as educating children. Women in general should carry forward the fine tradition of hard work and self-improvement of the Chinese nation, the pursuit of a positive and civilised life, and promote the formation of good social morals.
>
> Xi Jinping 2013

1 Introduction

My aim in this article is to provide the first English analysis of the film *Angels Wear White* (2017), a powerful and controversial work that mainly exposes the problem of sexual assault on minors in China. The film is the second work of art-house producer-turned director Vivian Qu (Wen Yan 文晏). Co-produced with France, with a Belgian director of photography known for his collaboration with the Dardenne brothers in Europe, and with no famous actors starring in it, *Angels Wear White* is a typical art-house film.

The film describes the case of two girls' sexual assault by the godfather of one of them in a hotel. The two victims, Xiao Wen and Xin Xin, are middle school students and best friends. With the help of a female lawyer called Hao, the parents try to prosecute the perpetrator, President Liu, the head of a local company well introduced in the local gentry. The latter uses his influence to bribe or intimidate them, while the police stall on the case, deeming the evidence insufficient. A second examination performed by corrupted doctors affirms that none of the girls were victim of rape and the case is closed. Intersected with this storyline is the one of Mia,[2] nearly 16, who works at the hotel where the assault took place. She possesses the proof that would convict President Liu – some footage of the security camera showing him entering the girls' room while they try to push him away – but she is reluctant to help Attorney Hao and is more preoccupied with keeping her job, since she does not have a proper ID af-

1 "Tu comprends, sur cette Terre, il y a quelque chose d'effroyable, c'est que tout le monde a ses raisons". Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the Author.

2 Mia's original name in the film is Xiao Mi, but I chose to use the name given to her in the international versions to avoid confusion for the readers.

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ter running away from home a few years ago. She attempts to blackmail President Liu to gather enough money to buy a fake ID, but she fails and is beaten up by the perpetrator's underlings. After being rescued by Attorney Hao, she entrusts the evidence to her and resolves to sell her virginity to get an ID. When she hears on the radio that President Liu and his accomplices, the police head and doctors, were just arrested, she eventually decides to run away.

In this article, I will argue that Qu's film sheds light on issues of vulnerability and gender performativity for contemporary Chinese women. Judith Butler's key work on each of these concepts will serve as a theoretical framework to analyse the film's narrative and the directing choices made by the filmmaker. At the end, I will discuss Qu's own vulnerable position as an art-house and a woman director in the Chinese industry.

2 What Does 'Vulnerability' Mean?

Originating from the Latin word *vulnus*, 'wound', vulnerability,

> expresses the capacity to be wounded and suffer. As bodily, social, and affective beings, we all have the capacity to be vulnerable to one another and to conditions of inequality, discrimination, exploitation, or violence, as well to the natural environment. (Koivunen, Kyrölä, Ryberg 2018, 4)

Butler is a key scholar in this field and her discussion on vulnerability as informing resistance is especially useful to comment on *Angels Wear White*, which articulates both at the same time.

In Butler's view, if anyone can be vulnerable, there are various degrees of vulnerability depending on the context, which is always connected to relations of power and the political. It allows then some welcomed intersectionality by encompassing issues of age, class, gender, and ethnicity, and can also be mobilised locally to read into films like *Angels Wear White*.

> The terms we examine take on very specific meanings under neoliberal and austerity conditions when the state structures of social democracy and institutions of social welfare are losing their own resources and standing, thus exposing more populations to homelessness, unemployment, illiteracy, and inadequate health care. How, then, is the political demand to address these issues to be directed toward those institutions that should be responding to these conditions, at the same time that we seek to resist the models of power represented by those institutions? Are we stuck in the situation in which there are two opposing alternatives, paternalism and victimization? (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016, 3)

The situation described is meant for Western countries but can also apply to post-reform China. The new market economy has led the state to progressively withdraw from the welfare it used to provide since 1949. Nowadays, the accent is put on individualism and consumerism for social progress and economic development, which can be seen as contradictory to Confucian values of interdependency and social harmony; however, scholars of the neo-Confucianism have been promoting Confucianism at the same time as the cement of the spread of capitalism in East Asia since the 1980s. In this context, both neo-Confucianism and neoliberalism join hands when it comes to define "the normative femininity against which women are measured and evaluated" (Zuo 2018, 532).

How to articulate resistance to these norms in this context? The dichotomy paternalism-victimisation evoked by Butler is a real dilemma in feminist activism.

> Of course, feminist theorists have for a long time argued that women suffer social vulnerability disproportionately. [...] The claim can sometimes be taken to mean that women have an unchanging and defining vulnerability, and that kind of argument makes the case for the provision of paternalistic protection. If women are especially vulnerable, then they seek protection or protected status, and it becomes the responsibility of the state or other paternal powers to provide that protection. According to that model, feminist activism not only petitions paternal authority for special dispensations and protections, but affirms that inequality of power that situates women in a powerless position and, by implication, men in a more powerful one. And where it does not literally put 'men' in the position of providing protection, it invests state structures with the paternalistic obligation to facilitate the achievement of feminist goals. (2012, 169)

This is particularly relevant in the People's Republic of China (PRC), where the state has a profoundly paternalist approach to feminism. After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the All-China's Women Federation (ACWF), a state organisation dedicated to the defence of women's right, was created to promote and implement state feminism's policies. Feminist movements became more diversified in the 1980s-1990s but still relied heavily on the ACWF's structure and network to enable their actions (Wang 2021). To this day, feminism is very diverse in the PRC and designates different trends, the word 'feminism' sometimes even being rejected as a Western concept. Since it remains hard to implement large-scale actions without the state's support, the most radical activists operate at a grassroot level. The ACWF, still active today, has relative leverage but is very often considered as more or less a mouthpiece for the government regard-

ing women, following the Chinese Communist Party's line. Feminists of all kinds have taken the Internet by storm since the 2010s, thanks to a new generation of young, urban and educated activists (Wang 2021; Fincher 2018). At the same time, the masculinist backlash is also very strong, and Chinese feminist movements are often perceived through a Western-biased lens in scholarship (Wu, Dong 2019).

In this context, Butler's idea of vulnerability is useful to discuss Chinese feminist movements. In Butler opinion, "political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilisation of vulnerability, which means that vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (2016, 24). This "exposed and agentic" condition allows us to rethink how we perceive locally situated feminist movements.

It is also important to stay clear of the masculinist conception that "a political subject [...] establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability" (24). On the contrary, this paper will consider "the role of vulnerability in strategies of resistance" (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016, 6), on how vulnerability is "a potentially effective mobilizing force in political mobilizations" (Butler 2016, 14) in *Angels Wear White*.

Vivian Qu's film goes beyond issues of sexual assault and also addresses social inequalities, economic precariousness, corruption and the construction and performance of femininity. In my view, the film demonstrates how women in contemporary China are vulnerable to violence – sexual or not – and to gender norms they are expected to conform to, but successfully avoids both paternalism and victimisation when addressing these issues.

3 Addressing Sexual Assault as a Systemic Issue

How does vulnerability as both "exposed and agentic" translate on screen? The film is helped first by its cinematic style. The camera stays at a distance with the characters, inducing an accompanying stance rather than identification with the characters for the audience.[3] There is no play of lights in the image composition to orient our perception of the characters, the editing is light, and the narrative's pace is relatively slow. Finally, the soundtrack is almost raw, with very few moments with music. As a result, our emotions aren't really guided or oriented. Overall, *Angels Wear White* is shot with a very restrained style that effectively encourages a more reflective po-

3 The director of photography is Benoît Dervaux, a long-time collaborator of the Dardenne brothers, Belgian directors known for their socially engaged works.

sition. This reflective position offers the audience some room to think. In a way, when watching the film, the audience is also "exposed and agentic" at the same time. They receive the story as it is while having some leverage to make their own judgement.

In the following section, I will first comment on the characters' vulnerability, then on how the director depicts violence on screen, and finally how she manages to turn one particular case into a systemic issue.

3.1 Vulnerable Characters

The film adopts the perspective of vulnerable characters in today's Chinese society: more or less isolated female minors. The main characters, Xiao Wen and Mia, are in various vulnerable situations but they are also shown active to defend themselves, developing strategies to survive. Besides, Mia's perspective adds layers not only to the case but also on the socio-economic reality faced by women and minors in contemporary China.

In comparison to her best friend Xiao Wen, the second victim, Xin Xin, is well looked after by her own parents. However, even if both families first try to convict the perpetrator, the way they handle the tragedy differs greatly. Xin Xin's parents are focused on providing the best future for their daughter and accept the perpetrator's offers to settle the case, convincing Xin Xin that nothing bad happened to her for her sake. While Xiao Wen is mostly left to her own devices and to handle the trauma on her own, Xin Xin is sheltered as much as possible by her parents. In both cases, the trauma is not addressed properly.[4]

It is noteworthy that the two girls don't discuss the event on screen, or exchange about what they feel, except for physical pain the morning after. They play together and only the ending suggests a strain in their relationship. At the exception of acknowledging their pain the morning after, Xin Xin doesn't seem to be particularly affected by what is happening. As Cathy Caruth explains on trauma:

> Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on. (2010, 4)

4 The film overall criticises the handling of the case by the adults, with the notable exception of Attorney Hao, asking for a more psychological approach when addressing the victims. The denial of each girl's distress can be seen as a call for more involvement of the victims, going "from a discourse of 'protection' towards that of 'participation', where those involved and affected become active players in determining what it means to be safe, and free" (Segalo 2015, 453).

While Xiao Wen is shown affected by the events and by the unsensitive procedures they go through, Xin Xin appears oblivious most of the time and is relieved when she is told by the bribed doctors, after their second examination, that nothing happened to her. Consequently, the way Xiao Wen handles the aftermath makes her a more prominent character in comparison to Xin Xin. The latter's lack of overall screen time can then signify the lack of space she is given to process what happened to her. Thanks to her parents' efforts not to address the tragedy to preserve her, her feelings on that matter are repressed but the trauma may resurface later in her life.

Coming back to the main characters, Xiao Wen's parents are divorced. She is under the custody of her mother that is neglecting her. Both her parents are poor and she suffers from a bad reputation in school, where she physically fights a classmate who films her without her consent. When the teachers punish her but not the boy, we are given a first clue of Xiao Wen's lack of support from the adults in her life. Xiao Wen's mother ends up blaming her daughter for her assault and punishes her, provoking the girl's flight to her estranged father's home. After the latter reluctantly accepts to let her stay, she skips school, pretending to come and go in her uniform while spending the day outside.

At this point of the film, Xiao Wen flees the structures supposed to take care of her, her mother's home and the school, to find refuge in 'unsafe places' such as the house of her father, who is not legally allowed to take care of her, the beach, or at a statue of Marilyn Monroe's feet where she sleeps the night she runs away. Her flight is both a result of her vulnerability and at the same time her means to take action against it. Since she no longer has a safe space, she looks for shelter somewhere else.

Xiao Wen is not talkative in the presence of adults. She is regularly scolded by her teachers for being late, her mother is verbally abusive, insulting and provoking her; her father's first reaction is to send her back home to her mother when she seeks refuge with him, and the policemen make her uncomfortable with their repeated questioning. In response, Xiao Wen remains silent. She is aware that anything she says can be turned against her, and that she won't be heard or understood, so she prefers not to speak at all. The stare that accompanies her silence is another weapon of hers. Like her mutism, it is a way to challenge the adults, like her mother when she despises her, or the policeman trying to intimidate her, as if saying: "I know what you are trying to do, and I don't like it" **[fig. 1]**. She uses it to both highlight and defy the adult's violence, neglect, and intimidation towards her.

Mia, on the other hand, has slightly more leverage, as she is a bit older and more independent than Xiao Wen. She lies about her age to be able to work. As she later reveals, she ran away from home and has been moving from place to place these last few years. Not only

Figure 1 Vivian Qu, *Angels Wear White*. 2017. 72'49". Xiao Wen's Stare

she is a minor on her own but she doesn't have an ID, which makes her situation very precarious; at the same time, she seems to be ready to do anything for her survival. She lies, even if her nerve is not always enough to convince her interlocutor. She has developed small tricks to save money (falsifying the laundry bill to pocket the difference, exchanging favours with her colleague Lili). She has interiorised that nothing is free in this economy, that even information has value, which is why she asks Attorney Hao for money when the latter comes to interrogate her about the case. She even dares to negotiate deals with people more powerful than her, like Lili's boyfriend, a local gang leader, and President Liu, when she blackmails him with the crucial evidence she holds on the case. Either way, she bites more that she can chew: she is beaten up by President Liu's men and ends up accepting Lili's boyfriend proposition to sell her virginity. Her attempts at undermining their leverage would be a complete failure if she didn't run away from the latter transaction at the end of the film.

Thus, both characters have a limited range of action, and are vulnerable in terms of age, gender, and class, but they are also proactive to ensure their own survival and safety. They are "neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region" (Butler 2016, 25-6), in a sort of "vulnerable-and-resistant" state. Thankfully, they are both helped by Attorney Hao in different occasions. Overall, the narrative opposes the behaviour of the other adults to the empathy and care embodied by the lawyer. She is the only person in front of which the two girls allow themselves to be vulnerable or talk about their actual situation. It is in the safety of Attorney Hao's car that Xiao Wen answers questions on the case, and it is in her arms that she allows herself to cry. Mia calls her when she ends up in the hospital

after her beating, and exchanges the proof of President Liu's guilt she retained until then to thank the lawyer for paying her hospital expenses. It is then that we learn about how she survived until now. In the end, it is their collective mobilisation that advance the case and lead to President Liu's arrest with his accomplices.

3.2 Violence and Visual Pleasure

In her great 2018 article, Chinese scholar Wei Ying compares Qu's film to the South Korean film *Silenced* (*Dogani* 도가니, 2011) by Hwang Dong-hyuk, that depicts a real-life case of sexual assault on minors in an institution dedicated to deaf children. A newly hired teacher discovers that several members of the school staff are abusing the children but fails to successfully convict the perpetrators. The film encountered a huge success when it was released and provoked a change of legislation on sexual assault in South Korea, as well as a re-opening of the old case accompanied by official excuses from the government. *Angels Wear White* was even promoted as the Chinese *Silenced* when it came out, but did not lead to a similar outcome.

Wei explains that each film's depiction of violence is radically different: while in *Silenced* violence is explicit and repetitive, in *Angels Wear White* it happens off screen (Wei 2018, 59-60). I will first elaborate on what the voluntary concealment of sexual violence on screen entails, then I will argue that there is still some cold-blooded violence on screen in *Angels Wear White*, although an unusual one, that in one instance even involves the audience's participation in an eye-opening and chilling hospital scene.

In *Silenced*, the image quality is visually pleasing, with play of lights and shadows, which contributes to an aestheticisation of violence, sexual or not. Abuse of all sorts is not a one-time occurrence, but repetitive, notably through flashbacks. The assault scenes also last for a long time, displaying the men taking off their clothes, throwing themselves on the children, and beating them. Although the scene always stops before actual penetration, it is painful to watch overall. Violence is thus explicit, repetitive, and last for a long time. This approach is intended to condemn these acts; however, it also presents drawbacks.

Depicting sexual assault scenes in a long and explicit way can be risky. It might aim to shock the viewer, but it might also appeal to their visual pleasure, especially if it shows the perpetrator's point of view on their victim. Staged like this, the audience is aligned with the former's perspective. For example, in *Silenced*, there is a scene that lasts for several minutes where an adult man touches a young boy in the shower. This scene might be disturbing for some viewers, but it might also be enjoyable for others (not to mention

the possibility of film edits being uploaded on porn websites). I do not agree with the idea that finding pleasure in such a scene would necessarily lead to abuse in real life, but I think it is important to discuss how these scenes are constructed. Being explicit and dwelling on the acts can be seen as problematic, but adopting the perpetrator's perspective is even more so for several reasons. First, it is a moving image that leaves little space for the viewer's imagination, next, the recurrence of such patterns contributes to rape culture (that entails blaming the victim while finding excuses for the perpetrator), and therefore influences people's understanding of what is consensual and what is not. One instance is not risky, but the almost systematic use of the attacker's perspective has a significant impact on the viewer. Combined to the lack of satisfactory sex education, this kind of representation is not to be taken lightly. In China, the state holds a conservative view of sex, promoting abstinence as the way to avoid teen pregnancy and the spread of STDs. Therefore, media and pornography are an important source for sex education in China (Zhang, Na 2023; Fang 2020). As a result, this kind of scenes, even framed as something reprehensible, may have a different impact from what the authors intended, or contribute to undermine their original intention.

From this perspective, the concealment of visible violence in *Angels Wear White* can be seen as a political act, a refusal to give in to these problematic tropes of rape representation. Of course, censorship plays a role in this concealment, since it is likely that more explicit scenes would have been cut. However, the narrative is not designed to include assault scenes. Instead, it focuses more on the aftermath and how the characters cope with it. If there is violence, there is no visual pleasure.

Sexual and physical violence is only suggested or take place off screen. We do not see Xiao Wen and Xin Xin's assault, but the film lingers on the morning after, when they come out of the hotel room, shaken and dishevelled. Their bruises and the pain they feel is underlined in a later scene, but what happened to them is never verbally described.[5] The audience is meant to connect the dots themselves and can only imagine it, which is arguably worse than showing it. When Xiao Wen's mother brutally cuts her daughter's long hair – a trait that she deems responsible for her daughter's assault –, the act happens behind a closed door with only the girl's cries filtering to us. The scene cuts next to Xiao Wen, now with short hair, contemplating herself in the bathroom mirror in a mostly silent shot.

5 It might be worth mentioning that because of their young age, the actresses playing Xiao Wen, Xin Xin and Mia were not given the full script and thus were not aware that the film was about sexual assault (cf. Qu, interviewed by Dong 2017).

Similarly, when Mia is chased by President Liu's men after trying to blackmail him, she leaves the road and runs behind some trees but the camera doesn't follow her. It stays on the side of the road while we hear Mia's screams as she is beaten up. Then we cut to the teenager at the hospital, bruised all over. As these examples show, Qu is more focused on the consequences and how this violence affects the girls, physically and emotionally. In fact, the only explicit violence on screen comes from gynaecological examinations and internalised misogyny.

Xiao Wen's mother first reaction after hearing the confirmation of her daughter's assault is to slap her. The camera, who was at the girl's head level, stays on her face as the mother goes off-screen and argues with Xin Xin's father. As they yell off-screen, we stay focused on Xiao Wen's face as she takes in what just happened and the harsh words exchanged next to her. With this framing, we adopt her point of view and take a guess on how this is affecting her. This scene is a reminder that violence isn't exclusively male in the film. Xiao Wen's mother is verbally and physically abusive to her daughter, and, in a later scene, blames her daughter's long hair, dresses, and girly accessories for her assault. In her view, biased by internalised misogyny, her daughter is responsible for being raped. She then takes action by destroying the dresses and cutting Xiao Wen's hair.

Like for the slap previously mentioned, these few displays of violence are quiet and cold-blooded. After delivering the proof of President Liu's guilt, which should suffice to arrest him, the two girls have to go through a second examination by several experts. It is an unnecessary procedure, as underlined by a dialogue line of Xiao Wen's father, and we soon understand that the experts are actually President Liu's accomplices scheming to clear him. There is no music to induce tension, the silence is chilling enough. The camera embraces Xiao Wen's point of view on the examination table while doctors take turns to inspect her. As she lays down, her legs are placed on each side of the frame and jolt every time the nurse and gynaecologists touch her **[figs 2-4]**. This is already a very vulnerable position to hold, and the exposure is reinforced by the fact that the doctors and staff only stand a few seconds between her legs. This quick succession of characters gives the terrible feeling that Xiao Wen is being assaulted again, right before our eyes. The experience is even more uncomfortable for the audience, forced to embrace her perspective and literally put in her place. Therefore, we share her discomfort and distress, highlighted right after by her silent tears in the next shot once the examination is over.

One the one hand, the division of Xiao Wen's body into pieces by showing only her legs visually conveys the dehumanising process the two friends are going through. On the other hand, it can also suggest that it could be any other young girl undergoing the same terri-

Figure 2 Vivian Qu, *Angels Wear White*. 2017. 92'57". The Nurse

Figures 3-4 Vivian Qu, *Angels Wear White* (2017). 93'10" and 93'29". The Doctors

ble experience. The purpose is to make the audience revolt in order to demand that it will never happen again.

From a narrative perspective, the in real-time superficial examination is not only meant to make an impression on the audience, but also to stress the lack of professionalism of the experts that declare that no rape was committed on Xiao Wen and Xin Xin in a press conference held minutes after seeing the girls. Xiao Wen's father, enraged, tries to protest but is hold back by policemen. Between the doctors and the police intervention to close the case, the scene thus condemns the system that not only does not believe or protect the children from the influence of their abuser, but also forces them to experience their trauma again without consideration of their well-being.

In sum, violence in *Angels Wear White* isn't aestheticised nor dramatised through editing and soundtrack. In contrast with films such as *Silenced*, there is no rush of adrenaline for the viewer but more of a chilling feeling, which can be destabilising for an audience used to mainstream ways of telling stories. Involving the audience in the gynaecological examination is particularly unusual and upsetting. Thus, Qu interrogates our definition of violence, also raising the following question: do we have to show it to denounce it? Here, the filmmaker is clearly more interested in exposing the consequences of these assaults, how they affect the characters and therefore how they can affect the audience in turn, in a reflexive manner rather than an emotional one.

3.3 A Systemic Issue

A third directing choice is presenting sexual assault as a systemic issue. This is visually conveyed both by the concealment of the perpetrator's face, which emphasises a collective responsibility, and the lack of a final trial when the culprits are arrested at the end of the film.

Rape in the PRC is included in the Criminal Law where the age of consent is set at 14. Sexual intercourse with a child under 14 is

then considered rape. For minors over 14 and under 18, there are very few measures regarding girls and none for boys. According to scholars Liu Chun and Ren Ruihong, another flaw of the legislation is its definition of rape which is far too narrow (Liu, Ren 2013). Indeed, rape is only described as vaginal penetration, thus excluding other acts that fall then under the scope of 'indecent acts' or 'molestation', that entail lighter sentences. To resolve these issues, Liu and Ren asks for the removal of the gender marker in the law to protect all genders equally, the use of the word 'minor' instead of 'children', and the raise of the age of consent to 18 (while setting aggravating factors depending on different age groups). Liu and Ren's report goes back to 2013, but the most recent amendments made in 2020 in the Criminal Law still do not answer these demands. They add aggravating factors to penalties, but rape remains defined as vaginal sex and still does not include men (only molestation applies since amendments in 2015; cf. *China Law Translate* 2020; Daum 2022; Wang 2022).

Another loophole of the Criminal Law was that the sanction used to be lighter when the child raped was presented as a prostitute. Perpetrators often took advantage of this to reduce their sentence when convicted or to avoid being convicted in the first place, a situation heavily condemned in Nanfu Wang's 2016 documentary *Hooligan Sparrow* that covers a case similar to *Angels Wear White*. This was apparently corrected by amendments to the Criminal Law in 2015 (Daum 2022), but what remains to know is how efficiently the law is applied, and how efficient it can be while the previous issues about age, gender, and definition of assault remain to be correctly addressed.

The current wording of the law is also problematic. By defining rape as an assault on women and girls, it actually enforces both women as vulnerable and violence as male. However, violence is not male in essence – Xiao Wen's mother's behaviour is a painful reminder – but results from a system where male violence is encouraged, permitted and exonerated. On the other hand, as Butler rightfully puts it, we cannot only blame the system.

> I don't think individual men can point to 'social structures' as an excuse, i.e. 'the social structure of masculine domination made me commit this act of violence'. At the same time, it is all of our responsibility to ask ourselves how we are living out, reproducing or resisting these structures. (2019)

How do we take responsibility for our actions then and try to advocate for change? Vivian Qu commented on that by quoting Jean Renoir's film *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du jeu*, 1939) in an interview:

> The terrible thing about the world is that everyone has their own reasons. So, when you think of these characters, they have reasons for doing what they do, and it just reflects a larger, societal problem.[6] (Qu, interviewed by Dzolan 2017)

Then, the director's intention points to a denunciation of a social structure more than advocating for a change in legislation, and the belief that law follows social behaviour rather than transforming it. I argue that she embraces Butler's refutation of vulnerability as a condition that "requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power at the expense of collective forms of resistance and social transformation" (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016, 1). To maintain agency in vulnerability, we must avoid victimisation and paternalism.

One of the first elements supporting this idea is the deliberate concealment of the rapist's face. He has a last name and a title, President Liu, but he remains unidentifiable on-screen. The director uses different ways to do so: his face can be off-screen, or he turns his back to the camera, or he is too far from it. On one instance, we are told he is to be on-screen, but a group of men walks in the frame without a single clue to pinpoint him among them. Nevertheless, the extent of his influence and power is clearly visible. President Liu is able to mobilise police heads, doctors as well as hooligans to threaten the girls and their parents. He uses intimidation, bribery and even violence, if needed, to cover up the case. The dissimulation of his face and invisible influence reminds me of Zhang Yimou's film *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hongdeng longgao gaogua* 大红灯笼高高挂, 1990), where four wives and concubines fight for their husband's favours. The husband face is always concealed to let the audience focus on the wives' schemes, while he has the servants execute the rituals and punishments. The concealment has several implications. First, it does not create a real antagonist but points to a systemic issue beyond individuals. It does not matter who he is, it could be any man that chose to comply with the social system. As Butler stresses when describing performativity (Butler 2016, 24; 2019), I emphasise here both the structure, and the person's agency and free will since they both participate, one by enforcing and the other by following willingly. It is important to take into account those two dimensions, especially in a neoliberal economy that insists on individual choices and responsibility. Both the system and the individuals are accountable here. Going back to the narrative, the second implication is that it is easier – and more comfortable – from a moral point of view to antagonise an aso-

6 "'这个世界糟糕的地方是每个人都有自己的理由'。 所以你去设想这些人物, 他们做出这些都是有理由的, 这恰恰反映出一个更大的, 属于社会层面的问题"。

cial and isolated individual that commits violence, to reject them and position ourselves against them. In *Angels Wear White*, the connection between President Liu and many other characters prevents such a position, pushing the audience to reflect on that.

Overall, the film emphasises the responsibility of society as a whole. The film's narrative describes a typically Confucian microcosmos, where every individual is somehow connected with the others through different types of interdependent relationships where one's actions inevitably affect others. When interrogating Mia about the case, Attorney Hao shows her a picture of Xiao Wen and tells her she ran away from home. "What if it was you?" she asks, hoping to convince the teenager to cooperate. This line highlights the link between the two girls: Mia has the possibility to help Xiao Wen, and her inaction can also turn the girl into another isolated minor like herself. What is also implied here is that there should be no other victims of sexual violence, and each character has some leverage, even small, to act on that.

The attitude of the parents, teachers, policemen and doctors towards the case actually advocates for a collective responsibility and points to the failure in protecting the girls, before and after the assault. Xiao Wen's mother neglects, then blames her daughter. Xin Xin's parents chose President Liu as their daughter's godfather in the hope of providing her a better future thanks to his influence and connections. Teachers call Xiao Wen a 'bad element' and try to antagonise the two best friends. The head of police blames the girls for drinking alcohol the night of the assault even though it is not grounds for being assaulted, and asks them to recount again and again what they have been through without consideration for their well-being. Nurses and doctors act with the same carelessness regarding the girls' feelings, do not explain any procedure to them and even accept President Liu's bribery to cover up the case.

The second element is the absence of a trial at the end of the film to judge the culprits. As I mentioned before, the law is problematic, as well as its fair application, and relying on the state to resolve the case leads to paternalism without subverting the structure. At the same time, a direct attack to the state could prevent the film to be released, thus limiting its possible impact. Qu then takes another path for the conclusion of her story.

In the last part of the film, Mia hears on the radio that President Liu was arrested, as well as the corrupted police head and doctors that assisted him. The radio report is followed by an official statement by the ACWF, the state organisation dedicated to the defence of women's rights, calling for a better protection for the children, and to secure them a better growing environment. This report could seem to bring a relative settlement to the story, however, several elements in this scene tend to subvert this conclusion.

First of all, even though the culprits have been arrested, nothing guarantees that they will be actually be convicted. Besides the issues with the wording of the Criminal Law regarding rape and corruption, mentalities regarding sexual violence evolve very slowly in China. Police and officials often discourage people to file a lawsuit, or offer mediation instead of protection. Domestic violence and sexual assault in families and couples are usually considered as 'private matters' that do not need the state's intervention. This attitude is slowly evolving but social stigma remains very strong, as demonstrated by Xin Xin's father discourse when trying to convince Xiao Wen's father to drop the lawsuit: "[President Liu] will serve a few years in prison and will start again as soon as he goes out, but our daughters will be tainted forever. It will follow them for all their lives. We must think of them". Even with the possibility of a trial, the characters are lucid on how the system works. The father's lines also stress the cultural shame bared by 'tainted' women. Even if they had no responsibility in it, that is not how others will perceive it. In this context, it is then not surprising to read in a study conducted by the UN on men and violence in Asia, that the majority of the men interrogated in China that admitted committing rape did not face any legal action or condemnation (Fulu et al. 2013, 9).

The director's decision not to hold an official trial in the film has been criticised, since it could have opened a public debate on the lack of adequate laws, like it happened in Korea after the release of *Silenced* (Xie 2017). The audience may also feel unsatisfied without a solution provided. However, I claim that by doing so, Qu effectively removes any paternalism from the narrative, because a trial could have contributed to glorify and reinforce the authority of the state. We cannot rely exclusively on the state, since it is partly responsible for the lack of protection of victims, and sanctions of rapists. It is not about demanding a change of the law since the laws are written and implemented by the same people that protected the perpetrator in the case. Also, a public debate on these issues would be difficult since it could be a source of social instability, and therefore at risk to be quickly shut down by the authorities. Refusing a trial therefore successfully undermines any state paternalism while not putting the filmmaker in a difficult situation with the authorities.

Finally, the official statement by the ACWF is also subverted by what we see on screen. As she listens to the radio, Mia is dressing herself up in a bedroom where she is meant to give her virginity to an unknown man in exchange for money to finally buy an ID. At that moment, she embodies all the children who are being left behind and whom the ACWF calls to protect but for whom then fails to do so. Even if the two other girls have reached a relative 'conclusion' with President Liu's arrest, Mia's future remains uncertain as she has lost her job and therefore a place to stay. This subtle subversion of state dis-

course is later reinforced by how Mia takes action. After hearing the report, she ultimately decides to run away on her scooter after breaking the chains that were locking it down. The last shots of the film show her riding on a highway, desperately following a big statue of Marilyn Monroe tied to a truck. This is by no means a satisfying conclusion nor a happy ending for her, since she is once again left to her own devices, without Attorney Hao to help her. On her frail scooter, she starts again her search for a better place to ensure her survival.

Qu's directing choices when addressing sexual assault suggests an anti-paternalist stance while not directly attacking the Chinese state. It is a subtle approach that not only allows the film to pass through censorship – another proof of the negotiations filmmakers undertake in the market – but also points to a both local and global issue of systemic violence. Once again, exposure and agency are intertwined.

4 Addressing Gender and Class Issues

When presenting her idea of vulnerability, Butler explains that vulnerability embodies a similar process as performativity. Performativity is "both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting" (Butler 2016, 18). She then elaborates further:

> we are invariably acted on and acting, and this is one reason performativity cannot be reduced to the idea of free, individual performance. We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavor to change or make them on our own. In this way we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose. (24)

Choice comes late in this process, insists Butler. I argue that Qu's film represents her take on gender performativity for Chinese women. In an interview in MUBI's publication *Notebook*, the filmmaker explained that she wanted to explore how women are constrained by patriarchy and capitalism in their life choices.

> when I look at a woman, I realize the set of values that she has actually come from when she was growing up, how she was taught and what kind of choices she was given. Most of these women didn't have the opportunity to break out from what [their lives were] directed towards. It is really sad. I wanted to really look at the whole past of a woman, from the young adolescent to the mature woman, and really examine how we became what we became. (Qu interviewed by Dong 2017)

Indeed, *Angels Wear White*'s female characters are exposed to a set of conditions, but arguably only one character seems to acquire the possibility to choose, Mia. Before looking into that, I believe it is necessary to draw a picture of the conditions of gender performativity in contemporary China.

4.1 Women in Today's China

Drawing on the words of Simone de Beauvoir "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one", and Butler idea of performativity, Mila Zuo affirms that Chinese women face today an intricate combination of neo-Confucianism and neoliberalism values that define a normative femininity.

> The Confucian woman is not born but 'becomes' through kinship performances as daughter, wife, and mother – thus she is located within various relationalities with men, namely her father, husband, and son, each of whom she is expected to obey as her moral superior. (Zuo 2018, quoting Rosenlee 2006)

With the reforms, neo-Confucianism thinkers have turned to a differentialist approach to gender and sex by enabling biological arguments to naturalise what is a man and a woman, and the part they play in society. This was partly coming from the feeling that men were castrated by the Maoist era (1949-76), by the authoritarian state on the one hand, and the promotion and support of women in the professional and political life on the other hand (Zhong 2000). The accent is then put on the naturalisation of women's gender roles as wives and mothers, deemed more important than a professional career. In official discourses, women's role in the family, and in society at large, is to ensure its stability (Evans 1997). Xi Jinping as a leader has reinforced this view by describing the wife as 'virtuous' and the mother as 'kind': *Qi xian fu an, mu ci zi xiao* 妻贤夫安, 母慈子孝, which literally means "virtuous wife – husband at peace, kind mother – filial piety" (Xi 2016). By doing so, it reaffirms women's role in the family to raise children and transmit Chinese values (Xi 2016; Hird 2017).

As Angela Xiao Wu and Dong Yige put it in their illuminating 2019 article:

> China's transition to postsocialism has set in place a new gendered structure of power that culminates in the predominance of a particular marriage market, a heterosexual institution governed by a market logic which emphasizes women's economic dependency on men and their sexual objectification by men. (Wu, Dong 2019)

The institution of (heterosexual) marriage is, socially speaking, mandatory. The pressure to get married is put up by families and state discourses as testified by the "leftover women" campaigns targeting unmarried women over 25, whereas women's access to property is endangered by this same institution and the successive laws on divorce (Fincher 2014; To 2015). Marriage is seen as an opportunity of social progress, and polygamy has returned, since "how many women a man owns is proportional to the power and capital he owns" (Wu 2021, 106), which illustrate both women's economic dependency and their objectification. In this context, refusing marriage is thus a strategy of resistance to these power structures. Some feminist activists actually encourage women to work in order to be financially independent instead of getting married (Wu, Dong 2019).

Marriage is not the only concern. Reproduction is also under the scrutiny of the government, whether when it was enforcing the "hard birth planning", as Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) call it, until the 2010s, or when shifting to a two to three child birth planning policy. In addition, both the state and the consumer market have been promoting motherhood and the importance of the mother's role in her children's education, reaffirming and naturalising women as natural mothers in the process. Because of the birth planning policies, most Chinese couples have to support four grandparents on their own, and having children is getting more and more expensive, so even both parents' salaries are sometimes not enough to support the entire family. Women then find themselves in the contradictory situation where they are encouraged to have more children, but the job market is not supportive since they are precisely discriminated at work or laid off for having children in the first place (Angeloff 2012; Song 2011), preventing them to be able to provide for their family.

At the same time, women's appearance and sexuality has become commodified by consumerism, without really being able to transform gender norms (Evans 2008). Consumerism and socio-cultural values stress the importance of beauty for women to succeed professionally as well as finding good marriage prospects, both with the aim of social progress, which is a discourse that women internalise, as studies show (Wu, Mulkens, Alleva 2022).

In sum, these socio-cultural, economic and political constraints shape women's appearance, behaviour, professional and personal lives. In this context, femininity is a performance that must comply to more than often contradictory norms and expectations, whereas deviating from these very norms is socially condemned. These two dimensions lead to vulnerability in Butler's sense.

4.2 Gender Performativity in *Angels Wear White*

Some of these issues are depicted in *Angels Wear White*. In the film, female characters experience sexual and domestic violence, economic precarity, unbalanced relationships, and a lack of emotional satisfaction and of genuine connection with one another.

Some female-female relationships are friendly (Xiao Wen and Xin Xin), or an alliance formed by circumstances (Mia and her colleague Lili), others are marked by internalised misogyny like Xiao Wen and her mother. The latter blames her daughter's feminine appearance (long hair and clothing) for her assault, holding her responsible and punishing her for it by throwing away her dresses and cutting Xiao Wen's hair. When her daughter gets back at her, she throws away her mother's make up and nail polish, which are other symbols of this femininity. Each character has internalised what characterises femininity in this environment, and use it to hurt one another instead of supporting each other.

Dong Guang (2020) has remarked that some characters have the potential to become one another. First, when the youngest, Xiao Wen, runs away from home, she is likely to become like Mia who is always moving from one place to another after fleeing her own home. This link is emphasised by Attorney Hao, when she tries to convince Mia to help her in the investigation. Next, Mia, as a virgin, may resort to a hymen reconstruction surgery like her colleague Lili, after losing or selling it. Finally, Lili, currently working as a receptionist and shown using her charms to obtain favours from men, can later embrace Xiao Wen's mother occupation: a bar dancer, relying on her charms to earn a living. Lili's disappointment in her boyfriend can also later evolve into Xiao Wen's mother resentment for her ex-husband. This creates a possible chain reaction from one generation to another.

However, according to Dong Guang, the film fails to deconstruct the gender binary, with only negative male characters and no, or too little, solidarity between female characters. While I don't agree with the two latter statements (all the characters are complex or even morally grey), I will focus on the former: I argue that Mia's character is in a privileged position to expose the different aspects of gender performativity in today's China. She is as vulnerable as the other female characters to norms and expectations, but she ultimately opposes them. Like Butler said, choice comes later, here at the end of the film.

As an isolated minor, Mia seems to only rely on herself to guarantee her survival, and is exposed to several issues for contemporary Chinese women. While being fascinated by the performances of feminine behaviours and representations, as I will demonstrate in the following section, she eventually resists conforming to them. I will focus on three main elements that signify this performance of femi-

ninity: Mia's relationship with her co-worker Lili, a statue representing the American actress Marilyn Monroe, and finally the symbolism attached to the colours pink and white.

4.2.1 Lili

Mia is a growing teenager, and in her process of becoming an adult, she relies on the women around her to see what it means to be a woman in this society. Her closest relationship is with Lili, an older employee at the hotel. She is also more qualified as she is responsible for the hotel's reception while Mia is in charge of cleaning the rooms. She has a boyfriend, a local gang leader, and exchanges favours with Mia when she wants to spend time with him, which is the reason why Mia managed the reception the night of the assault and accidentally became a crucial witness for the case.

Spending time with her, Mia witnesses how Lili uses her charms on men, whether it is to alleviate their boss' anger or to distract policemen. Mia observes her as she takes good care of her appearance, wearing make-up and jewelry, dying her hair, smiling and acting sweet and harmless to look appealing in men's eyes. In return, men are attracted to her and she revels in it. Meanwhile, her attitude varies greatly when she is not gazed at by them, showing her true personality. Mia watches besides her or from afar, impressed, absorbing everything she can. When she later discovers a tattoo on Lili's hip after helping her to bed, she can't help but caress it reverently. This tattoo is another example of the teenager's fascination and attraction for femininity.

However, this performance is not without risks. Mia also witnesses the eventual backlash when Lili is hit by her boyfriend and goes through a surgery to rebuild her hymen after being dumped by him. In her post-operation haze, the older declares that since the doctor told her she could still have children, she will give birth to a son and bring him to her ex-boyfriend to scare him. She then starts to cry and pray to not be reborn as a woman in her next life. These few lines of dialogue clearly underline the social pressures Chinese women endures during their lives, such as giving birth to children (preferably a son, even if this preference is not as strong as a few decades ago) and remaining pure until marriage (even if this belief tends to be more and more contested, marriage is still posed as the only legitimate setting for sexual acts in official discourses).

Lili's story embodies the idea that femininity is a performance that provides socio-cultural legitimacy to the one performing it, however, the same performance can motivate violence towards her, whether the result of other's actions or internalised misogyny, coming from herself as well as other women.

At her side, Mia learns the monetary and moral value of a woman's virtue in this society. Lili's boyfriend offers to help her get a fake ID in exchange of a certain sum of money, and suggests that selling her virginity would be very lucrative for her. Mia then understands that her virginity is a commodity, apparently worth more than her workforce at the hotel. The issues of purity and chastity are emphasised by Lili's operation in a clinic dedicated to surgeries for women, showing the extent one woman can go to preserve her virtue. Mia has observed that a woman must look and act nice before men, hide her true personality behind charming smiles, and that marriage offers social legitimacy.

With no parental figure around, Mia takes inspiration from the adults around her. Attorney Hao is another role model, but in contrast to Lili, she is more masculine-coded: she wears no accessories, very little make up, and her hair-style is practical. She sticks to black and blue clothes, certainly to appear professional and be taken seriously by her male colleagues. She displays a tough exterior while still acting caring to the girls. But Mia is very reluctant to accept her care.

4.2.2 Marilyn Monroe

Another 'role model' is a statue of the actress Marilyn Monroe. Opening the film and appearing regularly during the narrative, it is located on the beach. The actress is depicted in her famous pose from Billy Wilder's *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), with her white dress lifted by the air blowing from the subway's vent. Vivian Qu explained that she took her inspiration from the news of a real statue of the actress that was built in a Chinese city, then destroyed because it was deemed too indecent (Rezo Films 2018, 5-6). Following this narrative, this local attraction – as demonstrated by the number of people taking pictures with it in the beginning of the film – is later removed and sent away.

When we discover the statue at the beginning of the film alongside Mia, we first don't see the whole structure and stay at its feet. Mia is shown fascinated by the pink nail polish that decorates the actress' toes as she strokes them. Next, the camera, poised as her gaze, timidly goes up the statue's leg to frame its underwear. But it doesn't linger and goes right back down, which suggests a feeling of something forbidden, illicit or even shameful. Mia then tries to take a picture of it with her phone but because of the sun she fails to get a satisfying shot. Her several attempts are finally cut to black before she goes back to her workplace. She isn't shown returning to the pictures she took in the remainder of the film, which indicates that this focus on the underwear may have been an impulse of the moment. She may have felt desire but it was fugitive. However, her attachment to

the statue remains as she goes back several times to see it and even takes care of it by removing the ad stickers that progressively cover the statue's ankles, as if to preserve her appearance and integrity.

This statue is an ambiguous figure in *Angels Wear White*. On the one hand, she is a symbol of the influence of American soft power and globalisation in post-reform China through the actress's image. She is an icon, selling people a sensual image and influencing beauty standards for Chinese women. Her blonde hair in particular is desired by the three young girls. Xiao Wen and Xin Xin are shown playing with a blonde wig the night of their assault, experimenting with their appearance and attitude to look like a grown woman. After finding it when cleaning the hotel room, Mia preciously keeps it. The star is thus a model of femininity and sensuality for the girls.

She is also a figure of comfort. When she leaves her mother's apartment, Xiao Wen spends the night curled up between the statue's feet. And when Mia runs away at the end of the film, she decides to follow the statue that is being moved away in a truck. After losing her job and thus a place to stay, the statue appears as the only remaining landmark for her, which could explain why she decides to trust it with her fate for the time being.

On the other hand, the statue exudes too much sexuality for the morality the government tries to enforce, provoking her removal. She is both a sexual fantasy and a threat as a woman embracing her sexuality, which are targeted by repressive regulations from the patriarchal power. She then embodies the inherent contradictions of women's condition in post-reform China. Women are objectified and commodified by capitalism, while expected to preserve their virtue and fulfil their roles as mothers and wives. Marilyn Monroe's personal life is an example of what patriarchal capitalism can do to women if we consider the sexual violence, and the commercial objectification and exploitation she went through. However, the actress' agency has been rehabilitated by feminist scholars and journalists these last few years, who now consider her as a vanguard of the #MeToo movement for denouncing her rape experience, and warning aspiring actresses of predatory Hollywood producers in her autobiography (Banner 2012; Baillot, Chassé 2022). As another victim of rape and economic exploitation who tried to resist both, her bond with the girls becomes even more meaningful.

4.2.3 Pink and White

Finally, these tensions around femininity's performance are visually conveyed by the recurrent use of white and pink colours for the female characters' clothes or accessories. The symbolism embedded into these two colours is likely to be intentional, considering the film's international title.[7]

Angels, like the colour white, are beings associated with purity. In a similar way, in the film, white is connected to female purity and innocence, as demonstrated by the young girls' dresses, especially when they have to go through medical examinations, or the supposedly innocent white dress of Marilyn Monroe's statue (embodying the actress's part of a beautiful and naive neighbour). Similarly, at the end of the film, when Mia prepares herself to lose her virginity to a client, she is given a white dress to emphasise her virginal purity, her pure, untouched condition.

According to historians Michel Pastoureau and Dominique Simonnet (2005, 21-2), white was originally associated to purity and innocence, and became a symbol of virginity with Christian marriage. To ensure their lineage and transmission of patrimony, fathers had to make sure their children were truly their own, and virginity was thus demanded of the brides. With the rise of bourgeois values, young women and girls had to display their purity-virginity by dressing in white, which led to the still on-going custom of white wedding dresses.

Thanks to globalisation, the adoption of this custom by Chinese couples when getting married has become more and more prominent, as illustrated by the numerous couples taking their wedding photos on the beach in the background of a few scenes. The beach appears to be a popular spot according to the number of couples. Some brides pose in front of the sea, others ride a horse led by their husband, and other 'romantic' settings, but all brides wear a Western white dress, a colour that clearly stands out in the frame. In one particular scene, Xiao Wen wanders on the beach while skipping school and observes the newlyweds in their various settings, but as they leave the frame, our gaze is attracted to a mother and her child playing on the beach, suggesting that this is Xiao Wen's actual dream: a loving parent instead of a loving husband.

Pink, on the other hand, is worn by women such as Lili and Xiao Wen's mother, who conform to a feminine appearance and attitude. Some of their clothes, accessories or make-up are often pink and worn proudly. The clinic where Mia and Lili go for the latter's surgery presents various pink items and decoration to indicate that this is a la-

7 Co-produced by a French company, the film came out in France under the same international title but translated in French (*Les Anges portent du blanc*).

dies' place. Mia and Xiao Wen, still in a formative state, can only borrow these pink items, like when Mia takes Lili's shift at the hotel and temporarily gets to wear her bright pink uniform jacket. The garment gives her a short-term legitimacy as she pretends to be the employee in charge, adopting a cold attitude to appear qualified. The younger ones are still learning and experimenting with this concept of femininity.

The colour pink, as a recent attribute to women in Western history and later on reinforced by consumerism (Paoletti 2012), is clearly associated with a certain idea of femininity based on biological arguments, and embedded in a dichotomy with masculinity. Because of this association, it is often considered as a lesser colour that must not be worn by men. It represents expectations for women as well as their subordinated position in patriarchy. In the film, wearing pink seems to indicate the character's compliance with normative femininity. Pink is also the colour of Lili's cheek after her boyfriend hits her. The colour personifies, once again, the contradictions of this gender performance.

But the symbolism of these colours is not set in stone. When Mia runs away in the end in her white dress, it attributes a new meaning to the colour white: hope.

4.3 Mia Resists

In this paper, femininity is understood as a gender performance intersecting neo-Confucian (patriarchal then) and neoliberal values, norms and expectations for women. In the film, as she observes the other women around her, Mia is given the choice to conform to the normative femininity she is presented with. She is shown fascinated by it, even attracted to it, while not being comfortable embracing it for herself.

When cleaning the room where the assault take place, she finds the blonde wig the girls were playing with the night before and keeps it preciously. It is evidence for the assault case but she seems to keep it more for her personal interest than as a something to be traded. She is determined to get it back when Lili's boyfriend steal it from her, and in a later scene she is shown eyeing a similar-looking wig in a shop next to the beach. This wig obviously appeals to her, maybe because it is a step closer to look like the Marilyn Monroe statue that she adores. However, she does not dare wear it.

She borrows Lili's accessories (jacket, lipstick, earrings) when she has to stand in for her at the reception, always temporarily. Lili gifts her the earrings when they separate but she only wears when she tries to look appealing as she is about to sell her virginity. This scene is another attempt at adopting these feminine attributes and presenting herself the way she thinks is expected of her. However,

this attempt of conforming to gender expectations is subverted by her flight. At the last minute, she refuses to perform.

When she takes pictures of the statue's underwear, she may feel attraction or even desire but the acting suggests that she does not really comprehend what she is feeling at the moment. Plus, her voyeuristic and fetishist perspective is thwarted by the sun. The fact that the film does not dwell on it indicates that may have been a failed attempt to conform to the male gaze that leaves her puzzled and unsatisfied.

Finally, certainly because of her past experience, she is not kind. She only gives in exchange for something, and rejects any care from Attorney Hao. When she eventually provides her the proof of the assault, it is unclear whether she does it to repay the woman who paid for her hospital bills, or in retaliation to President Liu, or if she genuinely wants to help Xiao Wen and Xin Xin. It may be a combination of all three, which demonstrates again the complexity of *Angels Wear White*'s characters.

Most of the issues of gender performativity represented in the film are introduced through Mia's experience. Because she has a backseat on most of them, she has more leverage to determine what she feels is right or wrong for her. I believe it is this difference of affect that leads her to refuse to comply to the normative femininity she has been presented with. She is deeply aware of her vulnerability, but mobilise it to go even further: she runs away, and by doing so, she breaks, at least for the moment, the chain of characters. She will not become like Lili. This breakthrough is significant, as Butler puts it:

> Precisely because something inadvertent and unexpected can happen in this realm of 'being affected', we find forms of gender that break with mechanical patterns of repetition, deviating from, resignifying, and sometimes quite emphatically breaking those citational chains of gender normativity, making room for new forms of gendered life. (2016, 18)

Escape is the solution provided but it does not settle the teenager situation. While the ending conveys a message of hope, it does not offer a satisfying conclusion for the audience. President Liu has been arrested but it by no means guarantees that sexual assault will never happen again, and Mia remains an isolated minor. In this situation, the answer seems to be leaving, removing ourselves from patriarchy. It is reminiscent of the question Chinese intellectuals have been pondering since the beginning of the twentieth century, with Lu Xun intervention "What Happens After Nora Walks Out?" (Lu 2017): what happens to the fugitive if she has no money? Mia's vulnerability is both gendered and economic as she has no income, no ID and no home. Her body (as both her workforce and virginity) is the only thing she has to offer. This acknowledgment is to be connected with

the accent on economic self-reliance advocated by feminist movements since the 2000s in China (Wu, Dong 2019).

As I have discussed elsewhere, the escape of the heroine at the end of the story is a recurrent feature in Chinese women filmmakers' works and Qu's film seems to be no exception (Reynaud 2020). I argued that this kind of open-ending is a way for the filmmakers to frustrate the audience used to happy endings and satisfying conclusions thanks to consumerism (leaving the audience satisfied) and the censorship system (no discussion of social and political issues likely to disturb the social harmony allowed). Here, the ending insists on the character's vulnerability. Without a clear destination ahead, Mia is in a liminal space, an in-between that expresses her exposed and agentic state, and a reason enough to raise political mobilisation.

5 Conclusion

On 23 November 2017, a scandal blew out in Beijing: the head of one of the private kindergartens in Chaoyang District, managed by the American company Red Yellow Blue Education (RYB), was fired after reports by news state agency Xinhua of alleged sexual assault and abuse on the pupils (*Reuters* 2017). With the lack of public structure for early education since the state's withdrawal on most social services with the economic reforms, private companies such as RYB took the market. The absence of official regulations led to a growing list of similar scandals, and this one in particular fuelled anger online. Coincidently, the following day *Angels Wear White*, which deals with the very same issue, came out in theatres. The RYB kindergarten scandal offered then an unexpected success to the small feature. In the days following its release, the film's box office tripled as people rushed to see it, raising it to the 160th place out of the almost 300 films distributed that year, which is an honorable score for an art-house film with a limited run.[8] The scandal seems to have benefited the film more than its prize at the Taiwan's Golden Horse Festival. According to some local journalists and filmmakers, people may have gone to see the film because these issues are rarely discussed publicly in China (Fan 2017b; Han 2017). This unexpected success proves that *Angels Wear White* deals with burning issues in contemporary China.

This article has shown how vulnerability helps reading Qu's narrative and directing choices regarding sexual assault and gender performativity for women. The filmmaker follows two vulnerable but resilient young girls in their search for safety, chose to conceal the as-

8 Cf. https://piaofang.maoyan.com/i/imovie/1208113/box.

sault on screen, and instead of establishing visual pleasure, provokes the audience's participation during Xiao Wen's gynaecological examination. The concealment of the culprit's effectively points to a systemic issue, and favouring an open ending to an official trial reflects the director's delicate position between calling for a change in mentalities at large without directly attacking the state. Not demanding the state's accountability has been criticised but at the same time, it successfully avoids any paternalism from the latter.

Next, the film focuses on Mia's perspective to tackle issues of gender performativity in today's China, intersecting economic precarity and gender norms. Through other female characters and a statue of Marilyn Monroe, Mia is exposed to many gendered norms and expectations. She tries to experiment with the normative femininity presented to her but subverts it by running away. She prefers to remove herself from the situation rather than complying with the commodification of her virginity and her future objectification by men. Her flight undermines the symbol of purity associated with her white dress to transform it into a new canvas, the possibility of a new life, as she starts all over again. The uncertainty of her future underlines the economic vulnerability shared by migrant workers and isolated minors in post-reform China, and the open ending is meant to be unsatisfactory to elicit a reaction and a reflection from the audience.

Vulnerability as Butler conceives it, that is informing mobilisation of political resistance, is useful to read *Angels Wear White* and feminist film-making in the PRC. In this case, Qu's directing neither asks for state support nor solidifies women in an oppressed position. I will finish by considering the filmmaker's own vulnerability in the Chinese cinematic industry, especially for an art-house and socially engaged director like Qu.

First, there is no proper art-house network in the PRC that would be able to support this kind of production. Even with a censorship visa, art-house and low budget movies must compete with domestic and foreign blockbusters and therefore usually get limited screening.

Regarding the gender of Chinese directors, according to official statistics, 59 women directors produced 182 feature films between 1980 and 1989 (Huang 1995, 71). It is well known that there was state support for women in the industry until the 1990s before it gradually disappeared, leading to the end of many women directors' careers. More recent statistics from 2017 to 2021 show that the proportion of women directors never go over 10% of the total of domestic directors (The One International Women's Film Festival 2021). While there is no data available before 2017, we have very little or no reason to believe that the proportion was higher before then. In addition, many women filmmakers direct one movie, two if they are lucky, and then more than often disappear (Chan 2016). Qu herself, after one first feature in 2013 and *Angels Wear White* in 2017, has not produced or

announced the preparation of a new film since then.

The combination of the lack of an art-house cinema network, gender bias in the industry when it comes to production, political censorship, and market pressure put women filmmakers like Qu in a very delicate position. If *Angels Wear White* was relatively successful when it came out, the result of a desire to see the issues of sexual violence addressed, the film did not raise a public debate on these very issues. This is easily explained by the tight control the Chinese government exerts on public discussions. Nevertheless, Qu was able to show her film to a larger audience than most art-house films from the PRC. To conclude, I return to Butler's vulnerability and performativity that constitutes in my eyes useful concepts to discuss Chinese cinema or even feminist movements in China. Implemented properly, I believe they allow a locally situated perspective taking into account issues of gender as well as age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on, without falling into a dichotomy state-people or paternalism-victimisation.

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Fragile National Identity in Taiwanese Historical Film
A Narrative Analysis of Selected Case Studies from the 1980s to 2010s

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Abstract This paper aims to redefine and negotiate the boundaries of Taiwan's identity through an examination of historical films, delving into its complexity and fragility. It begins by providing a contextualisation of Taiwanese historical films. It then proceeds to compare narrative styles between the 1980s Taiwan New Cinema and 2010s films, tracing the transition from one historical interpretation to another. Lastly, it argues for a distinct narrative style in the 2010s, citing examples from feature films and documentaries. This study contributes to the understanding of Taiwan's multifaceted national identity and the role of cinema in shaping it.

Keywords Taiwan cinema. Taiwanese identity. National cinema. Historical narrative. New historicism. Literature and Cinema.

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> Taiwan cinema is best understood by treating the 'nation' as a nexus of internal and external contentions.
>
> Hong Guo-juin
> *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*, 2011-19

1 Introduction

1.1 Taiwan Cinema Studies

The national identity of Taiwan's cinema covers an ambiguous, complex, and even paradoxical reality, in relation to the multiple traumatic experiences of domination to which the island was subjected in its history. The present research on Taiwanese cinema is based on two axes: on the one hand, the analysis of the aesthetics in the filmography of major film-makers from 1982 to 1987, and on the other hand, the portrayal of the emergence of a collective consciousness through Taiwanese cinema, considering cinema as a witness or a vehicle for the formation and spreading of a national identity (Kolatte 2019, 13).

The first axis focuses on the most famous film movement in Taiwan's film history, Taiwan New Cinema or TNC (*Taiwan xin dianying* 台灣新電影). This movement was characterised by the emergence of talented film-makers who created their own signature styles, which brought international acclaim to Taiwanese cinema, contributing to the development of Taiwanese cinema as a respected art form on the global stage (e.g. Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and its second wave, namely Ang Lee, Tsai Ming-liang and others). The major achievement of TNC is represented not only by its artistic contribution, but also by its portrayal of the complexity of Taiwanese identity. At that time, on the eve of the lifting of the martial law, this group of film-makers touched on taboo issues, bringing to light Taiwan's history that had been concealed in the past. Among these films are Hou Hsiao-hsien's "Taiwan Trilogy",[1] Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* 牯嶺街少年殺人事件 (1991), Wang Tong's "Modern History Trilogy",[2] Wan Ren's *Super Citizen Ko* 超級大國民 (1994); the second wave includes Lin Cheng-sheng's *March of Happiness* 天馬茶房 (1997), among others.

The second axis considers the historical and social context of the Republic of China (ROC)/Taiwan. Taiwan was colonised by authoritarian regimes throughout its twentieth-century history. In 1895, the island became one of Japan's colonies and the Japanese domination

1 Hou Hsiao-hsien's "Taiwan Trilogy" consists of: *City of Sadness* (*Beiqing chengshi* 悲情城市, 1989), *The Puppetmaster* (*Xi meng rensheng* 戲夢人生, 1993), and *Good Men, Good Women* (*Hao nan hao nü* 好男好女, 1995).

2 Wang Tong's "Modern History Trilogy" includes: *Strawman* (*Daocaoren* 稻草人, 1987), *Banana Paradise* (*Xiangjiao tiantang* 香蕉天堂, 1989), and *Hill of No Return* (*Wuyan de shanqiu* 無言的山丘, 1992).

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lasted for fifty years. After Taiwan's handover to the Republic of China in 1945, Kuomintang practiced an authoritarian system for almost forty years.[3] Since the end of the 1980s, the island has experienced rapid democratisation in politics as well as a move towards globalisation in economic trade.[4] Since 2000, Taiwan has faced different circumstances from that of the past. While the island has undergone several peaceful transitions of power and a gradual democratisation process, it has also encountered the ascent of China as a major world power, leading to increasing geopolitical threats. In this context, Taiwanese films from different periods are particularly capable of expressing this complexity: the plurality and evolution of identities.

1.2 Nation, History and Cinema

How to define the 'national' cinema of the island? A cinema produced by the stated-owned studio or a cinema capable of projecting 'an imagined community'? The attempt to define a national cinema must be aware of the historical events characterising Taiwanese history, as the history of the island and its multiple colonial experiences have shaped its national identity. Hayden White's neologism 'historiophoty' is composed of the roots 'historio-' (history) and 'phot-' (light) and defined as "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse" (White 1988, 1193), which also indicates that cinema often reflects a community's imagination of itself while portraying history.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Taiwan has faced a number of contemporary problems, including cultural crises, economic exploitation, and environmental pollution, all of which have been accelerated by globalisation and neoliberal influences.[5] Additionally, Taiwan has experienced political and economic oppression due to the rise of People's Republic of China (PRC), which continues to impact the national identity of Taiwan today. This complex set of

3 Initially on the Chinese mainland and then in Taiwan. From 1949 to 1987, Taiwan underwent 38 years of martial law, which was qualified as "the second longest imposition of martial law by a regime anywhere in the world" (Chung 2017).

4 During the 1990s, on the political front, Kuomintang enacted a series of democratic reforms, such as the abolition of temporary provisions against the 1991 communist rebellion, the 1994 constitutional amendment, and the direct elections for the president, vice president, and Assembly in 1996. On the economic front, Taiwan also began to actively participate in international trade organisations, joining the GATT in 1993 and the WTO in 2002.

5 For instance, *Cape No. 7* is a film that presents the face of contemporary Taiwanese society under the influence of globalisation. Ivy Chang considers *Cape No. 7* a national parable of contemporary Taiwan, and the film's plot demonstrates the paradox of transnational cultures interacting in a post-modern time-space environment (Chang 2019, 97).

issues is reflected in the cinema of the 2010s, which projects an alternative national imagination compared to the 1980s one. The revival of Taiwanese cinema during this period has led to a significant increase in film productions. These diverse works offer an opportunity to delve into the current national imagination from different viewpoints. In parallel, the 2010s Taiwanese films inherit the *Zeitgeist* of TNC, with a renewed emphasis on historical themes. However, the interpretation of history diverges from that of TNC, reflecting a transition of national consciousness of modern Taiwanese history. Therefore, based on the concept of 'historiophoty', this article seeks to elucidate the national imagination of the 2010s Taiwanese historical films by approaching the issue on three distinct levels.

Firstly, the different narrative styles of Taiwanese historical films will be discussed. By examining the various styles of interpreting history in different periods, we can gain insight into the instability and fragility of Taiwanese nationality in its cinema history since the beginning. Secondly, since the 1980s, TNC have exhibited a spontaneous expression of national consciousness without state intervention. Therefore, the different narrative styles between TNC and 2010s Taiwanese cinema in terms of historical interpretation will be further analysed. By comparing the narratives, the transformation of national imagination in modern Taiwanese history can be illustrated. Lastly, the article will focus on the analysis of 2010s Taiwanese historical films by reviewing a range of feature films and documentaries, and will explore the interpretation of history and narrative styles employed in the historical films of the 2010s.

2 Narrative Style of Taiwanese Historical Films

Taiwanese cinema from different periods projects different ideologies. Before the 1980s, Taiwanese films were often produced by the state studio or under state control, which means the films had to conform to the spirit of the ruling government's political propaganda. However, this approach contributed to the creation of a paradoxical reality where the identity represented in these films did not always reflect the national imaginations of the islanders, in a context where the histories of the different ethnic communities and social classes were quite varied. For instance, *Sayon's Bell* (*Sayon no Kane* サヨンの鐘, 1943) is a propaganda film promoting the Japanisation (*Kōminka* 皇民化) during Japanese rule in Taiwan (1895-1945).[6] After

6 'Japanisation' or 'imperialisation' refers to a policy in which Japanese culture dominates, assimilates, or influences other cultures. During World War II, the Japanese government imposed its culture on the people of Taiwan through various measures, such as

the regime was handed over to Kuomintang, it began focusing on film production through the state-owned Central Motion Pictures Corporation 中央電影公司 (CMPC) in the 1960s.[7] For nearly two decades, CMPC dominated Taiwan's major production companies and specially created a film-making genre named the 'Healthy Realism Genre' (*jiankang xieshi dianying* 健康寫實電影). Healthy Realism focused on showing the positive image of Taiwanese society and traditional Chinese values. The genre was used by the Kuomintang regime under martial law as a form of propaganda, with productions such as *Oyster Girl* (*Ke nyu* 蚵女, 1964) and *Beautiful Duckling* (*Yang ya renjia* 養鴨人家, 1965) being typical examples.

It was only in 1982 that Taiwanese cinema underwent a significant transformation with the emergence of the TNC movement. In the 1980s, influenced by the Taiwan nativist literature (*Hsiang-t'u Wenxue* 鄉土文學) of the 1970s, that activated film-makers' national consciousness, TNC broke through the restrictions of the authoritarian government and was able to narrate Taiwan's history authentically without any ideological control, and examined officially concealed history of the past. The TNC, as the cinema movement with the most far-reaching influence in Taiwan, successfully led Taiwanese films to international recognition due to is artistic achievements. But most of all, TNC demonstrated spontaneous representations of national consciousness, conveyed through its historical interpretation by filmic discourse.

However, from the end of the 1990s, after TNC (1982-7) and its second wave (1990s), Taiwan cinema faced a structural crisis. In 2002, in order to join the WTO, Taiwan lifted the deregulation on the import of foreign films, which was tantamount to opening up the film market to full trade liberalisation, allowing foreign films to be screened in Taiwan at will (Jane 2017). In the absence of a sound policy to protect the domestic film industry, the domestic film market was dominated by foreign films – especially Hollywood films –, resulting in the gradual collapse of the already fragile film industry. Production budgets were cut due to poor box office, which in turn affected the scale and quality of films, leading to a vicious cycle of film production.[8] For nearly two decades, the domestic film industry had been in such a long slump. Only in 2008 was Wei Te-sheng's debut, *Cape No. 7*, accompanied by a boom at the box office and became a

mandating the use of the Japanese language and encouraging the adoption of Japanese names, with the aim of making Taiwanese people subjects of the emperor.

7 CMPC was established in 1954. Source: `https://www.movie.com.tw/about`.

8 Between 1995 and 2009, the average production of feature films was only around 18 films per year. The market share of national films was only 1-2% (Yeh, Davis 2008, 18, tab. 1.1.).

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cultural phenomenon.[9] Its reception aroused the public's interest in Taiwanese films and drove the revival of the 2010s Taiwanese films.[10] Although TNC and the 2010s Taiwanese films seem to have different orientations – one authorial and artistic, the other commercial and genre-cinema –, one thing that is closely related is the focus of both on historical themes. In other words, although Taiwanese cinema in the 2010s has shifted away from the art-film style of the 1980s, it has not completely abandoned the *Zeitgeist* of TNC but has instead adopted a different narrative approach to interpret its concern for Taiwan's history.

The evolution of Taiwanese nationality is reflected in various forms of art, such as literature, music, painting, film, and others, that bear witness to social, historical, and cultural transformations. Among these, the development of literature and film is particularly closely related. Many Taiwanese films from different periods are adaptations of literary works. For instance, several Taiwanese language films (*Taiyupian* 台語片)[11] and martial arts films were originally from classical Chinese novels, such as *Luo Xiaohu and Yu Jiaolong* (*Luo Xiaohu yu Yu Jiaolong* 羅小虎與玉嬌龍, 1959-60), which was originally from Wang Dulu's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *A Touch of Zen* (*xia nü* 俠女, 1971), retrieved from Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異); and *Legend of the Mountain* (*shanzhong* 山中傳奇, 1979), retrieved from some of Song dynasty's *Huaben*.[12] Anti-communist films (*fangong dianying* 反共電影) were adaptations of Anti-communist novels (*fangong xiaoshuo* 反共小說) or Scar literature (*shanghen wenxue* 傷痕文學), including *Black and Blue* (*lan yu hei* 藍與黑, 1966), *If I Were for Real* (*jairu wo shi zhen de* 假如我是真的, 1981), and *On the Society File of Shanghai* (*shanghai shehui dangan* 上海社會檔案, 1981).

Moreover, literature and cinema are not just form-shifting textual adaptations; they are especially co-constructing the contemporary national imagination in cultural terms. Taiwan nativist literature in the 1970s indirectly contributed to the birth of TNC (Yip 2004,

9 *Cape No. 7* earned nearly NT$530 million at the domestic box office and remains the best-selling Taiwanese film to date.

10 In 2008, *Cape No. 7* created an unprecedented social-cultural fever and was called the "Taiwanese Miracle" (Chang 2019, 81). The unexpected success of *Cape No. 7* has resulted in the government's revision of its policies on grants for Taiwan cinema in order to assist the development of Taiwan's film industry (83).

11 *Taiyupian* are films with Taiwanese as the spoken language and were prevalent from the 1950s to the late 1970s. The genre of *Taiyupian* is usually melodrama, produced on a very low budget. Source: `https://www.taiwanculture-uk.org/cs-film/2021/3/18/taiyupian`.

12 *Huaben* 話本 is a short storytelling or novella written since the Song dynasty.

60).[13] Several works by nativist literature writer Huang Chunming were adapted into films of TNC.[14] Other nativist works such as Wang Chen-ho's *An Oxcart for Dowry* (*jiazhuang yi niu che* 嫁妝一牛車, 1967; film 1985); Liao Hui-ying's *Ah Fei* (*youma caizi* 油麻菜籽, 1983; film 1984); and Hsiao Li-Hung's *Osmanthus Alley* (*guihua xiang* 桂花巷, 1977; film 1987) were also notable adaptations of nativist literature during TNC. Furthermore, the close bond characterising Taiwanese cinema and literature since the 1980s is proven by the direct involvement of book authors in the film creation process. Several writers participated in the creation of films, including Hsiao Yeh, Wu Nien-chen, Ting Ya-ming, and Chu T'ien-wen. The experiences of collaborating with TNC's film-makers also had a direct impact on their writing (Yip 2004, 61). Thus, inspired by nativist literature, TNC was also referred to as "national nativist cinema" (Huang 1995, 64). Both film and fiction aimed to deconstruct the grand narrative of state-defined national identity by the Kuomintang, displaying strong "native consciousness" (*bentu yishi* 本土意識) and an attachment to the land (Yip 2004, 62). This highlights the important influence of literature on cinema and nationality. In this context, to further explore the different characteristics of Taiwanese historical films in each period, we can refer to the development of Taiwanese historical fiction.

Taiwanese scholar Chen Chien-chung has made great contributions to the study of Taiwanese historical fiction. Chen's discourse on Taiwanese historical fiction is relevant to the study of Taiwanese historical films. Chen classifies Taiwanese historical fiction into four categories: Traditional Historical Fiction, Anti-Communist Historical Fiction, Post-colonial Historical Fiction, and New Historical Fiction, by analysing the narrative modes of Taiwanese historical fiction in different periods (Chen 2018, 45-6). These four types of historical fiction reflect the social culture and historical consciousness of Taiwan in different periods with different narrative modes. Although the examples presented by Chen are, as mentioned, mainly based on Taiwanese historical fiction, the classification not only echoes historical narratives if placed in the context of Taiwanese cinema, but also helps clarify the transformation of national imagination in Taiwanese cinema.

13 A literary style that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s in Taiwan, it generally refers to literary works that depict the middle and lower classes in local communities. Its literary style expresses the characteristics of 'self-subjectivity' and 'social realism".

14 For instance, the films *The Sandwich Man* (*Erzi de da wan'ou* 兒子的大玩偶, 1983) is based on Huang's three stories *The Taste of Apples, Xiaoqi's Cap* and *His Son's Big Doll*. Other namesake works include *A Flower in the Raining Night* (*kan hai de rizi* 看海的日子, 1983), and *I Love Mary* (*wo ai mali* 我愛瑪莉, 1990).

2.1 Traditional Historical Films (1950s-1970s)

The first type of historical fiction, as defined by Chen, is Traditional Historical Fiction, focusing on the history of mainland China,[15] where legendary historical characters emerged, and significant historical events happened. This type of fiction also has the characteristics of popular fiction (Chen 2018, 235-6). These works often "carry the projection of historical consciousness of the author, himself situated in his own time" (236). In terms of both thematic features and style, Traditional Historical Fiction echoes the popular martial arts films of the 1960s and 1970s, both of which aim to establish an ideal 'Cultural China' (through the fiction or film),[16] reflecting, among the others, the historical context of *Waishengren* 外省人, the group of migrants who were exiled out of mainland China post-war.

In the case of Taiwan Cinema, from the 1950s, many Taiwanese opera film (*Gezaixi dianying* 歌仔戲電影), a type of *Taiyupian*, were originally from Chinese traditional legends, such as *The Story of Sit Ping-kwai and Wong Bo-chuen* (*xuepinggui yu wangbaochuan* 薛平貴與王寶釧, 1956), *Butterfly Lovers* (*yingtai bai mu* 英台拜墓, 1959), and *Tale of the Lychee Mirror* (*chen san wu niang* 陳三五娘, 1981). Later, in the 1960s, with the heavy promotion of Kuomintang nationalist policies, film production was changed gradually to Mandarin language films. Among these films, martial arts are one of the genre films that also feature traditional Chinese history. It is worth mentioning that although some martial arts films are set in Taiwan, the stories have nothing to do with the local landscape where they were filmed, which means martial arts films transformed Taiwan in a virtual China. For instance, King Hu's martial arts films are mostly set in the Ming Dynasty, and the stories are about chivalrous heroes who rescue the loyalists. However, due to the diplomatic tensions between the 'two Chinas' during the Cold War, it was difficult for Taiwanese directors to film in mainland China in the 1970s. As a result, most of his films were shot outside China, in Hong Kong, Taiwan or South Korea. Two of his most famous films, *Dragon Inn* (1967) and *A Touch of Zen* (1971),

15 For Taiwanese people, the term 'mainland China' (*Zhongguo dalu* 中國大陸) refers to the People's Republic of China (PRC). It distinguishes the PRC from Taiwan (officially the Republic of China) due to the political divide between the two entities. It's worth noting that the interpretation and understanding of 'mainland China' can vary among individuals in Taiwan. Some may view it as merely a geographical term, while others may associate it with political implications and historical contexts.

16 'Cultural China' refers to a broad conception of China based on cultural identity; Tu wei-ming argues that China does not necessarily refer to a political and territorial entity (i.e., PRC, to which it is usually made equivalent), but rather to a common cultural imaginary shared by other political and territorial entities (Tu 2005, 147). In other words, Cultural China does not necessarily correspond to mainland China, but includes other Chinese communities living in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, or the United States.

were both filmed in Taiwan, transforming the natural landscape of Taiwan into the Chinese mainland one (e.g. *Taroko* in Hualien, *Huoyan Mountain* in Miaoli) and thus projecting his ideal imagination of Cultural China in the film. In addition, as one of the major genre films in the 1960s and 1970s, martial arts films also represented a national allegory, implying the ideology of the ROC at that time. Films often emphasise the dichotomy of good and evil. This ideological narrative not only provides the audience with visual pleasure (the good chivalry conquers the evil), but also reflects the political confrontation between the ROC and the PRC (the good ROC would defeat the evil PRC), conforming to the policies propagated by Kuomintang (Lin 2015, 13).

As a result, from 1950 to 1970, we can observe that both Taiwanese language films and Mandarin language films produced in Taiwan reflected the imagination of Cultural China by traditional historical narratives. These genres not only proclaimed traditional Confucian values, but also conveyed a nostalgic recall to mainland China.

2.2 Anti-Communist Historical Films (1960s-1980s)

Since 1949, after the defeat in the Chinese Civil War, the ROC was established in Taiwan. As mentioned, Kuomintang strongly dominated the implementation of literary and arts policies since the 1950s in order to maintain the legitimacy of the regime. In the field of literature, writers were encouraged to devote themselves to the writing of anti-communist literature (Chen 2018, 105). In that of films, the state-owned film company CMPC fostered films that mimicked Italian neo-realism as one of the main genres of political propaganda (e.g. *Oyster Girl* [1964], *Beautiful Duckling* [1965], and *Good Morning Taipei* [1979], directed by Li Hsing). The CMPC was also involved in the production of anti-communist films as *By the Hillside* (*Mei Gang Chun Hui* 梅崗春回, 1954), its very first film, narrating the story of people and soldiers fighting against the Chinese Communist Party's People's Liberation Army. In the 1970s, due to a series of diplomatic crises such as being forced to withdraw from the United Nations and the severance of diplomatic relations between Taiwan and Japan, the CMPC produced many patriotic films featuring the Sino-Japanese War to assert Kuomintang's political authority during this difficult diplomatic time, such as *Everlasting Glory* (*yinglie qianqiu* 英烈千秋, 1974), *Eight Hundred Heroes* (*babai zhuangshi* 八百壯士, 1976), and *Victory* (*meihua* 梅花, 1976) (Tseng 2010).

Such background for cinema, characterised by state-led patriotic films, could echo Chen's second category, Anti-Communist Historical Fiction. Most of Anti-Communist Historical Fiction depict the experience of exile during the Second Sino-Japanese War or the Chinese

Civil War, reflecting the history of those eras through the traumatic experience of individuals (Chen 2018, 105). The common denominator of the two art forms – fiction and film – is that they were deliberately cultivated by the authoritarian government and were intended to serve as cultural vehicles for political propaganda.

Compared to fiction, which tends to focus more on depicting individual experiences, anti-communist films place greater emphasis on the collective, aiming to evoke collective patriotic feeling and present a positive image of the state (Tseng 2010). In other words, the two art forms were committed to the goal of culturally constructing a single national identity through different vehicles in the public and private spheres.

2.3 Post-Colonial Historical Films (1980s-1990s)

The third type of Chen's classification is Post-colonial Historical Fiction. In contemporary post-colonial theory, the term "politics of memory" is used to refer to 'memory' as a tool used by the colonised to resist the colonisers in order to evoke the suppressed memory of the authoritarian eras, with a political connotation of "resistance to colonization" (Chen 2018, 369). The writing of Post-colonial Historical Fiction was a practice of "politics of memory" to retrieve the muted history at that time. In Chen's words, "post-colonial historical fiction is precisely a creation from the perspective of reconstructing historical memory" (237). With such political purpose, the concept of post-colonial writing is in line with the *Zeitgeist* of TNC. Both film and fiction aim to recreate the national history of the colonised, such as the periods under Japanese rule (1895-1945), the February 28 Incident, and the White Terror (1949-91). The motive of these works is to 'recover' the history of the past that was erased by the dictatorship, thereby recreating the trauma of the colonised.

Because of the political connotation of "resistance to colonisation", Post-colonial Historical Films often present a slow, realistic narrative aesthetic that expresses the sadness and gravity of post-colonial history. For instance, Hou Hsiao-hsien's "Taiwan Trilogy" explores the story of ordinary people at the time (between the 1900s and 1950s). The trilogy confronts the legitimacy of the official history through the recreation of personal memories of the common people, and further embodies the suppressed history of post-colonial countries. Among the films in the trilogy, *City of Sadness* depicts the February 28 Incident,[17] which was triggered by a series of corrupt

17 The February 28 Incident, which occurred in 1947, was a significant uprising in Taiwan where the people revolted against the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) government. In

and unpopular policies of Kuomintang, who had just taken over Taiwan from Japanese rule. Hou Hsiao-hsien narrates the history of the Lin family in the *Jiufen* village by means of long takes and avoidance of close-ups, reflecting the traumatic memories of Taiwanese people in the big time. Other TNC films, such as Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), are set in the early sixties in Taiwan. *A Brighter Summer Day* is based on a true story about juvenile delinquency and gang violence. Using the concentration of long shots and natural lighting, Yang accurately presented the repressive atmosphere of the White Terror, and the teen crime reflects the authoritarian government's omnipresent violence during the martial law era. Wan Ren's *Super Citizen Ko* (1994) and Hou's *Good Men, Good Women* (1995) adopt a narrative strategy of time-space dislocation to piece together the memories of political victims. This narrative strategy not only highlights personal historical trauma, but also effectively serves as a political indictment.

2.4 New Historical Films (2010s)

The last of Chen's categories is named "New Historical Fiction" (*Xin lishi xiaoshuo* 新歷史小說), which is inspired by the theory of New Historicism (Chen 2018, 38). New Historicism, on the one hand, is a literary concept that was first introduced by Stephen Greenblatt (1982) and gained widespread influence by the end of the twentieth century. Unlike "former' (traditional) historicism, which focuses on the textual analysis of the work itself and aimed at the objective interpretation of texts, New Historicism views the text as a product of a specific era and region, that is, as a culturally imprinted document of the historical discourse. Specifically, history is seen as a process of textualisation, and the text itself is thought to have the quality of reflecting the context of history. Therefore, unlike former historicism, New Historicism considers the factors influencing textual production and emphasises the co-constructive relationship between the text and history, that is, "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Montrose 2013, 20). On the other hand, New Historicism is also different from that of the past in terms of historical perspective. Influenced by post-structuralism, New Historicism is skeptical of the grand narrative of traditional historicism. For Foucault, history is a "discursive formation" that is

response to the rebellion, the KMT employed brutal force to suppress the movement. This event holds great significance in modern Taiwanese history and played a crucial role in promoting the democratisation in Taiwan (Fleischauer 2007).

constructed according to a specific time and space.[18] In other words, as a post-modern approach to history, New Historicism emphasises that history should be deconstructed, non-linear, and decentred, and that a spatialised view of history needs to be established.

While New Historicism is commonly applied in textual analysis and interpretation of history, it has also inspired new approaches to storytelling. New Historicism argues that in order to understand facts, we should see them as if they were products of imagination, thereby opening up another way of interpretation of history (Chen 2018, 60). This way of historical interpretation is embodied in the fictional texts, which means story (e.g. novels and films). The texts of New Historicism often use deconstruction of grand narratives as a narrative strategy, creating a different approach of historical interpretation. These narratives employ New Historicist ideas to construct a more nuanced view of history, one that takes into account the complexities of context and multiple perspectives. Regarding the historical interpretation of New Historicism, I will further explain its narrative characteristics in the following paragraphs.

Chen defines the New Historical Fiction as a literary form with a deconstructive perspective on textual narrative and is concerned with the inter-construction between text and history, further embodying a post-modernist historical view through this narrative aesthetic. Therefore, the New Historical Fiction is not only a form of literary writing, but also historical writing itself. For Chen, New Historical Fiction emphasises a connection with contemporary society, in which writers engage with contemporary social issues through historical writing, and express their concern for society (Chen 2018, 72). The New Historical Fiction emphasises individualised discourse, with the first person, 'I', as the main narrator. This narrative strategy deconstructs the objectivity of traditional historical writing, allowing writers to create "Imagined (Non) Communities".[19] In other words, the writers of New Historical Fiction no longer see history as an objective but engage with it through their own experience, seeking a 'dialogue' between the individual and society. Beyond fiction, the use of "deconstruction as a narrative strategy" can also be found in Taiwanese films of the 2010s, which, with reference to Chen's classification of fictions, can be called "New Historical Films" (NHF).

18 "Discursive formation" is in fact the combination of various 'Statements'. Different combinations of statements form different discourses, and the combination of statements can further develop into a system in the process of discourse formation and become different "Archives" (cf. Foucault 1969).

19 Chen's so-called "Imagined (Non) Communities" means that the New Historical Fiction creates a "synchronic" view of history, either by writing to recall a common memory or by fabricating a history of the "Other" in order to reflect its difference from our own history (Chen 2018, 75).

The Taiwanese films produced during the 2010s have established a distinctive style in terms of film paradigm and historical representation. In terms of film paradigm, unlike TNC, which used third-person perspectives such as realist setting and wide shots, the 2010s Taiwanese films left behind this paradigm of *auteur* and shifted towards developing genre films, transforming historical representation from a realist narrative into a popular narrative. In other words, instead of exploring historical facts in a heavy, melancholic style, NHF of the 2010s incorporated deconstructive and hyperrealist elements such as collage, time-travel or anachronism, as narrative strategies. These narrative strategies opened new styles in historical interpretation. However, has NHF formed a heteroglossic view of history, embodying a historical approach of public history,[20] or has it been influenced by fetishism, turning history into a mass commodity to be produced, sold, and consumed for the sake of commercial profit at the box office? This concern about the commodification of history remains to be further clarified, and we will not discuss it further here.

Nevertheless, the *Zeitgeist* of TNC – the historical consciousness of pursuing the island's own identity – can still be identified in these commercial feature films of the 2010s, which continue to influence the creation of the most recent generation of film-makers. Through the above analysis, we can clearly observe that Taiwanese cinema in the 2010s has transitioned from Post-colonial Historical to New Historical Films (NHF). NHF re-negotiates the monolithic narrative of history, rethinking Taiwanese past in a different way that reflects a contemporary perspective on history.

3 Transition of the Historical Perspective Between TNC and 2010s Taiwanese Films

The above-mentioned narrative approaches to historical texts reflect the creators' understanding of history as well as the prevailing ideologies of the respective era they belonged to. The last two narrative forms – Post-colonial Historical Films and New Historical Films – mentioned in the previous section, precisely embody the process of establishing Taiwanese consciousness free from state control in modern history. Hence, if TNC is regarded as the start of historical consciousness of Taiwanese identity, then the 2010s Taiwanese

20 The vehicles of transmission of public history are often associated with the consumption of popular historical products, such as films, television, museums, performances, and novels. Public history can be seen as a decentred historical discourse in comparison with traditional historiography (De Groot 2018).

films can be regarded as another page in the progress of Taiwanese identity.

In order to explore this evolution of historical perspective, I will further focus on the two distinct periods: the 1980s TNC and the 2010s Taiwanese films. By comparing historical films from these two periods, we can observe significant changes in the way Taiwan's national identity is constructed and represented. This shift will be analysed through three dimensions, namely changes in narrative structure, agency, and the representation of the 'Other'.

The first transformation pertains to the narrative structure. Although both the Post-colonial Historical Films and NHF display a counter-hegemonic ideology, they interpret history differently through their narrative structure. TNC adopted a realist aesthetic, such as long shots, long takes, natural lights and real scenes, to 'recreate' history that had been erased by the authoritarian regime, emphasising the national trauma. Through slow style, realist aesthetic and long silence, TNC pose a significant interrogation to Kuomintang authority and challenged the legitimacy of official history, which was under authoritarian rule at that time. For instance, in *A Brighter Summer Day*, in the scene of the secret police interrogating Mr. Chang, director Edward Yang uses scenery shot, medium shots, off-screen voice, as well as long silence to convey the intense state of the person being interrogated **[figs 1-3]**. Similarly, through ice cubes in the corridor and a puddle of water on the floor of the interrogation room, this scene subtly reveals how the secret police forced people to confess **[figs 4-5]**. By using a third-party perspective, *A Brighter Summer Day* recreates the atmosphere of the White Terror period, accusing the national trauma caused by state violence.

However, with the influence of New Historicism and post-modernism, the 2010s Taiwanese cinema does not intend to restore or recreate the past, but rather represent history in a re-contextualised way. That means historical events are extracted from the original context and placed in another reconstructed context. For instance, in the 2019 horror film *Detention* (*Fan xiao* 返校), the story is based on a real-life event during White Terror.[21] By combining elements of the horror genre with local cult religion and folk culture, the historical events are re-contextualised into a new filmic text. In parallel, the storytelling of *Cape No. 7* combines two storylines: a pair of Taiwanese and Japanese lovers in 2008, and another pair of Taiwanese and Japanese lovers in 1945. Through juxtaposing the two storylines, *Cape No. 7* creates a narrative style to look back on the history under

21 *Detention* is based on a real-life event that happened in 1949 in Keelung Middle School, where the school was caught running an underground newspaper. The principal was executed while hundreds of students were jailed (Lee 2019).

Figures 1-5
A Brighter Summer Day, the scene from 153′33″ to 171′25″

Japanese colonial rule with a contemporary regard, conveying another historical interpretation. Hence, we can observe that the focus of NHF has shifted from grand narratives to small narratives, with a tendency to deconstruct mainstream and authoritarian narratives,[22] embodying a collage style of post-modern narrative.

The second transformation pertains to agency. Although TNC and 2010s Taiwanese films both exhibit characteristics of public history,[23] there are significant differences in their portrayal of agency. The portrayal of the characters shows more of the drive of agency in 2010s Taiwanese films than TNC. In TNC, characters mostly serve to reveal the sadness under the big time and the oppression of the authority, which they had no choice but to endure (Sing 2010, 144-5). Two films of Wang Tong's "Modern History Trilogy" are good examples. *Strawman* is a black comedy that portrays Taiwanese farmers' story towards the end of the Japanese occupation. The two brothers, the protagonists of the story, find an unexploded American bomb in a field and excitedly carry it to the city, hoping to be rewarded by a Japanese general. The journey is filled with slapstick humour but also outlines the damage of the war on the Taiwanese people. Another film, *Hill of No Return*, is about the story of the gold miners who worked for the Japanese in *Jinguashi*, a village in Taipei. The film

22 In *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Jean-François Lyotard (1979) propose the use of *petit récit* (small narrative), a localised, event-centred, and personally centred pluralistic discourse, to question the totalitarian and eternal truths of grand narratives.

23 The forms of transmission of popular history are diverse; the historical texts can be written, visual, audio, artifacts, or even digital, multi-media, in different form (Chou 2004). Chou defines public history as generally referring to: 1) history of the publics; 2) history written for the publics; 3) history written by the publics (Chou 2004).

depicts the humiliation they suffered at Japanese hands and the hardships of their working conditions, which convey the helplessness of Taiwan being forced to become a Japanese colony.

Compared to the pessimistic and powerless image of characters in the 1980s, the characters in the 2010s Taiwanese cinema have transformed, becoming active and courageous, showing the agency of individuals under the oppression of neoliberalist hegemony. Specifically, the oppressed classes can be seen standing up against the powerful classes. For instance, in *Cape No. 7*, one of the characters, the town council representative, sees his hometown losing its local characteristics as a result of the globalised capitalist hegemony. He therefore opposes the conversion of local resources into private property for a transnational consortium and fights hard for the rights of the local residents (Pan 2021, 290). Other films, such as *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* (*Saideke balai* 賽德克．巴萊, 2013) and *Twa-Tiu-Tiann* (*Dadaocheng* 大稻埕, 2014), recreate the historical incidents of the Japanese rule period, respectively the Wushe Incident of 1930 and the Petition Movement for the Establishment of a Taiwanese Parliament in the 1920s. The plots of these films both depict the bravery of the Taiwanese people in their struggle against the hegemonic regime.

The last transformation is the representation of the 'Other'. The period of TNC underwent the dissolution of martial law, so the purpose in these works is nothing less than a political recourse against the long-standing authoritarian regime of the Kuomintang. Such as in *Super Citizen Ko*, *A Brighter Summer Day*, *Banana Paradise*, *City of Sadness* and *Good Men, Good Women*, the story background is always around the White Terror, the collective trauma of state violence on the people of Taiwan. Yet, in the 2010s, Taiwanese films have shifted their reference to the 'Other' from the authoritarian regime of post-colonialism to the globalised issues of late capitalism. In some films that depict contemporary society, we can see that the issues they focus on have shifted from portraying the oppression of authoritarian rule in the past to examining the symptoms of contemporary society arising from neo-capitalist hegemony and global mobility. Such contemporary issue is particularly well portrayed in *Cape No. 7*. Due to the gap between urban and rural areas, the small town in the film faces many difficulties, such as brain drain, a crisis of traditional culture, and the occupation of local natural resources by international conglomerates. These storylines realistically depict the social issues in contemporary Taiwan and reflect the survival crisis of Taiwanese people under late capitalism.

Most importantly, there is a special 'Other' who is invisible in contemporary Taiwanese cinema, namely mainland China, which has emerged after the millennium (Berry 2017, 119). Although there may be a lack of explicit references to China in Taiwanese cinema of the 2010s, we can still perceive this invisible 'Other' by the significant

emphasis on Taiwanese identity, particularly in works that explored historical themes. For instance, film-maker Wei De-sheng's works (e.g. *Cape No. 7*, *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* and *Kano*, 2014) focus on depicting Taiwan's national memory of the Japanese rule period. By highlighting the historical connection between Taiwan and Japan, Wei's films showcase Taiwan's historical and cultural peculiarity. In parallel, by incorporating more local characteristics, the historical films of the 2010s also attempt to detach themselves from the historical context of Greater China and establish its unique Taiwanese history. For instance, the famous Taiwanese actor Chu Ke-liang plays a history professor in *Twa-Tiu-Tiann* (similar to a storyteller's role in this movie). Through his signature *Taike* feature,[24] *Twa-Tiu-Tiann* incorporated successfully the grassroot element with the historical theme and brings history closer to the public. Moreover, we can also see the emphasis on ethnic diversity, such as in *Blue Brave: The Legend of Formosa in 1895* (2008), which features the Hakka people; and *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale*, which depicts the Wushe Incident of 1930. Mona Rudao, the chief of Wushe (a village in Nantou County), led Seediq warriors to fight against Japanese police. Thus, through the representation of the 'Other' in TNC and 2010s Taiwanese films, we can observe that the 'Other' has shifted from the Kuomintang regime to today's mainland China. Specifically, Taiwan's attempt to establish a distinct identity separate from PRC culture is prominently depicted.

The aforementioned three transformations in historical interpretation reflect the globalisation-driven, geopolitical, and socio-cultural changes that have occurred in Taiwan since the turn of the millennium. These changes have influenced the ideological shifts among Taiwanese people and the process to establish their own identity through cinema. After exploring the evolution of historical perspectives between the 1980s TNC Post-colonial Historical Film and the 2010s NHF, our focus will now turn to analysing the narrative style of the latter.

24 *Taike* 台客, a Taiwanese subcultural phenomenon widespread since 2000, was initially regarded as vulgar; however, as island consciousness rose in the 1990s and 2000s, *taike* gradually evolved into a Taiwanese cultural icon and a source of local pride. "Recently, *Taike* has imposed itself on the youth as an archetypal representation of a rediscovered local lifestyle and as the revaluation of a particular island identity" (Ligot 2012, 167).

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4 The Narrative Styles of the New Historical Films

The resurgence of the film industry has enabled Taiwanese cinema in the 2010s to make significant strides in the development of themes and genres, leading to an increased experimentation with different narrative styles. Among these numerous works, whether they are commercially oriented feature films or art-oriented documentaries, there are some works that conform to the above-mentioned narrative style of New Historicism. In order to analyse this narrative style in more detail, I broadly categorise the historical narrative style of Taiwanese films in the 2010s into two categories: popular narratives in feature films and alternative narratives in documentaries. While it is evident that popular-narrative feature films dominate the trend in Taiwanese cinema during the 2010s, we should not overlook the many excellent creators in documentaries who boldly explore historical themes and interpret their personal views of history more intuitively, without worrying about commercial considerations. Specifically, both filmic forms reflect the thoughts of the 2010s' creators on history, and this will be the focus of my next discussion.

4.1 Popular Narratives

Regarding popular narrative, producers and directors have been, since 2010, trying to develop a more diversified and specific genre of films in Taiwan, such as horror, comedy, teenage and gangster, etc. Among the commercially successful films are also those related to historical themes. It is worth mentioning that in 2008, several new directors released their critically acclaimed debut films, which mainly featured popular narratives and successfully attracted public attention, marking a milestone in the history of Taiwanese cinema, and paving the way for the commercial film industry of the 2010s (Pan 2021, 284). Therefore, the Taiwanese cinema of 2008 can be seen as a precursor and catalyst to the resurgence of the film industry in the 2010s. Thus, the analysis to follow will also cover some works from 2008. Here are some examples of feature films.

The teenage coming-of-age film, *Winds of September* (*jiu jiang feng* 九降風, 2008), set on a high school campus in Taiwan in the 1990s just after the lifting of the martial law, reflects the collective memory and the social atmosphere of the 1990s at that time through the depiction of a seven-member youth gang who love baseball. Based on personal experiences, the director's semi-autobiographical portrayal of the post-martial law period successfully evokes contemporary collective memory and the public's nostalgia for the past, constructing a national allegory of the 1990s. A key plot point of the film refers to the

1996 baseball scandal that shocked Taiwanese society.[25] In terms of narrative structure, the film combines personal intimacy with social events through inter-referencing, evoking the common memory with the collective.[26] In terms of image style, the film is interspersed with news footage about the baseball scandal, blurring the line between feature film and documentary. For instance, in the final scene, the director arranges Xiao Tang to act with Liao Ming-hsiung,[27] the baseball player in the scandal (one of the seven members of the gang). This surreal scene juxtaposes two people from different time-space: the real (and nowadays old) Liao in 2008 and the fictional Xiao Tang in 1997. It combines the present and the past and blurs the line between fiction and reality. This arrangement embodies the narrative of NHF, guiding Taiwanese audiences to re-experience history and reminisce about their common memories.

Another film from 2008 is *Cape No. 7*. This film tells the story of two love affairs between Taiwan and Japan at different times. *Cape No. 7* is closely interconnected by two time-space: the Japanese evacuation from Taiwan in 1945 and the present-day Taiwan in 2008. The two storylines seem to be unrelated, but they are linked by seven love letters written in 1945. Through these seven unsent love letters, Tomoko and Aga (the lovers in 2008) discover the love story of a pair of Taiwanese and Japanese lovers who were forced apart by Japan's defeat in World War II. The film uses the love letters as the element of time travel, using audio-visual juxtapositions to interweave the love stories from two different time periods. Most importantly, when the lovers of the present-day, Tomoko and Aga, face their own moment of farewell as the past lovers did, they recognise the significance of history through the seven love letters, which eventually causes them to decide to stay together rather than repeat the regrets of the past. Further to the point, the love letters function as a key twist in the advancement of the storyline. They not only become in themselves a symbol of transitional time, but also signify the inspiration of the past history for the present time. This narrative strategy displays a historical interaction between two time periods, creating a time state of simultaneity. In Foucault's words,

25 The 1996 Chinese Baseball Fraud Scandal refers to several Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) players being arrested and facing charges of bribe-taking for match-fixing and baseball gambling. http://twbsball.dils.tku.edu.tw/wiki/index.php/職棒簽賭事件_(1996_年).

26 Taiwanese people used to consider baseball as their national sport. However, this scandal caused many fans to be disappointed and the number of spectators to drop drastically.

27 Liao Ming-hsiung was a Taiwanese baseball player. He was known as a baseball hero for his outstanding performance, but was later banned for life from the CPBL as a result of the 1996 Chinese Baseball Fraud Scandal.

> The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition [...] We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (Foucault, Miskowiec 1986, 23)

In the film, the narrative strategy of *Cape No. 7* – juxtaposing the epochs of 1945 and 2008 – demonstrates exactly the concept of Foucault about the time and space, embodying the notion of historical revelation to the contemporary, as emphasised by New Historicism.

In the film *Twa-Tiu-Tiann*, the protagonist time-travels from present-day Taiwan to the time of Japanese rule to witness the historical event of Chiang Wei-Shui demanding that the Japanese government establish a self-governing parliament. This experience inspires the transformation of the protagonist from indifference to his own history to becoming conscious of history. It is thus seen that the theme of time-travel embodies the concept of intervention in history advocated by New Historicism, in other words, the importance of history for contemporary inspiration. The film *Detention* replicates the concept of its namesake prototype video game, presenting the 1970s White Terror in a meta-narration of dream-within-a-dream. It is worth mentioning that the film incorporates elements of horror genre films, visualising the authoritarian regime as a ghostly figure, which is different from the cinema language of TNC that employed realist aesthetics to present authoritarianism. Another example, the TV series *The Magician on the Skywalk* (*tianqiao shang de moshu shi* 天橋上的魔術師, 2021), also uses elements such as time-travel, magical realism and meta-narration to recreate the historical traces of Taipei city in the 1980s.

These feature films use a deconstructive concept to fragment history and include elements of commercial entertainment to make the subject of history more accessible to the public. The popular narrative employs the approaches such as collage, time-travel or magical realism to interpret a post-modern historicism. This narrative approach deconstructs linear history and constructs a "spatial history", enabling contemporary audiences to search for a weak Messianic power in the fragments of history (Benjamin 1969, 254). On the other hand, the NHF usage of popular narrative also confirm Adorno's concept of the "culture industry", which commodifies history as a product for mass consumption, leading to the possibility of ideological control by the capitalist hegemony in the interpretation of

history.[28] In view of the above, in exploring the New Historicism of the 2010s, it is necessary not only to analyse popular narrative but also to consider alternative narratives from documentaries to fully comprehend contemporary perspectives on history.

4.2 Alternative Narratives

The second type of narrative style in NHF is the alternative narrative. Different from the popular narrative, which characterises commercially oriented feature films, the alternative narrative is mainly used in art-oriented documentaries. Their primary funding typically comes from the non-profit sector or the government, and the budgets for their productions are usually low. Consequently, devoid of commercial constraints, alternative narrative videos often employ avant-garde and experimental approach to interpret historical themes in the form of art-house films.

Taiwanese historical documentaries, especially those related to the Japanese colonial period, rely heavily on archival footage, historical documents, and first-hand interviews with witnesses or participants to provide an accurate and factual representation of history. These documentaries adopt a third-person perspective as the storyteller and use the linear storytelling approach to document individuals and present historical archives as evidence. For instance, *Viva Tonal* (2003) uses interviews and historical records to trace the evolution of popular songs during the Japanese colonial period. *Shonenko* (2006) combines archival footage and interviews to tell the story of Taiwanese teenagers who were sent to Japan to produce military aircraft during the war. *Song of the Reed* (2015) follows and films six Taiwanese comfort women as they heal their personal traumas caused by World War II.

Different from these historical documentaries, *Le Moulin* (2015) stands out as an experimental documentary that offers an alternative approach to storytelling. Instead of relying on conventional narrative approaches, *Le Moulin* combines archives and theatre to recreate the history of "Le Moulin Poetry Society" (*Fengche Shishe* 風車詩社) in the 1930s in Taiwan using a formerly avant-garde approach.[29] At the time, the surreal literary philosophy of Le Moulin Poetry Society

28 Cf. the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002, 94-136).

29 "Le Moulin Poetry Society" was a group of Taiwanese poets who were active during the Japanese colonial period. Influenced by French Surrealism, they belonged to a generation of Taiwanese individuals who were born and raised under Japanese rule. Most of the poets in the group wrote their works in Japanese, as they felt more comfortable expressing themselves in that language rather than in Chinese (Hioe 2016).

confirmed that Taiwan had an association with Western modernism as early as during the Japanese rule. Through voice-over, the documentary presents letters or diaries of the members of Le Moulin Poetry Society, reflecting the ambivalence of a colonised country caught between Western modernity and local identity. Unlike traditional documentaries, which display historical events for the audience through extensive interviews and archive collection, *Le Moulin* employs experimental approaches such as theatrical simulation, avant-garde music and visual collage to recreate the context at that time, leading the audience to feel the background of Le Moulin Poetry Society and its creative philosophy. This proves that the ambition of the millennial Taiwanese film-makers is no longer just to recreate the hidden history of the past, but to offer a multilingual and multi-temporal (Japan, Taiwan, France) view of history through a multi-media approach.

In addition, alternative narrative is not only a deconstruction of historical discourses outside the official context, but also a re-deconstruction and re-creation of official video archives. This deconstruction is not limited to the works themselves but is also evident in the curation and presentation of video screenings. The Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF) exemplifies these characteristics. Since 2014, TIDF has been running a programme titled *Real Taiwan* (*Shiguang Taiwan* 時光台灣)[30] which is a project conceived by the current director of TIDF, Wood Lin.

Before discussing *Real Taiwan*, it is necessary to go back to its predecessor: *Memory Ninety-Nine* (*Jiyi jiujiu* 記憶玖玖). Wood Lin was invited to participate in the curation of the TIDF in 2010, which was also the 99th year of the ROC calendar. The last two characters of the Chinese name *jiujiu*, which spell out the Chinese number ninety-nine, are also homophonic with the Chinese word 'forever'. In Lin's view, the governing Kuomintang and Taiwanese society at the time were surrounded by the festive atmosphere of the centennial celebration of the ROC, but, as he considers, the historical relationship between the ROC and Taiwan had not yet been sorted out and clarified. That's why he conceived the programme of *Memory Ninety-Nine* to criticise the festive approach towards the 100th anniversary of ROC of the time, and further deconstruct the ideology created by the Kuomintang government for the ROC centennial celebration (Lin 2019). The name *Memory Ninety-Nine* suggests a question: can the memory of the Republic of China represent the memory of Taiwan 'forever'?

30 Founded in 1998, the TIDF is one of the major platforms for documentaries in Asia. In 2014, the TIDF executive team established its permanent office under the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute. The current program director is Wood Lin (2014–present). Source: https://www.tidf.org.tw/en/page/32016.

Building upon this idea, the selection of the programme contains a collection of official documentary propaganda films from different eras in Taiwan, such as *To the South, Taiwan* (*Nanjin taiwan* 南進台灣), *Happy Farmers* (*Xingfu de nongmin* 幸福的農民) and *Citizens' Dojo* (*Guomin daochang* 國民道場), produced by the Japanese government in 1920, as well as *The Livestock Industry in Taiwan* (*Xumu shengchan zai taiwan* 畜牧生產在台灣, 1953), the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR) propaganda film produced by Kuomintang to improve the island's agricultural basis in the 1950s.[31] Wood Lin expected that the audience would become self-aware and reflective while watching these official propaganda films from different periods, and conscious of the government's self-propaganda created for the centennial celebration in that context (Lin 2015).

As Lin's ideas became more concrete, the prototype of the *Real Taiwan* project gradually took shape. In 2014, *Real Taiwan* was officially incorporated as a permanent programme of the TIDF. The objective of *Real Taiwan* is to discover the unknown side of Taiwan through video archives. The TIDF team released long-lost official materials and collected a series of propaganda films shot by the Agricultural Restoration Society from 1951 to 1965. These were shown under the umbrella title *Real Taiwan 1951-1965*. Using these gradually unsealed video archives, Lin aimed to present an alternative perspective on history and uncover the historical narrative that lies beyond the dominant official discourse. This is precisely the purpose of *Real Taiwan*.

In 2016, Lin and the TIDF team attempted a different curatorial approach, combining *Real Taiwan* with another programme of TIDF, *Taiwan Spectrum* (*Taiwan qiepian* 台灣切片). For the first time, a TV news video was added to the official videos to cover a wider range of historical themes. The module was titled *Green Team vs. TV News*. That year, TIDF screened the 1980s TV News of CTS[32] and productions of the independent media outlet, Green Team (*Luse Xiaozu* 綠色小組),[33] together in the same session. For example, "Real Taiwan #1"

31 Established in 1948, the JCRR was a commission involving collaboration between the ROC and the United States. After the JRCC moved to Taiwan, it was credited with laying the foundations of agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s in Taiwan with a coordinated programme of economic, social and technical development. Source: https://web.archive.org/web/20180727024521/http://nrch.culture.tw/twpedia.aspx?id=3923.

32 Chinese Television System, Inc. (CTS) was an official television station in Taiwan previously owned by Kuomintang. CTS transformed into a public broadcasting group and became a member of Taiwan Broadcasting System after the democratisation. Source: http://web.pts.org.tw/~web01/TBS/index_e.htm.

33 Green Team (1986-90) is regarded as the most important non-mainstream media group in the period prior to and after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. Its members aimed to document social movements and transmit them to the public in order to fight against the official TV station. Source: https://docs.tfai.org.tw/en/office/6231.

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screened the news *The Chiang Kai-shek Int'l Airport Incident* (1986) and *Follow-Up Report on the Chiang Kai-shek Int'l Airport Incident* (1986) by CTS, together with *The Taoyuan Airport Incident* (1986) by the Green Team. The background of this incident is that on 30 November 1986, when the exiled Hsu Hsin-liang (許信良)[34] planned to return to Taiwan from Japan, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)[35] mobilised its supporters to greet him at the airport.

In the TV News, the official media used many subjective words such as 'lawbreakers' (*bufa fenzi* 不法份子), 'mob' (*yexing fenzi* 暴亂份子), 'barbarians' (*baoluan fenzi* 野性份子) and 'extremists' (*pianji fenzi* 偏激份子) to describe DPP's supporters at the airport, and repeatedly showed images of the supporters throwing rocks at military police. Such broadcast was clearly intended to stigmatise these DPP supporters and conceal the fact that Hsu Hsin-liang himself had returned to Taiwan. However, in *The Taoyuan Airport Incident*, the Green Team documented the full sequence of the incident from another perspective. The opening of the film shows that DPP issued a speech at the party headquarters before departure, in which the organisers called for its supporters to walk to the airport in a peaceful and non-violent manner. But in the next scene, we can see the military police deliberately blocking supporters from entering the airport. Afterwards, military police tries several times to disperse the crowd with water jets and tear gas. This conflict lasts until late into the night, when Hsu Hsin-liang himself arrives at the airport to address his supporters. This curatorial concept juxtaposes official media and independent media to view the same event through different perspectives, allowing the audience to experience directly the manipulation of different ideologies, thus creating reflexivity in the process of watching and further asking: what is real?

In 2018, Wood Lin planned to interpret official archival materials through visual intervention. The project, titled *Real Taiwan 2018: Archives Revisited* (*Shiguang taiwan 2018: fan dangan* 時光台灣2018: 翻檔案), is a collaboration between the Taiwan Film Audiovisual

34 Hsu Hsin-liang is a Taiwanese politician, formerly Chairman of the DPP. In 1979, Hsu left Taiwan exiled in the United States, where he maintained his position opposing Kuomintang. In 1986, he tried to return to Taiwan via Japan, but was repeatedly blocked at the airport by the Kuomintang government.

35 Founded in 1986, the DPP is the first local political party in Taiwan. DPP is currently the majority ruling party and the dominant party in Taiwan.

Institute (TFAI)[36] and the Public Television Service (PTS).[37] Fourteen film-makers participated in this project to shoot short films using the official archival videos in the TFAI's collection. The film-makers edited these official video materials (e.g. TV news, political propaganda videos, and early national films), integrating them into their own videos and ultimately reinterpreting them to produce new works. These short films were screened both at the TIDF and on the PTS. Although such re-creation of official video has been practiced in foreign countries for years, it is still a new concept for Taiwanese film-makers (Lin 2019). This is primarily due to the fact that it was only after the dissolution of martial law that the government gradually started making public what was once considered classified official material. In Lin's words:

> What I contemplated was to liberate these images. While we now talk about transitional justice in political terms, I feel that it can be achieved in terms of images too. How should we give new political meaning to these authoritarian images of the past and subvert them? (Lin 2019)

These thirteen short films touch on a wide range of issues: Chung Chuan's *One World One Dream* (*Yi zhong* 一中) and Fu Yue's *Taiwan Province of China* (*Buceng xiaoshi de taiwan sheng* 不曾消失的台灣省) investigate the political issues of history and identity between China and the Republic of China/Taiwan. Rina B. Tsou's *The Horrible Thirty: Me, My Father and Richard the Tiger* (*Hufu niuniu de wei erli* 虎父妞妞的未而立) and Shen Ko-shang's *Moment Within Time* (*Shiguang zhong* 時光中) explore the connection between individual family memories and collective history. Chen Singing's *In Trance We Gaze* (*Huanghu yu ningshi de lianxi* 恍惚與凝視的練習) discusses the relationship between Taiwan traditional folk religions and individual existence. Lau Kek-huat's *Firefly* (*Yinghuo* 螢火) extends its vision to the history of Chinese immigrants in Malaysia, mirroring the history of Sinophone diaspora with that of Taiwan.

Through the above examples, we can find that both the documentaries themselves and Lin's curatorial concept demonstrate the ambition for history discourse, practicing the New Historicist concept in the 2010s. These documentaries use an alternative narrative style to deconstruct history, to diversify history and allow us to gaze at the past with a contemporary view.

36 The TFAI is the national administrative institution specialising in the collection of audio-visual assets, with the mission of preserving, restoring, researching, and promoting these assets and making them available to the public. Source: `https://www.tfai.org.tw/en/page/history.html`.

37 The PTS is the first independent public broadcasting institution in Taiwan. Since its creation, PTS has been perceived to be a hallmark of the 'Taiwanisation' efforts.

5 Conclusion: Cultural Imagination of Post-Nationalism

In *Cinema et histoire*, the French historian Marc Ferro called the historical film as "a cinematic writing of the past" (Rosenstone 2012, xiv), and such film-makers create independent interpretations of history and thereby make "an original contribution to the understanding of past phenomena and their relation to the present" (25). Since the 2010s, Taiwanese historical films (both feature films and documentaries) have created different forms in the cinematic writing of history, such as anachronic narrative and meta-narration in terms of narrative approach, or hyperrealist aesthetics and reconstitution of video archives in terms of visual style, etc. These transformations are not only stylistic innovations, but also convey a desire to reconstruct self-identity. In other words, when people look at the past in different forms, they are not just reinterpreting it, but also presenting a contemporary self-imagination.

In *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary*, Yip argues that national imagination has developed towards post-colonial, post-modern and globalised trends in Taiwanese films from the 1980s to 1990s, demonstrating the characteristic of "post-modern hybridity", which has enabled Taiwan to become a post-nationalist paradigm (Yip 2004, 285). However, Ming-tsung Lee considers that Yip's post-nationalist argument, while persuasive in post-colonial and post-modern discourses, lacks a relevant discussion of nationalism (Lee 2006, 237), overlooking the complexity of the historicisation process in Taiwan and its impact on the transformation of national consciousness, resulting in the oversimplified discourse of national imaginary that "Taiwan's nationhood started too late and its 'post-nationhood' came too soon" (240). Looking back at Yip's argument, it was perhaps a little premature for Taiwan in the 1990s to be considered the vanguard of post-nationalism at that time. More recently, the Taiwanese identity-making process in the 2010s has experienced several significant moments, such as the Sunflower Student Movement,[38] the alternation of political parties, the boom in social media, the acceleration of inter-globalisation, and the rise of the PRC, etc. All these changes have been constantly shaping the direction of Taiwan cinema and projected the national imagination of Taiwanese people. Today, the arguments of Yip are no less than a prophecy of the current global and Taiwanese situation, and Taiwan cinema since the 2010s is reflecting the national imagination of contemporary Taiwan. Nonetheless, in the post-capitalist era

38 A protest movement driven by Taiwanese students and civic groups in 2014. Students stormed the national legislature to oppose a free trade agreement with China. Source: https://oftaiwan.org/social-movements/sunflower-movement.

of accelerated globalisation, liberal multiculturalism and geopolitical re-organisation, developing a post-nationalist cultural imagination and building the new self-identities is not only a trend but also a compelling choice for Taiwan today.

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Nation-Building Through Imperial Images Fragility and Charisma of Emperor Meiji's Public Persona

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Abstract This article explores the complex construction of Emperor Meiji's public image, from a calculated fragility that promoted national unity to the projection of modern imperial charisma. It examines the extensive Meiji period regime of censorship of imperial representations in various forms, such as portraits, photographs, statues, and currency. The fact that the Emperor was forbidden to compose love poetry and the highly selective publication of his poems during his lifetime likewise emphasises the state's control over the imperial persona and paints a vivid picture of the multifaceted image-crafting efforts surrounding Emperor Meiji.

Keywords Meiji Restoration. Imperial taboo. Fragility. Theatre of power. Public sympathy.

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One is not duchess
A hundred yards from a carriage
(Walter Stevens, *Theory*, 1917)

"The King's a thing..".
"A thing my lord?"
"... of nothing".
(William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1599-1601)

1 Introduction

What makes an emperor? The answers historically given to this question closely reflect peoples' religious world views, moral hierarchies, and the most potent historical-cultural signifiers available in a civilisation's repertoire. From Queen Elizabeth's (1533-1603) court of allegorical representations of virtue, where "nothing took place unburdened with parable", to Hayam Wuruk's (1334-89) Indonesian court as a copy of the cosmos, with its king as a mediating image between gods and men (Geertz 1983, 129-30), performances of power have abounded in extraordinary variety throughout human history. Likewise, from Hans Christian Andersen's children's story "The Emperor Has No Clothes" to Ernst Kantorowicz's extraordinary discussion of medieval political theology, "The King's Two Bodies", literary treatments and studies of representations of power, with its complex relations to authority and legitimacy, have yielded libraries.

The personal and ideological costs of constructing the "theatre of power" and the charisma of a ruler have perhaps been less explored. The PhD Symposium on *Fragile Selves*, hosted by Ca' Foscari University of Venice from 2 to 4 March 2022, explored notions of fragility and fragile selves from a cross-historical and interdisciplinary perspective in a wide range of topics, from discrimination against sexual and cultural minorities, the legal status of women in fourteenth-century Italy, to literary and cinematic representations of cultural identities. For my part, I would like to pose the question of those political and cultural agents whom society does not allow the display of a fragile self, and to consider whether, at the same time, a carefully crafted appearance of fragility has been, and continues to be, a useful political tool for engendering public sympathy and cementing national consciousness.

This article is a historiographic review and, to some extent, a critique of previous historical scholarship on the life and person of Emperor Meiji.[1] The aim is to explore the construction of the public,

1 Given the Meiji government's ambitions for colonial expansion and their fulfilment during the Meiji period and up to 1945, the use of the translation 'emperor' for the mid to late Meiji period could be reluctantly justified. Nevertheless, I would like to contextualise my use of the term for other historical periods. Similar to the political context in which the term *tennō* 天皇 originated (Japan's desire in the seventh century to declare itself equal to

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imperial persona of Emperor Meiji by the Meiji oligarchs, using existing scholarship to highlight the constraints placed on the emperor, the censorship of criticism and public portrayals of the emperor, and the occasional use of manufactured fragility as a political tool to elicit sympathy and cooperation. The constraints imposed on the imperial persona as a symbol and tool for the nascent nation-building efforts shed new light on the world view of the Meiji state-builders, who, while inconsistent in – and often at odds over – their portrayal of Emperor Meiji, consciously moved from one end of the spectrum of the "imperial performances" to the other, from the persona of an ordinary man to that of a manifest deity.

The young emperor's transformation took place in the first decade under the guidance and according to the agenda of Meiji state-builders such as Kido Takayoshi 木戸孝允 (1833-77) and Ōkubo Toshimichi 大久保利通 (1830-78), who had access to the young Mutsuhito (the later Emperor Meiji) through court nobles such as Iwakura Tomomi 岩倉具視 (1825-83) and Sanjō Sanetomi 三条実美 (1837-91). From their nominal use of imperial legitimacy – approaching Max Weber's (1968, 56) notion of a "hereditary charisma" – in bringing about the Meiji Restoration to their conscious shaping of a public imperial image, their task unfolded as a process of trial and error, similar to the parallel ongoing formation of political forms of organisation and national identity. Image construction ran parallel to censorship efforts and image control. To recall Ohnuki-Tierney's observation that different military governments assigned different meanings to the emperor, the ability of the Meiji state-builders "to move the Emperor up and down the scale of humanity-divinity was possible because of the fluid conception of Japanese culture" (1991, 208-9). To this end, his fragility was exchanged for a construction of institutional charisma according to the needs dictated by circumstances.

China in the famous letters by Suiko Tennō 推古天皇 [554-628]), its translation as 'emperor' then (and in our time) reflects a similar desire to simulate equal status with the great powers of the twentieth century that were expanding their empires at the time. To translate *tennō* simply as 'king' or 'sovereign' would have been to admit an inferior position, and so the translation continued well into modern times, although the country's name was changed from "empire" to "state" in the post-war period. While the use of the English term "emperor" in state treaties and decrees for the 15-year-old 'reinstated' Mutsuhito after 1868 can also be seen as the beginning of an effort at image-building for foreign nations, it is also a continuation of the translation practice, as a letter from Commodore Perry in 1853 also refers to Japan's "two emperors": the secular *shogun* and the sacred *tennō* (Kornicki, Antoni, Hugh 2019, 8). The use of the term thus predates the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. As Hall has argued (1983, 11), avoiding the use of the translation term "emperor" raises several other issues regarding the complex of terms, from political titles to specific terminology and adjectives used to describe the *tennō*'s family and its activities, as additional terms would remain untranslated. For the sake of readability, I will use the terms "emperor" and "imperial", while being aware of their shortcomings and problematic history. I thank Klaus Antoni for his valuable input on this topic.

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In the following sections, I will broadly introduce the political and cultural context of the Meiji Restoration[2] and sketch the understanding of the emperor's role before the Meiji period. Following, I will discuss several examples pertinent to the construction of the imperial image, between fragility, censorship and imposed limitations. The instances chosen are discussed chronologically to facilitate understanding. They comprise an early imperial decree asking for the people's cooperation, a rare example of harsh criticism of the "boy-emperor" published in 1868 before the national press censorship was instituted; the choice of whether to allow photography of the emperor or the reproduction of his portrait on national bills and coins, and the selection of his poems printed against his will during his lifetime in newspapers and school textbooks, particularly during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05).

2 Meiji Era's Inherent Contradictions

In world history, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 ranks as a revolutionary watershed, on a par with the American and French Revolutions. It was a time of immense social, political, and cultural upheaval felt by all societal layers. The samurai factions from the Satsuma and Chōshū domains overthrew the shogunate government, which had lasted more than 250 years, with the emperor as a symbolic authority-granting figure. The revolution was precipitated by the arrival of the famous 'black ships' of Commodore Perry, in 1853, through which the United States of America ultimately forced Japan to open and maintain trading relations. In Japan's case, the new era was described by its state agents[3] as a "Restoration", signifying the

2 The term 'restoration' as a designation for the political events and regime that came to be after 1868 has long been found a misnomer (Shillony 1990, 299). Prominent historian of the Meiji period, W.G. Beasley (1972), distinguishes between its initial phase of restoration and its main phase of renovation or reform. The first one is anchored in the well-established concept *chūkō* 中興 of the political philosophy of East Asia and seen in the imperial edict *ōsei fukko no dai gorei* 王政復古の大号令 (August Command Restoring Imperial Rule). While it can be argued that 'renovation' would be a far more appropriate translation given the modern, reform-oriented developments of this period, and better corresponding to the Japanese scholarly term in use, *ishin* 維新, I have opted, for the sake of clarity, to employ the term 'restoration' since it has become widespread practice in the English language scholarship of this period.

3 According to Jansen (2002, 334) the edict of January 1868 announcing "a renewal of all things" and the end of the military government was composed for the court noble Iwakura Tomomi by his Shintō advisor and ghostwriter, Tamamatsu Misao (see below on the Letter to the People written in the emperor's name in April 1868). Additional input was given from Satsuma leaders, particularly Okubo Toshimichi (Jansen 2002, 334). In a more general sense, concerning the whole Meiji period, Gluck states that there was no single group with an official status as myth-makers to the Meiji state, but instead

pretext of an alleged return to the ancient imperial rule (*ōsei fukko* 王政復古) of the emperor system (*tennōsei* 天皇制), but also as a "revolution" or "renovation" (*ishin* 維新), thus embodying a profound contradiction. The leaders of the new Meiji state claimed to reinstate the current emperor, Meiji, called Mutsuhito, a then 15-year-old youth, as the *de facto* ruler of Japan. In doing so, they modelled their governmental functions and political rituals on those of an idealised eighth century Japanese antiquity, while at the same time moving in line with unfolding global trends in nation-state construction.

At the beginning of the Meiji period, there was little social cohesion that did not amount to a common national identity, with a population that was generally indifferent to the machinations of political power (Fujitani 1996, 7; Jansen 1986, 5; Steele 2003, 64-6). Fukuzawa Yukichi summarised this problem in his 1873's *Bunmeiron no Gairyaku* 文明論之概略 (An Outline of a Theory of Civilisation), stating that "in Japan there is a government but no nation (*kokumin*)" (text by Fukuzawa translated by Dilworth and Hurst; Dilworth, Hurst 2009, 187). Therefore, Japan's condition was that of a fragile, nascent state, fearful of being colonised by Western powers, aware of its technological disadvantage, and having suffered the humiliation of the "unequal treaties" with the Western powers in 1858.

Thus, one of the most famous and studied periods in Japanese history, the Meiji Era experienced major innovations such as the abolition of the four-class system, the adoption of a constitution and a parliamentary system, the introduction of compulsory education, the building of railways, and the installation of telegraph lines. In addition, at a time when most Western powers were reforming their armies and navies, Japan established a strong new national army and navy. The resultant tension between the incredible technological and social renovation of the period and its guiding principle of a return to the forms and morals of an idealised antiquity (an attempt that was quickly abandoned in the case of forms of political organisation) is best summed up by Marius Jansen's observation that "with the exception of the ideological underpinnings of the throne and Emperorism, antiquity was something of a void into which modernity could be inserted" (2002, 459).

The period can also be understood as having the longest lasting influence on the definition of Japan's national character and what it meant to be Japanese. The following section briefly examines the evolution of the roles and understandings of pre-modern Japanese emperors and delves into the sources of the Restorationist ideology of the Meiji period.

an array of people from government central ministries such as Home, Education and to a lesser extent, Army, Agriculture and Commerce, who were involved in ideological enterprises (1985, 9-10).

3 Imperial Image in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

It is difficult to do justice to the complexity of the changing roles of Japanese emperors throughout history, but in an over-simplified way it is possible to trace a line of continuity that remained constant, centred on their little-changing religious and symbolic functions. Since the early Yayoi period (300 BCE-300 CE), the early agrarian leaders, like the early emperors, were magico-religious leaders whose political power "rested on the ability to invoke supernatural powers to ensure good harvests" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1991, 200). In the eighth century, the imperial system reached its zenith. Its legitimacy and religious authority were codified through the compilation of mythical historical chronicles[4] that laid out the creation myth of Japan and the one of the emperor's descent from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. The following centuries saw the fall of the imperial house and the rise of the warrior and *bakufu* supremacy. But even during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), the emperor was seen by many as the country's ultimate source of divine legitimacy: he symbolically invested new shoguns[5] and the court's ties with Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines became stronger than ever. This sacred authority, which only the emperor could bestow, meant that many intelligent people of the time continued to believe in the ability of the emperor and the court to invoke the power of gods, Buddhas and spirits, and many political figures nourished the fear of being branded "an enemy of the Emperor" (Wakabayashi 1991, 29).

For several hundred years before the Meiji Restoration, Japanese emperors were confined to the seclusion of the imperial palace, and in 1615 the Tokugawa regime (*bakufu*) decreed that the emperor and court should confine themselves to cultural, ceremonial and religious affairs (29). Scholars have shown that they were virtually unknown to the people, and the few existing popular beliefs about the emperor tended to be non-political and rooted in folk religions. After studying popular legends about emperors and imperial princes, the ethnographer Miyata Noboru argued that in some areas of Japan, belief in emperors overlapped with folk belief in *marebito*. Emperors were believed to be sacred beings who visited the village world and supposedly granted assistance to the people in the form of benefits such as the creation of sacred rivers, special bountiful crops (such as chestnuts with "imperial teeth marks"), or protection from natural dangers (Fujitani 1996, 7). The persistence of such beliefs into the

4 The Chronicles of Japan, *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 (720) and The Records of Ancient Matters, *Kojiki* 古事記 (711-12).

5 Military commanders who from 1192 until 1867 ruled Japan, although they were nominally subordinated to the emperor.

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Meiji period is evidenced by anecdotes surrounding Emperor Meiji's imperial tours between 1869-73, in which peasants are said to have carefully gathered the soil he stepped on, believing that the earth thus consecrated would have healing properties (Griffis 1915, 261).

Except for the areas around the imperial capital of Kyoto, the complete unfamiliarity of the people with the emperor can be seen in other instances, such as the lack of incentive for peasants to fight in the last vestige of resistance against the new Meiji government, the Satsuma Rebellion (1876-7), because they did not know who the emperor was.[6] Similarly, on the occasion of the emperor's journey to Edo,[7] the craftsmen and makers of the woodblock prints commemorating it surmised that the emperor was Shōtoku Taishi 聖徳太子,[8] a deity of popular Edo folklore (Fujitani 1996, 7).

However, a very influential group of intellectuals and scholars in the Tokugawa period were by no means lacking in political conception and historical knowledge of the emperor. The rise of the Mito School (*mitogaku* 水戸学)[9] and the *kokugaku* 国学 native studies movement, which sought to rediscover and affirm a Japanese identity (also in opposition to Chinese culture)[10] through the study and

6 Quoted in Fujitani (1996, 7), elderly women were saying that "even though it's said that the Emperor's taken the place of the shogun, what kind of person is he (*dogan hito ja*)? Must be the one in the *kyogen* play who wears the gold crown and the full-sleeved robe with gold brocade".

7 Today known as Tokyo.

8 Prince Shōtoku 聖徳太子 (574-622) was a regent and politician who served under Empress Suiko, renowned for modernising the government administration and for promoting Buddhism in Japan. Over several centuries a devotional cult arose around his figure, with special emphasis on the protection of Japan, the imperial family and Buddhism.

9 The Mito School of the Tokugawa period shared much of the *kokugaku* precepts of nationalistic Shintō, with the addition of ethical maxims of neo-Confucian social ethics (thus their lack of opposition to Chinese culture). The slogan *sonnō-jōi* 尊王攘夷, "Revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians" embodies the combative phase of the Mito School (1860-3).

10 During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, between late seventh century and ninth century, the Japanese state was greatly influenced by Chinese state philosophy and adopted its models of government (known in Japan as the *ritsuryō* 律令, 'system'). Japan was also the recipient of Chinese culture and aesthetics, and it increasingly adopted religious thought systems such as Buddhism and Confucianism, which were brought to Japan concomitant with the introduction of the Chinese writing system. The effect of this cultural and political influence from the mainland continued to be widely felt until the eve of the Meiji period, with the *kanbun* 漢文 of classical Chinese serving as the written language of the cultured elite and that of government documents (Inoue 1993, 163). The more far-reaching changes in government administration modelled on Chinese concepts of governance are known in Japanese history as the Tanka Reform, which, among other measures regarding bureaucratic administrative order, population registration and taxation, established a new principle of imperial governance and a permanent imperial city (Totman 1981, 24). The influence of Chinese culture and literature was so long-lasting that some contemporary Meiji writers have gone as far as

translation of ancient texts of Japanese literature and history, placed the imperial house at the centre of their world view a hundred years before the Meiji Restoration. Key ideas of the national ideology that emerged after the Meiji Restoration can be traced back to the so-called "Restoration Shintō" (*fukko shintō*), and the *kokugaku* scholar Hirata Atsutane's 平田篤胤 understanding of Japan as a *shinkoku* 神国, "Land of the Gods", and the emperor as an *arahitogami* 現人神, a deity presently visible as a human being. Atsutane's concept of *fukko shintō* formed the central ideological and intellectual tenet of the Restoration movement. The core principles of this ideology were the unbroken line of emperors as descendants of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and the uniqueness and supremacy of the Japanese national policy, or *kokutai* 国体. These beliefs are reflected in various tenets and edicts issued by the emperor and the government from the early Meiji period (Antoni 2016, 178).

In addition, the philological works of the renowned *kokugaku* scholar Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730-1801), who had a large following at the time, up to a thousand disciples, exerted an immense influence. He redefined the emperor as a direct link to the ancestral deities (*kami* 神) watching over Japan and as a kind of icon of the primordial Japanese community, and he propagated the idea of a return to the divine age (Burns 2003, 13, 76). Closer to the Meiji Restoration, the works of Aizawa Seishisai 会沢正志斎 (1781-1863)[11] contributed core elements to the nationalist ideology and rhetoric of the Meiji period: the idea of the national body, *kokutai* 国体,[12] and the importance of the unity of religion and government, *saisei itchi* 祭政一致.

Although most political and cultural interest groups, from prominent Meiji leaders to the people at large, tended to agree in their assessment of the emperor as an authority-granting symbolic

stating that, in the Tokugawa period, the production of Chinese poetry (*kanshi* 漢詩) in Japan may have exceeded the amount of verse composed in Japanese (Yaichi 1909, 424).

11 Aizawa Seishisai was a representative of the highly influential Mito School. His importance to the Meiji Restoration is evidenced by the fact that he was posthumously honoured by Emperor Meiji when he accepted a handwritten edition of Aizawa's programmatic work, *Shinron* 新論 (New Theses), on the occasion of his visit to Mito in 1890. Furthermore, Aizawa was also posthumously awarded a rank of nobility.

12 The history of the concept of *kokutai* 国体 is too extensive to be examined in detail here. In the sense established by Aizawa's *Shinron* 新論 (New Theses) in 1825, and which became dominant for most of the Meiji period and beyond, *kokutai* or Japan's national polity consisted of the supposedly unique fact of being a "divine land" (*shinkoku* 神国, *kami-no-kuni* 神の國) founded by the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and ruled by her direct descendants on the basis of her divine mandate to her grandson Ninigi-no-mikoto and all subsequent human emperors to rule the land of Japan for all time as a single dynasty. Thus, the divine emperor (*tennō* 天皇) as a descendant of Amaterasu became the personification of Japanese identity (Antoni 2016, 375).

figure,[13] this did not prevent them from exercising flexibility in modelling the emperor's role and image. It is not far-fetched to suggest that the emperor himself played the role of a vessel onto which ideas about governance, national character or religious world view could be projected. As a result, the Meiji state-builders' ideas of the emperor's representation and role varied widely, as best illustrated by the long and contentious debate over the first imperial audiences granted to the representatives of foreign powers.[14] Scholars have also long pointed out the dangers of using terms such as "the imperial court", "the Western clans", "the anti-shogunal movement" to cover heterogeneous conglomerations of individuals, or the fallacy of viewing the agents of the Meiji Restoration as representing a class of lower samurai (Sakata, Hall 1956, 34), when in fact they were not a cohesive group compared to those behind the Chinese and Russian revolutions, with no similar organisational structure or explicit ideology (Westney 1986, 2). However, it is not the purpose of this article to detail the specific ideas of individuals regarding the depiction of the emperor, but rather to highlight what can be seen as general patterns of simulation and censorship of imperial fragility in a national context throughout the Meiji period.

13 This is seen in historical facts such as the dissidents of Tosa hatching a plan to kidnap the emperor and use him as a political "jewel" amid domestic turmoil in 1868 (Jansen 2002, 336).

14 The proposed visit of the Duke of Edinburgh in 1869 provoked a vigorous debate in the Japanese government on the question of exposing the emperor to foreign royalty. According to Harry Parkes, British envoy to Japan, the progressive faction maintained that the emperor's reception should be mainly in accordance with the customs of other nations; the conservative faction regarded as injurious to the imperial dignity any practice that could be regarded as an admission of equal rank with a foreign prince (Kornicki, Antoni, Hugh 2019, 14-15).

4 Beginnings of Imperial Images: Emperor Meiji and the Restoration

On the brink of the Meiji period, the seclusion and highly ritualised, symbolic nature of Emperor Meiji's life can be glimpsed in a description by William Elliot Griffis,[15] where he remarks:

> The Mikado[16] was never allowed to set his foot upon the ground, and the heir apparent was usually carried from room to room. When he went beyond the Palace grounds, [...] to see spring's cherry blossoms or autumn's polychrome foliage, he was shut within the vehicle from the gaze of any and all eager eyes, by thick curtains of split bamboo. [...] In other words, the Mikado's life in the Palace was that of a puppet, the wires being held by others. Personality was reduced as nearly to an abstraction as possible, and individuality was extinguished. (1915, 90)

The easy access and control of the emperor by the Satsuma and Chōshū factions, facilitated by Iwakura Tomomi's presence at court, aided the coup that brought about the Meiji Restoration. In a famous scene, on 3 January 1868, Iwakura Tomomi handed the young emperor the decree declaring the Imperial Restoration, while soldiers guarded the palace gates to prevent interruptions. Even the Meiji leaders were divided over the new forms of government, and the deliberations took place in the presence of the emperor on the night of 4 January, but without his participation. His contemporaries and historians considered him too young, at 15, to have any role in the unfolding events. To paraphrase the Japanese historian Nishikawa Makoto (2018, 25), one must wonder how the young emperor must have felt to hear himself discussed but not consulted.[17]

The other date regarded as the beginning of the Restoration is the promulgation of the Charter Oath (*Gokajō no Goseimon* 五箇条の御誓文) on 6 April 1868. A ground-breaking document, drafted in part by Kido Takayoshi, the Charter Oath was seen as something

15 William Elliot Griffis (1843-1928) was one of the first foreigners employed as advisors by the new Meiji government (*oyatoi gaikokujin* お雇い外国人). He helped organise schools and taught physics and chemistry in Japan between 1870-4. On his return, he published extensively on Japan, attracting much interest in the West.

16 Term for the emperor in the Meiji period, which became widespread through its use in Scheuchzer's English translation of Engelbert Kämpfer's 1727 *History of Japan* (Kornicki, Antoni, Hugh 2019, 8).

17 In the young emperor's presence, councillor Yamauchi Yōdō insisted that Yoshinobu, the last Tokugawa shogun, be allowed to attend the deliberations and criticised the "sinister activities of nobles" who were attempting to obliterate the shogun's achievements in the name of the emperor, whom they called "a mere child" (Keene 2002, 121).

akin to a constitution for the new government, outlining its guiding principles in terminology both vague and liberal enough to serve as a basis for future political interpretation and usage. The first article, which proposed the establishment of deliberative assemblies and the decision of all matters by "wide discussion", served to placate the old-school Tokugawa conservatives at court, while the fourth article simultaneously repudiated the Tokugawa Era in the familiar syntagma of renouncing the "evil customs of the past". Articles two, three and five represent the more liberal content of the Oath, guaranteeing the freedom of the common people to pursue their vocations, the participation of all classes in government and the pursuit of knowledge throughout the world.

According to Breen (1996, 428), the proclamation ritual of the Charter Oath played a role at the time as significant as its content, marking in one fell swoop the emperor's transition from an "attendant at the political centre" to a "political leader possessed of will and authority". The previous emperor-centred rituals of the pre-modern court were now transformed into public state rituals that gave the emperor's political role a new context and renewed sacred authority. With the emperor still hidden behind a panel during the ceremony, 30 councillors took a vow of allegiance in front of him, and after he left, another 400 courtiers signed the document, a ritual affirmation of authority that must not have sat well with many of the disgruntled participants. The ideals of Restoration Shintō outlined above were also incorporated into the ceremony, as the proclamation included Sanjō Sanetomi, who, on behalf of the emperor, reported the contents of the Oath to the ancestral deities, to whom he ritually offered *sakaki* branches in accordance with Shintō practice.

Faced with such an overt display of ritual and political authority, the letter distributed in the emperor's name to the people the very first day afterwards is perplexing at first glance. This letter is very unlike anything previous emperors would have written, and seems to serve as an exhortation for a rapprochement between the emperor and his people, a decidedly modern plea for the people's cooperation and an announcement of the emperor's renouncing of the passive role assigned to him in previous times. In the text, the military shoulders the blame for the unfortunate distance between the emperor and the people which makes it impossible for the emperor to know the people's feelings.

The following is a fragment of Donald Keene's translation of the letter (2002, 140-1), while the original is to be found in *Meiji tennō ki* 明治天皇紀 (1: 649-52).

> Ever since, quite unexpectedly, We succeeded to the throne, young and weak though We are, We have been unable to control Our apprehension, day and night, over how We are to remain faithful to

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> Our ancestors when dealing with foreign countries. It is Our belief that when the authority of the court declined in the Middle Ages and the military seized power, they maintained on the surface worshipful respect of the court, but in reality their respect intentionally isolated the court, making it impossible for the court, as the father and mother of the entire people, to know the people's feelings. In the end, the Emperor became the sovereign of the multitude in name only. That is how it happens that although awe of the court today is greater than ever before, the prestige of the court has diminished correspondingly, and the separation between those above and those below is as great as that between heaven and earth. Under these conditions, how are We to reign over the country? Now, at a time of renovation of rule of the country, if even one of the millions of people in this country is unable to find his place in society, this will be entirely Our fault.

The letter goes on to emphasise the emperor's decision to throw himself into the governance of the country as his "heaven-sent" mission, and to offer as a shining example the personal rule of the ancestors of ancient times, the closeness between them and the people, whose reciprocated love bestowed heaven's blessings upon the land. While Keene sees the main point of the letter in the expressed desire for closer contact between the emperor and his people, I approach the text from its sympathetic dimension, for its uncharacteristic public revelation of a constructed private self of the emperor.

The author of the letter may have been Tamamatsu Misao 玉松操 (1810-72),[18] as it is unlikely to express the true thoughts and feelings of the young emperor. In it, the now-familiar cultural signifiers of Restoration politics (return to the imperial rule of the ancestors, the emperor as father and mother of the people, inheriting the "evils of the past" and safeguarding the Land of the Gods) are interwoven with a revelation of the constructed fragility and openly admitted precariousness of the newly defined imperial role that the emperor, though by his own admission "young and weak", is preparing to fulfil despite "the pain and suffering it may entail". The first two thirds of the letter describe the current situation and the emperor's desire to resume personal rule over the country, for if he were to spend his days in a peaceful existence in the palace, forgetting the "hundred years of grief", the country would be scorned and the ancestors would be shamed.

18 A learned, former Shintō priest and *kokugaku* scholar who served as Iwakura Tomomi's 'brain' and is credited with drafting the Rescript on the Imperial Restoration (*ōsei fukko no shōchoku* 王政復古の詔勅; Keene 2002, 115).

Toward the end of the letter, the true purpose of gaining the cooperation of the people in bringing about the Meiji Restoration is emphasised, as they are admonished not to be surprised at the emperor's involvement in the government, but to support him. Failure to do so would be due to their ignorance of the danger threatening the Land of the Gods and would cause the emperor to lose his ancestral patrimony. The issue of the desired cooperation of the people is publicised with emotional vocabulary such as the rhetorical question quoted above: "Under these conditions, how are We to reign over the country?". This culminates in a final appeal to the people to "give due consideration" to the emperor's wishes and to join him in putting aside private thoughts for the common good and the security of the Land of the Gods.

The general tone of the letter places the emperor in a position dependent on the goodwill of the people as he undertakes the immense task he perceives as his ancestral duty. The constructed image of fragility due to youth and inherent weakness in the face of a heaven-given mission that may entail hardship and sacrifice serves to harness the power of public sympathy as a political force. The emperor's apparent interest in knowing the feelings of the people and growing closer to them serves to cement their sympathy through flattery, while the frequent references to the spirits of the ancestors to be pacified or made proud reinforce the idea, articulated in Restoration Shintō thought, of the emperor as a medium between the ancestral deities and the people. In other words, the circle of a mutually beneficial relationship is drawn: in return for the people's support of the emperor, his governance of Japan would bring them security, international glory, and the blessings of the ancestral deities who watch over the Land of the Gods.

A comparison of the two documents issued on the same day, the five-article Charter Oath and the emperor's Letter to the People, reveals striking differences in both intent and content. If the Charter Oath serves as an approximation of a first constitution of Japan, declaring public assemblies and all classes high and low united and involved in decision-making, the emperor's letter places most of the burden of government on the emperor himself (with only a mention of the help of "officials and *daimyo*?"). The former served to appease the Tokugawa *daimyōs*, before military victory over them was assured; the latter sought to gain the cooperation of the people for the Restoration and to justify it in their eyes. The former was outlined as a political document embodying contradictory goals and manoeuvering around vague and dry vocabulary, while the latter contained clear exhortations, emotionally charged language, and the redundant infusion of religiously infused ideological tropes.

I believe that the two documents, by contrast, portray the beginning of the long-term dual nature of imperial image-making in the Meiji

Era. Early on, the image of the emperor constructed for the people was distinct from the image of his largely ceremonial, authority-granting role presented to the Meiji elites. This echoes a metaphor used by historian Kuno Osamu 久野収 for late Meiji portrayals of the emperor:

> The Emperor appears to the people as an absolute sovereign, while in actual political and administrative affairs he is understood in the institutional theory as an existence within the constitution. The former is a "manifest religion" (*kengyō* 顕教) widely taught to the people, while the latter is an "esoteric religion" (*mikkyō* 密教) known only to the ruling elite. (Nishikawa 2018, 14; Author's transl.)

This paragraph examined the role of the emperor at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration, contrasting two documents in terms of their functions in shaping the public image of the young emperor, including a rare, early instance of a constructed portrayal of imperial fragility to generate public sympathy and thus people's cooperation. I will now turn to Meiji's most intense, transformative phase of becoming a modern monarch.

5 Imperial Tours and Image Limitations

Perhaps nothing illustrates the contrast between the different image-making philosophies and symbolic performances of the Tokugawa and Meiji governments more starkly than their approach to pageantry and the visibility of power. If the Tokugawa government employed what Timon Screech has poetically termed "an iconography of absence" in an attempt to make politics invisible (2000, 111), the Meiji oligarchs in the early 1870s favoured an ideological representation that emphasised the direct relationship between the emperor and the people (Gluck 1985, 73). On the rare occasions when the shogun left Edo Castle, efforts were made to clear the streets and vacate the second floors of houses along the way, so that no one would be able to look down upon the emperor crossing the area. When Emperor Meiji continued his imperial progress, his entourage numbered more than two thousand people, and his schedule included ceremonial visits to public and civic places such as schools, workshops, and military arsenals. If the shoguns eschewed public coronations, the traditional Shintō rite of the emperor's enthronement, *Daijōsai* 大嘗祭, became a national, religious event. If there were a total of three imperial tours during the 260 years of the Tokugawa period, Emperor Meiji made 102 imperial excursions (*gyōkō* 行幸) outside the capital during the 45 years of his reign.

This increased exposure of the young emperor in the first half of his reign earned him the moniker of "Emperor in motion" (*ugoku tennō* 動く天皇) by historians (Murai 1999, 79). According to Gluck,

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from 1868 to 1881 the new government "invoked the imperial institution as the symbolic center of the unified nation" (1985, 73). At the initiative of Ōkubo Toshimichi, the emperor was to be "brought down from the clouds" and made known to the people. At the same time, the imperial tours served the additional purpose of showing the emperor his country and of removing him from the imperial court, with its old-fashioned nobility and an environment traditionally characterised by court ladies in strictly prescribed roles and close to the emperor. Such was the importance attached to imperial tours that one-fifth of the new government's total budget was spent on them (Craig 2014, 48), and they remained the dominant form of public imperial pageantry until the 1880s.

The Meiji government also intensified its efforts to present the emperor as the sanctifying legitimator of its authority by implementing the "unity of rites and government" (*saisei itchi* 祭政一致) that it proclaimed in the very first decrees of the Restoration, making the performance of rituals an inseparable part of government. Takashi Fujitani (1996) has examined in detail the processes by which the "theatre of power" of the Meiji period was constructed, highlighting the national holidays, mnemonic sites (monuments, statues, and shrines), and Shintō rituals that were instituted as "a device for remembering a mytho-history that had never been known", a kind of collective cultural memory in the making (Fujitani 1996, 12-13). Murakami Shigeyoshi tellingly pointed out that the architects of the modern imperial institution had invented numerous court rituals that were extended on a national scale, among which eleven of the thirteen emperor-centred, archaic-seeming rituals had no historical precedent (quoted in Fujitani 1996, 13).

While the mechanics of the Meiji state-builders' imperial pageantry and active image-making have been extensively studied, I would like to turn my attention to two incidents related to the imperial tours that are worthy of closer examination, as they represent the first instances of censorship decisions made by Meiji leaders when confronted with an unforeseen event that was potentially damaging to the emperor's public image: rare press criticism of the young emperor in the print media in 1868 and Japan's first "paparazzi" photograph by commercial photographer Raimund von Stillfried.

5.1 Political Satire and Meiji Press Censorship

The siege of Edo Castle began in May 1868, one month after the proclamation of the Charter Oath. The stronghold of the former Tokugawa shogunate was eventually surrendered peacefully through the skilful mediation of Katsu Kaishū 勝海舟 (1823-99), but discontent was high in the city, and the population was cynical about the ruling elites, be they

the old *bakufu* government or the new Satsuma and Chōshū factions. Their ambivalent attitude could be glimpsed in the short-lived pro-Tokugawa newspapers that sprang up in the benign, lax period after the fall of the Tokugawa regime and its censorship laws, but before the new Meiji government implemented censorship measures.

As William Steele (2003) has shown, by February 1868 as many as 20 newspapers were regularly informing Edo citizens of political (as well as local, humorous) events, and political satire also played a central role. The press capitalised on the general sense of excitement and popular support for the Tokugawa government. Also motivated by financial gain, it vilified the Satsuma and Chōshū factions and exaggerated Tokugawa victories, as such articles sold best. In media such as the largest newspaper, the *Chūgai shinbun* 中外新聞 (whose sales often exceeded 1,500 copies per issue), we find an unflattering description of the young emperor at the time of the imperial army's advance on Edo as a "small boy of indolent character" and a "prisoner in the hands of the mutinous southern *daimyō*" (Steele 2003, 68).

The newspaper *Kōko shinbun* 江湖新聞, founded in April 1868, was likewise critical of the new government, as its creator Fukuchi Gen'ichirō 福地源一郎 (1841-1906) called Satsuma and Chōshū a "second *bakufu*" and declaimed that the political authority lay not in the hands of the imperial court. In another article titled "On Strength and Weakness" (*Kyōjaku ron* 強弱論), he laid out his most explicit justification of resistance – that Japan must be saved from the usurpers of imperial government – and his belief in the ultimate victory over the Restoration government. He went so far as to say that "the Emperor does nothing" and called for the establishment of a parliamentary form of government. His articles later led to his arrest on 23 May and a brief imprisonment.

Satirical prints, or cartoons, are also a useful means of gauging people's feelings about the contemporary political context. The prints were produced until the late Tokugawa period, varied in quality and were sold cheaply on the streets. They served as social and political commentary and reached a peak around the time of the surrender of Edo Castle (Steele 2003, 73). The content of one print from the same period was particularly antagonistic and cynical towards the ideology of loyalty to the imperial house:

> Are we afraid of being called an enemy of the court? NO!
> Is there a way to escape humble submission? NO!
> Does the Emperor know anything? NO!
> Is honour due to the pseudo-princes? NO!
> Is respect due to wearers of imperial armbands? NO!
> […]
> Does righteousness exist between high and low? NO!

> Is there a path leading to loyalty and fealty, benevolence and virtue? NO![19]

By 15 May, the new government was in full control of Edo and imposed stricter censorship regulations. Just one day after the publication of Fukuchi Gen'ichirō's article, the Council of State issued Dajōkan Decree 358, which stated that all books and reprints would require official permission before printing. Subsequent decrees prohibited the unauthorised publication of newspapers and established penalties for violators. In one fell swoop, all pro-Tokugawa and non-government-sponsored newspapers were eliminated. Based on the Tokugawa licensing precedents, the government enforced a press-prohibition policy that would remain unchanged, except in tone and degree of specificity, for the next 75 years (Huffman 1997, 45).

As for the unrest in Tokyo, Ōkubo Toshimichi's solution of using the emperor's public presence as a means of pacifying the people and reasserting the authority of the new government worked to the satisfaction of the Meiji leaders in the long run. The imperial capital was moved from Kyoto to Edo (Tokyo), and in honour of the emperor's coming of age on 27 August, the name of the epoch was changed from "Keiō" to "Meiji", following the Chinese tradition of naming epochs based on the length of an emperor's reign. The name "Meiji", which means "era of bright reign", also gave rise to further satire, as a mocking rhyme popular in Tokyo at the time interpreted it maliciously: "Read from above it may mean bright rule, but read from below it means ungoverned by anyone (*osamarumei*)" (cf. Steele 2003, 84). However, in a surprisingly creative twist of public relations management, an unnamed official decided that large quantities of sake would also be distributed to the population to commemorate the emperor's arrival in Tokyo, which seemed to further soothe the spirits of the people.

5.2 The Mikado Photograph Affair vs. Imperial Portraits

The trial-and-error nature of imperial image-making in the Meiji period is perhaps most vividly illustrated by what Yokohama newspapers called the "Mikado Photograph Affair" in 1872. On the occasion of the emperor's visit to the Yokosuka Naval Yard, Raimund von Stillfried, an Austrian commercial photographer, took an unauthorised photograph of the emperor and his suite and advertised it for sale a week later **[fig. 1]**. After skilful diplomatic negotiations on the part of Mutsu Munemitsu, then governor of Kanagawa Prefecture, the photographs

19 Translated in Steele 2003, 76.

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Figure 1 Baron Raimund von Stillfried, *His Imperiall Majesty the Tenno of Japan and Suite*. 1 January 1872. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/Emperor_Meiji_Inaugurating_Yokosuka_Arsenal_Jan_1_1872.png

and their negatives were confiscated. The incident, however, had far-reaching implications for the government's policy of representing the emperor. As Luke Gartlan (2016, 73-100) has shown, there is a direct causal link between the illegal photograph and the subsequent total control that was enforced over the possession, display, and distribution of photographs of the emperor, as well as the official commissioning of imperial portraits by Japanese photographer Uchida Kuichi 内田九一 (1844-75).

Looking more closely at the context in which the photograph was taken, several significant details could be said to have contributed to the chain of reactions it triggered. If von Stillfried is to be believed, this was the first day that the emperor performed an official act outside of his palace, appearing before the people for the first time without the formalities that had previously been observed. Like his European counterparts, on 1 January 1872, the emperor placed the imperial seal of authority on the Arsenal, built by French engineers, by laying the foundation stone of a new dry dock. As a souvenir of the visit, he received a golden hammer made by French officials. If the visit lacked the formality and degree of rigidity of previous staged imperial events, it would further explain the panic of Meiji officials at the appearance of photography **[fig. 1]**.

Contemporary testimony, such as the official report of the Austro-Hungarian Minister resident in Japan, Baron Heinrich von Calice, as well as the travel diary of the Austrian globetrotter Josef von Doblhoff, established that von Stillfried took the photograph, titled "His Imperial Majesty the Tenno of Japan and Suite", hidden aboard a ship in an adjacent dock by directing his camera lens through a hole in the ship's sail as the emperor's entourage paused beside the dock (Gartlan 2016, 88). But what was so disturbing about the photograph to Meiji officials?

The photograph shows the emperor seated on a low chair, dressed in court robes, pleated formal pantaloons, and a gold headpiece, with a folded fan in his hand. The figure to his right is the Chancellor of the Council of State, Sanjō Sanetomi, and to his left are two foreigners, one of whom is identified in the caption as the director of the Yokosuka Arsenal, François Verny. The clandestine nature of the photograph's execution is evident in the relaxed, unfocused postures of the subjects, who either look away from the camera or appear to be engaged in conversation. There are 24 men in the group, most of them dressed in Western clothes. While the contemporary viewer, accustomed to sensational paparazzi photographs of celebrities ranging from actors to royalty and heads of state, may find nothing scandalous or remarkable in this photograph, it is arguable that there is no trace of majestic authority either.

Building on Luke Gartlan's observations, I further believe that from the perspective of the Meiji leaders, both the candid nature of the photograph and the manner in which it was executed may have signalled in print for all to see a damage to imperial prestige and mystique, a lack of control over imperial representation, and a lack of authority over foreigners who had long sought to circumvent Tokugawa restrictions on photographing representative, authoritative sites such as Edo Castle. Add to this the widespread mystique that still surrounded the person of the emperor, and the fact that the people's custom of not looking directly at the emperor or crown prince in person was maintained until the end of the Asia-Pacific War, and the audacity of the foreign photographer would have been all the more galling.

As a result, the officials tightened their control over subsequent photographs of Emperor Meiji and their display, going so far as to confiscate even the negatives of the official portraits taken by Uchida in 1872 and, on the occasion of their widespread distribution to all prefectures, to stipulate that they be displayed only on special occasions. Furthermore, the exhibition of the photographs in 1873 included a police presence to ensure the appropriate level of piety on the part of the viewer. As Gartlan (2016, 99) astutely noted, in the newly created and tightly controlled public space, the portrait played the role of "imperial cynosure by proxy", extending "the experience of majestic spectacle throughout the nation".

This would later converge into the ritual veneration of the sanctioned imperial portrait, *goshin'ei* 御真影 (lit. 'the venerable shadow'), from 1890, when it was distributed to all schools along with the Imperial Rescript on Education. According to Ohnuki-Tierney (2020, 172), however, the fact that most public and private schools acquired a copy of the imperial portraits did not result in students seeing them very often, since they were housed in a small wooden structure in the form of a Shintō shrine whose doors were opened only during ceremonial times. Thus, the emperor remained invisible to the people. Nevertheless, the scandal surrounding the Christian professor Uchimura Kanzō's 内村鑑三 alleged refusal to bow before the framed rescript in 1891 sparked a fierce debate over the compatibility of Christianity and state Shintō. Similarly, as late as 26 March 1903, 21 November 1909, 12 September 1923, and 3 February 1927, articles in newspapers such as the *Asahi shinbun* praised school directors who perished in fires while trying to rescue the rescript and the imperial portrait from burning buildings (Tseng 2020, 312). The nationalist fervour that gripped the young nation manifested itself in the degree of internalisation of the ritually and violently taught demonstration of respect or even worship for the "August Emperor" represented by his imperial portrait, reinforced by lingering superstitions and quasi-religious reverence.

While the Meiji leaders learned to tolerate political satire directed at them after the turmoil of the tumultuous 1870s and 1880s subsided, accepting it as an integral part of civil society, not even the slightest hint of parody of the imperial institution was tolerated. This is illustrated by the case of the rogue journalist Miyatake Gaikotsu 宮武外骨 (1867-1955), an avid reader of the *Marumaru chinbun* 團團珍聞, who was imprisoned in 1889 after printing a cartoon parody of the Constitution Proclamation Ceremony, in which an emperor-like figure resembled a skeleton[20] (Duus 2001, 980-1) **[fig. 2]**.

This section has shown the Meiji leaders' desire for total control over the photographic representation of the emperor and its visualisation by the people, and their desire to eliminate any possibility of an unfavourable portrayal in which human fragility might be observed. At a time when portraits of monarchs and their families were sold by the millions in France and Britain as *cartes de visite*, photographs of Emperor Meiji were banned from private possession (Gartlan 2016, 99). However, as Alice Tseng has shown, Meiji leaders

20 The skeleton supposedly represented a pun alluding to the newspaper editor's name, Gaikotsu. The illustration and its accompanying article, titled "Promulgation Ceremony for the Sharpening of the Ready Wit Law" (*Tonchi kenpō happushiki* 頓智研法発布式), reflecting the magazine's name, *Journal of the Society of Ready Wit* (*Tonchi kyōkai zasshi* 頓智協会雑誌), were considered offensive enough to punish everyone involved and shut down the journal (Marks 2010, 174).

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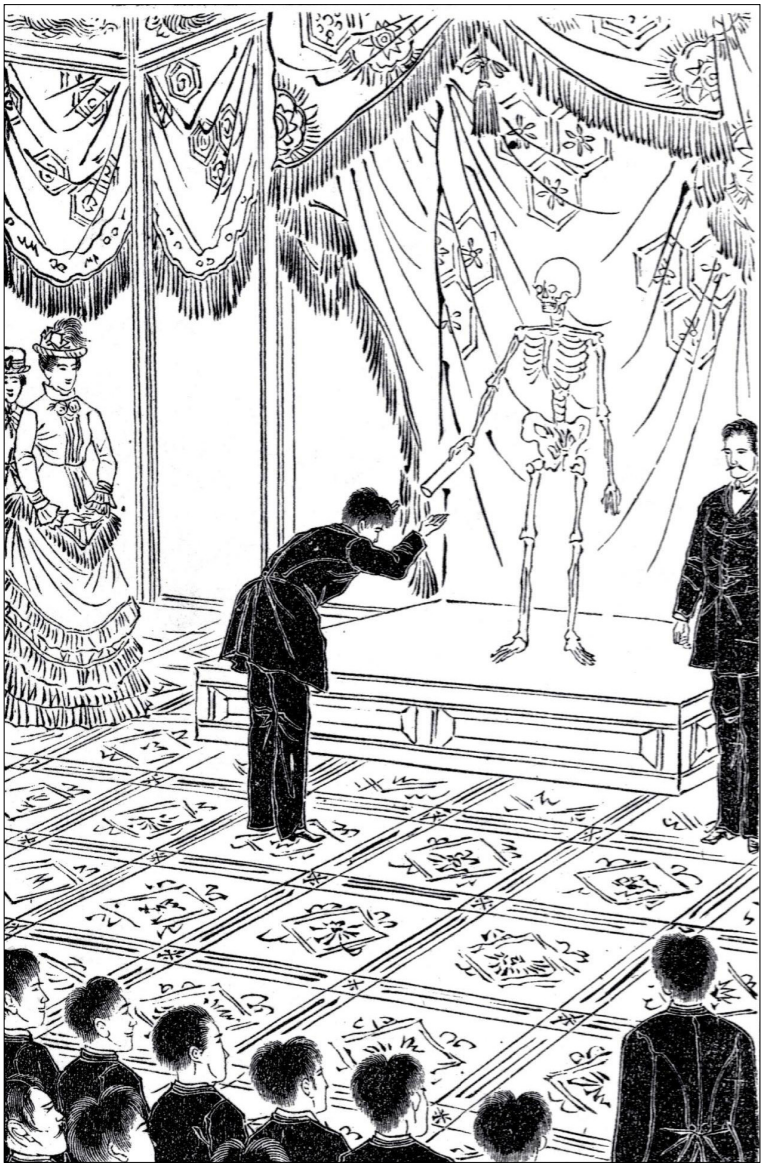

Figure 2 Miyatake Gaikotsu, *Promulgation Ceremony for the Sharpening of the Ready Wit Law*.
Source: *Journal of the Society of Ready Wit* (*Tonchi kyōkai zasshi* 頓智協会雑誌), 28, 4. March 1889.
Picture title in Japanese: *Tonchi kenpō happushiki* 頓智研法発布式

were soon forced to realise the value of photography as a medium, and magazines such as *Fūzoku gahō* 風俗画報 (Illustrated Magazine of Japanese Life; started in 1889), *Taiyō* 太陽 (The Sun; started in 1895), and *Kōzoku gahō* 皇族画報 (Illustrated Magazine of the Imperial Family), a supplement of *Fujin gahō* 夫人画報 (Lady's Graphic; started in 1905), regularly featured portraits of the imperial family (except the emperor) and members of the social elite to widespread readers' interest (Tseng 2020, 323-4).

The absence of additional portraits or photographs of the emperor is noticeable, however, as he entered the second period of his reign, known as "the quiet Emperor" (Murai 1999, 79), when he was slowly replaced in public view by his sanctioned imperial portrait (of 1890) and attained a perpetual youthful, majestic image in the collective national identity. The next section will examine another type of imperial symbolic absence from national representation: Meiji banknote design and patriotic statues.

6 Mutable National Symbols and the Sacrality of Imperial Representation

Duus (2001, 983, 989) argued that from the Meiji period onward, political cartoons played the complex and contradictory role of being both a weapon of political criticism (against Meiji officials, once a healthy civil opposition had developed) and a tool for "constructing a national imaginary whose legitimacy and authority were never questioned" (in times of perceived external threat, especially during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars). However, Duus also touched on the mutability of national representative symbols, noting that "there was no Japanese equivalent of Uncle Sam, John Bull, or Marianne", and that the few attempts to portray the Sun Goddess Amaterasu as a symbol for Japan, in the way that the neoclassical goddess Britannia represented the British Empire by the artist Kitazawa Rakuten, were quickly abandoned. According to Duus, the image of Amaterasu as a symbol did not prove popular, perhaps because "it was faintly incongruous to see the imperial ancestress so tangibly embodied in flesh" (2001, 985). The depiction of the emperor was not an option because of the imperial taboo that was prevalent in society at the time. Therefore, the national symbols depicted varied from a moustachioed gentleman, a manly worker, or Japan as "Miss Rising Sun".

A similar but less differentiated variant, which also omitted the possibility of imperial representation, is the case of the iconography decorating the newly printed national banknotes. In the 1870s and 1880s, the mythical Empress Jingū 神功皇后, who supposedly reigned in the third century, was used as a representation of the new nation-state, serving as an ideal representative not only of Meiji Japan but

also of the Meiji emperor. Trede (2008) has shown how she was variously imagined in her mid-nineteenth-century popular representation as a goddess, a "martial mother endowed with supernatural qualities", a cross-dressing warrior who blurred gender categories, and as a symbol of Japanese interests abroad through her successful invasion of Korean kingdoms, according to mythical historiography, or as a virtuous wife, according to the eighteenth-century Mito School portrayal of her, which focused more on her secondary role in relation to her husband and child, Emperor Ōjin 応神天皇. In this way, she fulfilled several roles consistent with the values promoted by Meiji ideology, from virtuous womanhood to military competence to the feminine re-imagining of Japan as a nation outlined by *kokugaku* thinkers such as Motoori Norinaga. The feminine attributes of virtue and motherhood were combined with the more masculine warrior stance in much the same way that Emperor Meiji was described at the beginning of the period as both "father and mother of the nation" (as seen in the 1868 decree cited above).

However, I would like to draw attention to the decision-making process regarding the design of the banknotes that led to the choice of Empress Jingū as the national symbol. According to Trede (2008), Thomas Kinder's 1872 proposal to depict Emperor Meiji on banknotes was rejected, despite the fact that he was only following Western examples. Although it was believed that printing photographic portraits, usually showing the head of state in an oval frame, was effective in preventing counterfeiting, in Japan it was not considered appropriate to use Emperor Meiji's portrait. Surprisingly, the next suggestion came eight years later from Emperor Meiji himself, who put forward the legendary first human emperor, Jinmu Tennō 神武天皇, as a suitable symbol for banknotes.

The Ministry of State rejected the idea as blasphemous because "the Emperor's image would be defiled by being touched by ordinary people" (Suzuki Masayuki, quoted in Ohnuki-Tierney 2020, 170). The Japanese also generally regarded money as spiritually as well as physically polluting, as evidenced by the contemporary custom of washing one's hands after handling money and the fact that the merchant class was the lowest in the Tokugawa class hierarchy because of its involvement with money (Ohnuki-Tierney 1989, 28-9). However, it is the justification for the rejection of the proposal by the imperial advisor Motoda Nagazane (1818-91) that sheds further light on the perception of imperial augustness in the Meiji Era. Motoda claimed that:

> The image of an imperial ancestor would become soiled through its being handled by all manner of people; moreover, the value of the notes would rise and fall, thus suggesting the rise and fall of the Emperor so represented. (quoted in Trede 2008, 63-4)

This perception lay at the root of the reason why no emperor or empress was depicted on such an everyday medium in the Meiji period and beyond. Interestingly, it was only because the Meiji government adopted the Tokugawa-era decision of the Mito School historians to exclude Empress Jingū from the emperor's lineage and refer to her as an interim regent that she was deemed suitable to serve as a national symbol in the manner described above. Like Shōtoku Taishi (574-622), she lacked the iconicity of a sanctified empress (Trede 2008, 66).

While the legendary first emperor, Jinmu Tennō, might have been considered too majestic a symbol to be depicted on banknotes, the cult that grew around his persona as a symbol of the supposedly unique, unbroken imperial line was supported by the appearance of numerous statues throughout the country (Brownlee 2014, 183-7). Other legendary figures, such as Yamato Takeru, were also depicted in statues such as the one erected in Kanazawa in the 1880s. Nevertheless, Sven Saaler has shown that of the more than 900 statues of various public figures erected in Japan between 1880 and 1940, the lack of representation of the reigning emperor stands out as a conspicuous feature of public statuary in modern Japan. The only sanctioned statues of Emperor Meiji were made after his death, and until 1968 not a single statue of him was displayed in an outdoor public space (Saaler 2017, 5-6).

As one of the few studies of the absence or indirect representation of the Japanese emperor, I will devote the following paragraphs to a discussion of Ohnuki-Tierney's (2020) book chapter "The Invisible and Inaudible Japanese Emperor". In it, the author proposes an interesting, if confusing, connection between the religious nature of the emperor as a deity in the Shintō pantheon and a vessel for an imperial soul transmitted through the unbroken imperial line, and the Shintō notion that it is "the soul (*tamashii* 魂) that defines and identifies deities" and other beings of the universe.

Drawing a parallel between the imperial soul and the purported invisibility of the souls of Shintō deities, or of important deities of the Shintō pantheon itself (whether physically, the unseen character of Amaterasu Ōmikami in the Inner Shrine, or textually, in Kawai Hayao's interpretation of the Kojiki centred on the "empty centre" theme of Shintō folk religion), Ohnuki-Tierney seems to suggest that the reluctance to directly depict Emperor Meiji and his perceived invisibility in image and word share a common core with Shintō practices and views regarding the conceptualisation and representation of Shintō deities and their souls. She concludes by stating that "the notion of soul in Japan necessarily precludes the externalization of the imperial soul" (2020, 166), where externalisation is defined as the expression of "an idea or concept either as an object, including signs and symbols, or as sound or speech" (155). The first statement could

be interpreted as the impossibility of representing the imperial soul and thus the emperor, which makes the idea of imperial symbols of power infeasible and removes the nature of the emperor as a "sacred legitimator". The following chapter in the book is titled "Non-Externalization of the Emperor", but just a few pages later, Ohnuki-Tierney examines national symbols for the emperor such as the phoenix, dragon, and crane on Japanese stamps printed as early as 1871. Terminological inconsistencies aside, the author's approach sheds further light on the possible origins of the so-called "imperial taboo".

While Ohnuki-Tierney approaches her analysis from the perspective of religion and anthropology, I would argue that the Meiji statebuilders' skilful political use of the imperial persona as a conferral of legitimacy would play as much or more of a role in the degree of representation and presence of Emperor Meiji in nation-building efforts and governance. Moreover, the existence in the Meiji period of persistent popular superstitions or folk beliefs about the emperor, on the one hand, and quasi-religious reverence for him, on the other, qualified him all the more as a malleable vessel to hold within the "metaphysical core of the nation". Because of his ambivalent nature, the emperor could thus be brought forth, humanised or deified, as circumstances demanded and as the Meiji custodians of the imperial image (Gluck 1985, 73) saw fit to employ his person, between a humanised, modern, and benevolent monarch, the patriarch of the nation, and a manifest deity – *arahitogami* 現人神 – embodying Japan's *kokutai* 国体 of an unbroken line of imperial descendants of Amaterasu and ensuring the peace of the Land of the Gods. Beginning in 1904, for all these facets of the imperial persona, there was a sympathy-evoking, ideology-condensing medium that could express them in appropriate response to political events and to the heart's content of Meiji officials, and that was imperial poetry.

7 The Emperor Meiji's Voice: Imperial Poetry

This section examines Meiji officials' use of Japanese *waka* 和歌 court poetry by and for the emperor in nation-building efforts, particularly during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). I examine the emperor's poems in terms of the role of the New Year's Imperial Poetry Contest *utakai hajime* 歌会始[21] in building an imagined community, the ideologues' decisions to limit the emperor's poetic activity, and their selection of poems to publish against the emperor's wishes. The ideologues chose to make accessible the poetic content that served the purpose of highlighting the emperor's emotional fragility (due to his supposed concern for his people, thus evoking public sympathy and unity) and content that reinforced the religious-ideological components of the Restoration's nationalist rhetoric outlined above.

Throughout the Meiji period, there were almost no public appearances or means of communication that facilitated Emperor Meiji's communication with the people, beyond the imperial scripts written in his name, which expressed the will of the government in highly formalised, lofty imperial terms. Ohnuki-Tierney (2020) suggests that this quality of the "inaudible Emperor", along with the lack of developed public oratory in Japan, should also be interpreted in the context of Japanese religious beliefs about the power of the soul of language, *kotodama* 言霊. In my opinion, similar to the idea of the emperor's lack of visibility stemming from Shintō religious beliefs about the invisibility of the souls of gods, here, too, the Meiji oligarchs' preference for the emperor's absence of direct communication was crucial. Moreover, what Ohnuki-Tierney does not address is the political role played by the publication, after 1904, of carefully selected hundreds of imperial poems (*gyosei* 御製) by members of the Meiji period Imperial Household Agency (*Kunaichō*), more specifically the Imperial Bureau of Poetry (*Outadokoro*).

The Imperial Bureau of Poetry was established in 1869 as part of the court ministries brought back to life, in an attempt to bestow

21 The Imperial Poetry Competition, or Imperial Poetry Reading, dates back to the middle of the thirteenth century or earlier. The name *utakai* refers to a party dedicated to the composition of poetry on a given theme, and such gatherings were often held on various occasions as early as the Heian period. Those held by the emperor were called *uta-gokai* 歌御会. Beginning with 1502, it was established as a regular New Year's court event and continued intermittently until the modern period, with almost annual occurrences in the Edo and Meiji periods (Tagaya 2017, 213-16). The Meiji Era *utakai hajime*, continued through the early years of the Meiji period, despite domestic and international unrest. It was organised in 1869 ostensibly at the request of the young Emperor Meiji. Initially, it stayed true to tradition and allowed only courtiers and those close to the emperor to submit their verses. In 1872, however, participation was gradually opened to junior court officials, *hanninkan* 判任官, and in 1874 to all Japanese subjects, regardless of class, age or gender (Miyamoto 2010, 187-200).

upon the new government a veneer of the prestige of the imperial rule in the Nara period (710-94).[22] Like many other Meiji government institutions, it too underwent several transformations until its final organisation form in 1888, when Takasaki Masakaze 高崎正風 (1836-1912), the emperor's advisor and tutor of *waka* poetry, became its leader[23] until the end of his life in 1912. The majority of Outadokoro's members in early Meiji came from Satsuma and Chōshū and were part of the widespread political and cultural networks of Shintō and *kokugaku* scholars. They often occupied other political posts at the same time and were repaid with entry into the newly created aristocracy towards the end of their careers, thus representing an intersection between the "field of power" and the "cultural field" (Bourdieu). Their duties included editing the *waka* poems of the imperial family and the court nobles and ladies, offering literary criticism, and compiling literary anthologies. In addition, starting with the Russo-Japanese War, many of Outadokoro's members were active in composing war songs and school songs for indoctrination purposes.

Outadokoro's most enduring legacy, however, which has been carried into the modern era and continues to this day, is the revival of the New Year's Imperial Poetry Competition (also called the "Reading") in 1869, *utakai hajime* 歌会始, and its expansion into a national event open to all Japanese, in 1874. The competition was used to build a bridge between the emperor and his people, as the imperial poems, the poems of nobles and officials, and the selected poems of commoners were published side by side in all major newspapers throughout the Meiji period, in a poetic and political construction of the nation as an 'imagined community'. Akira (1990, 322) has described the New Year's Imperial Poetry Competition as a performance of the "man-of-letters Emperor", in which the emperor is portrayed at the apex of the cultural hierarchy.

Emperor Meiji was in fact a truly prolific poet, with more than 90,000 poems attributed to him. His education as an imperial prince also relied heavily on mastery of Confucian classics, calligraphy, *waka* poetry, as was the custom for princes and emperors before the Meiji period (Keene 2002, 3). However, out of this extraordinary number of poems, one genre of poetry was missing after the tenth year of the Meiji period (1877), namely love poetry. In an article on 6 April 2004 in *Asahi Shinbun*, literary critic and writer Maruya Sai'ichi 丸谷才一 (1925-2012) stated:

22 For more information on the Meiji period's Imperial Bureau of Poetry, see Tsunekawa (1939), Miyamoto (2010) and, in the English language, Tuck (2018, 147-91).

23 Incidentally, 1888 was also the year Takasaki became a councillor on the newly-established Privy Council (*Sūmitsu-in* 枢密院). He was also, like the majority of early Meiji court officials, a native of the Satsuma province.

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> As a result of the Satsuma Rebellion, the Meiji government decided that the army must be the Emperor's army and the Emperor must be the commander-in-chief. It would be unacceptable for the Emperor to be weak because it would set a bad example. They decided that the Emperor must be proud and solemn, and they forbade him to compose love poems. Therefore, the Emperor stopped composing love poems, even when composing poems on a set topic.[24] (Maruya 2004; Author's transl.)

Maruya goes on to call this literary censorship of the emperor a "barbaric act" that constituted "one of the most severe literary suppressions and perhaps the greatest upheaval in the history of Japanese literature", since the emperor's love poetry was the foundation of the classical works of Japanese literature, the imperial poetry anthologies from Kokinwakashū 古今和歌集 to Shinkokinwakashū 新古今和歌集, and most emperors up to Emperor Kōmei 孝明天皇 and Emperor Meiji (for the first ten years of the Meiji period) had always composed love poems. Leaving aside Maruya's denunciatory pathos or Mamiya Kiyoo's 間宮清夫 opinion that prohibiting modern emperors from composing love poems was tantamount to prohibiting them from loving and living freely (Mamiya 2013, 20), I believe that the Meiji government's censorship of the emperor's private literary endeavours shows the lengths to which they were willing to go to protect the imperial charisma from any appearance of fragility.

Of the vast number written, no more than 8% of his poems were made known to the world during his lifetime (Tanaka 2007, 20), and of these, excluding his submissions to the Imperial Poetry Competition, the majority were published during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), due to the actions of the leader of the Imperial Bureau of Poetry, Takasaki Masakaze. The timing of these first widespread publications of imperial poems can be explained by the very heightened nationalistic wartime atmosphere that reached its peak during the Russo-Japanese War, and the by then more developed and established tradition of using *waka* poetry as *shōka* 唱歌 (school hymns) and *gunka* 軍歌 (military poetry) for purposes of ideological dissemination, in classrooms and in the newspapers, going back to the years before the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95; see Eppstein 2007). While we do not have precise information about Takasaki's motivations or his ability to get the imperial poems out to the press before 1904 (e.g. during the Sino-Japanese War), it is likely that he was influenced by observing the growing role of *waka* poetry in the newspaper columns at

24 The word in the original Japanese here is *dai'ei* 題詠, and it refers to composing poems on a set topic (usually of traditional Japanese aesthetics) in the context of a poetry gathering (*uta-awase* 歌合) or for example the Imperial Poetry Competition *utakai hajime*.

the time (which he helped steer), and that his own position at court and in the Poetry Bureau was more stable in 1904 than it had been in 1894, allowing him to take this initiative.

Historians have shown how Emperor Meiji was made to retreat from public view in what is termed the period of the "quiet Emperor" (*shizukana tennō* 静かな天皇へ) from 1886-1912, as he was being increasingly replaced with the image of his imperial portrait and he fulfilled strictly ceremonial purposes in public life. His last grand imperial tour took place shortly before the opening of the Meiji Parliament and his major political contribution was lauded as having graciously bestowed upon the people the imperial Constitution of 1890. His other achievements were said to have transcended politics and enhanced the nation. As Gluck (1985, 84) described it,

> Politics was too ambiguous an endeavor to identify with the symbolic 'jewel' that was the Emperor, and in the ideological presentation to the people his imperial heart was made to lie elsewhere.

At the time of the Russo-Japanese War, however, he returned to the role of wartime commander-in-chief and was portrayed, in part through his poems and accompanying editorials, as a sympathetic ruler, a father of the nation whose deep concern for the dangers and hardships of soldiers and the pain of families on the home front gave him little rest. The emperor's poems submitted to the New Year's Imperial Poetry Competition were generally of a conventional nature, giving little insight into his feelings and following the aesthetic principle of compositions on a given theme of the *waka* literary genre. Therefore, Takasaki Masakaze took matters into his own hands and leaked about 100 imperial poems that he was in a unique position to access to the newspapers (Tanaka 2007, 20). Significantly, this "leakage" was facilitated by high-ranking Meiji statesmen of the time, signalling their approval and active participation in the use of poetry to strengthen national consciousness.[25]

If one believes the later testimony of members of the Imperial Poetry Bureau at the time, Inoue Michiyasu 井上通泰 and Chiba Taneaki 千葉胤明, Takasaki acted against the will of the emperor and out of an ideological conviction that it would be a very good thing for the world and humanity (Chiba 1938, 38) and that the poems would greatly "lift the spirits of the people on the home front and raise the morale of the generals at the front" (Inoue 1932, 4). Takasaki thus explicitly

25 Takasaki leaked the poems to Tanaka Mitsuaki 田中光顕, Minister of the Imperial Household and a "zealous worshipper of Meiji Tennō" (Saaler 2017, 6), Tokudaiji Sanetsune 徳大寺実則, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal of Japan, and Iwakura Tomosada 岩倉具定, councillor on the Privy Council (Tanaka 2007, 20).

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chose among the emperor's poems those that best gave the people access to his emotional life, including his fears and worries, in order to simultaneously enhance the emperor's reputation as a "paragon of statecraft and solicitude" (Gluck 1985, 89) and humanise him for the purpose of fostering better national unity in wartime.

Many of the poems remained famous and were invoked at later points in Japanese history, such as the following poem published on 7 November 1904, in the *Kokumin Shinbun*,[26] often subsequently interpreted as a proof of the emperor's pacifism:

> *Yomo no umi mina harakara to omou yō ni nado nami kaze no tachisawagu ramu*[27]
>
> Where all within the four seas / Should be as brothers / Why is it that waves and wind / Should rise and cause such tumult?[28]

For the purposes of this section, I will focus on several poems published during this period that illustrate the Meiji myth-makers' willingness to portray the emperor in a carefully staged fragility on the one hand, and their use of *waka* poetry to reinforce religious components of the Restorationist national ideology that would later be called *tennōsei* 天皇制, the ideology of the emperor system.

As a leitmotif of constructed, acceptable fragility, some newspapers of the time[29] portrayed the emperor as suffering from cold in unheated rooms in the imperial palace, wearing only a thin shirt out of solidarity with Japanese soldiers at the front, while hiding the true fragility of his failing health. This served the purpose of making the people sympathetic to the emperor and thus raising their opinion of him. As Adam Smith once noted, sympathy is a particularly fine "detector of virtue", capable of measuring it in nuanced and subtle ways (quoted in Altamirano 2017, 370). Consider the following poem, whose accompanying editorial also emphasised the emperor's great solidarity and his suffering from cold, published by the *Yomiuri shinbun* on 3 November 1904:

> *Nezame ni mo omoitsuru kana ikusabito mukaishi kata no tayori ika ni to*[30]

26 The influential newspaper under the chairmanship of Tokutomi Sohō 徳富蘇峰 came to be considered a "government's mouthpiece" after the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5).

27 The Japanese original transcription is: 四方の海みなはらからとおもふ世になど波風の立さわぐらむ.

28 Translation by Donald Keene (2002, 645).

29 *Kokumin shinbun* (1905, 1); *Yomiuri shinbun* (1904, 3).

30 In Japanese, 寝覚にも思ひつるかな軍人むかひし方の便りいかにと.

> I wonder, / While awake or asleep, / If I'm hearing news / From where the soldiers have gone. (Author's transl.)

Another poem also published in *Kokumin shinbun* on 7 November 1904, reinforced the image of the emperor as a father of the nation, united in sympathy with other fathers left behind on the home front:

> *Kora wa mina ikusa no niwa ni idehatete okina ya hitori yamada moru ramu*[31]

> All his sons have / Quit their home, on their way to / The theater of war / Only the old man is left / To guard the hillside paddies.[32]

According to a member of the Imperial Poetry Bureau, Chiba Taneaki (1938, 40), after the publication of this poem, the Bureau received countless pictures of old people in their farmlands from readers who identified with the content of the poem because they had lost sons in the war. This poem, also published in the article of 7 November 1904, indirectly portrayed the emperor as a medium between the ancestral deities of whom he was a descendant and the Japanese people:

> *Chihayaburu kami no kokoro ni kanau ramu waga kunitami no tsukusu makoto wa*[33]

> The people's heartfelt sincerity / Of our country / Surely fulfills the wishes / Of the mighty gods' hearts.[34]

At the same time, the poem illustrates the idea of Japan as the Land of the Gods (*shinkoku*) by depicting a relationship of identity between the hearts (or minds) of the *kami* (deities) and those of the people, with the emperor as the intermediary who ensures the eternal connection through the (supposedly) unbroken imperial line of divine descent. The emperor as a mediator who prays to the *kami* to ensure the safety of the country is a common motif in later imperial poems, which often refer to the *kami* guarding Japan, the age of the gods (*kamiyo* 神代), or the teachings of the *kami* (*kami no oshie* 神の教).[35]

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31 In Japanese, こらはみないくさのにはに出でははてて翁やひとり山田もるらむ.

32 Translation by Donald Keene (2002, 645).

33 In Japanese, ちはやぶる神のこころにかなふらむわがくに民のつくす誠は.

34 This type of poem was termed by Sasaki Nobutsuna a "didactic poem", *kyōkunteki* 教訓的, poems in which the emperor thought of the nation, revered his ancestors, and was compassionate towards the people (quoted in Uchikoshi 1999, 90).

35 To be sure, traditional *waka* poetry vocabulary also incorporates tropes which are Shintō-imbued and reference the *kami*, but the frequency of their appearance in the

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The connection between imperial *waka* poetry and the government's fostering of national consciousness against the background of state Shintō was further strengthened through *Kokumin shinbun*'s later publications (1905-12) of the emperor's poems on the dates of the newly created national holidays, many of which centred on the imperial house: the Emperor's Birthday, *tenchōsetsu* 天長節 (3 November), the National Foundation Day, *kigensetsu* 紀元節 (11 February),[36] and on the national holiday celebrating the anniversary of Japan's legendary first emperor, Jinmu Tennō-sai 神武天皇祭 (4 April).

As mentioned above, more of the emperor's poems were published during the Russo-Japanese War than during the rest of his lifetime. The war thus marked the beginning of his reputation as a "poet saint" (*kasei* 歌聖) on which subsequent ideological and indoctrination efforts would build, as Meiji ideologues and their Shōwa period (1926-89) counterparts incorporated his poems into reading and ethics textbooks and daily school rituals. At a time when the popularity of *waka* poetry as a literary genre was waning in the face of the poetic movements of the new schools of haiku and *shintaishi* (free verse), *waka* became even more closely associated with the imperial house than before.[37]

That these later efforts were also aimed at further perfecting the imperial image of a strong modern monarch, while avoiding any perceived unfavourable fragility, can be seen in the process of selecting his poems for the imperial anthologies that proliferated after his death. Mamiya Kiyoo (2013) has explored how the renowned Japanese literary scholar Sasaki Nobutsuna 佐佐木信綱 (1872-1963) impressed upon the selection committees that the inclusion of love poems in the anthologies would damage the image of the emperor as the ruler of a strong nation and would detract from the desired "manly dignity" of a *Kaiser*-like monarch. For this reason, the pre-war imperial anthologies did not include love poems, and even in the case of the post-war anthologies, when most of the editorial committee members wanted to include more than 30 love poems, Sasaki Nobutsuna strongly opposed the idea, so only seven poems were included as a compromise (Mamiya 2013, 15).

In summary, in this section I have shown how the Meiji government used and limited the emperor's poetry to eliminate the appearance of

few poems published on the occasion of national holidays suggests a conscious political choice towards ideology-bearing tropes.

36 The date of the holiday and of the promulgation of the constitution was chosen to coincide with the mythical foundation date of Emperor Jinmu's ascension to the throne (K. Antoni, Y. Antoni 2017).

37 It is generally believed that *waka* poetry, as a literary genre with extraordinary continuity, was able to maintain its vitality for more than 1,000 years not only because it existed as a literary expression in the narrow sense, but also because of its character as a "ritual" that could be linked to politics and religion (Suzuki 2017, 12-13).

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unmanly fragility (falling in love), to portray the emotional fragility of an emperor as a father of the nation who was concerned about the fate of Japanese soldiers, and to reinforce the image of the emperor as a medium between the *kami* deities watching over Japan and its people by selecting poems that contained religious-ideological tropes.

8 Conclusion

In this article, I have traced the historical development of Emperor Meiji's portrayal by Meiji state-builders and politicians, as well as the constraints placed on him by his advisors in their search for an appropriate image of a modern, *Kaiser*-like monarch. Scholarship on Emperor Meiji's "theatre of power" is replete with studies of rituals and symbols of power, "invented traditions" in Hobsbawm's terms. In my review of existing scholarship, I have moved away from the problematisation of his actual political role and authority, the "pageantry" of his court, and emphasised the nuances and variety of his presentation (or lack thereof) to the people.

I underlined and compared two instances of manufactured fragility: the letter distributed to the people on 7 April 1868, in the name of the emperor, and the newspaper articles and poems suggesting the precarious condition of the anxious emperor suffering from cold out of solidarity with Japanese soldiers. I suggested that this portrayal of fragility served as a political tool to elicit public sympathy in times of upheaval, such as the Meiji Restoration (1868) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). Only acceptable facets of a fragile self were presented to the people: on the one hand, youth and weakness attributed to inexperience, which was presented as understandable and simultaneously justified the advisory position of the Meiji leaders, and on the other hand, the vulnerability of an anxious emperor as "father of the nation" who endangered his health out of a moral principle of solidarity with the soldiers he himself had ordered to the front.

In addition, this article has reviewed several known and researched cases of censorship and control that illustrate the trial-and-error process of the Meiji government's use of the imperial image. As in the case of political satires and cartoons against the emperor, and in the case of Baron von Stillfried's unauthorised photograph, new government censorship laws were enacted immediately after such unpleasant events occurred. While the ban on photography became more lax during the Meiji period as it applied to other members of the imperial family, and implicitly to the future Emperor Taishō 大正天皇, the differentiated nature of censorship in the political sphere, where the Meiji oligarchs learned to tolerate satire directed at themselves but never at the emperor, laid the foundations of the imperial taboo into the modern era. Similar to the decision-making processes that led to the

deliberate refusal to depict Emperor Meiji (or any emperor) on banknotes and to have statues depicting him, this imperial taboo was likely rooted in part in the desire to maintain the people's religious perception of the emperor as a manifest deity and medium to Japan's ancestral deities, and in part in the Meiji leaders' borderline obsessive control of the dignity and charisma of the imperial image for their own benefit.

In post-war Japan, a new expression and indeed a new manifestation of the imperial taboo appeared. The so-called "chrysanthemum taboo" (after the imperial crest, a chrysanthemum) crystallised in the 1960s on the occasion of several right-wing writers and publishers deemed guilty of transgressing the imperial honour (Field 2011, 22). Field initially attributes the survival and development of the chrysanthemum taboo to the agenda of the American occupation, whose goals overlapped with those of the conservative Japanese leadership, making it difficult to problematise war guilt in general and imperial responsibility in particular (2011, 46). Despite post-war scholarship denouncing the ideology of the imperial system, the government suppressed union activity and educational reform in the interest of economic growth. In doing so, it also strengthened the right-wing agenda that perpetuated the chrysanthemum taboo. On the few occasions when people broke the imperial taboo, such as when a novelist published a short story in which members of the imperial family were murdered, or when the mayor of Nagasaki questioned the responsibility of Emperor Shōwa 昭和天皇 (1901-89) for war crimes, the consequences were swift, shocking, and brutal.

Conversely, the representation of the emperor in the modern era has also allowed for an increasing display of humanity, be it the avidly chronicled courtship of the current Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako, the retirement of Emperor Akihito, or the abdication of Princess Mako in the event of her marriage to a commoner. The individual and fragile selves of world leaders are allowed to be more visible in the climate of developed countries that increasingly value individuality and freedom of choice. The extent to which the emperor as an individual enjoys a greater degree of freedom in personal pursuits or life choices is debatable, but a departure from previous, restrictive imperial protocol can be seen in tendencies such as Emperor Shōwa's passion for marine biology to the point of organising a laboratory in the palace, and Emperor Akihito's uncharacteristic withdrawal from political life for personal reasons.

Further studies could explore the dynamic tensions in Japanese public life between the limitations imposed on the imperial self and the self-censorship of the people's free speech for fear of right-wing extremist retaliation. In an age of free press and critical thought, it is still true, as seen in the examples outlined in this article, that ideologies such as that of the emperor system can represent both internal psychological constriction and enforced external political subservience.

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Decolonising Space and the Self
A Post-Colonial Reading of Activism on Statues

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Abstract This article discusses recent activism on public statues from a post-colonial perspective. First, it outlines a post-colonial concern with the notion of subaltern space, focusing on the relation of space-making to subjectivation. Then, it analyses distinct theoretical insights coming from post-colonial literature that deal with the theme of political space and resistance, addressing in particular the thought of Mbembe, hooks, and Ahmed. Finally, it discusses activism over colonial statues in light of this theoretical approach, interpreting activism on statues as a decolonial intervention that directly addresses questions of representation and democracy.

Keywords Decolonisation. Political space. Post-colonial studies. Statues. Subalternity.

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1 Introduction

This article discusses activism performed in and over public space in the context of battles over decolonisation and memory. The main research question addressed by this article concerns the proper interpretation of activism on colonial statues, in the light of which it is possible to interpret with due attention the recent phenomena of activism on statues. In light of recent, very much discussed events where public statues and monuments have been the object of activism, being damaged, vandalised or straightly toppled down, such as the removal of the statue of Rhodes in South Africa in 2015,[1] the attempts to do the same in Oxford,[2] or the colouring in pink of the statue of Montanelli in Milan in 2019,[3] important questions have been raised and dis-

1 Cecil Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was the target of a huge campaign known as *Rhodes Must Fall*, involving students, teachers, and other activists, that asked for the removal of the statue from the university campus, claiming that Rhodes (1853-1902), founder of De Beers mining company in South Africa and conqueror of a territory in southern Africa, that eventually was called Rhodesia after his name, was symbol of southern African colonisation, racism, and slavery. The campaign succeeded in having the statue removed by the university council on 9 April 2015, at the presence of many people cheering and jumping on the plinth in celebration (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32236922). However, this is not the only South African statue that has been object of such intervention: activists protested against other statues celebrating colonial men in South Africa, including other statues of Rhodes. For example, a statue of Rhodes was beheaded in Cape Town on 15 July 2020 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53420403). The fact that Rhodes' statue at UCT was removed after a decision taken by the university council, upon the requests expressed by a popular movement, was also seen as a case of co-optation of the movement by the institution, the uplifting of the statue symbolically expressing the co-optation of a popular desire from below. In this sense, the institutional appropriation of the act of removal can be seen as an attempt to maintain a monopoly over the means of violence, just as the latter are sought to be socialised and reappropriated by the people.

2 A statue of Rhodes can also be found at Oriel College in Oxford, where Rhodes was a student and donor. In the wake of a campaign similar to that in Cape Town, again under the name of Rhodes Must Fall, that asked for the statue to be removed, Oriel College council decided not to attend to this request, on the basis of the "financial challenges" the removal would require, also arguing that history is not to be censored, but learned and explained. Subsequently, an explanatory plaque was appointed under the statue, yet activists lamented that the plaque "trivializes the pain and suffering Rhodes caused" (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-58885181).

3 During a feminist manifestation in 2019 in Milan, the statue of the Italian journalist Indro Montanelli was coloured in pink (https://www.ilpost.it/2019/03/10/statua-indro-montanelli-imbrattata). A supporter of the fascist regime, Montanelli participated as a volunteer in the colonial conquest of Ethiopia, where he bought and "married" a 12-year-old girl. Years later, when the feminist Elvira Banotti publicly asked him about this underage war "marriage", Montanelli justified himself by claiming that, given their civil, cultural, and moral backwardness, children rape was just not an issue for Ethiopians, while on the other hand he would not have done anything similar in Italy. For a comment on this event, see https://www.dinamopress.it/news/montanelli-colonialismo-italiano-gli-intellettuali-orfani-del-padre/?fbclid=IwAR3B9prIA_2E1XO-oF4kkWd0gJ41Er0tRUx8mTtl4wPhnj_9tU7kJpGvXTE. For a discussion on the Italian debate about statues and public memory, see Por-

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cussed, all over the media as well as in academic discourse: what are statues built for? Who has the right to take decisions over their building and removal, and who has not? What is their meaning and function in public space? Why do statues matter? This article will reflect on major theoretical concerns underlying these kinds of questions, through a specific reflection on colonial and post-colonial space. Indeed, addressing similar questions requires a preliminary analysis, aimed at developing a framework of categories suitable for understanding the phenomenon at stake. The article, therefore, develops such a preliminary analysis, elaborating on the categories that may be used to understand recent activism on colonial statues, while it interrogates the proper interpretation of this phenomenon.

In more detail, the argumentation provided in the course of the article leads to the following main hypothesis: that activism performed in and over public space in post-colonial contexts is best seen as a decolonising intervention, namely, an active intervention aimed at the decolonisation[4] of the space marked by statues. More specifically, un-

telli 2020. After the manifestation, the city council removed the pink ink from the statue. Subsequently, the statue was painted red once more in 2020 (`https://www.money.it/Indro-Montanelli-statua-perche-abbattere-cosa-ha-fatto`). The three episodes of activism on statues we just mentioned are just a few examples, not exhaustive, among many. We decided to mention them because of their media relevance and because they all, albeit differently, represent cases of public contestation over colonialism and memory. It should be noted, however, a slight difference that distinguishes the first episode mentioned (relating to South Africa) from the other two (relating to the United Kingdom and Italy, respectively). While the former took place in a formerly colonised country, the others occurred in formerly colonising countries. It is possible to wonder, therefore, if the three cases share the same project of 'decolonisation', given that the second ones do not concern the kind of colonial occupation and structuring of space we will discuss later in the article. However, it is possible to argue that all the cases listed aim at the removal of a colonial symbol from a space that has been deeply structured by colonialism, whether in a colonising or colonised country: therefore, they all participate in a decolonising project and a memory-questioning operation, albeit situated in specific historical circumstances. Moreover, this kind of decolonising intervention on colonial statues directly addresses the racial logics that still inform the post-colonial world in all its parts, affecting, for example, how migrants perceive public space in formerly colonising countries.

4 The post-colonial and the decolonial perspective are not the same. The latter was also developed in critical response to the former, as post-colonial studies have been object to several charges, such as: firstly, to focus only on the Indian subcontinent and Africa, lacking to theorise colonialism and its aftermaths in Latin America; secondly, to sustain the view that colonialism is over, given the ambiguity of the particle "post-" it adopts, therefore lacking a serious political commitment to fight coloniality; thirdly, to formulate too complicated and sterile theoretical elaborations, concentrating too strictly on issues of culture and representation, failing to address the materiality of oppression, and adopting a post-structuralist, post-modernist tone that dilutes the radicality and efficacy of the writings of its own predecessors, i.e., the first theorists of anti-colonial struggle, such as Fanon and Césaire. Decolonial studies claim to overcome all these lacks, elaborating a comprehensive view of coloniality and the responses to it, namely, decoloniality (Mignolo, Walsh 2018). On the other hand, a response to these charges from a post-colonial perspective has been made, also commenting on several

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derstanding activism on statues as a decolonising intervention implies conceiving statues as symbols that practically affect how space is lived and perceived, both in public memory and in everyday life. In more detail, actions against colonial statues qualify the targeted statues as symbols that, even after processes of formal decolonisation, continue to affect and structure public spaces, impacting on the subjectivation of those who live in and through such spaces. Moreover, these actions are to be interpreted as challenging ongoing processes of memorialisation and celebration of colonial heroes.[5] As the following sections argue, statues symbolically reproduce or maintain the subaltern space created by colonial powers, thus reproducing processes of subalternisation. In order to understand this main point, the article will discuss the construction and use of public space

problems inherent to the decolonial approach (Colpani, Mascat, Smiet 2022). Despite this serious theoretical divergence, in this article we do not distinguish too strictly between the two currents, rather stressing their common concern with issues of colonisation, anticolonialism, and the problematic afterlives of the colonial regimes. Moreover, most of the authors we will discuss do not strictly fall under any of the two labels, yet they think extensively about colonialism, racism, decolonisation, and struggle. We are more interested in the productiveness of the debate that has been going on between the two currents, rather than on their mere opposition. This is not to ignore the divergences among the authors we discuss, but rather to point to their convergence in delineating a perspective on space and the intervention on statues, that seriously addresses questions of colonialism and anti-colonialism.

5 The issue of activism targeted at colonial statues must also be addressed in the light of a recent historiographic debate concerning colonial heroes and their legacy in post-colonial societies. A specific research field on this topic has been developed, namely that of heroic and celebrity studies in imperial contexts: see for example MacKenzie 1992; Bernault 2010; Jones et al. 2017; Sèbe 2019; Von Tunzelmann 2021. The field is critically concerned with the public memory of heroic figures of colonialism and imperialism in post-colonial societies, so as to interrogate the complex relationship between the former metropolises and the former colonies, as to their mutual remembrance of such figures, in a way that directly involves cultural as well as political processes (Bernault 2010; Jones et al. 2017). This historiographic field has been highlighting the crucial role of monuments and statues in providing "ways in which older imperial fantasies survived the decolonization era" (Bernault 2010, 373). This was done by historically addressing the role of public symbols in giving shape to the materiality of politics as well as of everyday life. More specifically, a recent re-evaluation of colonial figures in former colonies has been highlighted, which overcomes the anti-colonial repudiation of such men, pointing to the emergence of new features of post-colonial nation-building that seriously challenge the strong anti-colonial character of post-colonial national narratives (Sèbe 2019). As it were, the new erection of monuments celebrating colonial figures in the ex-colonies "dwarfs the previous [...] monuments dedicated to the history of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle" (Bernault 2010, 381). In response to this phenomenon, the article seeks to address activism from below as a de- or anti-colonial intervention that actively responds to such reappraisal of colonial memory, ambiguously and recently undertaken by post-colonial nations, as the Rhodes Must Fall movement for example shows. Although this article does not directly contribute to the historiographic debate concerning this topic, it addresses the general issue of the relevance of monumentalising processes and memorialisation of colonial figures in post-colonial societies, by way of providing a theoretical analysis of decolonial interventions that challenge these processes from below.

in contexts of colonisation and decolonisation, and the role of symbols in giving shape to the materiality of everyday life in such contexts, based on the assumption that "architecture and urban forms are key players in definitions of culture and identity" in (post-)colonial situations (Çelik 1997, 1).

Discussing the main hypothesis on activism as a decolonising intervention, the article is structured as follows: first, a nexus between the construction of subaltern space and the construction of a subaltern identity will be explored, thus revealing how the decolonisation of space is linked to the decolonisation of the self (§ 2). A post-colonial insight on political space reveals it both as an instrument of colonisation and subjugation, and a dimension actively reworked and acted upon for resistance and struggle. In the following sections, this twofold dimension of post-colonial space will be explored to understand what decolonial activism on statues does. The peculiarity of the organisation and structuring of space under colonial rule, as well as the possibility of resisting it, will be highlighted (§ 3). On this basis, the article discusses the necessity to articulate relevant strategies to decolonise space (§ 4). Subsequently, it will be shown how the actions targeting statues represent relevant instances of similar strategies (§ 5), thus showing that activism involving statues is to be conceived, in line with the hypothesis introduced above, as a decolonising intervention.

Carefully interrogating the post-colonial space will therefore enable us to tackle the issue of activism on statues and interpret it from a post-colonial perspective as a decolonising intervention. In more detail, the question of post-colonial space will be discussed in relation to authors such as Mbembe, Ahmed, and hooks.

2 Subaltern Space

In order to discuss the aforementioned questions on statues and symbols, it is important to theoretically address the relationship between space and subalternity, focusing on the construction of subaltern spaces and subaltern selves in colonial and post-colonial contexts. This focus will allow us to develop a specific perspective on activism over statues in post-colonial contexts. From this perspective, the article interprets subalternity as a distinct feature of colonisation. While addressing the construction of subaltern spaces, space is to be analysed as an instrument of colonial subalternisation and, as a consequence, subaltern experiences of public space are to be put in due light. From this point of view, it is important to acknowledge how urban studies have argued that "architecture and urbanism in the colonial context should [...] be viewed among the practices that make up the colonial discourse" (Çelik 1997, 6).

As a starting point, it is important to consider conceptually subaltern spaces, with reference to distinct notions of 'subalternity' that have been deployed within the field of post-colonial studies. The original formulation of the category of subalternity was provided by Gramsci (1975), who used it as a historically determined category to designate the oppressed classes, a subordinate social position within a hierarchy and, therefore, a relational category, since subalternity is always in relation to, and opposed to, hegemony. Secondly, the category 'subaltern' met an important development, as it was adopted by the Subaltern Studies collective, that applied it to the reality of post-colonial India:[6] the Subaltern Studies project adopted subalternity as a historiographic category capable of uncovering the peasants' role in the Indian struggle for independence from the British domain and, more generally, to address figures and groups that are not easily accessible through official records and archives, escaping standard representation (Guha, Spivak 1988; Chaturvedi 2000).[7] As Guha put it, the subaltern is:

> the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. (Guha, Spivak 1988, vii)

Moreover, Spivak expanded on the notion of subalternity with reference to the Subaltern Studies project, to which she contributed (Guha, Spivak 1988; 2005) but from which she also departed, as "a sometime member" of the group, according to her own statement (Spivak 2000, 327). In fact, Spivak developed a rather different theoretical conceptualisation of the subaltern, a feminist one, most notably in her ground-breaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), the first edition of which, admittedly, was written in 1983, before Spivak became aware of the work of the Subaltern Studies group, and which was later modified after her encounter with Guha and other subalternists.[8] In this text, Spivak questioned the very possibility that the Indian subaltern woman, caught within patriarchy and development, can actually speak her voice and be heard, especially as the Western left-wing intellectuals assume her to do so without problematising this possibility, falling into the risk of ventriloquising the subaltern, so that she always invariably fails representation. Spivak's connota-

6 However, it should be noted that the Subaltern Studies elaboration on subalternity has been criticised for misunderstanding the notion of the subaltern provided by Gramsci (Green 2002).

7 Moreover, the project of the Subaltern Studies collective has been expanded and adapted to other post-colonial contexts, most notably making the case for a Latin American Subaltern Studies project (Rodriguez 2001; Coronil 2000).

8 https://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=8840.

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tion of the subaltern woman changed over time, as the first elaboration of the subaltern woman in the above-mentioned text shifted towards slightly different considerations in more recent interventions, where the subaltern woman is discussed as a target of new modalities of exploitation, such as biopiracy and genetic engineering (Spivak 1999; 2000). In the course of this shift, the main point of Spivak's intervention on the subaltern turned to the notion of "learning to learn from the subaltern", rather than studying the subaltern as someone who has been cut off the lines of social mobility.[9] It should be noted, however, the continuous spatial underpinning of the notion of the subaltern by Spivak herself throughout this reorganisation. If in her early writings, Spivak characterised the subaltern woman as occupying a space of radical alterity and heterogeneity (1988; 1996a; 1999) and "the name for a space of difference",[10] in a later text she described the subaltern as a diasporic figure, "displaced to the global political sphere" (2000, 332) and, more recently again, a "position without identity" (2013, 9) and "an absence from the structures of the state" (11). All these different connotations share a spatial marking of the subaltern, whose position and location or, rather, whose aporetic non-place is highlighted,[11] either because it marks a space of difference, or because it constitutes an absence within state structures, or because it describes a diasporic dislocation (Spivak 1996b).

Postcolonial reflection on subalternity, which has historically used this category to discuss colonisation and its structures, as well as resistance to them, is a most relevant one, in fact, essential to grasp current interventions in post-colonial spaces. However, post-colonial studies have also been accused of conflating resistance and subalternity too simply (Mbembe 2021, 126), thus failing to address lack of agency and difficulty to resist in contexts of colonisation. In fact, Spivak's notion of the subaltern woman problematises exactly this absence of agency and speech in the subaltern. Notwithstanding this critical appraisal, the notion of subalternity is quite useful in identifying both the historical construction of a category of oppressed and the emergence of resistance and upheaval. At the same time, the notion that the subaltern escapes representation is quite a compelling one, and poses serious challenges to decolonial activism, as we shall see later.

The post-colonial theoretical formulations on subalternity that we just mentioned also laid the foundation for a body of geographical work that has been exploring the conceptual couple 'space and sub-

9 https://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=8840.

10 https://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=8840.

11 For a detailed discussion of Spivak's spatial connotations of the subaltern, and a thought-provoking attempt to rework her aporetic location, see de Jong, Mascat 2016.

alternity' in contexts of colonialism and post-colonialism. Critical geography uncovered the spatial nature of the concept of 'subalternity', with the aim of translating the historiographic notion of subalternity into a geographic one, thus suggesting that, in fact, "subaltern studies was always already spatial" (Jazeel, Legg 2019, 5) and that "critical engagements with colonialism and its afterlives are always already spatial" (3), as they have always been dealing with problems of space and, moreover, with the question of representation of space. On this basis, the aim of such geographers has been to develop "a rigorously geographical engagement with the concept of subalternity" (3). Critical geography, therefore, has been treating subaltern space as follows:

> subaltern space pertains to issues of subordination and oppression, and their relation to questions of voice, agency, representation, situated knowledge and imagined community. (Clayton 2011, 246)

More specifically, "the task of exploring the spatial invisibilities that power precipitates" (Jazeel, Legg 2019, 6) has been put on the agenda by critical geographers, who have been pursuing this task with reference to a wide array of different contexts and case studies, trying to recover forgotten places and their non-hegemonic representations.[12] Among other things, such studies have been focusing on "the historical significance of place-making on subaltern-making" (27), thus identifying a close connection between the construction of space and that of political identity, albeit in a non-deterministic way. This connection added a specific spatial light on questions of subjectivation, meant as the multifarious and heterogeneous arrange of processes leading to the never-ending formation of the subject, endowed with an inherently spatial dimension. This happens because the formation and transformation of political subjects and identities is possible thanks to spatial experiences and structures. In this sense, the construction and experience of a subaltern space, that power precipitates, and the formation of a subaltern subjectivity are linked to one another. Thus, the spatial construction of subalternised selves is to be carefully investigated, scrutinised, and challenged. A concern with a "subaltern territorialization of space – living it, knowing it, claiming it, and being restricted to it, with all the political failures that it entailed" (6), has therefore been central to investigating the spatial dynamics of subaltern subjectivation in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In more detail, the relevance of subaltern experiences of space and places for the making of the subaltern self is one main consequence of this theoretical approach.

12 For example, see Robinson 2003; Sharp 2011; 2013; Jazeel 2011; 2014; Sidaway 2000.

Different notions of 'subaltern space' have been identified with reference to the work of geographers: most importantly, it has been pointed out that

> in short, geographers treat subaltern space as both a delimited space of oppression and a liminal space of becoming and critical position on the margins. (Clayton 2011, 251)

The ambivalence between these two main attributes of subalternity – on the one hand being oppressed, on the other hand being able to engage in a critique –, albeit problematic and sometimes contradictory, is quite relevant and eventually an enabling one, as we shall see in more detail in the following sections. Moreover, an important ambivalence has been outlined, as to the fact that

> the subaltern can be located both outside (exterior to) and at the margins of (but still inside) a social and spatial formation, and, congruently, as both separate from, and an effect of, power. (247)

Consequently, the following paradox emerges in the form of a question,

> whether the aim to subaltern resistance and critique is to identify and protect the subaltern's exteriority or dissolve the subaltern's interior marginality. In other words, subaltern politics of knowledge are inextricably linked to how the subaltern is placed, ontologically, existentially and geographically. (247)

As we will see, the paradoxical ambivalence of being, as mentioned, "both separate from, and an effect of, power" (247), depending on how subaltern positionality is conceived of in the first place, can also be an enabling tool for the development of a politics of resistance that acts on the structures and means of oppression – however difficult it may be to determine such a politics.

Based on the above-mentioned elaborations on the notion of 'subaltern space' and its critiques, it is important that we consider the political implications of such an understanding of subaltern spatiality; for example, considering what it means that a subaltern identity claims space, and how a subaltern space is to be represented and transformed. To put it more clearly, it is important to wonder how a spatially informed understanding of the self as a subaltern constructed identity can help to challenge that very construction, and the oppressions it entails. To address this question, it is important that we linger more extensively on that of political space from a post-colonial perspective.

3 Post-Colonial Perspectives on Political Space

The spatial underpinning of post-colonial notions of subalternity also has to do with the fact that post-colonial critique and geography adopt the notion of subalternity to study spaces and processes of subjugation, and to address the colonial construction of spaces that are meant to be the environment, as well as the tools, for the oppression and annihilation of the colonised people: most notably, the space of the colony itself. This kind of analysis is fundamental to understand how the construction of colonial space is an essential feature in the construction of a fragile, subalternised identity.[13] For example, Achille Mbembe[14] discussed the spatial 'qualities' that characterise colonial territory and which are the objects of its control and governance (2001, 33). Through his reading of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), where the author described the urbanistic structures governing the colonial city of Algiers,[15] Mbembe argued that

> colonization is, above all, a labyrinth of forces at work. These forces are inscribed in the first place in a space they endeavor to map, cultivate, and order. (2001, 174)

Following Mbembe's argument, the spatial organisation of the colony aims at the most brutal economic exploitation of the territory and its resources, including the human beings that populate it, who "constituted the raw material, as it were, of government" (33). The ordering of the colonised territory is at work to dehumanise and annihilate the colonised people, according to "an imaginary of the native and

13 The notion of 'subalternisation', meant as the process of production of subalternity, has been defined as "the process through which the colonized peasantry is made into a subaltern figure" (Chattopadhyay 2012, 90-1). Subalternisation has also been defined as "the process by which minorities, ethnic groups and communities are rendered subalterns, mostly by acts of omission or commission by the postcolonial state" (Nayar 2018, 70). I insist here on a subalternised identity, as opposed to a subaltern one, to stress the production of subalternity.

14 In this article, we implicitly discuss Mbembe as a post-colonial thinker, although he rejected this label on the basis of several critiques he makes of post-colonial studies (Mbembe 2021, 126). If we analyse his thought as 'post-colonial', it is not to suggest that Mbembe belongs to the post-colonial studies he critiques, but rather to consider his own use of the term. In this article, we employ quite a broad understanding of 'post-colonial literature' that is not restricted to the authors who identify themselves as belonging to post-colonial studies, but that encompasses all those who think about issues of colonialism, its aftermaths, and decolonisation.

15 On the history of colonial urbanism as a feature of colonial administration and rule, a huge scholarship has been exploring the colonial and racial logics underpinning the structuring of urban space during colonial occupation. See for example: Njoh 2008; Çelik 1997. In more detail, Çelik discussed Algiers as "the colonial city par excellence" (1997, 1), like Mbembe, on the basis of its relevance in the work of Fanon.

a set of beliefs regarding his or her identity" (33) that precede and guide the domination over them. Regarding this last point, Mbembe explored those features in the space of the colony that play a role in the construction of the colonised human being as a fragile, exploitable, dehumanised subject, investigating the subjectivation of human bodies through spatial infrastructures. Not only in the colony, but in the African post-colony[16] as well, identity is often structured along questions of belonging and descent, making the condition of being bound to a specific location a fundamental feature in the constitution of identity and in the shaping of conflicts (86). Among the spatial features creating the conditions for the subjugation of the colonised people, Mbembe discussed the particular administration of borders and boundaries in the course of African history, making the case for different borderisation processes at different times. In particular, he showed how, in pre-colonial times, borders were not lines of demarcation separating distinct territories, insofar as "spaces of encounter, negotiation, and opportunity for Europeans and Africans" (2000, 265). It was only with colonial conquests that borders started to perform the function

> to mark the spatial limits that separated colonial possessions from one another, taking into account not ambitions but the actual occupation of the land. (265)

Contrary to the most common assumptions, though, post-colonial borders are not just the direct result of the colonial ones, but rather "devices of discipline and command, modeled on those of chiefdoms" (265).

Therefore, post-colonial borders often become internal to states, rather than only separating them externally, resulting in "the exacerbation of identification with particular localities" (Mbembe 2001, 87) and, consequently, of conflicts. Post-colonial borders, therefore, facilitate the association of identity to a particular place, thus making movement difficult and conflictual. According to Mbembe, the colonial regime introduces a new, distinct deployment of borders,

16 The 'post-colony' is a notion that Mbembe deployed to conceptualise the post-colonial African states and their ages (Mbembe 2001). Although widely associated with this author, the post-colony is not a notion that Mbembe himself invented, but one that he adopts from J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff (1999). The post-colony is introduced by Mbembe with the aim of problematising the very distinction between a before and an after of colonisation (Mbembe 2001, 15). Mbembe characterises the post-colony as a notion that "identifies a given historical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves" (102). Identifying "a distinct regime of violence" in the post-colony, Mbembe sees the post-colony as "a particularly revealing, and rather dramatic, stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline" (102-3).

making them uncrossable for the first time in Africa: a distinct process of borderisation transforms some spaces into uncrossable places for specific classes of people, so that, in the colonies, movement is actively slowed down. For this reason, the colony is a space for the entrapment of people, affecting their capacity to move, in fact denying it. Furthermore, boundary control practices reinforce a close association between the human body and identity, making the individual body itself a boundary to be controlled, a source and repository of quantifiable information and data to be extracted (Grossi, Lepratti 2021). On the one hand, through the act of colonisation the colonised is entrapped and made unable to move; on the other, the subjectivation of the coloniser is quite limitless. In order to experience their absoluteness and absence of limits, the coloniser needs to continually create and destroy what they tame: hence, the violence that characterises colonial government (Mbembe 2001, 189). Mbembe highlights how the space of the colony is institutionalised as a space for violence, where violence is configured as a spatialised presence:

> the colony is primarily a place where an experience of violence and upheaval is lived, where violence is built into structures and institutions. (174)

Colonial violence, lived in the space of the colony through its institutions, entails a relationship of spatial contiguity among the human bodies that inhabit it, physical contact being

> that direct character necessary for the colonial regime to open itself out, to have physical contact with its subjects, to maintain with them a bond of subjection. Thus, there is no violence in a colony without a sense of contiguity, without bodies close to one another. (175)

The violence based on bodily contact makes the colony a space saturated with contiguity, from which it is impossible to move or escape. Yet, bodily contiguity marks the space of the colony at the same time that this space is segregated according to a racial logic, which strictly divides blacks from whites. The notion of a spatially organised colonial segregation was first set out by Fanon, who, as mentioned, is a key source for Mbembe in this regard. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon analysed the spatial segregation taking place in the Algerian colony, notably describing it as ruled by a Manichean logic. The Manichean logic divides blacks from whites, which is to say, the colonised from the colonisers and the poor from the riches, where the first item in the couple is identified with evil, irrationality, wilderness, and backwardness, while the second one is identified with the positive pole, its attributes being goodness, rationality, civilisa-

tion, and modernity.[17] Specifically, Fanon (1961) describes the Manichean logic taking place in the colonial city of Algiers, a city drastically divided into two parts where no exchange is possible.[18] The racial segregation organising the colonial city of Algiers outlined by Fanon has also been discussed by subsequent historiographic scholarship, arguing that

> separation plays an important part in defining otherness and allows for a critical distance needed for surveillance. Racial, cultural, and historical otherness constituted the main paradigm that dominated all building activity in Algiers during the French occupation, and spatial separation in the most concrete sense reinforced the difference. (Çelik 1997, 5)

In more general terms, Mbembe expanded on the notion of a Manichean spatial logic, elaborated by Fanon in the case of Algiers, arguing that Manichean segregation creates a space of terror in the African colony (Mbembe 2001, 81), where the colony produces the annihilation of the body and the mind of the colonised: racial segregation is an essential feature in the implementation of a regime of terror and violence, as the Manichean colonial space is a space of terror.

The racial divisions enacted in and through the physical space of the colony are also discussed by Paul Gilroy, who described the colony as a special, unique space where no citizenship – meant as the universal attribution of rights – is possible, insofar as racial divisions rule. The colonial project produces a new, distinct type of geopolitical space, filled with new racialised characters (Gilroy 2004, 53), as opposed to citizens. Therefore, according to Gilroy, the colonial configuration of space is not a political issue, in the sense that, in fact, it marks a suspension of political relations, substituted by technologies and procedures that are, rather, para-political. Interestingly,

17 Historiographic scholarship highlighted different strategies of segregation, according to the distinct ideology and needs of the colonising country. For instance, Njoh explored in depth the different approaches to colonial urban planning that characterised respectively the French and the British occupation of sub-Saharan Africa in the nineteenth century: while the former enacted a type of cultural segregation that, in fact, reproduced a *de facto* racial segregation, the latter implemented an explicitly racial type of segregation. As Njoh argues, the result was, however, the same: "Despite the diametrically opposed spatial development strategies of the two colonial powers, colonial cities throughout Africa were equally segregated along racial lines" (2008, 598).

18 The notion of a Manichean logic that rules colonial relations is also discussed by JanMohamed (1985). According to JanMohamed, colonial ideology is characterised by a fundamental Manichean allegory responsible for the dichotomisation and, therefore, the opposition of races. JanMohamed explores the epistemic consequences of this, focusing his analysis on the textual aspects of colonialism and its literature. The author argues that colonial literature is basically speculative, in the sense that it makes the native into a mirror in which the coloniser can look at their own image thanks to a Manichean allegory.

such distinction between the political and the para- or pre-political is contested by Judith Butler, as something that unwillingly ratifies power and its claim to be the only source for the definition of the political – keeping in mind that Butler's reflections on political space do not concern colonialism. On the contrary, according to her, social movements and assemblages would question the very determination of a particular space as political, insofar as this determination is set by power, and politicise it anew by way of making appearance into that space (Butler 2015, 205-6).

A second outstanding example of an analysis of space, in which space is analysed both as an essential tool for oppression and racialisation, and a means for resistance, is to be found in bell hooks' discussion of the margin. It should be noted that hooks does not adopt the notion of subalternity in her reflections on the margin; yet, a proximity between feminist notions of subalternity and marginality can be productively identified and explored, as done by Mascat (2012).

In the context of racial segregation in the US South in the second half of the twentieth century, the black feminist theorist and activist hooks described the racial segregation she was subjected to in the town where she was born in 1953, in Kentucky (hooks 1989). hooks describes the urban racial segregation she and the black community she belonged to faced daily, stressing how urban racial segregation compelled the black people to daily cross the margin separating black spaces from white spaces in the city, a margin that physically took place in the suburban railroad tracks. Black people had to cross this margin to go to work as service workers in white neighbourhoods, and afterwards they had to return to the ghettos where they lived, as they could not stay in white neighbourhoods except for work. hooks emphasises how this particular crossing of the railroads was a daily experience that only black people had. Although facing marginality on a daily basis was a painful and humiliating experience, hooks also contends that to be put in the margin paradoxically provided blacks with an epistemic vantage point: whereas the whites living in the centre of urban space only know that centre, the marginalised blacks know both the margin and the centre, by way of crossing that margin itself. Therefore, their vision of reality is a more inclusive and complete one, comprehending both the spatiality of the dominants and the spatiality of the dominated. By way of acknowledging the fact that they are an integral part of a whole, in fact an essential one, marginalised people are offered

> an oppositional world-view – a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (hooks 1989, 20)

In this case, the self-understanding of being marginal provides the marginalised with a mode of seeing and knowing that is totally theirs. Moreover, this special epistemic point of view allows the marginalised community to develop a strong sense of the self and solidarity. It is important to note that the ambiguity that Clayton identifies in the geographic notion of subalternity recalled in the previous section (subalternity being both exterior to and inside a social and spatial formation, both separate from, and an effect of power) is to be found in hooks' notion of the margin: while the margin takes place inside a certain socio-spatial formation, it also maintains a critical exteriority from it, one that allows the marginalised an oppositional world-view, a distinct mode of seeing and knowing. Moreover, the dichotomous question that Clayton poses as a consequence of this ambiguity, namely "whether the aim to subaltern resistance and critique is to identify and protect the subaltern's exteriority or dissolve the subaltern's interior marginality" (2011, 247) leaves no room for a third option, which is in fact elaborated by hooks, namely to transform the experience of marginality so that it is not defined by the centre, nor does it indicate the move towards the centre as a move to escape oppression. The connection of space to subjectivation is explored by hooks in a way that stresses the potentiality of the dispossessed to occupy their own place and elaborate a whole new knowledge of it, one that contributes to the creation of a distinct and empowering "sense of self", that does not depend on the white elaboration of black identity as inferior.

As her autobiographical narration goes on, after leaving the space of painful marginality, segregation, and poverty where she was born, hooks went to university in California only to discover that her marginalisation was far from over in a place where, on the contrary, black people had the right to access and live. In fact, once she reached university, she found out that she was only allowed to speak of her marginality as a site of dispossession and pain, so that the hegemonic discourse of "radical critical thinkers" would appropriate her story and retell it to her, only with an authorising voice (1989, 22). For this reason, hooks argues that she was silenced into the centre, not into the margins. Interestingly, hooks' narration of being silenced into the centre by radical intellectuals, who would only listen to a story of oppression to retell it with an authorising voice, is close to Spivak's analysis of the subaltern who is silenced and ventriloquised by Western left-wing intellectuals. Based on her own experience of marginalisation, hooks engages in a process of re-signifying the very concept of margin, reclaiming the margin as "a site of radical openness", where the capacity for resistance can be nurtured, as opposed to the margin as a mere site of subjugation. Her experience of the margin meant that hooks wanted to speak about the margin and from the margin as a space of resistance, not a space of oppression. From this point of view, hooks qualified the margin not as

> a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center – but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (1989, 20)

The margin is described as a place where hooks could develop an inclusive view of reality, a place where she could find care and a strong sense of community. hooks here gives a new meaning to the concept of margin, from a space of dispossession (which the margin continues to be: hooks clearly explains that hers is not an attempt to romanticise the margin) to a space of radical openness and resistance: "that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor, is located in the margins" (21).

Through the autobiographical narration of her experiences of being enclosed into the space of the margin at different stages in her life, hooks takes a radical stance and chooses to defy the definition and narration of the margin told by power – power being that which structures the relation of centre-margin in the first place. Rather than accepting the construction and definition of the margin as a space of oppression, domination, and alienation, from where it is only desirable to escape to go into the centre, hooks argues that it is possible, and desirable, to keep a sense of marginality even while in the centre. Because the centre is a space in which she has been silenced, maintaining a sense of marginality while in the centre allows hooks to speak her voice and articulate a different experience of margin and centre altogether. On this basis, hooks redefines the margin as a space of resistance and struggle: a space of radical openness from where to see and know power relations in a way that power, locating itself only in the centre, cannot see, and where to develop a strong sense of resistance and care. hooks argues that it is necessary that people who want to resist power "identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" (1989, 15), finding a voice for themselves that is not already spoken by those in power. As hooks put it, rather than seeing it only as the position of subjugation, a location to be ashamed of, "understanding marginality as a position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people" (21).

hooks' theorisation of the margin as a space that can be turned into the space of resistance, rather than a mere condition one is bound to want to transcend, is thus a reflection on how it is possible to act on the structures that facilitate subalternisation and colonisation in order to challenge them, to act on the spaces in which one is trapped in order to elaborate new images of oneself and nurture one's capacity to resist, to build new worlds, rather than enter an unequal one. hooks therefore theorises the possibility of acknowledging how one's identity and positionality have been constructed

and determined by power, and act on them in a way that power does not foresee. With this critical operation, the possibility to elaborate a whole new knowledge and meaning of one's own place is positively affirmed as a means of resistance.

4 White Entrapment and the Decolonisation of Space

As we saw in the previous section, Mbembe identifies entrapment as a distinctive quality of the spatiality of the colony. Furthermore, the author also discusses entrapment as something that characterises "the white version of history", meant as that particular construction and narration of history, produced by white supremacy, according to which "to be black is a liability" (2015, 2). Insofar as the 'white myth'[19] of black liability makes us think that it has no outside and takes place everywhere, it is an entrapment in which we are caught (3). Such entrapment into white mythology did not stop with the end of formal colonial domination, as it were, in fact continuing nowadays most utterly through narrations of white superiority, racial structures, and symbols, as well as through the exploitation of racialised labour. In a similar way, Sara Ahmed discusses whiteness in relation to space in phenomenological terms, as not

> an ontological given, but as that which has been received, or become given, over time. Whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space. (2007, 150)

What the two descriptions of whiteness share is a sense of the historicity of whiteness, understood as a particular construction and experience of history, built at the expense and to the exclusion of those who are labelled as "non-white". Whiteness is not an essential quality attributed to someone based on phenotypic features, but rather a historical product with strong material effects: the historical construction of whiteness as superiority has relevant material implications, affecting, as it does, human lives and their very survival, and determining privilege. Moreover, both authors stress the spatial character of the white construction of history: Mbembe describes white

19 The notion of 'white mythology' is also adopted by the post-colonial critic Robert Young in his *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990). In the course of an in-depth analysis of Western history and the challenges post-colonialism poses to it, Young discusses history as a white mythology, by way of acknowledging Lévi-Strauss' notion that history is the myth of the modern man, rather than a privileged form of knowledge. Young also recalls Césaire's statement that "the only history is white", and Derrida's notion that "metaphysics is a white mythology" (Young 1990, 45).

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mythology as an entrapment and an enclosure, while Ahmed is specifically interested in the white capture of space and the world that racial privilege allows. Through a phenomenological analysis, Ahmed explains "how whiteness becomes worldly as an effect of reification" (2007, 150), namely how whiteness constructs a sense of inhabiting the world and being oriented in it as a habit that is the effect of whiteness' own naturalisation, to the exclusion of the "non-whites".

While presenting white mythology in somehow bleak tones, describing it as an entrapment, Mbembe also positively supports the possibility of putting white mythology to rest and escaping its trap, to "open a future for all here and now" (2015, 4). As the white version of history is constructed as a myth, the question is one of demythologising the white version of history in present times: "The demythologizing of certain versions of history must go hand in hand with the demythologizing of whiteness" (3).

Moreover, demythologisation is a question of decolonisation. Mbembe discusses decolonisation lamenting the dilution and weakening of the concept that followed its adaptation and large usage by many "jurists, historians and international political economists", as "the concept has lost some of the incendiary tenor and quasi-mystic exaltation that marked its many trajectories" (2021, 43) in the anticolonial struggles for liberation in the second half of the twentieth century, when the term was first adopted. On the basis of this first use of the term that Mbembe intends to renew to resist its later dilution, he recalls decolonisation as a "full political, polemical, and cultural category" that makes it akin to the notion of 'revolution' (43). The author defines decolonisation as

> a struggle by the colonized to reconquer the surface, horizons, depths, and heights of their lives. Through this struggle [...] the structures of colonization were to be dismantled, new relations between the sacred and the mundane, between the subject and the world instituted, and the possible rehabilitated. Understood from this point of view, the concept of decolonization was a shortcut for departitioning the world and bringing together its scattered fragments and isolated parts. It also referred to the difficult reconstitution of the subject, the disenclosure of the world, and humanity's universal ascent to a 'higher life'. (44)

This lengthy quotation suggests that decolonisation is predominantly a matter of reinvention, necessarily entailing a total reconfiguration of space and the subject, where the linkage between the two could not be tighter. As the spatial metaphors of reconquering the "surface, horizons, depths, and heights" of colonised lives suggest, the rehabilitation of the colonised self is also a question of rearranging their space altogether, so as to reconstitute the relation of the subject to

the world, by way of reuniting the world that was set apart by colonial domination and rehabilitating a subject that has been dehumanised. The space of the world, in Mbembe's view, is what the colonised have been deprived of, since they have been entrapped in one physical place, dehumanised, exploited, annihilated; with that, they have also been deprived of a relationship with the world. This is why, according to Mbembe, "the principal stake of decolonial thought was the disenclosure of the world" (61).[20]

As the above-mentioned text goes on, bringing together the "scattered fragments and isolated parts of the world" in an act of entanglement and disenclosure becomes part and parcel to the "difficult reconstitution of the subject", which needs to rehabilitate itself after being annihilated and racialised under colonial rule and deprived of its relationship with the world. It is important to notice that the reinvention of space is a foundational purpose of decolonisation, one that is connected to the reinvention of the human self. According to Mbembe, the reinvention of space is to be understood in terms of dismantling the colonial partition and structures, in a gesture of entangling previously scattered fragments to recompose a unity of the world. Regarding the imperative to reinvent space and its features, so that the world may be a place inhabitable by all, which is tantamount to decolonising the world, Mbembe's argument can be put in proximity to hooks' theorisation of the opportunity of critically reinventing the meaning of the margin, to understand it as a site for struggle and liberation of the racialised self. In one sense, both authors share a concern for reinventing space conceptually as well as physically, dismantling the ways space used to be structured under colonial rule as a fundamental issue for decolonisation and liberation, and an essential part in the reinvention of the colonised self.

Specifically, Mbembe qualifies decolonisation as a de-privatisation and rehabilitation of public space, that democratises access to public spaces, most notably universities (2015, 5). Decolonisation is, therefore, a process of rehabilitation and democratisation of those public spaces that, under colonial rule, were firmly enclosed and turned into the stage for colonial violence and brutality, and that in post-colonial times continue to be a site of privilege, the access to which is unequally distributed and the experience of which continues to be affected by racism. In one sense, the access to public space and the access to privilege go hand in hand. The process of democratisation

20 Mbembe draws the notion of 'disenclosure' from the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. Mbembe defines disenclosure as "synonymous with opening, a surging up, the advent of something new, a blossoming. To disenclose is thus to lift closures in such a way that what had been closed in can emerge and blossom" (2021, 61). Mbembe goes on to argue that disenclosure is "at the heart of anticolonial thought and the notion of decolonization […] even […] decolonization's fundamental object" (61-2).

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of public spaces, according to Mbembe, explicitly requires a whole rearrangement of colonial spatial relations, with particular reference to those that have been analysed by Fanon in terms of Manicheism (Mbembe 2015, 5). Mbembe recalls Fanon's own connotation of decolonisation as a question of self-ownership, where the colonised resolves to reappropriate oneself in a gesture of liberation. In Fanon's terms, to politicise the masses during the struggle for decolonisation is "to invent the souls of men [*sic*]" (1961, 138), an expression that Fanon quotes from his teacher, Aimé Césaire. The reappropriation of oneself under decolonisation takes place through a "dialectic of time, life, and creation" that does not tinker with margins, but rather reshapes forms and matter (Mbembe 2015, 12-13). Starting from this Fanonian connotation of decolonisation as the reinvention of human souls, Mbembe thinks of decolonisation as a politics of difference, as opposed to a politics of imitation and repetition, as difference is a question of invention (2015, 13; 2021, 54). While colonisation forces the natives to repetition, by way of depriving them of time and timing, on the other hand decolonisation means recreating time as difference, thus opening the very possibility of future for the natives, not as a gift of civilisation, but rather as "the possibility to reconstitute the human after humanism's complicity with colonial racism" and "the emergence of the not-yet" (2015, 14). To introduce a new timing as difference and futurity also complicates the linearity of modernity, and questions the possibility, as well as the usefulness, of distinguishing strictly a before and an after of colonisation. The reinvention of the self, in Mbembe's thought, goes hand in hand with the reinvention of time and space, the former being configured as a question of difference and futurity, the latter as a question of opening and disenclosing the world.

In short, the authors mentioned here discuss decolonisation as fundamentally a question of rearrangement and creation, an act of repairing and uniting what was divided under colonial rule in Mbembe's terms. Importantly, such processes of creative rearrangement involve reshaping time and space, as a fundamental part of reshaping subjects. On the one hand, hooks emphasises the strategical importance of reworking the relationship between the margin and the centre, not by way of following the path from the former to the latter – thus leaving intact and accepting their asymmetrical structure, and ending up being silenced and marginalised once more – but rather, fighting marginalisation means to re-qualify the margin, making it the space where one can develop one's own way of seeing and knowing reality, where one can develop another sense of self and nurture resistance. On the other hand, Mbembe qualifies decolonisation as a question of rearranging altogether the spatial and temporal dimensions of colonial rule, so as to make the world truly shared and accessible to all, by way of disenclosing and entangling its scattered parts.

Similarly, Ahmed investigates whiteness as a distinct orientation in space, where privilege is configured as the faculty to access space, inhabit it and naturalise this habit(at). Moreover, the rearrangement of spatial relations is specified by these authors as a question of democratising the access to public spaces.

5 Decolonising Statues

The argumentation just reconstructed relates to Mbembe's comment on the removal of the statue of Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which we mentioned in the first section of this article. Mbembe discusses this event as a question of demythologising whiteness and the white version of history, arguing that, although that singular act of removal does not erase history, it offers one possible way to put that history to rest and open up new possibilities in new, decolonised, spaces (2015, 3), where the access to knowledge is not informed according to racial lines. In Mbembe's view, one possible way to put white mythology to rest is to rework the spatiality of its symbols, most notably statues. Commenting positively on the toppling down of the statue of Rhodes at UCT, Mbembe encourages the removal of statues representing and celebrating colonial men, such as Cecil Rhodes, from their location in public spaces. He also suggests that they should be confined into newly created distinct places, while on the other hand, work is being done on new public spaces, inhabitable by all, that allow for the formation of truly democratic projects. From this perspective, colonial statues are to be removed from their positions and put to rest in new locales that would be new institutions, "partly a park and partly a graveyard" (4). As the statues representing colonisers are put to rest, the possibility emerges "to move on and recreate the kind of new public spaces required by our new democratic project" (4).

A public and democratic space cannot be home to a symbol of oppression and exclusion, however belonging to a formally concluded past, as this symbol not only constantly reminds the formerly colonised of a history of subalternity that, among other things, laid the foundation for public institutions from which they have so far been excluded, and into which they were only recently, yet contradictorily and restrictively, accepted in; it also suggests that there is nothing particularly wrong in commemorating this history and having it there.

Statues and monuments represent something that comes from a past that still asserts itself in the present: hence, they create a connection between the past they belonged to and the present in which they still have, literally, a place. In this sense, statues are both symbols and material space-markers, constituting a traffic between the material and the symbolic that makes them meaningful. As complex

imbrications of symbols and materiality, statues are material references of space, affecting people's orientation in space and how they experience it. Moreover, in order to be meaningful, statues need people to remember their stories. This is why responses to statues are important: people intervening on a statue, either to preserve it, or to topple it down, or claiming for the building of a new one, respond to the meaning of monuments and intervene in the construction and alteration of their spatial and social meaning. Statues are participants in a social discourse embedded in space. For this reason, the power to decide over their building and removal is a power to determine social meaning and to mark the space with that meaning, deciding what should be represented and where it should be celebrated, and what not.[21] Since the construction of a statue is a means to occupy space at the expense of others, it reveals that public space is deeply unequal, the power to build symbols on it being unequally distributed (Rao 2016). For this reason, popular movements made claims to the building of new statues to represent the oppressed and do justice to overlooked histories of subalternity and resistance, for example claiming that "the ideology of white supremacy not only venerates oppressors – it also erases the stories and sacrifices of those who dared to resist".[22]

Thus, obscuring their legacy. These interventions importantly concern the question of representing the subaltern, introduced above. As we saw in the first section of this article, the subaltern was defined by the Subaltern Studies collective as that which escapes official representation and archives but is nonetheless, at least in part, retrievable by reading the archives against the grain. This possibility was further problematised by Spivak (1988), who shed a light on the subaltern impossibility to speak, her voice being already embedded in a discourse that structurally erases it, eventually ventriloquising it. Considering this problem, it is possible to wonder if there is a signifier that can do justice to the subaltern at all, and how is the subaltern to be represented in space and be made meaningful. We will return to this problem later in this section.

As we saw in relation to the notion of decolonisation as "disenclosure of the world" in Mbembe's terms, the decolonisation and democratisation of public space is based on an understanding of it as

21 For example, the recent decision by the state of Congo to erect a huge memorial tomb to the colonial hero Brazza reveals a post-colonial nation-building from above that is in strong continuity with the colonial past (Bernault 2010), to which activism on colonial statues respond.

22 https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/8/16/16156540/confederate-statues-charlottesville-virginia. This article argues for the need to have statues representing racialised people who fought for the abolition and resisted slavery in the United States.

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a common good owned by everyone (Mbembe 2015, 5). Mbembe argues that the right to belong to public space allows the development of an expansive sense of citizenship, as well as "a logic of self-affirmation, interruption, and occupation" (6) for black people, as opposed to the feeling of being excluded from a space that, however formally public, is not meant to be theirs, especially if marked by a symbol of their oppression. As Ahmed argues, a white-oriented space is not easily inhabitable and occupiable by the non-white.

In more detail, the reconfiguration of space in universities is discussed by many as a question of democratising and decolonising the access to knowledge. Mbembe argues that the rearrangement of spatial relations in universities leads to a new construction of the right to belong to university and, therefore, to participate to knowledge. Following the author, the right to belong to educational space, when distributed among all, is not akin to charity, hospitality, tolerance, or assimilation of those who have been excluded so far, but rather to a relation of share, where knowledge is equally redistributed rather than being made the property of someone. The right to belong to public space in the case of universities therefore entails the development of new "pedagogies of presence", meant as

> a set of creative practices that ultimately make it impossible for official structures to ignore them [black students and staff in universities] and not recognize them, to pretend that they are not there. (6)

Through the development of "pedagogies of presence", the decolonisation of university is part and parcel with the decolonisation of knowledge and pedagogy: Mbembe suggests reinventing a "class without walls", as a space where teacher and student are "co-learners" and various publics converge in new forms of assemblies, from where to redistribute knowledge (6).[23] Mbembe claims that the aim of higher education is the equitable redistribution of the capacity of inquiry (8). In the words of cultural theorist Iain Chambers,

> Contestare una tale situazione non significa suggerire una semplice revoca, ma piuttosto considerare la ridistribuzione delle risorse e della conoscenza in una maniera che supera la loro riproduzione dell'assetto attuale. (2020, 49)[24]

23 For an example of the reinvention of an African university as a space where to decolonise knowledge and rethink of Africa altogether, see Sharp's discussion of Dar es Salaam University and the role of Tanzania's president Nyerere in it, in Jazeel, Legg 2019.

24 "To challenge such a situation is not to suggest a simple withdrawal, but rather to consider redistributing resources and knowledge in a manner that overcomes their reproduction of the existing status quo" (English transl. by the Author).

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The redistribution of knowledge should not reproduce the present condition but rather create a new one.

As we saw in the previous section, Ahmed discusses the habits of those who inhabit and inherit a certain space as that which gives shape to that space: as she puts it, "spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them" (2007, 156), as well as their "skin" (157). Habit structures the qualities of a given space, determining the access to that space and the capacity to act of those who come to inhabit it. For this reason, a space that has been inhabited and ruled by people defining themselves as white, in opposition to those who "fail to do so [becoming white]" (157), is a white space, whiteness being its habit. This is what happens in white universities, where the capacity to act and take habits of black and racialised people is severely affected by a habit of whiteness that shapes that space to their exclusion. On this basis, Ahmed discusses the institutions as spaces that "are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces" (157).

Ahmed discusses universities as institutional spaces that are made white, thanks to the gathering of white people around them, assuming a shape that is white in tone, where racialised people are seen as exceptional, and made to follow the line of whiteness in order to participate to that space (157-8). Ahmed's discussion of the institutional spaces of education, as oriented according to racial lines that thicken around whiteness, normalising it, and consequently making black people want to move to whiteness, reminds us of hooks' narration of being marginalised into a white university, and her subsequent invocation of

> ways [...] of making culture towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible. (hooks 1989, 15)

Whereas the access to knowledge is not unlimited, hooks characterises this rearrangement of space, that makes her choose the margin as a space of radical openness, and defy the definition of margin that is set from the point of view of power, in terms of giving "unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing". It is no accident that hooks' autobiographical narration of her own marginalization takes place in an university: it was here that she had her voice coopted by "radical critical thinkers" who made her into "the Other", whose story was them to be told, thus depriving her of her own voice as a passive victim (hooks 1989, 22). The experience of marginalization at university is therefore fundamental in hooks' conceptualization of the margin as a space of radical openness, that we recalled above. hooks' reflection on the margin is thus strictly linked to the question of the accessibility of knowledge and education, as the

margin is made into a space where to share knowledge on an equal basis so that the "pleasure and power of knowing" is accessible to all. The decolonising intervention in universities is a radical opposition, that necessarily acts at the same time on pedagogy and the curricula, as well as on the spatial structures and power relations that shape the place of education.[25] This is why, according to Mbembe and many other activists, to act on the statue of a white coloniser standing into the campus of the University of Cape Town is no minor issue to the democratisation of South African public culture and education. As the activists of the "Abolish the Racist Seal" movement in University of New Mexico had it,

> symbolic violence translates into material violence, reinforcing an atmosphere that can make Native students feel unsafe and isolated in their homelands.[26]

This is why the sixth of a list of 11 demands that native students at the University of New Mexico submitted to university authorities calls for "the abolition of racist imagery and cultural appropriation"[27] from their university, whose official seal represents in celebratory tones the subjugation of the natives during colonial conquest in the region of New Mexico.

25 An exhaustive account of the current debates on the decolonisation of education and curricula exceeds the scope of this article. However, it should be mentioned that Mbembe links his discussion of the decolonisation of educational space to the project of decolonising and democratising education itself. The author argues that the decolonisation of universities and education also affects the languages of knowledge and learning. Regarding the latter, Mbembe argues that the decolonisation of African university also entails making its education a multilingual one, while colonialism is closely associated with monolingualism and the imposition of one authoritative language of knowledge and learning, namely the colonisers' language (see also Chow 2014). Moreover, Mbembe claims that decolonising African university and education in this way requires a geographical imaginary that goes beyond the limits of the nation-states, as well as those of the African continent itself (2015, 18), so that colonial boundaries do not affect human relations of share. Such a rearrangement of space and knowledge that decolonisation requires is also connected to rethinking the human subject, which can now be redefined by Mbembe as a subject who shares agency with others, human and non-human. Mbembe suggests that the Anthropocene forces us to rethink the human in light of its finitude and the possibility of its biological extinction, as opposed to its power to control and dominate nature. This is why the author also introduces a re-reading of the notion of 'agency', not as an exclusive attribute of animated beings (whether human or not), but also a property of matter, insofar as a morphogenic capacity of matter is to be acknowledged. On this basis, Mbembe defines democracy to come as "humankind ruling in common for a common which includes the non-human" (29): a whole rearrangement of spatial relations and of the subject underlies this democratic, decolonial project.

26 https://hyperallergic.com/322003/native-american-students-fight-to-remove-colonial-imagery-from-university-of-new-mexico/.

27 https://hyperallergic.com/322003/native-american-students-fight-to-remove-colonial-imagery-from-university-of-new-mexico.

Based on this argumentation and examples, a whole rethinking of the spatial politics of decolonisation is required to make decolonisation and democratisation possible. As it were, "critical engagements with colonialism and its afterlives are always already spatial" (Jazeel, Legg 2019, 3). In one sense, decolonisation requires a whole rearrangement of space and knowledge, as the spatial structures and power relations that affect the distribution and composition of knowledge need intervention.

As is well known, a huge debate has been going on about the issue of removing statues, with many critics questioning the urgency, even the usefulness of concentrating on statues and symbols as an essential part of liberation struggles, arguing that acting on a symbol is not in itself liberating, while priority should be given to more concrete and material issues, such as granting minorities more scholarships and welfare provisions in universities; when not contesting that statues should not be touched at all, as historical monuments having in history their justification to stand.[28] On the other hand, it has been argued that "statues are never merely symbolic, which is also to say that there is nothing mere about symbolism" (Rao 2016, 3). Symbols are understood to be always already material, concretely affecting matter and the materiality of power in everyday life. In other words, symbols do matter, and it is therefore mandatory to acknowledge and act on the material consequences of the symbolic, that affect the materiality of space, and the construction of identities, including of course subaltern identities. Discussing different cases of statue-building, as well as movements against statues in post-colonial situations, Rahul Rao sheds light on the power relations and asymmetries that always concern these statues and monuments, identifying the question of statues as a question of domination over the public sphere. Rao explicitly asks:

> given a context of centuries of oppression and radically unequal contemporary power relations, who needs statues and who does not? Who occupies space to the exclusion of whom? (2016, 4)

as the most urgent questions in addressing such issues. When discussing the Dalit will to build statues of Ambedkar, that in recent years have been multiplying in India, Rao interprets it as "a defiant reclamation of hitherto denied space" (4): following Rao's interpretation, a statue to Ambedkar carrying a copy of the Indian Constitution under his arm, that he contributed to write, is a symbol of Dalit's rights and inclusion in the post-colonial Indian state: therefore, it is not a minor or merely symbolic issue for the Dalit minorities, but rath-

28 See for instance: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31983634.

er a way of claiming and occupying the space from where they have been excluded so far, affirming their presence and their right to belong to it in non-casteist terms.

Rather than just being a neutral adornment in a public sphere that is equally shared, nor a minor detail in the contexts of movements fighting for more essential and truly material needs, statues, according to Rao, can contribute to forge a "subaltern counterpublics" (5) that is needed to respond to unequal power relations. The notion of a "subaltern counterpublics" is one that Rao draws from Nancy Fraser's notion of the creation of a counter-power at the convergence of class struggle and boundary struggles (Fraser, Jaeggi 2018, 69), in the view that "confronting power requires counter-power, and counter-power requires organization" (181). If the public sphere has been created to exclude some along racial and colonial lines, so that, as Ahmed puts it, public space has been made white, then the creation of a counter-public is needed, to occupy and invest that space with new meanings and a new presence: for this reason, acting on the spatial structures and symbols governing subaltern space is no minor issue to decolonisation.

These arguments can be allied to the reflections of Judith Butler on public space in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). Butler's analyses the notion of 'appearance' into public space: the philosopher discusses the collective appearance in mass manifestations of those heterogeneous lives that have been made unlivable, "those who experience their existence as imperiled" (95). Butler interprets this appearance as a plural and performative action,[29] where different, heterogeneous bodies cohere and ally, exerting a common right to political space and belonging. In more detail,

> the specific thesis of this book is that acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political. (9)

Her analysis also involves calling into question of those "reigning notions of the political" that concern political space. Butler identifies specific, implicit spatial regulations, that determine who can appear into public space and who cannot, who is part of "the people" and who is not. In her words,

29 Here Butler uses the notion of 'performativity' in analysing how embodied actions signify: she explores the performativity of the coming together of bodies and their actions, as they signify in a non-discursive manner. Butler argues that "the political meanings enacted by demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse" (2015, 8), as public gatherings signify in excess of discourse. Therefore, "the gathering signifies in excess of what is said, and that mode of signification is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity" (8).

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> the spatial organization of power [...] includes the allocation and restriction of spatial locations in which and by which any population may appear. [...] This view of the spatial restriction and allocation of who may appear – in effect, of who may become a subject of appearance – suggests an operation of power that works through both foreclosure and differential allocation. (86)

Therefore, power has a distinct spatial organisation that affects which bodies have the right to appear in public, by way of allocation and restriction. The notions of 'allocation' and 'restriction' as spatial operations of power are very close to Mbembe's discussion of the spatial qualities of the colony and the post-colony, as he identifies the entrapment of bodies into distinct locations as a feature of the colonial administration of space, for example thanks to a specific deployment of borders. Given the implicit "spatial organization of power" that operates through allocation and restriction, according to Butler the conflicting appearance into public space of bodies that are not supposed to do so is itself a political act of contestation of the spatial organisation of power. Moreover, the plural gathering of bodies in assemblies is already a means to realise public space, in that the alliance between bodies reclaiming the right to appear already constitutes a political gathering with a distinct performative dimension, one that speaks the right to appear in excess of, and previous to, discourse. In that, the bodies coming together create the very space of their coalition, at the same moment when they claim the right to appear politically. When bodies gather and act together in public spaces, they put into being the spaces and conditions of their appearance and, in doing so, they act politically, thus creating a new political subject. This collective appearance is therefore a morphogenic moment, in that it creates a new political body that was not there before.[30] Following Butler's analysis, mass manifestations in

30 Activist Bree Newsome, who in April 2015 removed the confederate flag from the statehouse of South Carolina, stated that: "The image of me holding the unhooked flag went viral, and my name appeared in news stories across the world, but I was actually one of several activists and organizers who worked together to make the flag removal possible. Five days before the action, we huddled in a small living room. Half of us in the room had never met the other half before that evening and were brought together by a mutual friend. A small collective of people from various backgrounds and walks of life, we were multiracial with different gender and sexual identities, different faiths and varying political beliefs. What united us was a moral calling and a commitment to doing the right thing, recognizing the power we had as individuals coming together to act as one. With awareness of history and belief in a better future, we decided to attack a symbol of systemic racism with a direct action that symbolized its dismantling. We almost immediately settled on removing the flag, both as an act of civil disobedience and as a demonstration of the power people have when we work together" (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/go-ahead-topple-the-monuments-to-the-confederacy-all-of-them/2017/08/18/6b54c658-8427-11e7-ab27-1a21a8e-

the streets and squares claim the public sphere and, in so doing, performatively produce it, by way of occupying and reconfiguring its environment. While collective actions in public spaces rest on already available supports, they also attempt to elaborate anew their function and, in so doing, reshape the space of politics.

Although Butler's reflections on this issue do not refer to activism on statues, as the author rather focuses on other examples of mass manifestations, such as the occupation of squares during the so-called 'Arab uprisings' or the Occupy movement in the US, it is possible to make them resonate with the reflections on the decolonisation of space and statues that we have reconstructed above.

While commenting on Arendt's notion of political space, Butler discusses the role of infrastructures for the possibility of appearance into public space: sometimes, the demands advanced during manifestations are those for platforms and infrastructures that would allow the appearance itself, for example when public goods face privatisation: "at such a point, the condition of the political is one of the goods for which political assembly takes place" (2015, 127).

In fact, the possibility to appear in political space

> depends upon the performative efficacy of creating a political space from existing infrastructural conditions [...] the space of appearance is never fully separable from questions of infrastructure and architecture [...] they not only condition the action, but take part in the making of the space of politics. (127)

In this sense, "the task is actually to let the infrastructure become part of the new action, even a collaborative actor" (127).

The collective appearance of bodies in public spaces is a struggle for the material conditions that make the political appearance of the bodies possible in the first place: a struggle for space to be the support of a political manifestation and appearance, that transforms preexisting infrastructures into a new actor, and a support for the new political subject to appear. From this perspective, it is possible to interpret the collective action performed over public statues precisely as a struggle over the spatial means of politics: an intervention to decolonise political space and make it accessible to the subaltern who occupies it. While statues are not, strictly speaking, infrastructures, they do affect public space and its livability, marking the access to public space and the belonging to it, as well as creating social meanings that are experienced in space, as we discussed above.

006ab_story.html). This account seems to give another empirical evidence to Butler's argumentation that the gathering together of previously unconnected lives can create a new political subject.

On this basis, the intervention on public statues during mass manifestations can be interpreted in terms of creating the infrastructural conditions for the emergence of a new public and a new political space, one that is not already occupied and structured by a symbol of racist and colonial subjugation, but where social meaning and memory are oriented towards resistance and democracy.

In the course of this analysis, Butler reflects on the category of 'vulnerability' and the risks inherent in using it descriptively, namely, the risk that some subjects, most notably women, "become defined by their vulnerability", at the point that "the very problem that the description is meant to address becomes reproduced and ratified by the very description" (139). On the other hand, the fact that, under certain structural circumstances, certain groups of people are more exposed to vulnerability than others, is to be addressed. For this reason, Butler emphasises the opportunity "to think of vulnerability and agency together" (139), praising the view that

> women are at once vulnerable and capable of resistance, and that vulnerability and resistance can, and do, and even must happen at the same time. (141)

In this way, vulnerability does not designate a lack needing rescue, intervention, and protection from above, insomuch as something that can be productively mobilised in resistance, thus recognising agency and the capacity to resist to those who happen to be vulnerable, even to mobilise vulnerability in political terms.

In the previous sections, we discussed hooks' theorisation of the possibility of reworking the spatiality in which one is put into, in order to transform it into a new space in which one can begin to resist and develop a new sense of self. In this framework, the action on public monuments can be seen as a moment when people, gathering together, rework a spatiality that has been shaped by racist structures to exclude them from the domain of the political, and change it into the space of their very political appearance and resistance: in this political space, the symbols of oppression are put to rest, literally making space for a new political subject to emerge and signify. Hence, the subalternity and vulnerability of these subjects is what is mobilised in the first place, giving space to their politicisation, where the creation of a new political subject and a new political space go hand in hand.

6 Conclusion

In the first section of this article, we discussed the notion of 'subaltern space', with reference to the elaboration of the notion of 'subalternity' in the context of space-making during colonisation. We highlighted subaltern experiences of space in colonial and post-colonial contexts, discussing how post-colonial literature examines space as a feature in the subjugation of the colonised others. This understanding of subaltern space sheds light on space as an essential object of politics, highlighting the inequality of access to that public good that is space, in colonial and post-colonial times. Moreover, we discussed the material aspects of cultural and symbolic barriers, as well as the physical ones, that prevent access to public space. This understanding also explores a link that connects space to subjectivation, emphasising how the political construction of space and the multifarious processes of subjectivation go hand in hand, with particular reference to the creation of subaltern selves in, and through, subaltern spaces. On the other hand, we also discussed theoretical elaborations on the opportunity to rework space by way of changing its meaning and experience, notably in the case of hooks' re-signification of the notion and experience of the margin as "a site of radical openness", where to nurture resistance and develop another sense of oneself and one's community. Political space is to be acted upon to "disenclose" a formerly entrapped world, as Mbembe puts it, or to transform the meaning and experience of the space of one's oppression, rather than merely trying to escape it, as hooks had it. In particular, hooks' discussion of the margin explores how the self-understanding of being marginal provides the marginalised with a mode of seeing and knowing that is totally theirs, unavailable to the oppressors. Moreover, this special epistemic point of view allows the marginalised community to develop a strong sense of the self and solidarity. Therefore, hooks stresses the potentiality of the dispossessed to occupy their own place and elaborate a whole new knowledge of it, one that contributes to the creation of a distinct and empowering sense of self.

This analysis of space from a post-colonial perspective allowed us to address the question of activism on statues, arguing that statues are not irrelevant objects adorning streets and squares, but complex imbrications of the symbolic and the material, asymmetrically marking space and directly affecting the access to it, as well as the discursive construction of public meaning. Colonial statues are shown to be colonial spatial markers that act in our post-colonial present to exclude those whose oppression and subalternity they symbolise, contributing to making the access to public space unequal. In the case of university, discussed by Mbembe, Ahmed, and hooks, unequal access to public space is also the unequal access to education

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and democracy. For these reasons, action on statues standing in public spaces, particularly in universities, is an action that works to decolonise and democratise that very space, to make it open to all and to decolonise knowledge itself.

However, in the first section we also discussed the problem of the representation of the subaltern, with particular reference to Spivak's questioning of the possibility of the subaltern being able to speak and make her voice heard, as opposed to being ventriloquised by intellectuals and misunderstood. In light of this problem, it is possible to ask if the movements against statues are, in fact, successful in giving representation to the oppressed while erasing the symbols of their subjugation. As we commented in the introduction to this article, the eventual removal of the statue of Rhodes at UCT has also been interpreted as a case of an institution's co-option of a radical movement and appropriation of its instances, by way of undertaking that very symbolic action the movement claimed for itself, thus diluting its radicality in an act of appropriation. Moreover, unlike the UCT case, several requests to remove the statues of colonial men have not been met at all, representation being denied to the subalterns, while their erasure from history and meaning-making was reaffirmed and ratified. In both cases, it is possible to wonder whether the subaltern has spoken at all, or rather if their voices have been ventriloquised by hegemonic power once more. At the same time, it is possible to ask if this is a reason to give up representation at all, and to renounce fighting against the markers of oppression. The important problematisation of the notion of subaltern representation that we have encountered requires caution and encourages critique, but it also pushes towards the elaboration of new strategies and actions for an empowering self-representation in space.

In the light of such discussion, we can address the problem of subalternity in space in relation to activism on colonial statues, dealing with the difficult problem raised by the very notion of subalternity, as that which, almost by definition, escapes representation. While subalternity escapes representation, and always runs the risk of being unheard, misunderstood, ventriloquised, or having its ends co-opted by power, on the other hand it also proves to be a useful concept in grasping the spatial mechanisms of power and the constitution of oppressed selves. For this reason, it is possible to suggest that, as far as distinct subaltern geographies have been identified and explored, distinct subaltern interventions in and on space are also to be recognised and addressed theoretically. The decolonial intervention on statues, whether through the removal or damage of a colonial symbol, as in the case of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, or through the demand for the construction of a new statue representing the resistance and empowerment of subaltern communities, as in the case of Ambedkar statues, can be interpreted as a moment in which subal-

tern subjects, in a struggle to act on the material means of their subjugation, intervene on the symbolic and material markers of public space, in order to unmask its unequal structures and unequal access, and challenge it in order to create a political space open to all and, in so doing, challenge their subjectivation as passive victims.

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Secondary Pathology: 'Cisgender Fragility' and the Pandemic Body Politic

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Abstract The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has seen an international explosion of anti-transgender sentiment being elevated to the level of law. Legislatures from Idaho to Hungary have banned transgender student athletes from competing as their true genders; revoked existing protections for trans people; and mandated the addition of 'sex assigned at birth' to state-issued ID cards. This spike in anti-transgender laws would be alarming in any year, but carries extra force and urgency as the Coronavirus pandemic continues to unfold. The fact that so many different municipalities worldwide have used the opportunity of COVID-19 to enshrine anti-trans animus in law, or to propose its enforcement, or to prolong its effects, is not accidental. This raises the question of why now? I propose that transphobia and the concomitant championing of 'traditional gender roles' are intended to function not only as a distraction from mismanagement of pandemic responses, but as an attempt to create national cohesion by casting transgender people as subverters of the natural health and order of the body. Drawing both on the particular vulnerability of transgender people as a demographic in times of crisis, and on the critical concept of 'cis fragility', I argue that these anti-transgender policies function as attempts to reaffirm the ontological securitisation of the body politic.

Keywords Ontological securitisation. Moral panics. Fragility. Precarity. COVID-19. Transgender.

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1 Introduction

This article has been two years in the making. During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, I was stranded in Kyoto, where I was finishing the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on transgender lives in contemporary Japan. From my apartment and my laptop screen, I was glued to daily case trackers, death statistics, and updates from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as many people were worldwide. Soon, however, I noticed distinct alarm bells ringing internationally on a single theme within responses to the disease.

On 1 April 2020, less than a month into the global reach of COVID-19, the Republican-controlled state legislature of Idaho officially banned transgender athletes from participating in high school or varsity athletics as their identified gender, mandating that all athletes must be entered according to their "biological sex assigned at birth". A day later, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán submitted a draft bill to Parliament that included a proposal to reverse the country's policy on gender recognition. The law in place at the time permitted transgender Hungarians to change the gender listed on certificates of births, marriages, and deaths. Orbán's proposal, which passed and is now in effect, mandates all such certificates to list "sex at birth" and now forbids them to be changed after social/medical transition.

That same week in the United Kingdom, the Tory government announced that potential proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) will be tabled indefinitely, claiming that Coronavirus preparedness must take priority. Not content to merely delay the promised review of the GRA, Liz Truss, the then-Equalities Minister for the United Kingdom, announced a set of proposed reforms to transgender healthcare access. These would completely ban medical transition (including the use of reversible, temporary puberty blockers) for anyone under 18; introduce new gatekeeping restrictions on medical transition in adulthood; and potentially remove transgender people's already-existing rights of access to single-sex or sex-specific services. Truss' proposals did not come into force, and indeed Truss herself is no longer the Minister for Women and Equalities,[1] but a stream of

My ethnographic fieldwork in Japan was made possible in large part through the financial support of the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, through the academic support of my supervisors Dr. Fabio Gygi and Dr. Yuka Kanno, and most of all through the generosity of my respondents. I would also like to thank Dr. Margaret Gamberton, Dr. Rachel Rothenberg, and Dr. Satoko Itani for their collective expertise in critical transgender studies, Japan, and international relations, as well as the depth of their insights on gender in reactionary politics, which they kindly shared with me.

1 Truss was promoted from Equalities Minister to Prime Minister of the United Kingdom shortly after the first writing of this article (September 2022), stepping down equally

attempted or actual bills targeting transgender youth, transgender athletes, and transgender people as a demographic have been introduced in legislatures worldwide during the era of COVID-19.

Even in places where actual legislative change has not been proposed, including Japan, the level of anti-transgender animus by politicians and other elected officials has seen a marked increase since 2020. Prior to the onset of the novel Coronavirus, transgender-related legislation in Japan had reached something of a plateau: provision for the legal recognition of a change of gender was first established in 2003 and revised in 2008, the latter with little public discussion. The legal standards for transition as stipulated by the Act are invasive and highly medicalised, but – at the time of its revision – not accompanied by overt animosity or false claims about transgender people as a demographic.

What has changed in the intervening time is the sudden introduction of malicious misinformation into the Japanese discourse on trans identity. The English-language edition of the *Mainichi Shinbun* newspaper reported on 20 May 2021 that "Misinformation on Transgender Women Spreads in Japan, Even at LDP Study Session":

> A study session under the theme "LBGT out of control" was held in Tokyo's Nagata-chō district at noon on March 26 by a ruling Liberal Democratic Party parliamentary group promoting female lawmakers' empowerment.

According to the article's author, journalist Fujisawa Miyuki,

> Diet members, local assembly members and other participants were apparently seen nodding while listening to a lecture that portrayed transgender women as a threat to cisgender women […]. The lecture was given by Koji Shigeuchi, adviser to the LDP's committee to study sexual orientation and gender identity. (2021)

I discuss this article in further detail later in this paper: suffice it for now to say that it was the first, but by no means the only, news-

abruptly in October of the same year. A substantial portion of her campaign for leadership of the Conservative Party involved the burnishing of her transphobic credentials (on which see e.g. Hansford, A. [2022]. "How Shameless Attacks on Trans People Defined a Car-Crash Tory Leadership Race". *Pink News*, 25 August. https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2022/08/25/tory-leadership-race-trans). While she is no longer in government, and this specific set of proposals may have been discarded, the UK government under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak remains committed to transphobia, to the extent of blocking the devolved Scottish government's updated version of the Gender Recognition Act (for more on which see the Scottish Trans Alliance's "Statement on the UK Government's Blocking of the GRR Bill", 17 January 2023. https://www.scottishtrans.org/statement-on-the-uk-governments-blocking-of-the-grr-bill).

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paper article I saw in both the English and Japanese-language press on inflammatory rhetoric around transgender people finding a sympathetic audience amongst politicians in the country.

As an anthropologist of (trans)gender identity and sexuality, and from my own positionality and personal investment in the topic as a transgender man, I have been tracking popular discourses around gender transition, transgender identity, and access to medical care worldwide on both formal and informal bases for more than a decade. There have been phases, fashions, and abortive moral panics within what we may loosely gloss as international 'trans discourse', much of it online or mediated through sensationalistic media coverage, as well as a burgeoning canon of transgender life-writing enabled by greater access to publication – both traditional print media and online platforms such as blogs, Twitter accounts, and writing for feminist or queer websites.[2] I turn now to a closer overview of how transgender lives and experiences have been reported in the Anglophone and Japanese press over the last decade, including the 'trans boom' of 2014-17 and the onslaught of negative coverage post-2017. I begin my analysis proper with this quantitative overview of trans-related media coverage leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the application of a qualitative lens to two inherent threads of tension within trans-cis relations: 'trans precarity' and 'cis fragility'. I then examine why the conditions of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have provided such an incubatory environment for anti-trans animus on every social level from national legislatures to interpersonal hate crimes, through the lens of ontological security studies (OSS). I conclude with a discussion of the crisis point at which we now find ourselves.

I approach this topic from the specific positional standpoint of being a Japanologist, a person with dual British-American citizenship and community ties, and a transgender person who navigates his daily life in an atmosphere of worsening anti-transgender movements worldwide. Much of the qualitative data in this article, furthermore, was drawn from discussions with my respondents on the ground in Kansai, a group of roughly thirty trans people of varying gender identities, ages, and occupations. This has two main effects on the thesis of this article. One is its regional focus on Japan and on the US-UK Anglosphere, with reference to specific cases elsewhere (Hungary, Russia, etc.) when appropriate. The other is that much of my data and their analyses are quantitative but not neutral. I do not believe that ethnographic objectivity or 'true neutrality' are achievable, and in the case of organised hate groups galvanised by a global pandem-

2 For which see e.g. Chii 2016; Faye 2021; Dawson 2014; 2017; Hale 1997; Jacques 2015; Kamikawa 2007; Lester 2017; Mock 2014; Nōmachi 2009; Stein 2019; Thom 2016.

ic to intensify stochastic terrorism against a community to which I belong, any pretence of neutrality would be inauthentic. I have collated the data and offered my best analysis, in which I am satisfied that I am contributing to a chorus of raised alarms with merited urgency and seriousness.

2 Tracking Transness in Japan and the Anglosphere 2011-22

While there have been publications produced by and for queer/trans people in German since the 1920s and English since the 1950s (among them *Transvestia*, *Chrysalis*, *Drag*, *Fag Rag*, and Lou Sullivan's *FtM Newsletter*),[3] mainstream Anglophone media commentary on transgender civil rights and social existence was sparse prior to the turn of the twenty-first century, excepting high-profile cases of celebrities (Roberta Cowell, Christine Jorgensen, Jan Morris, Tracey 'Africa' Norman) transitioning or being outed against their will; particularly high-profile hate crimes, such as the murders of Brandon Teena, Gwen Araujo, and Marsha P. Johnson; or titillating depictions of transgender people in popular culture, as in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), Kimberley Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), and other weeping-based narratives.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw some significant gains in transgender rights, especially in Japan, where a procedure for legally affirming gender transition was first implemented with the Act on Special Cases in Handling Gender Status for Persons with Gender Identity Disorder (Act No. 111 of 16 July 2003), discussed briefly above.[4]

The first transition memoirs in English were written by Michael Dillon and Roberta Cowell, in 1946 and 1954 respectively, with their first Japanese-language counterparts appearing in the 1980s and 1990s. In the twenty-first century, however, the advent of popular memoirs and autobiographical narratives about transition actually began a few years earlier in Japan (early 2000s) than it did in the UK (mid-2010s): Yonezawa Izumi's *Toransujendarizumu sengen* トランスジェンダリズム宣言 (Transgenderism Declaration) and Torai Masae's *Toransujendā no jidai: seidōitsusei-shōgai no ima* トランスジェンダーの時代・性同一性の今(The Transgender Age: Gender Identity Disorder

3 Many of which are accessible online via the Simmons College Transgender Periodicals Guide: https://simmonslis.libguides.com/transgender-history/periodicals.

4 A full English translation of the Act's text can be found online here: https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/2542/en. For more on the law itself, see Ako et al. 2001; Itani 2011; Fujimura-Fanselow 2011; and Taniguchi 2003.

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Today) were both published in 2003; the politician Kamikawa Aya's memoir *Kaete yuku yuki: 'seidōitsusei-shōgai' no watakushi kara* 変えてゆく勇気:「性同一性障害」の私から (The Courage to Change: 'Gender Identity Disorder' from My Perspective) in 2007; and Nōmachi Mineko's humorous blog-turned book *Okama dakedo OL yattemasu* オカマだけどOLやってます。 (Even Though I'm an Okama I Became an Office Lady) in 2009.

However, media interest in transgender coverage steadily gained speed over the course of the 2010s, with peak positive coverage hitting between 2014 and 2017. Those three years saw the publication of multiple memoirs and non-fiction books by trans writers in English (Dawson 2014; 2017; Lester 2017; Mock 2014) and Japanese (Chii 2016; Yasutomi 2015). They received generally favourable reviews and were part of a boom in trans-interest popular culture alongside trans-positive articles in major magazines, such as Katy Steinmetz's award-winning *TIME* magazine feature "The Transgender Tipping Point" and the *National Geographic* magazine's January 2017 special issue *Gender Revolution*, with accompanying documentary by Katie Couric. The transgender journalists Juliet Jacques and Paris Lees were still writing regular features for the *Guardian* newspaper; transgender actors were breaking into major television and film roles, like Laverne Cox on *Orange is the New Black*; and breathless newspaper reports on supposed 'trans firsts' – such as the 'first trans man to get pregnant'[5] – were, if not free of sensationalism, at least generally positive in tone.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the shift from positive coverage to full-blown moral panic occurred in the Anglosphere. In Japan, there was a distinct trigger point (or at least an event consistently identified as such by my respondents in the field): the decision by Ochanomizu University, one of the oldest and most prestigious single-sex women's colleges in the country, to admit undergraduate students on the basis of self-declared gender rather than the gender listed on their family registry (*koseki* 戸籍). Tsuda University, a similarly prestigious women's college, soon followed suit.

The backlash from some cisgender feminists and from Japan's reactionary right wing was immediate. Its vitriol and the apparent strength of its feeling were shocking to my respondents, many of whom were long-term veterans of various Japanese feminist move-

5 Trebay, G. (2008). "He's Pregnant: You're Speechless". *The New York Times*, 22 June. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/fashion/22pregnant.html; Pilkington, E. (2008). "Childbirth: Transgender Man Has His Baby, Naturally". *The Guardian*, 5 July. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/mar/28/familyandrelationships.healthandwellbeing; *The Deccan Herald* (2023). "Pictures of First Trans Man's Pregnancy Go Viral". 4 February. https://www.deccanherald.com/dh-galleries/photos/pictures-of-first-trans-mans-pregnancy-go-viral-1187761.

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ments, as those movements in the post-war period have been accepting of anyone who would 'volunteer' to take on gender-related oppression and lend their solidarity to organised struggle.[6] The explosion of online anti-trans sentiment in Japan, which came in April 2018 and positioned itself as a backlash to Ochanomizu and Tsuda Universities' trans-inclusive acceptance policies, had three unusual elements. Firstly, it was constrained to Japanese-language Twitter. My respondents were unanimous in their agreement that these sentiments were not repeated at any of their various in-person activist meetings or social events; nor was it widely evident across other social media platforms, e.g. Facebook or LINE. Secondly, the accounts pushing this rhetoric were all anonymous: no-one was willing to put their name to the dissemination of anti-trans hatred, which led my respondents to speculate that the vast majority of these accounts may have been bots or sock puppets (multiple fake accounts run by one person). Thirdly, most of the accounts spreading transphobic hate speech in Japanese repeat derivative talking points copied and pasted from English trans-exclusionary rhetoric, all clustered around the same themes: bathrooms, 'single-sex spaces', women's athletics, and so on. None of these talking points are original and all of them have been debunked many times over across English-speaking social media.

It would be one thing if malicious misinformation about transgender people remained constrained to the grassroots level in Japan. Unfortunately, these talking points have begun to capture the attention of members of the ruling political party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan. It is at this point that I would like to return for a deeper commentary on the *Mainichi Shinbun* article quoted in the "Introduction". The quotations are lengthy, but I believe that it is worth close reading, as it both summarises the main talking points currently deployed by Japanese transphobes and indicates the level of audience this hate speech now enjoys.

> A study session under the theme "LBGT out of control" was held in Tokyo's Nagata-chō district at noon on March 26 by a ruling Liberal Democratic Party parliamentary group promoting female lawmakers' empowerment. The group is co-headed by former Defence Minister Tomomi Inada.

6 The genderqueer activist Tanaka Ray published their book *Toransujendā feminizumu* トランスジェンダー。フェミニズム (Transgender Feminism) as early as 2006; their consciousness-raising collective Rockdom of Sexuality has been active since the mid-1990s on issues of gender diversity and queer sexuality. This is not to imply that either the feminist (*feminisuto* フェミニスト) or militant 'Women's Lib' (*ūman ribu* ウーマンリーブ) movements have not had histories of violence, volatility, and exclusion; for more on which see Shigematsu 2012.

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> Diet members, local assembly members and other participants were apparently seen nodding while listening to a lecture that portrayed transgender women as a threat to cisgender women (those registered as female at birth and identifying as women). The lecture was given by Koji Shigeuchi, adviser to the LDP's committee to study sexual orientation and gender identity. […]
>
> Shigeuchi, who is male, apparently said if the LDP's bill does not pass, "I could say that I'm a woman from today and be able to enter women's bathhouses". His explanation seemed to suggest that men could participate in sports as women and enter women's bathhouses simply by saying they were women. His theory was that this kind of environment "is dangerous for women", and that trans women pose a threat to cis women and their empowerment, according to participants […]. Shigeuchi is the representative director of the Association for the Promotion of LGBT Understanding. The general incorporated association's website describes him as having been active in advising the government to gain further understanding of LGBT issues. In 2016, he received the Japan Pride Award from Fruits in Suits Japan, another LGBT-related general incorporated association, along with Inada. […]
>
> Regarding the view that trans women pose a threat to women-only spaces, Yuriko Iino, a project research associate on the study of feminism at the University of Tokyo, says posts that exclude or attack trans women began to stand out online in Japan around July 2018, when Ochanomizu University – a women's university – announced it would accept transgender women as students. Similar movements occurred in the U.K. after a bill to allow people to legally change their gender status by self-declaration was proposed in 2018. Some opponents of the bill deliberately spread misinformation, saying, "men can enter women's bathrooms if they say they are women", to evoke anxiety and make the existence of trans women seem dangerous. (Fujisawa 2021)

One notable difficulty in analysing reports such as this one is finding sources for the kind of rhetoric Shigeuchi is peddling here. Where is this discourse coming from, and who benefits from it? Yamaguchi (2009), Hori (2019), and Shimizu (2020) offer what I consider to be the most plausible analysis: it is a combination of ultra-nationalist reactionary politics coupled with international circulation of anti-LGBTQ narratives from American and British anti-transgender organisations such as Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and Fair Play For Women. Shimizu in particular identifies a willingness on the part of some minority groups (in her case, 'mainstream' cisgender feminists, mostly heterosexual) to ally with conservatives in order to gain what they see as strategic advantage over other minority groups they perceive as a threat to the limited privilege they can possess.

While the current anti-transgender backlash in Japan has a relatively short history and an isolatable trigger moment, the same cannot be said for the organised transphobic movement in Great Britain (frequently referred to by its preferred nomenclature of the 'gender-critical' movement). A full summation of twenty-first-century British anti-trans hysteria is far beyond the scope of this article. I strongly encourage interested readers to consult Barker (2017); Gill-Peterson (2018); Gupta, Pearce, Steinberg (2019); Hines (2013); Moore (2019); and Pearce, Erikainen, Vincent (2021) for thorough and wide-ranging analysis of the last ten years in British trans and anti-trans life. I have taken the liberty here of quoting a portion from the "Introduction" to Pearce, Erikainen, Vincent (2021), which I believe is a comprehensive account of the political timeline:

> In the UK context in which we write, a significant upsurge in public anti-trans sentiment has taken place since 2017, when Prime Minister Theresa May announced the Conservative government's plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA); a proposal that was also supported by other major UK political parties. While the GRA enables trans people to change the sex marker on their birth certificates from 'female' to 'male' or vice versa, the process involved is frequently experienced as unduly medicalised, bureaucratic, invasive and expensive (Hines 2013). This is because changing one's birth certificate sex marker requires, among other things, living in one's preferred gender for two years and having a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria (or homologous older term such as 'transsexualism'). […]
>
> In 2018, the UK government held a public consultation on GRA reform. The effect, however, was a backlash against the proposed changes. Leading up to the consultation, multiple campaign organisations were founded to specifically resist self-determination as the mechanism by which birth certificate sex marker can be changed. Organisations including A Woman's Place UK (WPUK), Fair Play For Women (FPFW), Mayday4Women, We Need To Talk and the Lesbian Rights Alliance held meetings across the UK, building a new trans-exclusionary feminist movement that also rapidly expanded online through digital platforms, such as Twitter and the Mumsnet 'feminist chat' message board. The activities and views of these groups have also been widely reported by the media. (Pearce, Erikainen, Vincent 2021)

If 2014-17 were peak years for pro-trans publications across the UK and the US, academic year 2020-1 was the year that a flurry of transphobic *soi-disant* nonfiction hit the shelves (Howard 2020; Joyce 2021; Shrier 2021; Stock 2021). Anti-transgender, or 'gender critical' rhetoric, as Pearce, Erikainen, Vincent (2021) observe, had been stak-

ing out increasingly aggressive positions in the town squares of public opinion, with Twitter, Facebook, and 'feminist' fora being particularly vulnerable to the dissemination of hate materials and targeted harassment of high-profile transgender public figures. A common tactic employed by anti-transgender activists on Twitter, for example, is known as 'dogpiling': dozens of accounts, many of them fake, gang together to tweet relentless harassment at a selected target, often involving the use of anti-trans slurs; misgendering; and accusations of paedophilia, misogyny, and rape apologism on the part of the person targeted. These harassment campaigns can also have real-life consequences. For example, the transgender model Munroe Bergdorf was removed from her role as an ambassador for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in 2019 after a coordinated hate campaign.[7] The online trans advocate and Twitch streamer Clara Sorrenti was 'swatted' in August 2022,[8] resulting in her having to flee first her home, then the country.[9]

There are two essential points to note about this groundswell of harassment and moral panic within the British social context. The first is that it began exclusively as an online phenomenon, with almost no interaction between anti-transgender obsessives and the infrastructure of actual feminist activism (i.e., rape crisis centres, migrant and refugee support, anti-forced-marriage initiatives, etc.). The second is that it has no direct link to actually-existing changes to any laws. The Gender Recognition Act has not yet been reformed in either England or Scotland. There has been no meaningful reform to adult transition care on the National Health Service. There are no plans to provide any legal recognition of non-binary identities.

If anti-transgender hysteria is still nominally restrained to the public rather than political sphere in Britain, the same cannot be said for the United States and several EU countries, including Poland, Hungary, and (with the election of Giorgia Meloni) potentially Italy as well. The three examples of chronologically significant transphobic legislation with which this article opened all happened before I presented the panel paper version of this article at the PhD Sympo-

7 Perraudin, F. (2019). "NSPCC Apologises Over Decision to Cut Ties with Trans Activist". *The Guardian*, 12 June. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/12/nspcc-apologises-over-decision-to-cut-ties-with-trans-activist-munroe-bergdorf.

8 A fake emergency call was placed to the police in her hometown in Canada claiming that she presented a violent threat or potential terrorist attack. An armed police crisis squad was dispatched to her residence, although she was able to prove that the call had been a malicious false report.

9 Sung, M. (2022). "Trans Twitch Streamer Keffals Says She Was Swatted and Arrested by Police in Ontario". *NBC Online*, 11 August. https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/trans-twitch-streamer-keffals-says-was-swatted-arrested-police-ontario-rcna42533.

sium on *Fragile Selves* at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in March 2022. Events have, however, moved with an alarming swiftness since.

> While I was redrafting this paper exactly a week ago, the Governor of the American state of Texas announced an immediate, sweeping ban on all transition-related healthcare for transgender children and teenagers, including support by families, teachers, and doctors for social transition. Adults who affirm trans kids' identities in Texas are threatened with convictions for child abuse should they not act as mandated reporters for trans children. Some families of transgender children have already fled the state. (Gamberton 2022)

The quotation immediately above was, in its original form, a portion of that panel paper from one year ago. In the intervening twelve months, the situation in Texas has developed as follows: the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, directed the state's Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to investigate the supportive families and parents of transgender children on allegations of child abuse, beginning 22 February 2022.[10] A legal contest was launched, denied, appealed, and finally granted in September.

At the present time of writing, more than a dozen families with transgender children have been investigated by the DFPS. As of 16 September 2022, the DFPS has been officially blocked by the Texas Supreme Court from any further investigation of trans-affirming parents.[11] Whether this latest injunction will hold remains to be seen; there is a significant risk that it will be reversed or simply ignored.

The state of Virginia delivered a fresh attack on transgender children and students from another angle in August 2022, implementing guidelines that would force trans children to be addressed by their deadnames,[12] made to use the bathrooms of the sex they were as-

10 Letter from Greg Abbott to Jaime Masters, Commissioner of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 22 February 2022. https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/O-MastersJaime202202221358.pdf; Bouranova, A. (2022). "Explaining the Latest Texas Anti-Transgender Initiative". *Boston University Today*, 3 March. https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/latest-texas-anti-transgender-directive-explained.

11 Yurcaba, J. (2022). "'Our State Is Terrorizing Us': Texas Families of Transgender Kids Speak Out". *NBC News*, 9 March. https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/-state-terrorizing-us-texas-families-transgender-kids-fight-investigat-rcna19282; Klibanoff, E. (2022). "Texas' Child Welfare Agency Blocked from Investigating Many More Parents of Trans Teens". *The Texas Tribune*, 16 September. https://www.texastribune.org/2022/09/16/texas-trans-teens-investigation-child-abuse.

12 'Deadname' refers to the name that a transgender person was given at birth or was known by prior to their transition. While some trans people keep their previous names after transition, most prefer to change their names as a rite of passage, especially if the previous name was strongly associated with the gender they were assigned at birth.

signed at birth, and to wear clothes 'suited to their biological sex' – in other words, to institutionalise anti-trans discrimination in schools for the new academic year 2022-3.[13] There have been so many anti-transgender bills introduced in the legislative sessions 2020-2, in multiple states across America, that I recommend interested readers consult Freedom for All Americans' online anti-transgender legislation tracker for a full account.[14]

It was already clear by June of 2020 that the COVID-19 pandemic, from its very earliest stages through to our current 'post-pandemic' era, was seeing non-contingent but non-coincidental anti-transgender sentiment being elevated to the level of law, through the mechanism of a manufactured moral panic. The fact that so many different municipalities worldwide have used the opportunity of COVID-19 to enshrine legalised anti-trans animus, or to propose its enforcement, or to prolong its effects, is not accidental. While trans lives and communities worldwide are rich in their diversity of experiences, an unfortunate international constant is that we have very few allies in positions of political influence. This was true before the pandemic began: it has been thrown into pointed relief by the current surge in anti-trans legislation. This raises the question of 'why now'?

I propose three lenses to analyse this phenomenon: 'trans precarity', 'cis fragility', and 'ontological securitisation'. I believe that the first of the three requires the second – that cis fragility is in fact dependent upon trans precarity to justify its continual reification. I argue furthermore that what we are seeing here is the weaponised deployment of cis fragility in the service of ontological securitisation worldwide. That is: transphobia should not simply be understood as a weapon of mass distraction from leadership failures around the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather as a key tool of the rising global right wing in this historical moment.

13 Pendharkar, E. (2022). "What One State's Transgender Student Policy Could Mean for Students". *Education Week*, 21 September. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-one-states-transgender-student-policy-could-mean-for-students/2022/09.

14 https://freedomforallamericans.org/legislative-tracker/anti-transgender-legislation.

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3 Trans Precarity, Cis Fragility

At this point a few definitions are in order. I use the term 'cis fragility' as coined by Morgan Potts in 2016, drawing on 'white fragility' in Critical Race Theory: cisgender fragility is discomfort or defensiveness on the part of cis (non-trans) people when confronted with information about transphobia and the realities of anti-trans discrimination. Zachariah Oaster observes that:

> Cisgender people […] are socialized in an environment that shields them from gender-identity-based stress. Like the construct of white fragility, cisgender persons exhibit defensive behaviour in response to encountering any gender-identity-based discomfort. Once triggered, defensive acts and false claims are deployed in an attempt to return to a state of comfort and normalcy. The stress that cisgender persons feel, and the defensive actions that they take upon encountering such gender-identity-based discomfort is what I refer to herein as Cisgender Fragility. (2019, 1)

We might summarise it thus: the term 'trans precarity' is the observation that trans people are vulnerable in ways cis people are not; 'cis fragility' is the defensive reaction to that observation; and 'ontological securitisation' is the mechanism for soothing cis fragility by increasing trans precarity.

Trans precarity as an observable phenomenon manifests in many ways, from housing discrimination, to employment difficulties, to familial and social rejection. LGBTQ people in general are a known vulnerable population in terms of healthcare, refugee status, disaster aftermath, and other critical circumstances. Trans happiness – transgender people's experiences of joy and pleasure in the everyday – are also heavily mediated by the precarity of transgender existence. As B. Lee Aultman challenges us to ask:

> I use shudder quotes around "happy" to point toward the normative perils of assuming that happiness extends from accepted healthy attachments to things, life-activities, and people. My aim is not to argue that happiness is impossible to achieve or that the things we enjoy will always disappoint us, but to question happiness' solidity across different ways of life […]. Is this sense of happiness most crucial to a person when life is patterned around a constant state of exhausting vigilance – whether about one's own sense of belonging in the world, a sense of local safety or ordinary mutual recognition and reciprocation? (2019)

Within the broader LGBTQ population, transgender people are also uniquely vulnerable to the structural violence committed both

by private actors (though hate crimes, social exclusion, sexual/gender-based harassment, etc.) and by mechanisms of the state, which gatekeep access to medical; legal personhood; the right to reproduction and family life (Czechia, Latvia, Romania, Turkey, Kazakhstan, South Korea, and Japan, amongst other countries, require sterilisation as a precondition for recognising a trans person's gender in law);[15] and other transition-related needs. Spade (2011) and Fogg Davis (2017) have written extensively on the administrative nature of violence against transgender people and the to-date relative futility of traditional civil rights frameworks in protecting trans communities. What I and they mean by 'administrative violence' is the precarity caused and aggravated by not having access to legal documents that all match one's gender and real name. Incongruent identity documents mean trans people are often challenged and harassed based on any discrepancies.

For people who live at the intersections of trans and other minority identities (disabled trans people; trans migrants and refugees; Black/Indigenous trans people, and other trans People of Colour; trans people living below the poverty line, or experiencing homelessness; etc.), the precarity, and thereby the danger, they face is amplified.

Despite this fact – that LGBTQ precarity in healthcare provision and crisis situations is a known quantity –, LGBTQ-specific needs and the necessity of culturally-competent care and support are routinely overlooked, ignored, or dismissed as irrelevant, or unconnected to the nature of the unfolding catastrophe *du jour*. To take one particular catastrophe as an example: transgender survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake (*Higashi nihon daishinsai* 東日本大震災) and meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in March 2011 reported challenges and shortcomings in the disaster responses they experienced, including a lack of access to essential medication, being forced to use gendered facilities according to birth sex, misgendering by emergency personnel, and other issues.[16]

In the specific context of COVID-19, across Britain, America, and Japan, the stakes were higher across the board for LGBTQ people than for most of their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts. Trans colleagues in the UK reported complete abandonment of trans people seeking treatment at official Gender Identity Clinics (GIDs). Appointments were cancelled without notice or moved to Zoom without notifying patients. While this was a shared experience for many people across the healthcare service, it was particularly dangerous

15 For more on the coercive sterilisation of transgender people as a prerequisite for legal recognition of their genders, see Carasthasis 2015 and Honkasalo 2018.

16 For a comprehensive account of these survivor narratives, see Yamashita, Gomez, Dombrowski 2019.

for trans people: as a matter of policy, the UK GIDs do not have public telephone numbers or email addresses, where other NHS departments uniformly do. The only medium of communication the GIDs employ with patients is the postal service. With waiting times currently standing at an average of seven years from referral to first appointment, and with a single missed appointment counting as reason to dismiss a patient from the waiting lists, this represented a disproportionate stress and level of gatekeeping access to healthcare which did not affect cisgender patients in the same way. Nor was this sudden helplessness unique to the UK and its centralised National Health Service. For example, a headline on the US news website *Slate* on 24 April 2020 read: "If I Get Sick with COVID-19, Don't Tell My Doctor I'm Transgender",[17] and I heard similar stories from American friends of out-of-state surgeries being cancelled, medication supplies being interrupted, and psychological distress skyrocketing.

An essential and shared element of all these legal efforts and institutionalised medical discriminations is that they do not affect cisgender people. There is real pain involved, but none of it lands on the majority: those affected are a minority of all populations worldwide. Why, then, is trans antagonism such an urgent task 'now'? I propose that the answer may be most usefully viewed through the lens of ontological securitisation, to which I now turn.

Although it will be most familiar to many readers as a term from International Relations theory, the term 'ontological security' was first coined in 1960 by the psychiatrist R.D. Laing to describe the schizoaffective patients he was attempting to treat in his clinical practice. In the words of the scholar Anthony Giddens, ontological security is

> [a] sense of order and continuity in regard to an individual's experiences, which relies on people's ability to give meaning to their lives.
>
> Meaning is found in experiencing positive and stable emotions, and by avoiding chaos and anxiety. (1991)

Crucially, Giddens observes that ontological security can also be *unmade* by critical situations, by emergencies, or by "a set of circumstances which – for whatever reason – radically disrupt accustomed routines of daily life" (1991).

The 'security' under consideration in studies of ontological securitisation works on two levels, the symbolic and the material. As Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020) summarise:

17 Urquhart, E. (2020). "If I Get Sick with COVID-19, Don't Tell My Doctor I'm Transgender". *Slate*, 24 April. https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/04/transgender-health-care-covid-Coronavirus-privacy.html.

> IR research on ontological security relies on a sharp distinction between security as traditionally understood in IR, i.e. as physical security or survival, and ontological security (cf. Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2015b; Steele 2008), and existentialist psychologists have a similar distinction in mind when they discuss "security". While the descriptor "ontological" is not used, distinctions between physical needs and the need for (ontological) security are made. For example, existentialist psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan differentiates between "satisfactions" and "security". Bodily activities such as eating, drinking, and sleeping are satisfactions, while security is related "more closely to man's [*sic*] cultural equipment than to his bodily organization" (Sullivan 1946, 6 in Gustafsson, Krickel-Choi 2020)

The process of making (and unmaking) ontological security, known as ontological securitisation, is therefore intrinsically a double-edged sword: in order for a community, a people, or a nation to be secured and protected, there must be a threat against which such protection is asserted. Securitisation is a non-teleological process. There is not, and cannot be, a terminal point at which safety and security are ensured on a permanent basis; as such, anxiety is essential to the project.

One classic example of ontological securitisation in the twenty-first century would be Vladimir Putin's heavy-handed response to the feminist punk band Pussy Riot on charges of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" in 2012. It hardly needs to be said that a guerrilla performance art piece presents no material threat to the Russian people or the Russian state. However, punishment of a pro-LGBTQ, anti-fascist, and anti-Orthodox Church activist collective acted as reinforcement of Orthodox gender norms and as a promise of protection against the 'corrupting, foreign' influences of feminism and human rights. Another example is that of Israeli state policy towards the West Bank and the Palestinian people, which uses violent military provocation to justify ever more funding for the Iron Dome. In both cases, the threat is perpetual and the state the only actor which can intervene.

Ontological security requires the maintenance of a consistent identity: securitisation, or the process of maintaining and reinforcing security, requires an 'Other' against whom this stable identity is contrasted. Crises in ontological security such as those provoked by pandemics, warfare, or natural disasters are perfect conditions for the emergence of identity-based moral panics, defined by Cohen (1972, 1) as the process by which "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to soci-

etal values and interests".[18] These panics are often centred on a supposed 'enemy within': child abusers, stealth trans people (who are figured as threats to both childhood innocence and adult heterosexuality), 'Big Pharma', 'diabolical Jews', or others who can pass undetected at a casual first pass.

Moral panics and ontological security crises are not interdependent on one another: a moral panic may occur at a time of relative social or political stability, not necessarily contingent on perceived or actual threats to a nation's security. Rohloff and Wright disambiguate the relationship between the two:

> While decivilizing processes are described by Jonathan Fletcher (1997) as likely to occur where there is an actual increase in levels of danger (and an increase in the incalculability of danger), along with a decrease in the state's monopolization of the means of violence, with moral panics there need only be a perceived increase in danger, with a perceived failure of the state to reduce those dangers. Elias (2000, 532) describes how "the armour of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was". And so, during moral panics, 'civilized' conduct may be affected. Here, we may witness a decrease in mutual identification between the 'folk devils' and the 'rest of us', with a corresponding increase in cruelty and the potential for the re-emergence of violence into the public sphere. (Rohloff, Wright 2010, 411-12)

Trans people are sometimes presented as a physical menace through claims that we are 'transing children' or 'forcing kids through experimental, untested medical procedures',[19] but I argue that this is set-dressing for the real fear, i.e., that we are threats to 'traditional values', the 'normal family', the 'healthy body', the 'innocence of childhood', and the 'rights of parents' to define their children's gender identity, and the 'rights of the state' to regulate sexuality and gender. It is not an accident that the intensification of anti-transgender moral panics since 2019 has coincided with increased attacks on, and hand-

18 "[P]anics are not like fads, trivial in nature and inconsequential in their impact; they do not come and go, vanishing, as it were, without a trace. Even those that seem to end without impact often leave informal traces that prepare us for later panics. A close examination of the impact of panics forces us to take a more long-range view of things, to look at panics as social process rather than as separate, discrete, time-bound events. Moral panics are a crucial element of the fabric of social change. They are not marginal, exotic, trivial phenomena, but one key by which we can unlock the mysteries of social life" (Goode, Ben-Yehuda 1994, 229).

19 Howard 2020; Shrier 2021; Joyce 2021; Stock 2021.

wringing about, transgender boys and young trans men, symbolised most succinctly by the cover and title of Abigail Shrier's 2021 polemic *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, which features an illustration of a cherubic young girl with a circle cut out of the binding where her uterus and ovaries would be. It is evident in fearmongering articles about the increasing number of trans boys receiving transition care and social support, and in trans-antagonistic fixations on trans men's future fertility, their supposedly natural roles as mothers, and their 'healthy breast tissue'.[20] Anti-transgender activists frequently use the term 'gender ideology' as a catch-all term for transition, feminism, and LGBTQ rights, implying that their discontent comes from a symbolic aetiology rather than a material one. However, Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi point out:

> [W]hat is actually meant by 'gender ideology' (along with anti-feminist uses of terms such as 'genderism' and 'gender theory') has not been clearly defined: as Korolczuk and Graff (2018, 799) argue, "these terms have become empty signifiers, flexible synonyms for demoralization, abortion, non-normative sexuality, and sex confusion". This makes them an effective tool in conjuring a moral panic around the breakdown of conventional notions of sex/gender, as evidenced for example in the increasing visibility of the trans liberation movement. (2020)

Two observations are critical here. The first is, as Horney ([1930] 1999) observes, that security and hostility are inextricably interlinked; when people feel insecure or threatened in some way, they often react with hostility towards those they perceive to be the source of the threat. The other, from May (1977, 11), is that "fascism is born and gains its power in times of widespread anxiety".

There are unmistakable echoes here of Umberto Eco's insight, in his essay "Ur-Fascism" (2020), that the enemy – the Other – is both pathetic and superhuman. Trans people in this situation are too small and hysterical a minority to take seriously in public health provision, while also representing a grave and existential risk to the health of

20 Prominent British anti-transgender activist Allison Bailey, who co-founded the anti-trans hate group LGB Alliance, used a portion of her keynote speech at the organisation's October 2021 general conference to lament that: "Up and down the country, and around the world, girls are removing breasts that have never known a lover's caress". As with much of the 'gender critical' movement in the United Kingdom, discourse around this assertion has arisen almost exclusively online. I have assembled a selection of representative critical commentary both from the blogosphere (`https://ephromjosine.medium.com/allison-baileys-loving-caress-6383d4e81c88`) and from a court deposition in favour of Mermaids, Britain's leading charity for transgender children and families (`https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022.01.31-Witness-Statement-of-Belinda-Bell-1.pdf`). Readers of a sensitive disposition are advised.

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the body public. That is: selective emotional and political mobilisation against trans people is being used to make life 'seem' safer for majority populations who feel themselves to be under threat from multiple fronts – Coronavirus, certainly, but economic crises, geopolitical crises, secularism, progressive politics, and other sites of reactionary anxiety. Nor indeed is the physical anxiety experienced by so many people worldwide an unreasonable fear. As of current writing, an estimated 6,811,869 people have died from COVID-19 worldwide.[21] Many of these deaths were avoidable, made unavoidable by deliberate policies of denial, corruption, and neglect.

Transgender people make easy targets for ontological securitisation in a time of medical crisis: enshrining a binary model of gender and 'complementarian' gender roles in law serves as a 'common-sense reaffirmation' of conservative, traditional social values. Additionally, the appeal to the supposed objectivity of 'scientific' models of sex and gender (using language such as 'biological sex', 'sex based on chromosomes', etc.) provides a veneer of medical authority: it may not be aimed at the right targets, but it strikes the right note in a worried populace. The frequently incoherent messaging around Coronavirus safety, coupled with the intensity of anti-vaccination sentiment worldwide, is proving to be rich ground for anti-transition disinformation.

4 Conclusion

I said above that the chronological duration of research for this article lasted two years, from April 2020 to September 2022. Within that block of time, I feel it is essential to disambiguate three discrete phases within the research and its analysis, each cumulatively more alarming than its predecessor. As stated in the "Introduction", I first began to track anti-transgender responses to COVID-19 and collate my data, both qualitative and quantitative, from the week that a national State of Emergency was declared in Japan (late March/early April 2020); gave the initial conference paper which became this article two years later in early March 2022; and submitted this article for review at the end of September 2022.

There was what seems like a long tail between the initial data that piqued my interest and the completion of this article, but between March and September of 2022, the worldwide state-endorsed atmosphere of intimidation and harassment against transgender persons became exponentially more volatile and more overt. One significantly alarming change in expressions of anti-transgender animus

21 Numbers for the afternoon of Sunday 12 March 2023. `https://www.worldometers.info/Coronavirus/Coronavirus-death-toll`.

involved a shift in attention to a specific demographic, one both historically overlooked as part of trans community and at the heart of many moral panics: transgender children.

Although the increase in trans-antagonistic rhetoric has not (yet) translated into an increase of physical violence in Japan, the United Kingdom and United States have seen a spike in intensity of stochastic terrorism against transgender children and adults since August 2022. In America, a wave of bomb threats against children's hospitals that offer gender-affirming care, including Boston Children's Hospital, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in St. Louis, and Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago made headlines.[22] Proposed or actual bans on changing birth certificates jostled with proposals for forced social detransitioning, forced exclusion of transgender student athletes from their sports, forced birth for trans men and gender-queer people as a result of the Roe v. Wade reversal on 24 June 2022. In late February 2023, the US state of Florida introduced two separate bills proposing to ban transition care for children and adults; ban discussion of trans identity in schools; and place transgender children or the cis children of trans parents into state custody.[23] A 16-year-old transgender schoolgirl, Brianna Ghey, was murdered in the UK on 11 February 2023; the inquest is ongoing at time of writing, but is widely believed to have been a hate crime.[24] Relevant to the discussion of symbolic versus actual threat in situations of ontological destabilisation, there is a fresh insistence that one pandemic (COVID-19) is "over" while the moral panic surrounding trans people only continues to ramp up.

This is not to say that the only international news for transgender people in the era of COVID-19 is negative. On 3 March 2023, the Finnish Parliament removed the sterilisation requirement from their legal transition pathway.[25] The fourth annual Kyoto Rainbow Pride Parade took place in April 2023, as I was finishing corrections to this article. Nor can the acute stage of a moral panic be suspended infi-

22 Gingerich, M. (2022). "Right-Wing Media Figures Claimed that a Bomb Threat Against Boston Children's Hospital Was a False Flag Up Until the FBI Named a Suspect". *Media Matters for America*, 16 September. https://www.mediamatters.org/libs-tiktok/right-wing-media-figures-claimed-bomb-threat-against-boston-childrens-hospital-was.

23 Equality Florida (2023). "Bill to Criminalize Gender-Affirming Care Filed in Florida Senate". *Equality Florida*, 3 March. https://www.eqfl.org/Anti-Trans-Care-Bill-Filed-Senate.

24 Kolirin, L. (2023). "Brianna Ghey: Boy and Girl Charged with Murder of Trans Teen in English Park". *CNN Online*, 15 February. https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/15/europe/brianna-ghey-murder-charge-gbr-intl-scli/index.html.

25 Reuters (2023). "Finland to Allow Gender Reassignment Without Sterilisation". *Reuters*, 3 March. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-allow-gender-reassignment-without-sterilisation-2023-03-03.

nitely: cis fragility, in common with racial, heterosexual, and other forms of fragility, is epistemologically unsustainable. The bad news is that securitisation's recycling of cis fragility into the chronic mode of trans precarity seems to be an infinitely renewable resource. The intervention I have aimed to make in this article is to make explicit the roots of the intensifying global anti-transgender crisis and its role as ontological securitisation in the COVID-19 pandemic. Moral panics are not spontaneous, having discernible aetiologies, but their danger lies in their capacity for trajectory overshoot: as COVID-19's presence on the global stage recedes, the frequency and inhumanity of proposed anti-transgender laws are not receding in kind. What happens next will be a matter of significant concern for us all.

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Invisible Extinction: Fragility and the Extinction of the Self in Neoliberal Societies

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Abstract Understanding capitalism as a system that inherently triggers extinction, this article portrays how the self and its character have been modified within neoliberalism to a point in which it has lost its subjectivity and it is bound to the laws and logic of capitalism. By looking at necropolitics and psychopolitics from a critical neo-Marxist lens, this article puts external biopolitics at stake while connecting them with different ways capitalism has to alienate subjects that are victims and, at the same time, vassals of this extinctive ideology. In addition, this theoretical framework will be analysed in a more tangible way by close-reading some sections of *Black Mirror*'s episode "Nosedive" as an example of a dystopia that is not that far away from our reality, where value and morality depend on the superficial image and extreme individuality of the subjects that belong to and perpetuate the ideology and dynamics of internal control, extinguishing their own existence as subjects. Finally, this article interrogates present times attempting to understand whether we are living in the Necrocene, the age of extinction due to capitalist logic, and whether this extinction of the self and its subjectivity might be symptoms of it.

Keywords Critical theory. Extinction studies. Neoliberalism. Neo-Marxism. Psychopolitics. Cultural analysis. Necrocene. Necropolitics.

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1 Introduction

The "character of the self" is something well discussed in philosophy and social theory. From the Greek classics to the twentieth-century French hermeneutics, the ideas of virtue, morality, subjectivity, and agency have been put at the forefront of most of the important debates in these disciplines. With these in mind, the character of the self has been defined as "the ethical values we place on our own desires and our relations to others" (Sennett 1998, i). By this, it is possible to argue that character depends on the connections a subject has with the world and its unique reality. In addition, s Richard Sennet puts it, individuals become and concern "the personal traits which we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued by others" (1998, i), having sustainable, lomg-term goals and sentiments as the items thats erve the character of a subject.. According to Michel Foucault (1993), the self is complex in the sense that techniques of domination can permeate subjectivity. In other words, the self can be modified by either internal or external constraints that will, in one way or another, interfere in its nature and the way in which exists and is perceived.

That is, because of this permeability of selfhood, the individuals in current neoliberal societies[1] seem to constitute themselves as subjects only through becoming subjected to domination and disciplinary tools and discourses. That is, individuals constitute their agency by means of the projection of the individualism, privatisation and selfishness that neoliberalism has internally inflicted in them. These aspects, in turn, originate and build upon the thoughts and choices of the subjects themselves, modifying the way they act according to a specific logic. Here, as a subject that is bound together to agency, the self falls into the danger of having a morality colonised by such domination tools. If one takes these statements into account and transmutes them into current capitalism, connections can be drawn between the notion and character of self and current capitalism. In addition, a link can be made to see how current capitalism has a noteworthy impact on the framing and nature of selfhood in this specific system. Using a quote by the novelist Salman Rushdie, it seems that

1 Even though the current neoliberal state has been defined as "late capitalism" or "late neoliberalism" on several occasions, this text is reluctant to use these concepts and will use the adjective "current" instead of "late". Since we don't have the ability to predict the future and the forthcoming shapes capitalism might have, the Author believes we must avoid using the term "late". Using "late" has the connotation that capitalism or neoliberalism are in their final stage. Being honest, few theoreticians would agree to state with conviction that capitalism is in a final stage of development if they were asked to provide a serious answer, even though capitalism is facing an unprecedented crisis of sustainability, not only in the Earth systems through its dynamics, but also as a system itself – that can potentially lead to its extinction at the expense of the annihilation of everything else.

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the modern self in neoliberal societies is "a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved" (1992, 12). Thus, these dynamics help us highlight the impact of societal and cultural dynamics into the formation of the nature of the self.

In this sense, similar to Jonathan Crary's (2013) *24/7* theory and Simon Glezos' (2012) thoughts in *The Politics of Speed*, Sennett (1998) argues that in current capitalism, the time's arrow is broken and that is continually re-engineered even though it has no fixed trajectory in a short-term, flexible political economy. As a consequence, individuals tend to experience a lack of sustained relationships and purposes (84). In other words, under these conditions emerges a conflict that jeopardises character and experience, an experience of "disjointed time" that threatens "the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives" (25). Sennett also argues that in current capitalism the character and, consequently, the self are built on the grounds of a circumscribed idea of "we", which is transmuted in our daily lives through belonging to a certain group (work team, social tribe, group with similar interests, for instance), as a desire for self-protection (118). By saying this, he claims that this desire of belonging is a defensive one, which is usually expressed as a rejection of the "other" in Herbert Marcuse's ([1964] 2020) terms, to generate confusion and dislocation. It is not a surprise that this aims more at those who benefit less from the current economic system in order to make them flow in the frames of, in this case, neoliberal capitalism.

Nonetheless, and even though Sennet has a very important point, individuality is also a crucial part of the nature of subjects in neoliberal capitalism. As will be portrayed in further sections in this article, the subjects desperately try to foster their individual agency and essence and, by doing this, they become tools internally controlled by capitalist ideology (Han 2017). And it is precisely this internal biopolitical control that seems to be extinguishing the very idea of a free subject. These claims for individual self-realisation came up after the upheaval of neoliberalism as a hegemonic system in wealthy countries, and have become "a feature of the institutionalized expectations inherent in social reproduction that the particular goals of such claims are lost and they are transmuted into a support of the system's legitimacy" (Honneth 2004, 467). This paradox, in turn, shows that the processes that were thought to promote or enhance qualitative freedom, such as the will of individual realisation within the system, are altered through ideology, triggering "a number of symptoms of inner emptiness, of feeling oneself to be superfluous, and of absence of purpose" (467).

In fact, in the last fifty years, there has been an increasing tendency towards individualism and individualisation of the *modus vivendi* in neoliberal societies that moved away from Fordist processes of production, by placing the self at the very centre. This, in turn,

is developing into effects that are harmful for the individual itself: depression, anxiety and an increase of suicidal tendencies amongst the subjects of a society (Han 2010, 11). It is no strange, then, that if this situation is read bearing in mind the ideas presented by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* ([1930] 2014), humanity is a beast that, through its cruel virulence, hurts its members and destroys itself. Actually, humanity has always made use of violence in order to accumulate power and, thus, reach the false realisation of feeling invulnerable or immortal. However, this violence or, as Freud calls it, "death drive", has been represented by the logic of capitalist accumulation which grounds itself on the negation of death through selfish economic welfare. Humankind, according to Freud, flows between the death drive and the eros drive. In order to survive, humankind projects its aggressiveness outside its own body towards other living and non-living agents in order to prevent itself from self-destruction. Thus, this death drive, inherent in human instincts, is projected through capitalism as an economic system in which humankind can unleash its repressed aggressiveness towards those that benefit the least from it while, at the same time, being a non-deliberate reaction in order to escape the imagery of death through production, growth and accumulation (Han 2022, 11). Think about the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and how it is invisibilised in mainstream discourses; the sixth extinction of species as the first one triggered by the actions of a single species on the planet; or, conversely, the usage of plastic surgery and cosmetic products to extend the young physical appearance of individuals as long as they can pay for it. As a result, going full circle, the capitalist will of negating death is actually self-destructive in a system where life is solely understood through utility and economic value.

In light of this, the very structure of selfhood has historically evolved in relation to the social, economic and cultural patterns within a certain society while, through this process of constant modification, it is also a modifier of these said patterns. It seems, then, that recent shifts in modern societies and, precisely, in Western current neoliberal societies have had a radical change on the self that is making us witness its dissolution and degradation (Thompson 2022, 3). In other words, capitalism and its voracious will and ability to integrate everything external into its market logic and dynamics seems to have penetrated the psychic level of personality. As Thompson (2022, 6) pointed out, the pattern of the modern self has been infected by a regime of social norms grounded in intensified and commodified technical apparatuses and logics that are, in fact, needed for the maintenance of a socio-political and cultural system rooted on extraction and accumulation to perpetuate hierarchical social relations.

With that said, this article will portray how capitalism, through individualism, is eliminating the conception and agency of the self

by means of the individuality that current neoliberalism promotes. In order to do so, this piece will critically engage with the ideas of necropolitics and psychopolitics, putting external biopolitics into question while connecting them with different ways capitalist logic tends to alienate subjects that are victims and, at the same time, vassals of this extinctive ideology. In addition, all these ideas will be practically looked at through a more tangible way by close-reading some sections in *Black Mirror*'s episode "Nosedive" (2016) as an example of a dystopia that is close to our reality, where value and morality depend on the surficial image and extreme individuality of the subjects that belong to and perpetuate the ideology and dynamics of internal control, extinguishing their own existence as subjects. The choice for this specific episode is by no means arbitrary, as it will not only help us illustrate the extinction of selfhood in current neoliberalism, but it also connects this critical issue with the rise of a cybernetic social realm that is having an impact in the daily lives of humans. Finally, this article interrogates present times attempting to understand whether we are living in the Necrocene, the age of extinction due to capitalist logic.

2 Beyond Biopolitics: Necro-realities, Psychopolitics, Extinction

For Michel Foucault ([1975] 2002, 142), bodies and societies are regulated through physical and mental discipline to produce tame and productive beings. In broad strokes, biopolitics connects power and life. Namely, power enters life, and, through an immunologic scheme, power tries to preserve life through negative control (Esposito 2004, 74). Nonetheless, as Deleuze (1999, 280) pointed out, in the state of affairs that current capitalism presents, societies are substituting the closed disciplinary model for another that does not come from the outside but rather from the internal psyche of individuals. Consequently, this internal domination extends control to the never-ending realm, in contrast to Foucauldian biopolitics. The Panopticon is no longer there. Control is no longer interested in said external scope. On the other hand, things tend to go towards transparency, that is, erasing traces of control both in the subject and the operator (Baudrillard [2006] 2021, 50). If, in classic biopolitics, subjects were under the anvil of some external disciplinary image, now subjects become images. Therefore, these images are intelligible at any moment by the subjects, overexposing themselves and overexposing their everyday lives with almost no secrets (Baudrillard 2021, 50).

Thus, as Han (2017, 25) points out, Foucauldian biopolitics can statistically frame and control the bodies and minds through external

force. However, it does not have access to the direct control of the individual ontological realm through a shift from the external Panopticon-like control towards an internal borderless control. Biopolitics semiotically shifts from the "you must" to the "you can" as, in current capitalism, motivation and initiative are more powerful in terms of exercising power over subjects than external frames (Han 2012, 4). That is, internal positivist control is much more efficient within neoliberalism than external constraints, generating a domination mechanism that operates in a silent way. This control is, paradoxically, much more constraining that external power and, at the same time, much more accepted by subjects and societies as a whole. To put it short, neoliberalism has discovered the psyche as a productive and constraining force while putting said domination into an invisible practice of which the subject is not even conscious. Power positively adjusts itself to the psyche instead of negatively dominating it. The workers' goals and motivations must match whatever their job may need from them, showing their commitment to benefit the business as a whole, being entrepreneurs of their own, within a company or in their daily lives. This flexibility and adaptability of the individual imposed on themselves is used in order to benefit corporations, which no longer offer fixed positions with fixed tasks. On the other hand, it is these corporations that demand adaptability and a will to thrive in multiple tasks, burdening the workers. Then, very close to Zygmunt Bauman (2007) idea of *Liquidity* in the modern world, Axel Honneth (2004, 473), postulated that workers must arrange their biographies in a fictive manner in line with the imagery of self-realisation to pursue a job position while, at the same time, it is only the desire of social and economic security, something almost unattainable in modern societies.

In this light, scholars such as Paul Ricœur (1978) have argued that human subjectivity is bound to a double allegiance: these subjects live and die through the laws of the natural world because of our physical and biological existence; but also, to the phenomenal world around the subjects in which we try to live and die by breaking away from some of the natural laws. This might imply that subjects are able to change, to a certain extent, their own efforts in the way they exist and co-exist with their own reality. However, if control has switched from externality to internality, the imposed laws that create the nature and character of the self in current neoliberalism are more complicated to be transformed because it is the subject itself the one that imposes its own discipline.

The material and psychological dimensions of capitalism do not allow human beings to culturally grasp an alternative to the current system. Capitalism has become a material and psychological force that steers our decisions and perspectives through its logic. It has become both material and mental, an element of global

"psychopolitics":[2] the colonisation, exploitation, control and extinction of the self (Han 2017). Here, tackling the necro-realities of the current system is pivotal so as to come to terms with its psychopolitics and, thus, the different processes of extinction that unfold from it beyond non-human ecosystems.

The current neoliberal society embeds the idea of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) at its core, understood from a rather historical materialist lens that does not cancel the post-colonial turn in Mbembe but complements it. Necropolitics here rejects the idea of necro- as the politics of having the right to kill. Instead, it refers to the right to expose people to death (Mbembe 2003, 12). For Achilles Mbembe, necropolitics is "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (14). In other words, in this process, humankind becomes subject to the negativity of this dialectic: death. The human being "becomes a subject – that is, separated from the animal – in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity)" (14), which means upholding death.

Nonetheless, here it is interesting to go beyond Mbembe's ideas. If one includes human and non-human beings alike, it regroups the subjects in the process of becoming extinct. The exploited human and non-human agents are to be subjugated under the anvil of capitalism. Consequently, human beings who believe they are entitled to a degree of subjectivity, become a set of objects. They are objectified, just as non-human ecosystems are. Objectified agents lose subjectivity in front of capital and become victims of necropolitics. This death is intrinsically linked with extinction, since death is part of the process of extinction. Yet this death is unnatural as it is bound to the external forces of capitalism and it will lead to the disappearance of whole cultures and ecosystems as it unmakes the task of being and existing, as opposed to individual deaths that do not jeopardise the evolutionary process. Thus, this death triggers processes of extinction.

As a consequence, these politics of exposing entities to death and, thus, extinction in this paradigm, imply the right to enslave, oppress and subjugate said entities. Furthermore, as Mbembe pointed out, in our contemporary world "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living-dead*" (Mbembe 2003, 40). Agents living in this system are too dead to be alive yet alive enough to be exploited.

2 For Byung-chul Han (2017), psychopolitics are the biopolitics of current neoliberal capitalism. These politics aim to focus on the emotions to influence actions at a pre-reflective level and steer the integral person towards the goals of capitalism. Psychopolitics can do so through unconscious, Big Brother-like friendly control, the quantification, individualisation and constant self-optimisation of the self, and the gamification of labour. All these traits lead to the extinction of the self in favour of neoliberalism.

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When approaching such concepts, Warren Montag speaks of necroeconomics, as an essential element that constitutes and is constituted by necropolitics (2005, 23). In his reading of Adam Smith ([1776] 2018), he acknowledges that Smith's economics rely on the dialectic between life and death (Montag 2005, 23-5). That is, necropolitics is the political dimension of death while necroeconomics portrays how the political dimension is transmuted into political economy. Based on Montag's development of necroeconomics, Chaka Uzondu highlighted that, according to Smith, "the market reduces and rations life; it not only allows death but demands that death be allowed by the sovereign power as well as those who suffer it. In other words, it demands that the latter allow themselves to die" (Uzondu 2013, 328). If one considers that "what is valorized within necroeconomics is the accumulation of capital" (328), capitalism, and especially neoliberalism itself, are fundamentally bound to necroeconomics, and necroeconomics is bound to the former. As Uzondu pointed out, necroeconomics can be described as

> an economic system which is principally organized around the consumption of bodies as part of the process of accumulation. That is to say, necroeconomics consumes specific populations that are rendered "matter" that can be used and/or disposed of. These populations, as instrumentalized "matter", can and are used in the generation of wealth, in the accumulation of capital. It follows that they are not citizens in any substantive sense. These populations' relationship to the mainstream economy cannot rest on their intrinsic value. They have none. (Uzondu 2013, 328)

Therefore, these two categories of necropolitics and necroeconomics feed one another in their own theoretical realms. These two deathly dimensions can be extrapolated into how the current world ecology works and how it is leading to extinction. Thus, a foundational intertwining between what we understand as necropolitics and necroeconomics and the correlation between them and current neoliberalism in a socio-political/cultural dimension seems to come to the surface. This, in turn, allows us to define the internal politics and economics of the age of extinction and how the implementation of this necrotic system is present on a daily basis in human cultures and non-human ecosystems, linking them in their multispecies interconnectedness.

Hence, if one considers economy and politics to be a cultural construction and ontology as "the most fundamental assumption that one makes about the world" (Uzondu 2013, 327), ontology is to be regarded as a core part of culture. In other words, "culture is constitutive of ontology" (327). Thus, there needs to be an intertwining and a correlation between necropolitics/necroeconomics as a

necro-ontology by saying that politics, economy, society, and culture are mutually constitutive under the canopy capitalism. And by necro-ontology is meant

> a systematic rendering of particular populations as bodies that must necessarily be killed [...] necro-ontology can be understood as a philosophical orientation that rationally organizes populations for their necessary death. (327)

That is, necro-ontology frames the current times as an age in which death and, precisely, extinction are present and caused by the internal logic of capitalism. Due to its systematic and hegemonic nature, necro-ontology generates under its canopy the categories of necropolitics and necroeconomics which are, at the same time, mutually constitutive. These three necro-realities shape the necroculture in which humankind is immersed, where the non-living is valued over the living and where life only has value as long as it can be exploited to meet capitalism's ends (Thorpe 2016).

Although it could be said that this death is part of the natural selection, in other words Social Darwinism,[3] that capitalism has promoted, these ideas in the shape of a narrative help us go beyond this realisation. In a system bound to the war of all against all and the survival of the fittest that neoliberalism has fostered for decades, together with the depletion of non-human ecosystems through extractive practices, the disappearance of human cultures in a globalised world and the disorientation that the inner human self attains, capitalism is putting itself at stake through its own logic. Hence, the capitalist logic transmutes these deaths into processes of becoming extinct, making the agents in which capitalism is grounded and dependent insofar as extraction, accumulation and surplus-value are concerned face their inevitable disappearance.

3 In general terms, Social Darwinism applies Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's ([1809] 2017) and Charles Darwin's ([1859] 2019) evolutionary theory, and Herbert Spencer's ([1864] 2009) and Thomas Hobbes' ([1651] 2017) social theory to portray that life is based on inherent competition in the human environment and condition, thus necessary for historical progressive development. In this light, William Graham Sumner (1881) theorised that civilisation is the survival of the fittest and that the survival of the unfittest is anti-civilisation. Therefore, socialism was unattainable as it went against the idea of a progressive civilisation. By using this theorisation, capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, racism and extractivism have been defended because, if one takes Lamarck's physical inheritance theory, the wealth inherited by a family or an individual was legitimate in this competition. That is, there was no real competition since after the feudal ages and the forthcoming industrial centuries, the ones that had the economic means were the ones that, in most of the cases, inherited them. In addition, humankind (in most of the cases white, male, rich individuals) have portrayed non-human ecosystems as matter to be exploited due to this ideology. For more information on this see Raymond Williams' "Social Darwinism" ([1980] 2020) and Friedrich Engels' *The Dialectics of Nature* ([1925] 2012).

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Therefore, these necro-realities are pivotal to come to terms with the current times and how this narrative helps us move beyond the geological/ecological/cultural debate by analysing how the current hegemonic structure has subjugated entities to a psychological extinction of the human self. These necro-realities embrace and go beyond external negative biopolitics in different internal dimensions. That is, contrary to a conventional understanding of biopolitics as external force implemented on a subject, neoliberalism exploits and gains its force both from the external/physical and precisely from the internal human psyche.

With that said, although Han (2017) does not illustrate an explicit connection between death, extinction and psychopolitics, it can be articulated if analysed closely. In the age of the dissolved self, where society has never been committed to work that much due to the individualisation of such and the gamification of labour itself, necro-realities have been hidden under a friendly mask in the aegis of psychopolitics and the control of our unconscious. Nonetheless, the logic of current capitalism and, therefore, death and extinction, is still there, underneath the friendly face of the game-like, addictive and appealing mask of current neoliberal capitalism. Connected with Mbembe's (2003) society of the "living-dead" and Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1995), the current psychopolitics makes all subjects under the anvil of capitalism part of such conceptualisations. Subjects are positively subjugated to the internal domination of the maximum efficiency. On the other hand, uselessness and rejection of the agents that are not useful for the system is present in a systematic manner. In a way, all subjects are *homines sacri* that are only executed to death if they are not productive or beneficial for the system, while at the same time internally exercising positivist disciplinary smart power on them. The others are Mbembe's (2003) "living-dead": too vital for the system to be annihilated, and already dead to live a full life with no constraints due to the *modus vivendi* of current neoliberalism (40).

In other words, necro-realities and psychopolitics become "smart power" (Han 2017, 15): a friendly and permissive power that appraises our conscious and unconscious thoughts with no direct violence whatsoever. Nevertheless, through this friendly image, current capitalism is still inherently connected with the processes of death and extinction. It does not only destroy the cultural-ecological world through material practices, but it also extinguishes the emotional self through a conscious and unconscious control of the subjectification of the subject. To sum up, by connecting and understanding these necro-realities with psychopolitics in the paradigm of capitalism as a system that triggers extinction, a new space might be opened for researchers, thinkers and activists to understand the current age, its material and psychological forces, and its foundations.

To support this acknowledgement, Alain Ehrenberg ([1968] 2008) pointed out in his work *La Fatigue d'être soi* that neoliberal societies are inflicted with an increase in the frequency of depression diagnoses, anti-depressant sales, and symptoms of neurosis. Very much in line with Han's (2010) ideas in *The Burnout Society*, Ehrenberg ([1968] 2008) postulated that individuals have been overburdened by the demands they implement on themselves, looking for an almost-impossible self-realisation through the internal biopolitics of current capitalism. This never-ending spiral in the shape of an, apparently, innate, unquestionable and self-imposed compulsion in the pursue of a self-realisation necessary in the neoliberal societies to thrive, never accomplished because of the flexibility and liquidity of the current times, tends to leave individuals with a feeling of emptiness, where they finally seem to realise that inner experience is not what determines the path of someone's life, leaving human beings with a feeling of burnout and frustration which, in many cases, can lead to depression, amongst other mental health illnesses.

3 The Disappearance of the Self: Dystopia, Reality and Extinction

One of the most prominent examples to come to terms and make these theories more tangible might be the usage of social media and how it has become a tool that modifies the self towards a series of behaviours that go very much in line with Han's internal psychopolitical control. So as to do that, it might be interesting to scan through the imagery presented in the dystopian world that "Nosedive" (2016), the first episode of the third season of *Black Mirror*, presents.

This episode, which has become a very important and celebrated one within the sci-fi/dystopia community, is placed in a society where people have embraced technology and share their daily activities through social media, the same way Instagram, TikTok or Facebook work. People can rate each other and their interactions from one to five stars and, through eye implants, can see the ratings people have. These ratings, in turn, can have an important impact on their socio-economic status. People with higher ratings have more privileges (i.e., skipping cues, having discounts, access to exclusive facilities or better job opportunities), whereas people with lower ratings are left aside in most of social and economic spheres. Therefore, most people are obsessed with getting higher ratings and, more importantly, not losing points.

Lacie Pound, the main character in this episode, who is obsessed with her rating (the same way most of society is), wants to raise her 4.2 rating to a 4.5 to get a 20% discount on a luxury apartment in a residential complex. Through the advice she gets from a consultant,

she decides to work her way to get ratings from very highly rated people. Naomi, rated with a 4.8, sees a picture that Lacie intentionally uploaded on the social platform everyone uses to catch Naomi's attention and decides to ask her for a wedding speech as her maid of honour. Lacie agrees and gives the entrance deposit to the apartment, anticipating many high ratings from the popular guests that will be at the wedding.

On the day of her flight, several misfortunes and events cause her ratings to radically drop way below her initial 4.2. After managing to get different lifts to get to the wedding, Naomi tells Lacie not to come, as her low rating will have a negative impact on Naomi's own rating. Lacie decides to go to the wedding anyway, sneaking into the villa. She grabs the microphone and gives a modified version of her speech as she becomes more and more upset. Lacie is eventually arrested. It is then when our main character and the man in the cell opposite hers realise they are freer now than they were in the open world, and start insulting themselves in a gleeful way, enjoying freedom for the first time in a while, since they don't have to worry about ratings that can jeopardise their lives.

What is interesting for us here is to see that, even though the police have tools to execute a downgrade in the ratings of the individuals as a punishment measure, the actual control is internal in the sense that people auto-infringe the politics that these apps have upon their daily lives. Although this might seem quite dystopian, apps such as Peeple[4] function in very similar ways. Dating apps such as Tinder or Hinge work similarly, too. In the case of the latter two, for instance and as a quick note, algorithms determine one's popularity based on the number of right swipes that an individual gets. This, in turn, makes individuals be more present or less present on other people's screens when selecting those people with whom they want to interact regarding the amount of likes or dislikes that they have received (Tiffany 2019).

In this sense, Instagram also becomes a key tool to take into consideration in order to realise that we might not be that far out from the world presented in "Nosedive". Being one of the most used social media platforms worldwide, with its peculiar format of posts, stories and reels Instagram has made its users show their daily lives on a constant basis. The very intrinsic ideas of the "like" or "followers" are also a prominent example of how capitalism has monopolised the way in which we interact with the social beings around us.

4 Peeple is a mobile app that allows its users to leave recommendations and reviews for other people regarding personal, romantic, or professional relationships. It has been subject of criticism because of cases of cyberbullying, lack of privacy or harassment (Wattles 2015).

The more you get, the more recognition you will have both in the virtual world and outside of it. Even though many people just post content to unconsciously seek for approval or get in touch with their friends, many others have found in Instagram a way to promote their lives and themselves as individuals. This transparency and control, connected with how the control of populations is carried out these days as opposed to the control put into practice by external biopolitics, is promoted or seen as something good or even necessary if you still want to interact with people around you. This is not an arbitrary choice, as these individuals, by consciously or unconsciously promoting their lifestyle, bodies or experiences, once they have reached a certain number of followers, can start getting access to things that "ordinary" people don't. This might mean free products, paid promotion campaigns, discounts in establishments, etc. In fact, it is no secret that nowadays there are advertisement companies that specialise in looking for Instagram/TikTok/Twitch users with 100,000 followers to use as sponsors to promote their products.

This, in turn, portrays how technology and the "device paradigm" illustrated by Albert Borgmann in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984) generate an intimate relationship between people, everyday life, politics and technology, defining economic and cultural relations. Even though it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully dive into this concept, we can actually see that reality has been moved into the cybernetic realm. The relationship between social media, technology and selfhood is put at stake and it is precisely the latter the one which has been degraded from its autonomy through internal control.

This tightly connects us again with the ideas on psychopolitics. Capitalism becomes this logic of internal exploitation and control that individuals suffer. As said, this control is executed by the individuals who happily access the logic in which the world is immersed. In certain spheres, if people are not on social media or, conversely, do not interact or don't have a lot of presence there, they are forgotten or left aside by the system which, in turn, grants those who make the effort to comply to certain standards. Therefore, individuals modify and eliminate their own selfhood in order to establish themselves within the boundaries of a certain order or system. It could be said, then, that these influencers or known personalities on Instagram or TikTok belong to a different social order or class that, although it seems virtual, it has transgressed the boundaries of the digital world and is having an important impact on the way in which people understand their everyday lives, social media, and technology.

Therefore, the necro-realities of the psychopolitics of capitalism become present when seen through this lens. Capitalism renders individuals towards their internal death and, when done in mass, extinction, through its logic. Although it is not something new to say

that capitalism, as a system, has modified the way in which people live and understand their reality as something given (the same way any other social and economic system would if established as the given truth),[5] when this logic is framed within the confines explained throughout this text, the self becomes an element bound to extinction. If we consider the internal psychopolitics and extremely efficient tools of control with friendly imagery that current capitalism provides through technology and social media, together with the discourse that current neoliberalism has had in terms of giving agency to the individual to seek emancipation playing by the rules of a system which does not allow social welfare or development in most of the cases, the self is at stake. And by this we need to understand that the self is not free to act, or to challenge the given, if it is strictly confined into the frames of capitalist ideology, and it can only be kept alive if capitalism is proven to be extremely unfair and inconsistent by the mainstream discourse, so alternative ways of perceiving the reality around are generated.

As Michael Thompson postulated in his book *Twilight of the Self* (2022, 10) current neoliberal Western democracies are now operating in such a way as to absorb individuals in their own matrix. As it has been portrayed in the previous discussion between external biopolitics and internal psychopolitics, the individual is not annihilated through coercion but provided with encapsulated desires, needs, interests and limited perimeters of knowledge and imagination. In what Thompson (2022) coins as the "Cybernetic Society" (11), very much in line with Han's (2017) psychopolitics and relying on György Lukács philosophy ([1923] 1972), "the technical logics of organizational management and control have been able to socialize the self, making it the simultaneous object and subject of control and surplus extraction" (Thompson 2022, 6). Thus, as Thompson sharply highlighted, and as foreshadowed at the beginning of this article, we might be facing the elimination or, in other words, extinction, of the self-reflective, ethically engaged, autonomous self that was an aftermath of the developments in the Enlightenment (20). That is, selfhood as understood in this text is eliminated and, therefore, autonomy and identity are jeopardised through individualism and self-executed internal psychopolitical control bound to the aforementioned necro-realities.

As Fredrick Jameson (2003, 76) once mentioned, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to conceive the end of capitalism.

5 See, for instance, the ideas by Antonio Gramsci on "Cultural Hegemony" ([1929-35] 2011) or the Gramscian-inspired scholar Raymond Williams and his texts on "Cultural Materialism" ([1980] 2020).

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And it is precisely this capitalist realism[6] that does not let the individuals see beyond it what makes selfhood diluted and does not let most individuals out of this ideology, no matter how in favour or against capitalism they are. Even alternatives such as ecological movements, conservation or feminism, initiatives that were grounded in a radical critique in political economy terms, have now been absorbed by capitalism to fulfil its aims of endless accumulation and economic growth.[7] The character of the self becomes infected and part of the system itself. It aligns with the internal means of coercion and control that appear in a friendly manner and, thus, the subjectivity of the self is diluted, extinguished in the logic of current neoliberalism. The norms and logic of capitalist economy have penetrated inside the cultural sphere of current neoliberal societies and the psychological structures of individuals. This results in a world that cybernetically steers selfhood by systems of control that serve as items of transformation of the relational matrices of sociality that shape new impulses within the self (Thompson 2022, 11). This results, as in "Nosedive", in a radical deformation of the material and psychical abilities for autonomy under the influence, almost impossible to evade, of the internal control that psychopolitics provides. Consequently, this develops, as we have already seen, in an extinction of selfhood and its autonomous self-reflection and ethical development of ideas that was fostered from the Enlightenment onwards, and put at stake from the very start of capitalism up to the current neoliberal systems Western democracies experience today.

Finally, and in a speculative way, referring back to Ehrenberg's ([1968] 2008) and Han's (2010) notions on burnout and mental health, it seems that the fact that there is no way out of it and that individualism and internal control are non-negotiable, mental stability is put in a very unstable position. Just as Lacie's emotions burst out when she couldn't handle the pressure of the situation anymore, current neoliberalism individuals feel the burn and pressure of a system that is restless and puts all its pressure on them while, at the same time, eliminating their selfhood as understood in this text.

6 Based on the Frankfurt School, Antonio Gramsci, and Louis Althusser, for Mark Fisher capitalist realism is the widespread thought that capitalism is the only possible and viable economic and political system, and that is impossible to imagine a coherent alternative to it (Fisher 2009). This concept is developed into a critique of neoliberalism and its usage capitalist praxes in all aspects of governance.

7 Under no circumstances I am saying that anti-capitalist movements within feminism, conservation or ecology do not exist. The point that is being made, however, is that alternatives that embrace capitalism have appeared within movements that, if were to be taken seriously considering their most basic fights against inequality, would need to be profoundly anti-capitalist. No capitalist society has been built on the grounds of equity, solidarity and justice for all human and non-human beings.

According to the hermeneutics scholar Santiago Zabala, "the truth of art no longer rests in representations of reality but rather in an existential project of transformation" (2017, 10). Interpretation allows us to challenge the given rational truths and, in this sense, the hegemonic structures that frame our daily lives and the way in which we interact with the different human and non-human agents in such reality. By doing so, artistic representations might give the viewer information about certain emergencies that are around us and make the viewer itself participate in an interpretative exercise to "call into question our comfortable existences" (122). It is precisely here that taking a look at "Nosedive" becomes of interest in order to understand the different ideas proposed by this paper, allowing us to explore them in a context outside our real world that might be more real than what we can think at first glance. In current capitalist societies, we are bombarded with the existence of emergencies around us but somehow the media apparatuses and the mainstream political, economic, and cultural discourses seem to avoid pinpointing the causes of most of the emergencies that strictly affect the inhabitants of a certain city, country, or the planet. Thinking through the different ideas presented in the previous sections in order to understand the internal dynamics of this system becomes of interest for us, because extinction is put at the forefront and the narrative clings to this idea to generate new thoughts regarding the inconsistencies of capitalism, and the dangers that current neoliberalism has posed upon the individual self.

4 Conclusion: The Necrocene, the Age of Extinction

Bearing everything said so far in mind, capitalism can be established as a system that builds the lived and current experiences in an absolute sense. In addition, reality experienced beyond this hegemonic structure is barely possible for most social beings living in a capitalist society. Then, capitalism, through its logic and practices that lead the world to a multi-focal extinction,[8] manages to renew itself and defend

8 Bear in mind that extinction, in the light of this article, should be expanded beyond the sixth extinction of species and biosphere, as can be seen, for instance, in the mass-bleaching episodes that have hit the Great Barrier Reef in Australia (Batalla 2022). Languages and cultures seem to be facing a similar fate in a globalised world with the hegemony of English as a *lingua franca* in many professional, educational and entertainment spheres and the influence that the British and the North American culture have had worldwide since World War II, precisely through the entertainment industry. As a matter of fact, Chinese is also becoming a hegemonic language in the East Asian context which can undoubtedly mean the speculative decline of certain languages and cultures overtime as well. These are just examples of a kind of decline that is taking place in many other different situations around the world as well through neocolonial-

its ultimate goals, limiting the existence of alternative possibilities that could become forms of opposition. Extinction lies at the heart of capitalism, and, through its logic and practices, it triggers these extinctive events in order to stay afloat as a system that, through human action, seems to have transgressed its passivity towards an entity that has its own will and power. In other words, capitalism is a system that now operates internally in the psyche of human beings living in current neoliberalism, thus, thinking outside of it or acting against its rules is not even an option. However, it is through these ways of operating that capitalism will destroy the world that it is exploiting and, ultimately, will become extinct, too, at the expense and annihilation of everything else.

It is here where it might be interesting to refer to stratigraphy and geology studies. As weird as it might sound, the ideas of extinction that lie at the centre of this article might denote a tendency in the organisation of the world in the human and non-human sphere. That is, the extinction of selfhood that has been outlined throughout this text can be an illustration of the dynamics of extinction that play part in our world. Furthermore, these dynamics are inherently linked with processes of mass-accumulation, extraction and surplus value, together with the modification of the psyche that capitalist ideology inflicts in individuals and societies in a global world.

In this light, the idea of Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002), the age of man as a geological agent that has modified the structure of the Earth, is one of the few ideas that come from said fields of study, later brought into the humanities and social sciences. This concept has opened new ways of theorising and researching, becoming a core element in order to recast modern history as the history of humanity. Nevertheless, scholars such as Naomi Klein (2011) or Jason Moore (2016) have opposed this nomenclature as they believe that not all humans are to blame for this modification of the Earth, yet it is the capitalist expansion, accumulation, and extraction. It is no surprise that dissident voices appeared criticising the anthropocentrism of the Anthropocene narrative as a way of perpetuating and whitening colonialism, extractivism, ecological degradation and slavery, amongst other issues. Thus, alternative nomenclatures such as the "Chthulucene" (Haraway 2015) or "Capitalocene" (Moore 2016) appeared so as to illustrate the issues that the Anthropocene narrative was leaving aside, consciously or unconsciously.

Without diving very deep into this issue, as it is not the aim of this

ism. Not to mention the various crises of refugees who will suffer the fall of a culture in the coming generations, becoming minorities in other countries (Batalla 2021). The extinction of selfhood is, therefore, the ultimate example of how we are living in an epoch dominated by extinction caused by the logic and practices of accumulation, exploitation and economic valuation of elements and beings.

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conclusion, in the debate of the "Many Anthropocenes" (Chakrabarty 2018), the idea of "Necrocene" (McBrien 2016), twists the previous nomenclatures focusing on capitalism as the inconsistency, and re-casts the current age as one in which "capitalism leaves in its wake the disappearance of species, languages, cultures, and peoples. It seeks the planned obsolescence of all life. Extinction lies at the heart of capitalist accumulation" (116), reframing the history of capitalist expansion within the process of becoming an element that triggers extinction. According to McBrien, "capitalism is the reciprocal transmutation of life into death and death into capital" (117) which is, at the end of the day, extinction through the reproduction of productivity.

The Necrocene narrative allows us to move beyond geology and the ways in which the Anthropocene as a theory looks at deep time, approaching the cultural, ecological, political and historical dimensions of it. In addition, the Necrocene as a narrative puts extinction as an intrinsic cause of capitalism while, at the same time, becoming capitalism the potential cause of its own destruction. That is, while capitalism is bound to this logic of extinction, this extinction will mean the eventual extinction of capitalism at the expense of the annihilation of everything else. In McBrien's words,

> The accumulation of capital is the accumulation of potential extinction – a potential increasingly activated in recent decades. This *becoming extinction* is not simply the biological process of species extinction. It is also the extinguishing of cultures and languages, either through force or assimilation; it is the extermination of peoples, either through labor or deliberate murder; it is the extinction of the earth in the depletion fossil fuels, rare earth minerals, even the chemical element helium; it is ocean acidification and eutrophication, deforestation and desertification, melting ice sheets and rising sea levels; the great Pacific garbage patch and nuclear waste entombment; McDonald's and Monsanto. (116)

The Necrocene narrative, thus, allows us to reframe the subject of justice, moving from the individual to the collective knots of life that hold life together on Earth, and back to the individual self. By placing extinction at the centre of the debate, it calls for an attentiveness to redefine what it matters to the entities that coexist in the planet and, above all, rejects the truths established by the capitalist logic in order to acquire a level of equity, justice and solidarity for all, redefining what it means to be alive, dead and extinct.

Apart from providing a coherent narrative to attempt to reorganise the existential, cultural, political, historical ecological and social crisis of the twenty-first century, the Necrocene challenges to the core the given in the capitalist realism in which humanity is framed, becoming a potential heuristic to analyse and (de)construct the

relations between capitalism, human cultures, non-human ecosystems and the self, illuminating the inconsistencies of capitalism in a historical sense. In other words, if extinction is put at the centre of the debate, further relationships between capitalism, its logic and extinction can be pinpointed, even beyond neoliberalism. With that being said, the global ideas of death and extinction through capitalism might allow us to conduct a biopsy of the contaminated parts of the system and radically scrutinise them through a lens that frames death and extinction as intrinsic in capitalism, putting capitalism itself at the centre of the question.

Even though critical engagements become more and more difficult

> because there is, after the end of formal domination, neither a clear measure of the difference between the possible and the real, nor a straightforward reasoning why more is possible than that which is real. (Wagner 2016, 139)

The force of critique in fact consists in "demonstrating that the real is deficient with regard to the possible" (147). Therefore, any alternative nomenclature that puts at the forefront the flaws or weaknesses of the Anthropocene is of important consideration insofar as the narratives towards equity are concerned. Subsequently, staying with this debate is crucial in the current state of affairs.

With that being said, through the Necrocene narrative, a new conceptualisation that challenges the Anthropocene narrative, the logic of neoliberalism and the extinctive nature embedded in such a system seems to come at the surface of the discourse. This narrative threatens the biosphere and the humanisphere as we know them with the imagery of an extinction process that is in fact multiple, as a result of a growth based on the paradigm of technological domination. In the current state of affairs "marked by the globalization of markets, the privatization of the world under the aegis of neoliberalism and the increasing imbrication of the financial markets, the postimperial military complex and electronic and digital technologies" (Mbembe 2017, 3), where forms of belief "get in line with the dominating techno-capitalist society, undergoing a process of deterritorialization and deculturation that renders them apt for global consumption" (Ungureanu 2017, 277), the Necrocene narrative helps us theorise a world-ecology that challenges the anthropocentrism of the Anthropocene and the inconsistencies of capitalism itself by putting extinction at the centre of its imagery. By identifying the issues at hand as intrinsic in the logic of capitalism, the Necrocene narrative might be a generative tool of analysis to engage with theory and matter at the same time. That is, by using alternative nomenclatures, we force us to think beyond the given truths, and new spaces for analysis that tackle the inequalities that lie beyond the spectrum of capitalism itself.

Therefore, the Necrocene, the age in which extinction is everywhere we look, seems to have become the hegemonic structure in terms of materialism and psychology in our reality. We do not question its fundamental existence. We might not even recognise it. As previously mentioned, individuals fall into the ideological realm of current neoliberalism without even knowing what they are doing. It is provided as the given rule, what should be done and what is right for our social coexistence.

Thus, the Necrocene age is characterised by the extinction of non-human ecosystems, human cultures and the human self through its necro-realities and psychopolitics. This extinction exists because it stops the evolutionary process and unmakes the task of being. Although this might be clear when it comes to non-human ecosystems and human cultures, the self, as we have seen throughout this article, is also facing extinction in a world in which everything is rationalised through neoliberalism, its free-market nature and the fact that anything outside the confines of it will be discarded.

With that said, it is too soon to outline a direct correlation between the degradation of selfhood as proposed in this article and the ecocidal epoch in which we are living. It is not the fact that the self is actually at stake in the current paradigm that is enabling ecological decline through human action. This decline can be traced back to the very first fifteenth-century expeditions of the Europeans into America, where some voices claim that current logics of global exploitation, extraction and accumulation gave rise to capitalism as we know it (Patel, Moore 2018). As we have seen, and even though capitalism has always been critically portrayed as a system that has had an impact in culture and in the *modus vivendi* and *operandi* of the people under its influence, the ultimate decline of selfhood has just happened only when control and power have transgressed the external realm to the internal psyche. Nonetheless, what we can actually weave together is the fact that extinction as a cause of the logics and practices of exploitation, extraction and accumulation is happening at different levels (non-human entities, human cultures and, lastly, the self). And it is precisely the latter that completes the circle and allows us to talk about an epoch dominated by extinction. An extinction that is consciously or unconsciously perpetuated through the dynamics of people living and acting in this system.

The biopolitical realm of psychopolitics is, thus, a very clear example of how the system itself is grounded on practices that trigger extinction. The self has been destroyed through current neoliberalism and, in a paradoxical manner, it is not strange to see those that benefit less from this system to be self-exploited and defending the free-market and the *entrepreneurship of the self* as a liberating category for the individual.

Finally, and even though it goes beyond the scope of this article, if we go full circle, the decline of selfhood that has been made clear in neoliberal societies can be connected with the tipping point in ecological degradation that the Great Acceleration signified. With the dilution of the self in neoliberal societies, the psyche was dominated for the first time in history by the logic and dynamics that make capitalism work. The will of extreme marketisation, surplus-value mass-accumulation and extraction of resources, together with the privatisation of commodified goods, privatisation and the enhancement of individualism, and an ever-expanding technological power can undoubtedly be connected to this turning point of degradation. With selfhood in a state of decline in terms of agency, the logic of capitalism had (and has) free reign to act upon the self and, through it, apply its praxis on the different elements and entities that needed to be exploited to fulfil its ends. And it was precisely the turn towards neoliberalism that, as mentioned throughout this article, because of its internal control as opposed to external biopolitics, the individual has the illusion to feel freer and with the liberty to act and do as they wants. Nonetheless, an individual cannot be emancipated within a capitalist society, without mentioning a society that does not look towards a future based on the grounds of equity, solidarity and justice for all human and non-human beings.

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Editors' Afterword

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A chance to create a dialogue between young scholars and researchers. A space for exchange with peers from various fields. A pretext to reconnect, finally in person, and engage in reflections on our *fragile selves*. These were a few of the motivations that led us to organise the doctoral symposium that paved the way for the present special issue. As editors, we felt necessary to dwell on this experience and on the process behind the creation of this special issue. In doing so, with these closing remarks, we hope to provide a useful contextualisation to readers and extend our thanks to all the people who collaborated on its creation.

The PhD symposium titled *fragile selves* was the result of a collective effort made by us and our colleagues of the PhD in Asian and African Studies, XXXVI cycle, namely: Valentina Barnabei, Jovana Bogojevic, Giorgio Ceccarelli, Piero Donnini, Chang Liu, Ali Razmkhah, Abbas Siavash Abkenar, and Anna Scarabel. The early stages of the conference have been supervised by Professor Patich Heinrich, our PhD coordinator, who fostered an environment apt for the discussion and development of fruitful ideas and suggestions. The financial support for the concretisation of the symposium came from the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari University and our PhD program. The symposium would not have been realised without the precious efforts and collaboration of those mentioned above.

The symposium was originally conceived during our first year's doctoral meetings, in the Spring of 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic after-effects were still strongly felt. Back then we were still forced to respect restrictions, affecting our training and, more broadly, our lives. A moment of extreme loss and introspection, in which some of us were unable to move to Venice, others instead relocated to Italy

Figure 1 Perspective from backstage during Professor Phillipps's Lecture. © Rossella Roncati

leaving behind families and friends, and some others could not help but join the conversation intermittently and online.

The process that led to the creation of the symposium and this subsequent publication was thus guided by a reflection deeply connected with our *global* biographies and geographies. Given this background, discussions spontaneously focused on a theme that could not only connect our varied interests but also gave us the chance to somehow exorcise collective feelings of angst and uncertainty: we could not but choose the theme of *fragility*.

Thus, as it often happens, starting from this personal need for answers – or even in the search for a collective response to intimate but shared sufferings – we tried to call for reflections to create a framework in which to position the fragility of our condition as humans, as academics, and as individuals. We wanted to think through the fluidity of our constantly shifting identities often expressed through sex, gender, religion, ethnic background, political affiliation and/or stance, and even national identity.

After months of remote planning and connecting from various countries across the globe, we launched the call for papers in midsummer 2021. A thorough selection of the abstracts received led to a multifaceted and diverse group of scholars, who then met in Venice in the early spring of 2022. The abstracts selected were heterogeneous in both content and methodologies and they reflected the high-qual-

ity research being carried out on the topic of fragility across various fields. In addition, the selection process tried, as much as possible, to follow a principle of representativity, in order to also include underrepresented topics and, most importantly, scholars belonging to sexual, cultural, and ethnic minorities.

The selected abstracts were divided into nine panels, respectively on: *(Re)Thinking Fragility: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations*; *Identity and Materiality; Imposing Vulnerability: Body Politics Behind Forced Fragility*; *Gender-Fragile Performativity: Re-Narrating Womanhood*; *Fragility and Activism: Challenging the Status Quo, Sensorial Nation-State Building: Utilizing Fragility for Political Maneuvering*; *Different Forms of Self-Fragmentation: Retelling Transformation and Experiences of Fragility*; *Cinema and Crisis: Systemic Fragilities; Aggravating the Precarity of Working Classes Globally: The Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Still constrained by regulations imposed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the symposium was held in hybrid mode between March 2nd and 4th, 2022. We convened in the majestic Aula Magna Silvio Trentin, a beautiful sixteenth-century room located in the Ca' Dolfin building **[fig. 1]**. The three days of engaging presentations were further enriched by three keynote speakers: Prof. Dawn Chatty, Prof. Ray Chow, and Prof. Victoria Phillips. We hosted them either remotely or in person, and we are greatly indebted to them for their thought-provoking lectures and insights. We are extremely happy to have had the chance to include two of these interventions as part of this issue. A developed version of Prof. Chatty's speech "The Fragile Self Among Circassian Forced Migrants: 1850-2000" is included in the foreword to this issue, while Prof. Phillips's keynote is presented in the article "The Power of Fragility: Martha Graham, Clytemnestra, and the United States Cold War Propaganda", which opens the special issue.

Prof. Chow's intriguing presentation on "Voices, Accents, Selves: Intimations from Two Literary-Cultural Paradigms", deserves a brief introduction. Narrator of marginality, Chow's presentation delved into an analysis of accents as a palpable feature of human social existence. Exploring the concept of *fragile selves* through two literary-cultural paradigms – the sojourner's sentimental homecoming, and the unhappy noble savage – Chow's intervention explored how accents offer material and potential fields through which reframe the conception of polarised relations as the beginning and the end of a journey, familiar and alien places, native and indigenous *habitus*. In her reflection, accents are not just rigid labels but flexible tools, strategically interacting with the speaking-subject (and listener) agency. Accents, thus, are not just a symbol of fragility but the complex result of a lifelong identity-negotiation process.

The symposium also represented a space to reflect on academia. We are living in a time of various global crises, and, as young

scholars and early career researchers in the Humanities, we are often facing not just moral issues but also an extremely complex labour market. Subsequently, we could not shy away from questions that transcend the borders of our privileged spaces for thought and reflection and deconstruct our positions in both the academic environment and the public sphere: what is the future of academia? What is the role of intellectuals in contemporary technocratic societies? Where is the boundary between research and activism? Do we still need such a separation? How can the Humanities have a tangible impact on people's lives? These were just some of the questions that came up during the three days of the symposium and that were addressed directly during a rich roundtable part of the conference program. Even though there were obviously no definite answers to such paradigmatic questions, the fact that so many young scholars are concerned with the future of our field and with our role in society at large highlights, without doubt, the obligation that we have to address and embrace our *fragilities* openly and collectively.

The idea of fragility evades easy categorisations. The concept addresses something akin to precariousness and it forces us to recognise the instability of previously uncontested boundaries. For example, for Judith Butler, precarity and fragility are inextricable and bring forward the instability inherent in social relations. William E. Connolly, on the other hand, looked at fragility from an approach rooted in a critique of capitalist and neoliberal systems, highlighting the idiosyncrasies emerging from the impossible convergence between economic demands and human activities. Thus, when engaging with fragility, we realise the fluidity and constant change that are inherent in every aspect of our lives. These shifts are also reflected in the various theoretical conceptualisations and methodological approaches presented in this special issue. However, what we think all these articles have in common is their perspective on fragility as resistance, as a tool to enact resilience. All contributions to this issue, albeit from different angles, tackle how feelings of fragility and precarity can be reframed as an empowering tool to respond to situations of oppression and violence, both on a political and personal level. The common thread that can be followed across the articles here presented is, therefore, that of fragility as a subversive force.

This volume can be roughly divided into two broad sections. The first one focuses on fragility and its interactions with national and state powers. The second section instead addresses fragility in connection with issues of subalternity, colonialism, and economic oppression. In their varied ways, all authors bring forward ways in which the reframing of fragility turns into a performative and generative act of resistance.

As we are reaching the end of this afterword – and of this inspiring special issue – a special thanks goes to Professors Chow, Chatty,

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and Phillips for their rich keynote speeches. Furthermore, we would like to express one more time our gratitude to Professor Patrick Heinrich for his encouragement in the early stages of the organization of the symposium and his support in realizing this volume; and to our colleagues because without them nothing of all of this would have been possible. Lastly, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Professor Rigopoulos and the editorial team of Edizioni Ca' Foscari, all the authors, the anonymous reviewers, and all the participants in the 2022 symposium. We really hope that the reflections engendered by the conference and then developed in this special issue might set the ground for further discussions on the theme of fragility and its broad interdisciplinary declinations.

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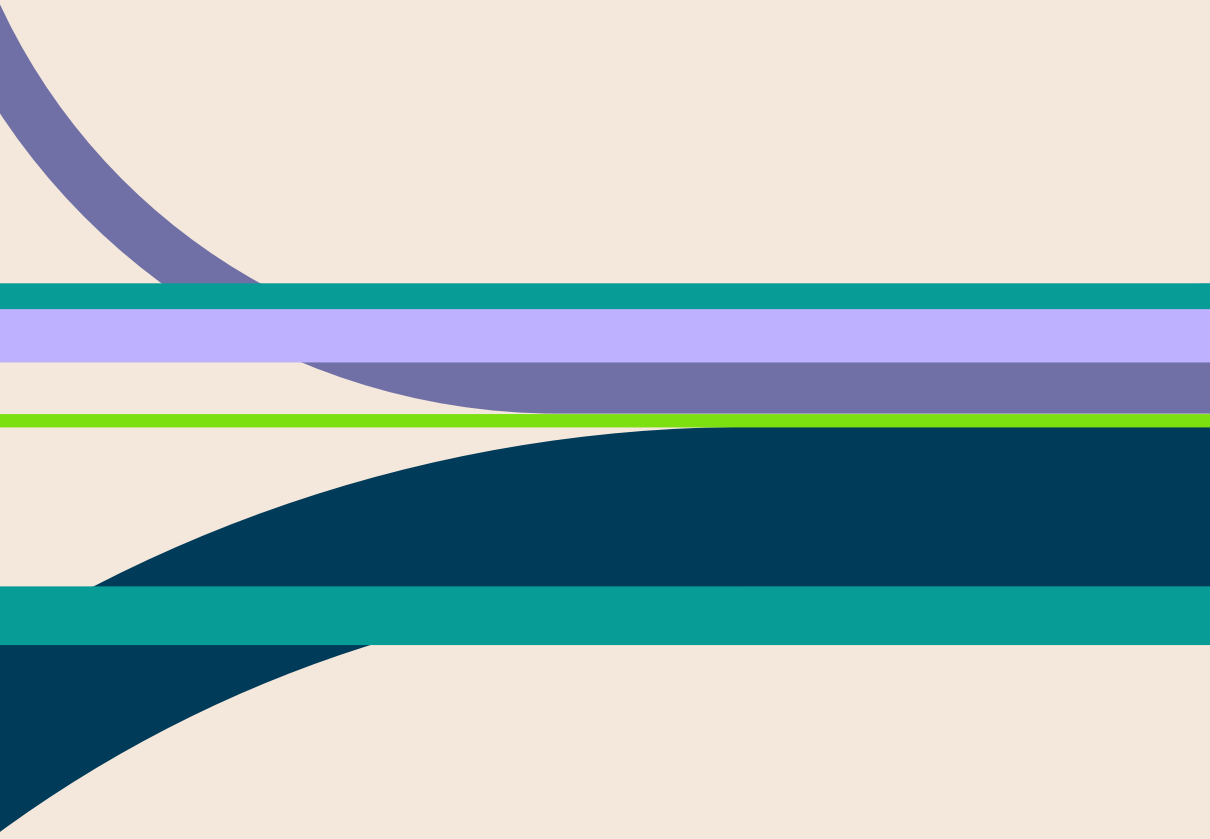

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