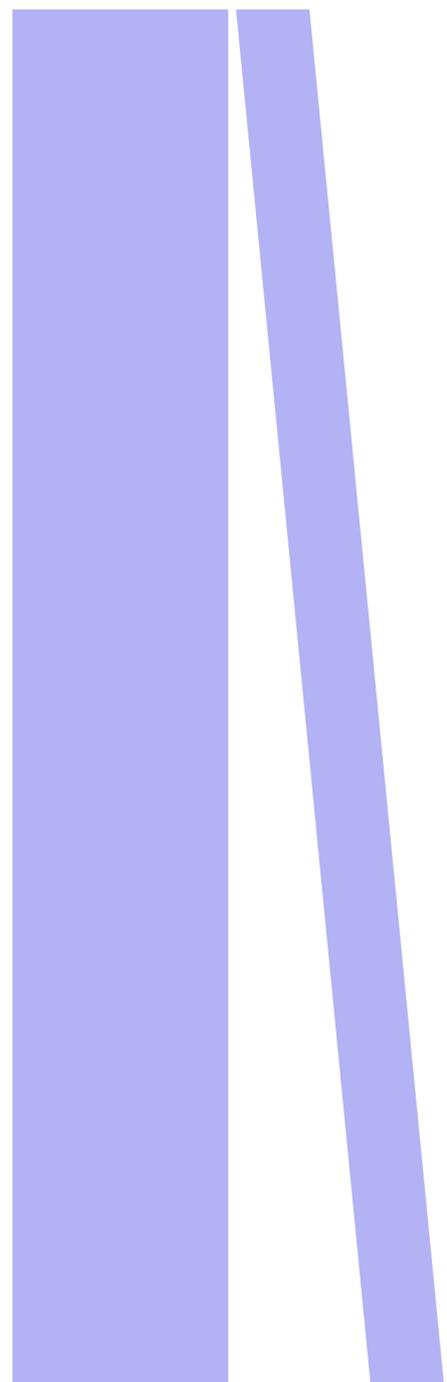


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**INTRODUCTION:
NEW PATHWAYS
IN NORTH AMERICAN STUDIES**

THIS issue of *Theory and Practice in English Studies* is dedicated to select papers first presented at the 2018 graduate conference entitled “New Pathways in North American Studies.” This conference took place at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic.

The issue opens with Ivana Plevíková’s paper “Academia’s Ivory Tower within the Worlds of New Media and Popular Culture.” This paper further investigates the issues put forth in Brett Stockdill’s book *Transforming the Ivory Tower: Challenging Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in the Academy* and contextualizes them within the space of New Media, with a focus on the psychological effects of the academia’s ivory tower on both its inhabitants and its spectators from afar. Her discussion of academic representation in online social media or within popular culture highlights various strategies that aim at drawing attention to academia’s limits of relatability and inclusiveness or that outright work to break them down.

The issue next presents Thomas Castañeda’s paper entitled “Christopher Isherwood’s Camp.” In his 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*, Isherwood first helped define “camp” as a system of subversive humor with features of the grotesque, aimed at empathy derived from the exclusion and marginalization of queer figures. In his paper, Castañeda traces the history of camp while exploring its notions and presence in Isherwood’s expatriate novels. While Castañeda’s exploration ascribes considerable importance to the surface qualities of people and objects and to camp’s relation to urban spaces, he also asserts that camp should be perceived as a political aesthetic that is specific to queer culture, by finding worthiness in objects, places, or people societally deemed less worthy or outright worthless.

The pathways continue with a paper entitled “What Else Can Nature Mean: An Ecocritical Perspective on Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction” by Kateřina Kovářová. Kovářová proposes a significant shift in the perception and interpretation of McCarthy’s novels, through reading them with an environmental awareness and through an eco-critical lens. Kovářová perceives nature in McCarthy as sensual, pointing to his aesthetic choices echoing the aesthetics of 19th-century painting, in order to depict nature in a unique way, evoking other senses than just sight. Kovářová then continues by proposing that McCarthy’s nature is not presented as pastoral but is rather depicted as a dynamic process, ending with the proposition that Whales and Men should be seen as his most environmental work.

Introduction

Shifting from prose to poetry, Alba Fernández Alonso's "Langston Hughes's Literary and Ideological Turn in the Early 1930s: Poetry as a Means to Understanding and Conceptualizing the Poet's Identity and Self-Development," investigates Hughes's "communist turn" during that period. Fernández Alonso proposes that Hughes's radicalization, while reflecting the general pro-communist tendencies of the Afro-American community, directly aimed at an escalation of expression of racial and class issues. For Fernández Alonso, the overarching issues ranging over Hughes's artistic choices and tendencies are the questions of identity as well as of self-perception, not only of himself but also of his Afro-American comrades.

The next paper, entitled "Always To Be Passed Along: Aporias of Wagner, Heidegger, and #MeToo" by Jan Čapek, presents a philosophical angle of the post-structuralist break with identity. Čapek starts by introducing the Greek myth of aporia, a logical paradox or impasse, and continues with discussion of its engagement by Jacques Derrida in accordance with his anti-representational, anti-identitarian thought presented, among other writings, in *On Grammatology*, *Aporias*, and the paper "Sending: On Representation." Čapek then continues to apply aporia to controversial figures in various strata of Western culture, solidifying the concept as one functioning beyond law and morality and, therefore, productive through its undecidability, necessitating continuous discussion and pondering.

Moving on from philosophical themes, the next article, written by Martin Ondryáš, is entitled "After the Great Flattening: Aspects of Contemporary Saskatchewan Feature Film." Ondryáš's interest in regional Canadian cinematography stems from the disproportionate concentration of Canadian film production in Central Canada and the fact that marginal cinema, specifically the "margin of the margin" in Saskatchewan, does not receive much notice. Ondryáš proposes that films such as *Wheat Soup* or *Corner Gas – the Movie* work with the expression of influence as much as with the subversion of regional cinema as a locus of "Central Canadian cultural colonialism."

The closing paper of the issue is Marcel Koníček's "Japanophilia: Becoming the Other", a venture into the history of Japanophilia as well as a discussion of its significance within American culture. Through his investigation of Japanophilia and its historical roots in Japonism, one of its bases being a partial acceptance of Japanese identity, and by applying his lens onto the current impact of Japanese art and culture on North-American cultural production and consumption, Koníček exemplifies the magnitude of cross- and inter-cultural relations. This article provides a commentary on the kind of intersectionality which constitutes the "new pathways", for Koníček very much interdisciplinary pathways, between his interests in Japanese and American studies.

Jan Čapek and Ivana Plevíková

This special issue follows the primary aim of the conference itself – to provide space for budding academics in the field of American Studies as well as those whose research activities explore and contribute toward forming new perceptions of American culture or literature. The issue effectively presents a wide range of research interests and promises a bright future for the field, following in the wake of traditions while exploring new pathways.

Jan Čapek and Ivana Plevíková,
Issue Editors



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ARTICLES

**ACADEMIA'S IVORY TOWER WITHIN THE WORLDS
OF NEW MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE**

Ivana Pleviková

Abstract

This paper focuses on issues of the accessibility and approachability of the academic space, the ways it is generally represented outside of academia as well as how scholars who have written about being academics perceive it. It discusses the levels of inclusion and exclusion that are present when academia is seen in relation to the real world and what both of these states generate in regard to the act of forming opinions of higher education and its usefulness in the eyes of the general public. Transcending the boundaries of academia, this paper explores how graduate students who are a part of academia attempt to deal with the clash of different identity points and mental health problems caused by it, and also how they try to forward academia into new spaces such as popular culture, music, or social media. These include for instance the American rapper Sammus, or the Canadian theoretician Kristen Cochrane. This paper further delves into ways in which academic space and university experience are represented on social media entertainment platforms as well as the means by which universities promote themselves online. In this regard this paper's aim lies in searching for a defamiliarized view of academia and creating a pathway for making its ivory tower more down to earth. This paper concludes that by getting closer to audiences with broader sets of interests, academia has an increasingly better chance of gaining new meanings, which may ultimately prove beneficial for the understanding of its significance not only within the sector of education, but also outside of it.

Keywords

Academic space, accessibility, approachability, ivory tower, popular culture, social media, rap music, defamiliarization, mental health

* * *

ACADEMIA generally represents the space of the university and a sphere where scholarly research takes place. The space is divided into individual sectors according to their academic focus, ranging from natural sciences to humanities, each of them being further divided, for instance, into sociology, literature, or other disciplines. Each occupies its small section of the academic space; however, the individuality of each section is not equal to the individuality of its parts, the people who

are either employees or are on their way to become employees, the professors, the teachers, the graduate students. Undoubtedly, it can be said that the prime functions of the university that are discussed most frequently are the processes of studying or teaching, or at least these are definitely discussed more frequently than any interpersonal level in such a space as well as the relations of the academic space toward the outside world.

A lack of focus on the individuality of people – the academics – may result in them being perceived as the equivalents of the institution that they are a part of, as knowledgeable enlightened people of reason. To a large extent academics are indeed exactly that. However, the individuality of their personalities, identities that reach beyond being a professor, or a teacher, as human beings that feel and not only think, are oftentimes neglected. This paper aims to explore the way academic space is generally represented nowadays, how scholars who have written about being an academic perceive it. In that regard, this examination will address a collection of essays entitled *Transforming the Ivory Tower: Challenging Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in the Academy* co-authored and edited by Brett C. Stockdill and Mary Yu Danico. Transcending the boundaries of academia and reaching out to different platforms, this paper further explores how graduate students who are a part of academia and who are also devoted to other unrelated disciplines attempt to deal with the clash of their different identity points as well as how they try to forward academia into new spaces such as popular culture, music, or social media. These include, for instance, the American rapper Sammus, or the Canadian creator of critical theory memes¹ Kristen Cochrane. This paper will also explore ways in which academic space and university experience are represented on social media entertainment platforms as well as the means by which universities promote themselves online, for instance, via YouTube videos.

The criteria based on which the discussed individuals, websites, and ways of representation of academia have been selected for this article include their direction towards the promotion of values relating to the accessibility and approachability of academia, the encouragement of greater transparency, and a more multi-faceted discussion regarding academic identity. The main aim of this paper is to analyze if and in what ways the exposure of the academic space and identity to these more popular and even mainstream horizons influences its further reception. This article studies

¹ Instead of the more well-known definition of a meme as “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture,” this paper deals with the term’s secondary meaning defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media” (Merriam-Webster 2019).

ways in which academia and academic space and identity are represented untraditionally, thus enabling it to be understood in a broader context than merely as the enclosed space of the ivory tower, or how this view might even allow this space to be normalized by the general public. Apart from the importance of the intersectionality of the academic sector with the space outside of it, the point of departure of this paper is also focused on a certain negligence in discussing the lives and identities of academic members, personal characteristics that reach beyond their research present in current scholarship.

Merriam-Webster defines “ivory tower” as “a secluded place that affords the means of treating practical issues with an impractical often escapist attitude” (Merriam-Webster 2019) and their exemplary sentence using the term is: “The book was written by some college professor who’s spent her entire professional life in an *ivory tower*” (Merriam-Webster 2019). As can be seen, the concept of the ivory tower is oftentimes used specifically in the context of university education or academic space. It describes not only the escapism and seclusion from the world outside of it, but also further aspects resulting from them, such as certain hierarchical structures emerging not only in the larger context of the academic sector versus the world, but also within academia itself, which is an issue that Stockdill and Yu Danico deem important in their aforementioned work. Therein, they explore different ways of perceiving education and its role in society as either a way of liberation or, contrarily, domination (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 3).

In their book, they and other contributors deal with different topics of discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or position, resulting in the establishment of domination and hierarchy between members of the academic space. They write:

While we were not strangers to bias and discrimination in academia [...] we grew increasingly troubled by systemic attempts to dismiss our concerns about inequalities on campus and quash our individual and collective defiance of these inequalities. We experienced quite viscerally a central paradox of the academy: Critical thinking was promoted only to the extent that it did not call into question biases and bigotry within the department, the classroom, or the university. [...] Multiple inequalities linked to hierarchical, undemocratic decision-making processes make higher education an alienating place for many students and staff and faculty members. When we questioned institutional contradictions and bigotry, some staff, faculty, and administrators viewed us as “troublemakers.” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 3-4)

What the quoted paragraph reveals is the description of a peculiar dead-end position in which many people may find themselves while being a part of academia. The

active realization of the trespasses of other members, together with the simultaneous feeling of being unable to deal with the situation accordingly, reinforces passive acceptance of the described situation as well as strengthens the inability to penetrate and dismantle the hierarchical structures of academia as an institution. In his own essay in the book, Stockdill writes about the time when he and his Ph.D. colleagues openly challenged their department for “the lack of representation of women and people of color in a modern social theory syllabus as well as Eurocentric/racist, sexist, and homophobic biases in other classes” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 154). In a reactionary memo written by the Department Graduate Affairs Committee, Stockdill and his colleagues were called “militant” and their activities were described as threatening “the intellectual and social atmosphere of the entire department” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 155).

Stockdill's story is a proof of the paradox which he describes in the introduction of his book quoted above and which is still pervasive today. Theories of equality and critical thinking are supported and preached during different seminars and lectures. Nevertheless, it can easily happen that a person making, for instance, unwanted sexual advances to colleagues or graduate students may be the same person teaching a seminar on the theory of gender equality and sexual politics. Outside of Stockdill and Yu Danico's personal experiences from their own university, there have, over the years, been many cases of university employees showing questionable or inappropriate behavior. In light of the #MeToo movement that has been at the center of attention in recent years, one well-known example might be seen in the case of John Searle, a professor of philosophy at UC Berkeley, who “had been sued by Joanna Ong, a graduate student in the Philosophy department, for sexual assault over many years. After the allegations, several other women came forward, and even more students relayed stories of Professor Searle making misogynist and racist comments during lectures and in office hours” (Newfeld 2018). Stockdill, further in his essay, ponders on a certain paradox when it comes to dealing with issues such as those mentioned and continues by saying:

Given the image of academics as open-minded, free thinkers, it may seem ironic that many in higher education assume the same reactionary stances as other elites. But it makes sense. The hierarchical and elitist socialization of graduate school (and the tenure/promotion process) elicits the labeling of dissent as a threat. And in some ways, it is a threat: A threat to the decorum, the expectations, the sense of entitlement and expertise that swell the egos of those with the letters “PhD” after their names. A threat to that face of the academy that claims detachment from the ugliness of the world, a claim that in reality feeds the ugliness of exclusion, violence, and poverty. (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 155-56)

In relation to that, there is another question that poses itself in the search for an answer. If the academic sector has troubles finding a common ground of equality and fairness in its own closed off institution, is there a possibility for such a space to ever be open toward the outside, or is the emergence and further widening of the gap between these two worlds inevitable? The gap, naturally, must be there in all cases, otherwise there would be no tangible elements distinguishing academia from non-academia. However, the understanding and the reception of meaning – whether of works produced within academia or people who are a part of it – could, for instance, be understood in correlation with the understanding of a literary work's meaning in Wolfgang Iser's essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." In order to interpret a particular text, he explains, the gap between the author and the reader must be present, so that the active interest in reading further and exploring the work is maintained. However, at the same time, it cannot go into horizons too far from the reader's apprehension and lose the connection between them altogether. For him, it is thus "boredom and overstrain [as] the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play" (Iser 1972, 280).

What Iser writes about may not only be understood in parallel with ordinary people reading academic works, but also more generally with people seeking understanding and the meaning of the whole academic community. Thus, if both works produced within this space as well as the space itself maintain their seclusion in the so-called ivory tower, the gap between this world and any other world outside remains. In that way, consequently, academia continues to be inaccessible and unapproachable for the people of the general public. One may also, of course, ask whether institutions of university education are to be approachable in the same way as, for instance, spaces, purposes, and personnel of lower levels of education such as high schools. In order to help answer that question, let us look at the opinion research conducted in 2017 by the Pew Research Centre striving to find out what views general United States citizens hold on the effect of colleges and universities on the country. In June 2017, "58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents sa[id] colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, while just 36% sa[id] their effect is positive" (Fingerhut 2017). Although the numbers for the Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters showed that 72% still believe the effect of post-secondary education has a positive impact on the country, the negative numbers for both parties are still quite substantial. Naturally, this might lead to a discussion of such results which could consider the reasons for such a difference as can be found between the voters of the two parties. However, according to further statistics provided by the research, it seems evident that the issue goes beyond merely partisan affiliations.

When the questions were only directed at the university graduates, the results were vastly different and the gap between Republican and Democratic voters diminished. “Overwhelming majorities of Republican (93%) and Democratic (97%) college graduates [...] indicated their education was useful in helping them grow personally and intellectually” (Fingerhut 2017). These results are where the aspects of accessibility and the approachability of academic spaces resurface and again become relevant to discussion. The numbers quoted above suggest that the experience of being a part of the academic space, whether as a student or even further, as a scholar, is crucial to attributing value to it and perceiving it as an important contribution to one’s society. It may also imply that the purposes of the academic space are still either unknown or vague enough for the perception of the ordinary people to deem them important. Arguably, however, there exist many professional job occupations which require a university degree and manage to be perceived as significant. For instance, in the case of medical doctors or lawyers, the purpose of their work is rather clear to everyone in the general public, seeing that they interact with various kinds of people while doing their job as well as finding themselves portrayed in mass media, television, or popular culture.

The work of academic scholars, on the other hand, is predominantly presented within the boundaries of the university, at conferences which are attended by people of the same or similar academic rank and interests, and is subsequently published in scholarly journals. These are largely inaccessible to the general public in the same way they are to the members of academia, and that despite the fact that these people, too, contribute to the development of university education by having their share in the tax money further used by the government to support universities. Firstly, the general public, in most cases, has no way of knowing that most of these events and scholarship even exist, because they are usually not advertised beyond academia. Secondly, if the scholarship is available, ways of accessing them are more difficult due to the various requirements of acquiring reader’s cards in libraries or even differences in their price, which largely depends on one’s academic position, or lack thereof.

After Michel Foucault’s death, his partner and the inheritor of his archives, Daniel Defert, spoke about the issue of exclusivity and accessibility of academic materials when the fourth and final volume of *The History of Sexuality* was to be made public against Foucault’s wish. In an interview conducted by Guillaume Bellon, Defert said:

The fourth volume of [The History of Sexuality], falls in the category of the posthumous publications. At one point Michel Foucault’s family had deposited the typed work at the Bibliothèque de Saulchoir. I was against the idea

of such a faulty reading, [...] if there is no posthumous publication, why would Ph.D. students be the only ones to know anything about it? What is this privilege given to Ph.D. students? I have adopted this principle: it is either everybody or nobody. (Defert 2010, 5)

The example of Defert speaking about Foucault's publication is representative of the stark division in accessibility to academic materials in a more general sense. However, in reality the privileged group that Defert talks about consist of more than just Ph.D. students and includes all kinds of faculty members and academic researchers. A professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, Elliot Berkman, claims that in order to fight the gap described by the difference in privilege and access,

[w]e academics need to do a much better job of actually contributing to society and telling people about our contributions. [...] We need to take our obligation to society more seriously. We need to make social impact the starting point of our work rather than something we say will happen later, be done by someone else, or magically happen on its own. More than that, we need to fundamentally shift how we think about ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. We have a tendency toward "academic exceptionalism," as though our jobs were not work and our work need not address reality. (Berkman 2018)

Importantly, Berkman stresses academia's turn to society as a whole, and that not only as a working space producing books, articles, and other intellectual content. Crucially, his thoughts also stress the importance of academics realizing their own humanness and opening up to other people in the world, in order to emphasize that the identity of an academic does not merely consist of being an enlightened machine controlled by reason, or a two-dimensional cardboard character. Based on that, Berkman proposes to break out of such a narrow-minded view and tries to explore ways in which academics represent the space they work in as well as their own identities as being multi-faceted and defined by a plurality of characteristics, rather than the singularity outlined above.

As seen in the passages quoted from the collection of essays edited by two Ph.D. students Brett Stockdill and Mary Yu Danico, the position of graduate students can prove to be valuable when discussing various issues regarding the academic space. Because they are the freshest members of academia as well as recent graduates of master's and bachelor's programs, their position of standing at the crossroads of being students, researchers, and teachers at the same time grants them a unique insight into the space itself and eventually gives their opinions relevance within the academic community.

Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo, also known as Sammus, is an American underground rapper as well as a recent recipient of a Ph.D. degree in Science and Technology Studies, and one of the prominent personas attempting to move academia out of its ivory tower by making it a frequent topic addressed in her rap songs. In one of her interviews, when she was still a doctoral student, she said:

I wanted to speak about the anxieties that I think a lot of folks who have a lot of different identity points experience when navigating the world. I am at the intersection of a lot of different identities and so I think that that lends itself to people questioning a lot of things about me. I am a black woman in mostly white environment, I'm a Ph.D. student, and a rapper, and a producer, and a gamer, a geek. ("Sammus Leads a Multi-Hyphenate Life" 2017)

In her songs, she not only tackles the experience of being a Ph.D. student, exploring the world of academia and finding her place within it, but also some of the more personal matters including having troubles defining her own identity and understanding who she is as opposed to who she "should" be as an academic. In a different interview, she confessed: "Sometimes my identity as a Ph.D. student has become content for different songs as in the case of '1080p' or 'Pity Party'" (McKinney 2016). When examining her song "Pity Party," one notices that in her rapping, Sammus tackles several personal dilemmas in regard to her position as a doctoral student. The following excerpt of her lyrics presents the song's most pertinent part:

What am I doing?
Is it worth me pursuing degrees?
I don't even know what I'm gon' do if
I'm 37 and I'm still a student
Can't focus on music
I be comparing myself to my friends I know
It's a bad habit I try hard to let it go
I admit I been feeling pathetic so
I keep on thinking in all hypotheticals
Every minute it's
What if I dropped out?
What if I stopped now?
What if I...?
Well where would I be now?
(Sammus 2016, lines 17–30)

On the one hand, she admits that because she is both a musician as well as an academic, the different identity points act as a break in her focus. On the other hand, the

passage full of questions which remain unanswered implies that Sammus's academic identity is in fact a strong one, and perhaps also an inseparable part of her personality and her identity. The rapper questions her decision of staying in the academic environment and asks herself what would happen if she dropped out of her studies. When she raps "I don't even know what I'm gon' do if / I'm 37 and I'm still a student" she not only stresses the fact of being a Ph.D. student at an age older than the one usually considered a "student's age," but also brings into the discussion a concern about the uncertainty related to doctoral students' career prospects after their graduation.

The academic experience as presented by Sammus is, however, not only an authentic way of peeking into her own life as an individual, but in a more general sense represents aspects of the whole world of academia through a lens that is different from that of enlightenment, ivory tower, and reason, but rather affords us a view of the artist's own personality and the troubles she undergoes. Eventually, this may not only help the people outside academia, who might be listening to her music to create a better and more informed picture of what the world of academia is like and thus bringing them closer to it, but importantly, also provides a representation and a way of relatedness for that part of her audience that shares the same feelings and parts of her identity she talks about.

Another of her songs vital for this discussion is titled "1080p." Straight from the beginning, the rapper directly delves into her feelings about the academic environment.

I'm kind of scared of the academy
think that my parents are proud of me
I just wish I knew how to be comfortable here
I never feel like I'm allowed to breathe
Rubbing shoulders with these old nerds
Rockin' sweater vests in their office hours
Eatin' hors d'œuvres while I soul search
Tryna make some sense of the ivory tower
Feelin' sober
Am I just a coward or a poser?
I don't really doubt it
Or a soldier?
Books in holsters
But the setting sucks I can't fight the power
Cuz they write books nobody reads
For these white folks that they tryna please
Recycle all the right quotes tryna cite blokes ain't my cup of tea
(Sammus 2016, lines 1–17)

In the first four verses, the rapper talks about her fear of the academic space in a very raw and unfiltered way. Instead of pretending to blend in with the environment as well as the people of higher academic positions who create it, she admits to her fear and feelings of discomfort, constraint, and a metaphorical sense of suffocation. In the following four verses, she proceeds to describe people which she encounters during her daily life as a graduate student. The attributes such as “old nerds,” “rockin’ sweater vests” and “eatin’ hors d’œuvres” are arguably all very superficial descriptions which imply that in Sammus’s perception superficiality and shallowness are generally means via which one has the chance to know the people she describes. These descriptions are also put into harsh contrast with the previous four lines presenting the artist’s own personal feelings, which, in her view of the professors around her, are lacking. Moreover, these attributes are undoubtedly also references to the history and tradition of academia, as well as to a kind of entitlement of the elite. The next six lines are where the two previously described poles – superficiality and the raw representation of feelings of fear, discomfort, and anxiety – collide.

As was the case in the previously cited song “Pity Party,” here, Sammus again questions herself, her identity, and her place within the academic environment. She poses questions which remain open and unanswered. In the last four verses, Sammus reminds us, again, of the inaccessible nature of academia, of academics often building up their careers, positions, and power by writing books for very small audiences as lacking in diversity as well as any social impact and general interconnection with the people of the real world.

What is worth mentioning is the fact that Sammus’s “1080p” is not a song exclusively about academia. When the introductory section which is quoted above ends, she seamlessly continues rapping about her ex-boyfriend while eating crackers: “Eatin’ chex mix / Feelin’ helpless / I really miss my fuckin’ ex it’s / Such a mindfuck” (Sammus 2016, lines 18–21). She stresses the fact that for her, being a graduate student together with her whole academic experience is not a secluded world of its own detached from anything else she experiences in her life. In the music video for the song, Sammus is portrayed having a consultation with a professor at school while rapping about a child that she never had with her former partner (1080p Official Video 2016). Sammus stresses that her identity points are interconnected and that being an academic does not instantly position her in an intellectual highground as might often be perceived, and that it does not make her any less of a feeling and emotional human being.

Later in her song “1080p,” Sammus talks about going to therapy, being on medication, and she mentions the topic of depression directly in connection with academia: “I was taking pills up in the bathroom / ended up alone in grad school” (Sammus 2016). In an interview, the artist herself emphasizes the importance of talking

about depressive feelings, especially in connection to spaces such as universities where reason to a great extent dominates feelings. She says: “I think the tide is starting to change regarding conversations about mental health across many genres. Perhaps, the thing that’s different about ‘1080p’ is the subject matter of the song. Depression, particularly in the context of academia is not necessarily a topic that has been broached, particularly by a woman MC” (McKinney 2016). As studies show, mental health problems among academics, namely Ph.D. students, are far from being rare and thus these topics as a subject of Sammus’s songs are not only personal for her, but also highly relevant within the academic community. “In a [2017] study of 3659 Belgian doctoral students across several universities and disciplines, 51 % reported having at least two mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety), 40 % reported three or more, and 32 % reported at least four, with work-family conflict found to most strongly predict psychological distress” (Levecque et al. 2017).

However, this issue most certainly is not limited to the doctoral students in Belgium who comprised the sample of the quoted study. A more recent study conducted in 2018 “surveyed a total of 2,279 individuals (90 % PhD students and 10 % Master’s students). Respondents were from 26 countries and 234 institutions [...] and represented diverse fields of study including, biological/physical science (38 %), engineering (2 %), humanities/social sciences (56 %) and “other” (4 %)” (Evans et al. 2018). Their official results are as follows:

Our results show that graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population. Forty-one percent of graduate students scored as having moderate to severe anxiety on the GAD07 scale as compared to 6 % of the general population, as demonstrated previously. Additionally, 39 % of graduate students scored in the moderate to severe depression range in our study, as compared to 6 % of the general population. (Evans et al. 2018)

Taking both studies into consideration, the fact alone that studies such as these are being conducted one year after another proves that mental health problems among Ph.D. students, and presumably other members of academia, are still very present. Nevertheless, in most cases no special attention is paid to such problems at the institutions and they are not dealt with accordingly, and in some cases not at all. Frederik Anseel, one of the professors involved in the study conducted in Belgium stresses that instead of dividing between believers and non-believers in any sort of crisis regarding mental health in academia, it is important to acknowledge that, “[g]iven that there are at least strong indications that a substantial group of people

are suffering, wouldn't it be worthwhile to at least examine in your own organization what the problem is, and make sure that you have policies in place to deal with problems if they arise?" (as cited in Flaherty 2018)

Because institutional changes take much longer to come into action and the studies themselves, as Anseel claims, take years to conduct and further evaluate, (as cited in Flaherty 2018) it is quite unsurprising that actions taken by individuals rather than masses, such as Sammus's songs discussed, are occurring more frequently now than before. Her songs dealing with these topics not only provide therapeutic comfort to herself as an artist and a creator, but also to other people listening to them and finding their own problems such as feelings of not fitting in, fears of inadequacy, alienation, depression, or poor prospects for their future career, represented in the artworks of popular culture. For Freud, as Rob Lapsley argues in his essay "Psychoanalytic Criticism," art has its own way of providing for the identification of its spectators with the values or heroes that it presents. For him, "artworks are [thus] more than merely the articulation of conscious and unconscious desires; they are also attempts to actively master distressing, even traumatic, situations" (Lapsley 2006, 72). In this way, Sammus's songs may also act therapeutically and offer their listeners a platform for identification and for mastering trauma.

Sammus speaking out about the mentioned issues through her music is not, however, the only occasion in which one can observe academic identity, or the problems people experience within academia, being actively represented outside of its own space, namely within the spaces of new media and popular culture. For example, an internet community called Shit Academics Say which has just under 620,000 likes on Facebook and 316,000 followers on Twitter is "a blog on faculty issues, graduate education, and social media" (Shit Academics Say 2019, "About") as introduced by its creator Nathan C. Hall, associate professor at McGill University in Montreal. The main aim of the platform is sharing memes related to either the experience of being an academic or also experiencing academia as a space more generally, including from the position of an outsider. The main success of the posted memes lies in the conjunction of relatability to the experience presented and sarcastic humor dominating most of the site's content. The form of a joke in which the various experiences of these people are presented is not incidental. As Rob Lapsley summarizes in his essay, for Freud, jokes, together with various other forms of art, are compromise formations which "disguise their articulation of the artists' conscious and unconscious desires through formal devices" and act as a medium through which repressed desires or impulses find their way of representation and social acceptance (2006, 70). As seen in Figure 1 below, in this case the platform

shared a real-life experience of a female professor being repeatedly asked about whose lab she was in and repeatedly not being understood after she explicitly answers that it is her own lab (Shit Academics Say 2018).

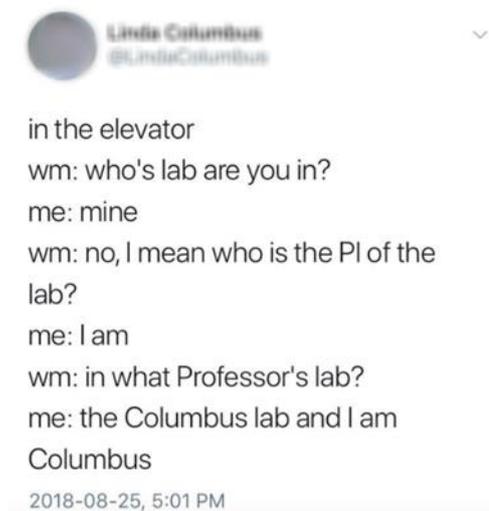


Figure 1 A screenshot of a picture posted on the Facebook page Shit Academics Say describing a female academic identity.



Figure 2 a screenshot of a picture posted on the Facebook page Shit Academics Say describing the accessibility and approachability of academia.



Figure 3 A screenshot of a comment reacting to the post in Figure 1.

As can further be observed in Figure 3 (Shit Academics Say 2018), which presents an excerpt from the discussion that was prompted by this post on the Facebook page, the community does not merely post memes to entertain its audience, but rather uses the entertainment as a channel through which vital academic experiences and issues of sexism, racism, professional mistreatment, and many of those already mentioned before, including depression or alienation, have a chance to be presented

to a wider audience. Arguably, in spite of the page's titular reference to academics specifically, due to its immense popularity, one cannot say that the page's content merely targets a niche academic audience and its significant reach outside of this community is more than predictable. Moreover, the public outreach gets even wider through the further act of sharing these memes on their fans' personal profiles. Because of that, not only can the frequency with which these various experiences ingrained in the memes occur be more consciously realized, but also, importantly, the issues can then be further debated.

In Figure 2 (Shit Academics Say 2019), there is another example of the kind of posts which Shit Academics Say shares on their Facebook page.

The paradox of academia being modern and up-to-date while simultaneously adhering to oftentimes worn out rules and values, which is at question in the picture, is a vital discussion topic that, in a broader sense, relates to the issues discussed by this paper and which Sammus and Stockdill both reference in their works. The increasing accessibility and approachability of academia are two issues brought to the fore by the modernization and the changing perspective of the orientation of academia. Therefore, despite being ruled by sarcastic humor and often ridiculing the academic space itself, Shit Academics Say, with the number of people that follow and like it on different social media outlets, creates a meaningful space stimulating the discussion on various current problems surrounding academia and contributes to the further dissemination of vital academic issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

Kristen Cochrane's Instagram account "ripannicolesmith" with more than 62,000 followers is another example where the products of the academic space find their way outside the boundaries of the university. In a way that is similar to Shit Academics Say, Cochrane's work is also oriented towards using humor and entertainment as attention-catching phenomena. Cochrane creates memes in which she takes segments of different theoretical materials, whether it be from philosophy, film studies, or literature, and connects them with what is seemingly the exact opposite of these highbrow scholarly books and articles – the mainstream popular culture. These include screenshots from the reality television series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, or various references to popular American high school dramas or music. In the description of her account she writes that, "everything is culture" (ripannicolesmith 2019) and emphasizes the fact that even these two worlds do not have to be perceived as so vastly set apart. Cochrane is a doctoral researcher from the Film and Moving Image Studies program at Concordia University in Montreal and creates memes and other content such as curated reading lists or articles on cultural criticism in order to help pay for her underfunded university program. On her Patreon page, where Cochrane introduces her work and interest in film studies,

she writes that one of the reasons she creates these memes is that she wishes these reality shows or teenage films had critical theory embedded in them (Cochrane 2019). In the pictures below, one can see examples of her memes recreating conversations between Kim Kardashian and her sister with the inclusion of Marshal McLuhan's theory on advertising in Figure 4 (ripannanicolesmith August 2018) and Roland Barthes's theory in Figure 5 (ripannanicolesmith September 2018).

"I don't want to be a Kardashian anymore. Our Twitter fanfic fights—that you orchestrated after doing close readings of Marshall McLuhan and his thesis that advertising is the greatest art form of postmodernity—are making me want to die." -Kourtney Kardashian (2018)



Figure 4 A screenshot of a meme posted on the Instagram profile “ripannanicolesmith” recreating the conversation of the Kardashian sisters while referencing a theory of Marshal McLuhan.

Kourtney: “All men are trash”

Kim: “You just THINK that all men are trash because you keep CHOOSING shady men! Maybe if you had actually READ Roland Barthes, you would know that language is never innocent. What does ‘man’ even mean?!”



Figure 5 a screenshot of a meme posted on the Instagram profile “ripannanicolesmith” recreating the conversation of the Kardashian sisters while referencing a theory of Roland Barthes.

Looking at the memes above, it may seem as if Cochrane has tried to combine elements which resist combination – theory and mainstream popular culture. At the same time, however, it reminds us of Slavoj Žižek's ever-repetitive warning about ideology being everywhere and in everything, perhaps especially in those parts of culture consumed by mass audiences. Cochrane agrees that critical theory should not stay in its often-inaccessible position as the intellectual high ground and should be used to penetrate those parts of culture that affect people's everyday lives. She writes:

I chose this area of study because I think it has tremendous power in effecting (and affecting) social change. For instance, why are we conditioned to see certain forms of culture as bad or as guilty pleasures (like reality television, soap operas, or sports)? I want to be analytical and fruitful. [...] I want to talk about, and share

with you, the ways in which we can confront culture, which is political, gendered, sexual, sometimes fun, sometimes uncomfortable. (Cochrane 2019)

In the discussions of her posts, her memes more often than not spark interest in her followers who ask her to give recommendations on which authors and works to read, or they directly get into discussions of the theories appropriated.

These concerns about the accessibility and approachability of the academic space are nowadays also being dealt with on a more institutional level. One of the phenomena which is on the rise is the self-representation of universities on YouTube. While it is a fact that a vast majority of universities have a YouTube channel, many use it mostly for self-promotion and as a way of presenting their university as a “place to be” for their prospective students. Although this is a legitimate way of advertising, it is not interested in reaching people who do not plan to apply to study at a university, but would maybe appreciate the chance to peek in and see what the educational process there looks like, what lectures are being taught, etc. There are several prestigious universities, such as Yale University or Massachusetts Institute of Technology, whose YouTube channels offer an additional value of exactly this kind. Despite both being top-ranked schools with difficult admissions processes and high tuition fees, they attempt to fight their seclusion and inaccessibility by providing a wide audience with countless hours of unedited lecture recordings, guest lectures, as well as interviews with their professors which are free of charge.

In this way, ordinary people who either do not plan to attend any university, people who attended it a long time ago, or those that are studying a different field and are simply interested in a particular topic, can all draw from the content provided to them via these outlets in virtual space. Naturally, attending lectures and seminars in real life is without a doubt different from watching them online, since the latter excludes the experience of being in the classroom at the time of lecturing as well as the immediacy of this allowing one to respond to or participate in discussions. Nevertheless, the activity of these universities breaks boundaries between their own academic space and the rest of the world, at least to a certain extent, and allows for accessibility, even to those who would otherwise not be able to afford it. It is thus an excellent example of “the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 3).

As has been pointed out by means of many examples showing the different endeavors of people to change perceptions of academia and accommodate it within the public space more than it has so far been, it is clear that the position of academia and the understanding of what it means are not values incapable of change. In this way, this text has tried to call attention to different ways in which not only academic

space but, importantly, also academic identity, are and can further be represented outside of academia itself and perhaps one day annihilate the concepts of “outside” and “inside” altogether. By getting closer to audiences with broader sets of interests, the academic space has an increasingly better chance of gaining new and different meanings, being viewed from different perspectives, which ultimately may end up being beneficial for the understanding of its importance not only within the sector of education, but also in the world generally.

It is not accidental that the people aspiring for such a change, some of which have been quoted above, are academics themselves. The representation of academic identity and the emphasis on its multifacetedness is, naturally, especially crucial for them. Moreover, as the institutionalized change coming from universities themselves is often a lengthy and bureaucratically exhaustive process, the call for change coming from the individuals themselves comes as no surprise. As has been pointed out in this paper, in order to personalize the academic sector and symbolically unlock it from the ivory tower it still finds itself in, it is necessary to focus on the individual parts creating it. Besides that, many of the experiences that the creators and doctoral students quoted in this article speak about, such as depression, alienation, or many others, are predominantly personal and first have to be discussed from a similarly personal point of view before they can be considered more generally and become numbers of in statistical research. In connection with this, the process of the academic space opening up to the world via its representation and inclusion in popular culture or social media, can then further lead to providing awareness and accessibility and to feasibly diminishing the problems discussed.

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Ivana Plevíková

Ivana Plevíková is a PhD candidate at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. Her current doctoral research is concerned with the construction of dystopian worlds in Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction and a theoretical investigation of the ways in which dystopian stories transcend the boundaries of the literary and actively engage in the process of defamiliarization of the known and normalized in spheres such as politics, social criticism, and environmentalism. In the past, her academic activities also included a focus on the processes of film adaptation of literary works and their further reappropriation into other non-literary and non-artistic spheres. As a PhD candidate, she has taught courses as well as co-organized a conference at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic.



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CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S *CAMP*

Thomas Castañeda

Abstract

In this paper I consider recurrent themes in the work of Christopher Isherwood, a novelist best known for his portrayal of Berlin's seedy cabaret scene just before the outbreak of the Second World War. The themes I discuss each hinge on uncanny discrepancies between youth and old age, male and female, sacred and profane, real and sham. Together, I argue, these themes indicate the author's investment in a queer camp sensibility devoted to theatricality, ironic humor, and the supremacy of style. I focus on specific descriptions of characters, objects, and places throughout the author's work in order to foreground camp's rather exuberant interest in artifice, affectation, and excess, as well as its ability to apprehend beauty and worthiness even, or especially, in degraded objects, people, or places. Ultimately, I argue that the term *camp*, especially as it applies to Isherwood's work, names both a comedic style and a specifically queer empathetic mode rooted in shared histories of hurt, secrecy, and social marginalization.

Keywords

Artifice; camp; dandy; humor; irony; style; theatricality; queerness

* * *

CHRISTOPHER Isherwood (1904–1986) first glossed the term *camp* in a 1954 novel entitled *The World in the Evening*; there, he describes camp as a way of “expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (125). The novel centers around a bisexual widower named Stephen Monk, who flees his second marriage in Los Angeles to live with his “aunt” Sarah – a close family friend – in a small Quaker community outside Philadelphia. Not long after his arrival at the commune, Stephen gets hit by a car and must undergo regular physical therapy at home; his therapist, a homosexual man named Charles Kennedy, arrives one day for a routine check-up and the two discuss camp.

CHARLES: “In any of your *voyages au bout de la nuit*, did you ever run across the word camp?”

STEPHEN: “I’ve heard people use it in bars. But I thought. . .”

CHARLES: “You thought it meant a swishy little boy with peroxidized hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich?”

Christopher Isherwood's Camp

Yes, in queer circles, they call *that* camping. It's all very well in its place, but it's an utterly debased form. . . What *I* mean by camp is something much more fundamental. You can call the other Low Camp, if you like. . . what I'm talking about is High Camp. High Camp is the whole emotional basis of the ballet, for example, and of course Baroque art."

[...]

STEPHEN: "What about Mozart?"

CHARLES: "Mozart's definitely a camp; Beethoven, on the other hand, isn't."

STEPHEN: "Is Flaubert?"

CHARLES: "God, no!"

STEPHEN: "But El Greco is?"

CHARLES: "Certainly." (Isherwood 1954, 125)

Apart from drawing a rather dubious distinction between "Low" and "High" forms of camp,¹ this brief discussion signals a specific and indeed quite esoteric kind of taste; such is evident in the way Charles categorically includes some historical figures within the camp canon (Mozart, El Greco) while excluding others altogether (Beethoven, Flaubert). In this way, Charles's explanation of the term recalls Susan Sontag's seminal 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," where she describes camp as something of a stylized "private code, a badge of honor even, among small urban cliques" (275).

While Charles's rather dogmatic, even snobbish, definition of the term is significant in itself, a later conversation between him and Stephen adds further nuance to the idea of camp. During another routine visit, Charles compares Stephen's plaster cast to the chrysalis of a butterfly. Tapping the cast with his finger, Charles asks, "How's this whited sepulcher?" "Not too bad," Stephen responds, "except for the stink" (1954, 128).

My poor friend, you call *that* stinking? Wait till you've been in it another two months. Nobody will be able to come near the house. Loathsome worms and beetles will crawl out of it. Buzzards and vultures will assemble and sharpen their beaks. And then, one morning, it'll crack wide open and the most gorgeous butterfly, all dazzling white, will emerge and spread its wings and flutter away over the treetops. (128–129; author's emphasis)

Isherwood's evocative description of a foul cast indicates camp's specific, if morbid, fascination with deterioration and decay. However, by emphasizing the singular beauty of a butterfly emerging from the cast, the author registers an even more complicated camp engagement with the grotesque: its ability to find worthiness in

¹ Charles's definition of camp as either high or low seems to derive from a rather flimsy distinction between popular and high culture vis-à-vis camp. Indeed, as Dennis Denisoff points out, "an aspect of much camp is its satirizing of 'serious,' or 'high,' artistic concerns through seemingly low-brow methods" (1998, 85).

supposedly worthless things, that is, its ability to apprehend or recover beauty even, or *especially*, in degraded objects, people, and places.

In this paper I argue that the term camp names both a comedic style and a specifically queer empathetic mode that is rooted in shared histories of hurt and social exclusion. Quite simply put, camp describes “those elements in a person, situation, or activity that express, or are created by, a gay sensibility,” a comic vision of the world that is “colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one’s gayness” (Babuscio 1993, 19–20). Through comedy, camp enables identification across invisibility, difference, and disgrace; it is, according to Heather Love, “a humor that laughs through tears” (Villanova 2009). To be sure, the history of camp culture in the United States intertwines with the historical institution and conditioning logic of ‘the closet.’ Fearing professional sabotage and legal backlash, Isherwood chose not to write candidly about his own sexuality until after the Stonewall Riots of 1969.² Yet, what is truly exceptional about Isherwood’s work is how it aestheticizes, through camp, what is not explicitly disclosed. Indeed, despite the lack of explicit homosexuality in Isherwood’s pre-Stonewall work, camp pervades his novels as tacit evidence, through traces of queerness encoded in clever language; intertextual references aimed at a coterie readership; and decadent descriptions of people, objects, and places that align most conspicuously with a gay sensibility.

The modern camp, construed as a kind of persona, originates in the late-Victorian dandy, a historical figure epitomized by the public personality and literature of Oscar Wilde.³ In *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), Ellis Hanson describes the typical dandy as, with few exceptions, an “upper-class, overly educated, impeccably dressed aesthete,” and a person prone to same-sex attraction (3). Noting his arrival in London in “a velvet beret, lace shirts, velveteen knee-breeches, and black silk stockings,” Susan Sontag describes Wilde as a man who “could never depart too far in his life from the pleasures of the old-style dandy” (2009, 289):

It was Wilde who formulated an important element of the Camp sensibility – the equivalence of all objects – when he announced his intention of “living up”

² Fearing legal repercussions following the obscenity trials held around the publication of Radcliffe Hall’s lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, British publishers were reluctant to put out work that dealt explicitly with homosexuality – or “sexual inversion,” as it was called at the time (Page 1998, 38).

³ A prolific Irish novelist, poet, and playwright associated with the Decadent literary and artistic movement of the late nineteenth century, Wilde was condemned to two years in prison for ‘gross indecency’ under Section 11 of the notorious Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1895. More commonly known as the Labouchere Amendment, the law criminalized sexual activity between men in the United Kingdom at the time and was used broadly to prosecute male homosexuals where actual sodomy could not be proven.

Christopher Isherwood's *Camp*

to his blue-and-white china, or declared that a doorknob could be as admirable as a painting. When he proclaimed the importance of the necktie, the boutonnière, the chair, Wilde was anticipating the democratic *esprit* of Camp. (289)

Published in 1939 as a collection of six short stories, Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* captures the unbridled hedonism of the Berlin demimonde just before the fateful rise of National Socialism in Germany. The book begins in the brisk autumn of 1930 with a curious description of a cluttered rooming house at Nollendorfstraße 17 in Berlin's Schöneberg district. Blurring the line between sacred and profane, Isherwood's eponymous first-person narrator, a young Englishman, describes banal household objects in essentially ecclesiastical terms: in the kitchen stands a "tall tiled stove, gorgeously coloured," which resembles an altar; a washstand, which looks like a Gothic shrine; a cupboard whose splendid stained glass windows recall a cathedral; and an enormous chair fit for a bishop's throne (2008b, 208).⁴

The narrator's religious description of a domestic interior – the home of his landlady, Fräulein Schroeder – indicates Isherwood's own investment in a camp sensibility that "nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles" (Sontag 2009, 292).⁵ In *Down There on a Visit* (1962) – a novel set in four different places (Berlin, the Greek islands, London, Los Angeles) at four different times (1928, 1932, 1938, the 1940s) – a character named Ambrose explains why he left Cambridge to establish a queer separatist commune on a small Greek island:

I'd been to a dinner party. . . A dreadfully dull party, actually. . . I'd have much rather stayed in my rooms and read. I remember, I'd just discovered Ronald Firbank, and I couldn't put him down. Well, I got back – it was about eleven, I suppose – and I opened the door, and I just couldn't believe my eyes. . . The entire place was wrecked – literally everything. They'd broken all the china, all the glass. They'd smeared some filth on the walls, and over the pictures. They'd even found my little egg-cup that I loved so. It was a present on my birthday; and I kept it hidden away in a cupboard, because it didn't go with the color scheme. But I loved it all the more, because nobody but me ever saw it. Well, they'd taken it out – this little bit of my childhood – and they'd smashed it. How could they have *known* that I'd mind that most of all? (1962, 115–116)

⁴ Given camp's fondness for ceremony and ornamentation, it is hardly surprising that Isherwood sprinkles his work with references to the architectural excesses and accouterments of the Catholic Church.

⁵ The narrator's description of the house also suggests a keen interest in exaggeration and artifice, in things-being-what-they-are-not: "three sham medieval halberds [...] fastened together to form a hatstand [...] a pair of candlesticks shaped like entwined serpents, an ashtray from which emerges the head of a crocodile, a paper knife copied from a Florentine dagger, a brass dolphin holding on the end of its tail a small broken clock" (Isherwood 2008, 208); tiny table napkins perforated along the edges to look like lace" (238).

Here, Ambrose recalls the time an unruly group of hearties⁶ ransacked his student dormitory at Cambridge, which he had color-coded in a then-fashionable emerald green. Ambrose's painful recollection of the incident is rife with camp references. Writing through Ambrose, Isherwood suggests his taste for camp when he cites Ronald Firbank (1886–1926), a homosexual British novelist and literary camp icon best known for his self-consciously stylized fictions set in the English countryside. Ambrose's camp sense is also clearly evident in his sentimental, if neurotic, attachment to a tiny egg-cup, which he nevertheless keeps hidden away in a cupboard lest it clash with his color scheme. Devastated, Ambrose leaves Cambridge upon finding his egg-cup in shards scattered across the floor of his room.

Upon hearing Ambrose's story, the novel's narrator hurries off to record what Ambrose has just told him. "I feel like something has been revealed to me," he writes, "not only about Ambrose but about myself" (117). The narrator's recollection of the egg-cup incident suggests a form of empathy rooted both in a shared history of homophobic aggression and a heightened affection for certain objects: "What astonishes me is how violently I was affected by his story. While he was telling it, all my undergraduate hostilities came back to me; I was grinding my teeth in fury against those hearties, and the smashing of the egg-cup nearly made me shed tears, too" (117).

As a taste in objects camp luxuriates in lavish décor, elaborate pattern, sensuous surface and texture; as a taste in persons it adheres to the notion of life-as-theater, of *being-as-playing-a-role*. In this way, camp encourages a particular "glorification of 'character,'" understood as "a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing" (Sontag 2009, 286). In his 1976 memoir *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood remembers Gerald Hamilton as an exquisite, "enchantingly 'period'" persona whom he claims to have "'recognized' as Arthur Norris, his character-to-be, almost as soon as he set eyes on him" (2012, 76–77). Something about Gerald's prim appearance and his anachronistic "courtly mannerisms" made him seem, to Christopher and his circle of friends, like "an absurd artwork which had been rediscovered by a later generation" (77). In his 1935 novel *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, Isherwood depicts Mr Norris "[s]eated before his dressing-table in a delicate mauve wrap" (2008a, 105):

Arthur would impart to me the various secrets of his toilet. He was astonishingly fastidious. It was a revelation to me to discover, after all this time,

⁶ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term 'hearties' referred to athletic students attending elite universities in England. In collegiate circles, the athletic hearties were set apart from the less athletic 'aesthetes,' who were known for their refined interests in art and literature.

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the complex preparations which led up to his appearance in public. I hadn't dreamed, for example, that he spent ten minutes three times a week in thinning his eyebrows with a pair of pincers. ("Thinning, William; *not* plucking. That is a piece of effeminacy which I abhor.") A massage-roller occupied another fifteen minutes daily of his valuable time; and then there was a thorough manipulation of his cheeks with face cream (seven or eight minutes) and a little judicious powdering (three or four). Pedicure, of course, was an extra; but Arthur usually spent a few moments rubbing ointment on his toes to avert blisters and corns. Nor did he ever neglect a gargle and mouthwash. ("Coming into daily contact, as I do, with members of the proletariat, I have to defend myself against positive onslaughts of microbes.") All this is not to mention the days on which he actually made up his face. ("I felt I needed a dash of color this morning; the weather's so depressing.") Or the great fortnightly ablution of his hands and wrists with depilatory lotion. ("I prefer not to be reminded of our kinship with the larger apes.") (105)

Here and elsewhere, Isherwood clearly draws inspiration from the dandy tradition, defined largely by its interest in masquerade, cosmetics, and self-conscious sartorial styling. By evoking the historical figure of the dandy, then, Isherwood hints at a contemporary camp persona drawn similarly to the pleasures of style and artifice.

As a verb, camp refers to a specific type of attitude or style of behavior. 'To camp' is to theatricalize posture and gesture, to turn temperament and speech itself into style (Keller 1993, 118). Camp speech, for example, typically incorporates foreign, often French, words and phrases. Many of Isherwood's characters behave and speak according to camp conventions. Before departing for an army camp in *Down There on a Visit*, Paul grabs "Christopher," Isherwood's eponymous narrator, and pretentiously exclaims, "*Au revoir, mon amour. . . tu sais que je t'adore*" (1962, 290). Elsewhere, in the "Ambrose" section of the same novel, a character named Maria Constantinescu arrives on Ambrose's island wearing a thick, almost theatrical, cake of blue eyeshadow: "*Mais, c'est ravissant!* [...] Oh, I like your island, Ambrose. One could be *très content* here" (17). Although the narrator recognizes Constantinescu's French as pure affectation and finds her appearance "ridiculous," even "monstrous," her theatricality puts her "somehow beyond criticism" (17).

In "Describing Camp Talk: Language/Pragmatics/Politics," Keith Harvey links the prevalent use of French in camp speech to its historical appropriation of outmoded aristocratic manners and styles.⁷ In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, William

⁷ Harvey traces camp's aristocratic impulse to the homosexual urban subcultures of eighteenth-century England. These communities, Harvey argues, deliberately challenged the values and conventions of the then emerging middle class, in part, by recouping the use of French — the *lingua franca*

Bradshaw⁸ is struck by one character's anachronistic laugh, which seems to have been "handed down from the dinner-tables of the last century" (2008a, 116):

Kuno threw back his head and laughed out loud: "Ho! Ho! Ho!" I had never heard him really laugh before. His laugh was a curiosity, an heirloom [...] aristocratic, manly and sham, scarcely to be heard nowadays except on the legitimate stage. (116)

By comparing Kuno's curious laugh to an "heirloom," the narrator not only raises a fundamental question – *whether camp inheres in objects or in the subject(s) perceiving them* – he also reduces an actual person, a homosexual German baron, to the status of an object, a relic. Indeed, Isherwood's work is filled with stylized descriptions of characters as objects. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, even before the narrator notices Mr. Norris's wig, he is fascinated by the man's forehead, which is "sculpturally white, like marble" (5). Later in the novel, the narrator meets a dominatrix named Olga at a New Year's Eve party. Her fleshy, grotesque appearance recalls the uncanniness of a life-size doll: "Like a doll, she had staring china-blue eyes which did not laugh, although her lips were parted in a smile revealing several gold teeth" (27). In *Down There on a Visit*, the narrator's description of Paul's girlfriend, Ruthie, evokes camp's interest in chinoiserie: "Ruthie's face is chalky white, with huge vermilion lips daubed upon it [...] Her great, beautiful gentle cow eyes have sculptured lids which make me think of an Asian bas-relief – the carving of some giant goddess" (1962, 192).

Sally Bowles, based on the real-life Jean Ross,⁹ is one of Isherwood's most enduring camp characters. Her story in *Goodbye to Berlin* has inspired several stage and film adaptations, including the 1951 Broadway production *I Am a Camera*, directed by John Van Druten; *Cabaret*, a Kander and Ebb stage musical that premiered on Broadway in 1966; and a 1972 Bob Fosse film musical starring Liza Minnelli alongside Michael York as "Brian Roberts," a character based loosely on Isherwood's eponymous narrator. In the book, Sally Bowles is a young Englishwoman working as a dancer at a seedy

of the European aristocracy during the early modern period (2000, 252). By appropriating French words and phrases, disaffected urban homosexuals could critique the cultural and economic transformations of the day; more specifically, through affected French speech, eighteenth-century English homosexuals could, according to Harvey, assert an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the emerging bourgeoisie while also parodying the declining aristocratic class (252).

⁸ Isherwood named the narrator after his own two middle names, William and Bradshaw.

⁹ Jean Ross was born in 1911 in Alexandria, Egypt to a wealthy cotton industrialist. In 1931, at age 20, Ross moved to Berlin to try her luck as an actress, but like Isherwood's Sally, ultimately fell into work as a magazine model and cabaret singer. In Berlin, Ross met and befriended the young Isherwood, who had been living there since 1929, and the two lived together for a period at Nollendorfstraße 17. Ross was on holiday in England, recovering from an almost fatal abortion, when Hitler came to power in March 1933. She chose not to return to Berlin, and Isherwood followed suit not long afterward (Carr 2019).

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cabaret club called The Lady Windermere, a rather conspicuous allusion to Oscar Wilde's four-act comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Play About a Good Woman*, which premiered at the St. James's Theatre in London in 1893.

In an essay entitled *Divine Decadence*, Linda Mizejewski lists some of the quirks that confirm Sally Bowles's enduring camp appeal: "her little stage-laugh" (qtd. in 1992, 64); her ability to spontaneously fabricate "some really startling lies" which she half-believed herself (64); and "her mock-elegant language in which nearly everything is 'most marvelous' and in which she 'adores' or is 'adored' by nearly everyone" (65). Her flirtatiousness also seems fit for the stage. A later scene in the Sally Bowles story depicts Sally "daintily curled up" on a sofa in a modest dress. She is "absurdly conscious" of her own beauty as if playing a part in a play (Isherwood 2008, 27). But, as Mizejewski notes, Sally's incessant talk of "gold-digging" contradicts her coy posturing (1992, 65). Earlier on, the narrator visits the Lady Windermere and observes Sally flirting in vain with men at work: "For a would-be demimondaine, she seemed to have surprisingly little business sense or tact. She wasted a lot of time making advances to an elderly gentleman who would obviously have preferred a chat with the barman" (65). The narrator's observation indicates a thematic concern at the heart of camp: *failure*. Through laughter, camp commiserates with the unsuccessful.¹⁰

As a comedic mode, camp derives humor from exaggeration and irony – uncanny discrepancies between youth and old age, male and female, sacred and profane, real and sham, or otherwise "any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association" (Babuscio 1993, 20). Incongruities of this kind abound in Isherwood's work. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, William Bradshaw is initially enthralled by Arthur Norris's preposterous wig. Later, Mr. Norris charms Bradshaw with his hideous teeth, which resemble jagged rocks (2008a, 4). Blurring the divide between sacred and profane, Paul in *Down There on a Visit* imagines his lapdog, Gigi, transmuting into "the world's first dog-saint"

¹⁰ Ella Carr, in an article entitled "The Real Sally Bowles," points out that Jean Ross was in fact quite far removed from the character depicted in *Goodbye to Berlin*: "For Ross, Sally – in particular her naivety and indifference to the political climate in Germany – remained a source of embarrassment throughout her life" (2019). Unlike Sally, Ross – a lifelong member of the Chelsea Communist Party – was an ardent activist, "pursuing her anti-fascist writings throughout the 1930s, and campaigning for nuclear disarmament and against the Vietnam War in the 1950s and 1960s" (Carr 2019). In light of this knowledge, Isherwood's famously one-dimensional portrayal of Ross/Sally as an apolitical and ditzzy dilettante speak to what some regard as camp's entrenched misogyny. While a more elaborate interrogation of camp's misogynistic impulse exceeds the scope of the current paper, I do wish to suggest that there might perhaps be a limit to camp's empathetic function. Indeed, when considering Isherwood's often flat or even hostile portrayal of women – as well as effeminate men – throughout his work, it is often unclear whether the author is laughing with or at the subjects of his camp gaze.

(1962, 313). And Fräulein Mayr, a stout anti-Semite at Fräulein Schroeder's flat, is described in rather masculine terms, with a "bull-dog jaw, enormous arms, and coarse string-coloured hair" (2008a, 214). Camp also finds exceptional humor in discrepancies between youth and old age. In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Sally's green fingernails betray her hands, which resemble "the hands of a middle-aged woman" – "nervous," "veined," and "very thin" (2008b, 235). In *Down There on a Visit*, Paul is portrayed as a man in his late twenties who dresses "like a boy in his teens" (1962, 194). His youthfulness, according to Isherwood, has "a slightly sinister effect, like something uncannily preserved" (194).

Throughout this paper I have focused on camp's rather obtuse attachment to certain types of objects as well as its odd, if also somewhat ambivalent, interest in certain kinds of personas. Before I conclude, I wish to shift attention to a version of camp that attaches itself instead to specific environments. In his memoir, Isherwood recounts a sea voyage from Antwerp to Rio de Janeiro aboard a Brazilian boat.¹¹ Drawing on diary entries from December 1935, the author recalls a lengthy stopover in Portugal, where he encounters an extravagant nineteenth-century palace perched high atop a hill overlooking Sintra, a small town near Lisbon "composed chiefly of palaces, ruinous and to let" (234). Built by Ferdinand II, King Consort to Queen Maria II, on the site of a derelict sixteenth-century monastery, the Pena Palace features an eclectic profusion of architectural styles – German Gothic and Renaissance Revival, Neo-Manueline and Moorish – and is flanked by turrets and fortified ramparts, battlements, domes, and a drawbridge. "The Castle of Pena is easily the most beautiful building any of us have ever seen," writes Isherwood (234), "[i]n fact, it has the immediate staggering appeal of something which is a sham, faked, and architecturally wrong. It could hardly be more effective if it had been erected overnight by a film company for a super-production about the Middle Ages" (234).

Isherwood's reference to filmmaking here is remarkable, since he would later support himself as a screenwriter upon moving to Los Angeles in 1939. The author's screenwriting experience in Hollywood greatly informed his later prose, which is suffused with a "heightened understanding of surfaces and gestures," a sensitivity to "outward experience," and a camp sensibility drawn as much from the insincerity of studio cinema as from the work of Oscar Wilde (Berg & Freeman

¹¹ Referring to himself and his travel companions, Stephen Spender, Jimmy Younger, and Heinz Neddermeyer — all homosexuals — Isherwood writes: "I remember the voyage in terms of opera, with the four of them relating to each other as quartets, trios, or duets" (2012, 230). Isherwood's reference to the opera signals a camp sense drawn to the high drama and emotional intensity characteristic of the operatic tradition, whose origins intertwine with the histories of Ballet, Mannerism, and contrapuntal music (143).

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2001, x). His novel *Prater Violet* (1945), for instance, takes place almost entirely on the set of a period melodrama set in nineteenth-century Vienna. The novel's narrator draws a striking comparison between the Hollywood film studios of the 1930s and the castles of the sixteenth century, suggesting, again, camp's fondness for duplicity and façade:

You see, the film studio of today is really the palace of the sixteenth century. There, one sees what Shakespeare saw: the absolute power of the tyrant, the courtiers, the flatterers, the jesters, the cunningly ambitious intriguers [...] There is enormous splendor, which is a sham; and also the horrible squalor hidden behind the scenery [...]" (1945, 60)

In the first volume of his posthumously published collection of diaries, Isherwood notes that he initially intended *A Single Man* to be a film, which is why the novel "reads somewhat like a screenplay – especially in the dialogue" (1997, xl). In 1969, he appeared in a BBC television documentary to discuss his inspiration for the novel.¹² By then, Isherwood had become not only a fixture in Hollywood, but a staunch pacifist and active member of the Vedanta Society of Hollywood led by Swami Prabhavananda. In the documentary, BBC journalist Derek Hart asks Isherwood, an Englishman from Cheshire, to explain why exactly he is so drawn to life in Southern California. The author responds by describing the region, and Los Angeles in particular, in quintessentially camp terms:

HART: You've written that you're rather fascinated by the sense of impermanence that you get here – Los Angeles, particularly.

ISHERWOOD: Yes, well, of course, in a way, this country is fundamentally desert country; it's been adapted and planted and settled, but nevertheless it's desert country. And there is always a certain sense of the mirage about it. But you know, I like that; it appeals to me altogether. Of course, as a devotee of Hindu philosophy, it's very much like the Hindu account of the universe as being just a kind of projection [...] and sometimes the great noble traditional buildings of Europe seem rather too solid in comparison. Here on the coast it's all rather dreamy and strange. [One] simply cannot recognize a street because they've built some other things on it, and since [Los Angeles] really always consisted of large billboards and neon signs more than buildings, you can change the whole place by just changing the lights. There's a sort of theatrical impermanence in that sense. (McDevitt 2014)

¹² Set in 1962 Los Angeles, the novel depicts the last day in the life of George Falconer, a middle-aged English professor who is grieving the sudden death of his longtime partner, Jim.

In his rather affectionate comparison of Los Angeles to a film set, Isherwood projects a camp sensibility onto an entire city, emphasizing and exalting its atmosphere of impermanence and mutability, a sentiment echoed in *Exhumations*, in which he claims affiliation with a certain tribe, “a tiny perverse minority who prefer the ignoble ruins of the day before yesterday, [who] would rather wander through an abandoned army camp or the remains of a world fair than visit Pompeii or Chan-Chan” (1966, 165). This is Isherwood’s perhaps most telling description of camp; indeed, even without naming the term explicitly, the author manages to capture the communal spirit at the heart of the camp sensibility. For Isherwood, camp ultimately always implies a tiny tribe, a queer clan assembled around a love of the marginal, the artificial, the absurd, the defunct thing, and the person past their prime.

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Thomas Castañeda is an MA student in American studies at the John F. Kennedy Institute, Freie Universität Berlin. He holds an interdisciplinary BA in cultural analysis from the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University and a minor in performance studies from the NYU Tisch School of the Arts. This is his first publication.



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**WHAT ELSE CAN NATURE MEAN:
AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CORMAC
MCCARTHY'S FICTION**

Kateřina Kovářová

Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's natural imagery has always attracted critical attention as a significant aspect of his fiction, since the mere volume of natural descriptions indicates their importance in the texts. However, McCarthy's nature was broadly perceived as symbolic, or as a setting device embedding the works in the environments of Tennessee and the West. McCarthy's natural imagery was first thoroughly studied by Georg Guillemin and Dianne C. Luce in their monographs *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004) and *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (2009). Since then, other critics such as Andrew Keller Estes have explored various aspects of McCarthy's natural imagery and the relationship between the human and non-human world and contributed to discussion on McCarthy's natural environment and its functions in the texts.

Following ecocritical theoretical framework of Lawrence Buell who suggests understanding nature and culture as inseparable domains with mutual influence instead of seeing them as isolated counterparts, this paper argues that reading McCarthy's novels with environmental awareness significantly alters their interpretation. The analysis of McCarthy's method of describing the natural environment and processes demonstrates that McCarthy's nature should not be interpreted as a purely aesthetic object, but rather as a means towards the revision of American history, and that his critical stance towards anthropocentrism reveals the ethical orientation of his fiction.

Keywords

Cormac McCarthy; ecocriticism; nature; culture; environmental ethics; anthropocentrism; Lawrence Buell

* * *

MCCARTHY'S singular vision was already fully formed in his first novel. His insistence on time, on the rhythm of the seasons, the phases of the moon, and most of all the evening redness in the West, manifests itself in almost the first image of *The Orchard Keeper*, and in the last, and rises to its most extreme pitch in *Blood Meridian*. (Hodge 2006, 67)

In his review for *Harper's Magazine*, Roger D. Hodge highlights two significant aspects of Cormac McCarthy's natural imagery: the links among the individual novels and "McCarthy's singular vision" (Hodge 2006, 67) of nature. McCarthy's natural imagery has always attracted both readers and critical attention as a significant aspect of his fiction, since the mere volume of natural descriptions indicates their importance in the texts. However, nature used to be perceived as a symbol or as a mere setting device embedding the works in their Tennessean and Western environments. Many studies seemingly focused on the place or other environmental aspects in fact "use environment to 'explain' the characters wandering through McCarthy's landscapes" (Estes 2013, 18). McCarthy's natural imagery as such was first thoroughly studied by Georg Guillemín and Dianne C. Luce in their monographs *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004) and *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (2009). Since then, other critics such as Andrew Keller Estes explored various aspects of McCarthy's natural imagery and the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds and contributed to the discussion on McCarthy's natural environment and its functions in the texts. This paper focuses on the depiction of nature in McCarthy's fiction and its significance for the interpretation of the works, emphasizing topics that recur throughout his literary career. While each of the novels would deserve an analysis of its own, this study predominantly analyses characteristics significant for more than one novel in order to expose the ethical orientation of McCarthy's fiction.

1. The Ecocritical Perspective

Ecocriticism is the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 1996, xviii). William Rueckert coined this term in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978, where he suggests inviting ecology to literary criticism as one of the possible ways to approach a literary text.¹ Since the 1970s, the discussion on ecology, the natural environment, and the impact of humanity on the Earth has begun to form an integral part of public debate as well as various academic disciplines such as psychology or sociology. Yet in the field of literature this topic has been rather marginal up to the 1990s with no systematic approach and only a smattering of essays (Glotfelty 1996, xvi). Cheryll Glotfelty further theorizes on the subject matter of ecocritical enquiry:

¹ Although Rueckert's text is an early example of ecocriticism, it already foregrounds several crucial topics, e.g. the ethical dimension of ecocriticism and the issue of anthropocentrism (Rueckert 1996, 106–107).

“Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (1996, xix).² Ecocriticism deliberately avoids creating a rigid set of rules and embraces a plurality of approaches; therefore, it is more defined by the similarity of its topics rather than by a uniformity of methodology. However, environmental critic Lawrence Buell established the following four criteria of an environmental text:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. [...]
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. [...]
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. [...]
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 1995, 7–8)

While being more of an idea of how “potentially inclusive *and* exclusive the category of ‘environmental’ is” (Buell 1995, 8), these criteria imply four main issues that ecocriticism addresses: the urge to stop marginalization of nature in literary studies (and in our thinking in general), the issue of anthropocentrism,³ humankind’s responsibility towards the natural environment, and the necessity to see nature in a different way than a mere aesthetic device or symbol, which is another way of appropriating it and of using it as a commodity.

All Buell’s notions are present in McCarthy’s fiction in various forms. However, an expectation to find a clear agenda in McCarthy’s fiction is bound to be disappointed by its employment of “the illusion of ethical neutrality in its narrator” (Luce 2017). The meaning must be co-constructed by the reader, because McCarthy’s subtle hints are often easy to overlook. This paper aspires to discuss the techniques McCarthy uses in his natural descriptions and to demonstrate how his natural imagery reinterprets American history and challenges the anthropocentric attitude.

² Ecocriticism suggests abandoning the nature/culture binary and perceiving these concepts in terms of scale rather than opposition because of the mutuality of their relationship. Therefore, the boundary between these concepts is in flux, which impedes their definitions.

³ Anthropocentrism is an “assumption or view that the interests of humans are of higher priority than those of nonhumans” (Buell 2005, 134), placing humankind at the centre of the world and establishing it as a norm.

2. McCarthy's Natural Imagery

In this paper, the word nature refers to “the material world, sometimes but not invariably including human beings” (Buell 2005, 143). In the context of McCarthy’s work, it is important to distinguish between nature and landscape, which “typically implies a certain amplitude of vista and degree of arrangement [... and] the totality of what a gaze can comprehend from its vantage point“ (Buell 2005, 143). Nature in McCarthy’s fiction is not limited to landscape imagery. On the contrary, the author emphasizes the complexity, interdependence, and dynamics between the environment and its inhabitants. Both living and non-living elements belong to it, as well as the relations between them and processes which might be invisible to the observer. This paper does not want to eliminate or hierarchize, but rather to enhance the diversity and multi-level character of McCarthy’s natural imagery. Hence the aspect of the nature definition which Timothy Morton considers problematic in his *Ecology without Nature*, that “nature is both the set and the contents of the set” (Morton 2007, 18), is actually necessary for understanding its complexity in McCarthy’s case. While Buell’s definition might seem quite general, it attempts to avoid the nature-culture binary, which is usually the basis of definitions of both nature and culture.

Like all natural imagery in literature, McCarthy’s natural descriptions are culturally produced. Despite his thorough knowledge of the regions he writes about, the novels are still literary works which do not simply pretend to document or imitate the actual locations. McCarthy often uses anthropomorphism,⁴ figurative language, or prose poems in his depictions of the natural environment. However, the anthropomorphism is not used in order to make nature more likeable and enable the reader to sympathize with nature by approximating it to them, but it is rather a method used to distort and destabilize the nature-culture binary still prevalent in Western culture. Even though McCarthy’s writings are inspired by the tradition of nature writing, literature is not the only medium influencing their natural imagery. According to Dianne C. Luce, the techniques used in landscape descriptions in *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985) frequently correspond with luminism and other forms of 19th century art (Luce 2017). Stacey Peebles points out that “[t]hroughout McCarthy’s career he has also been invested in writing for film and theater and so has been more engaged with media and performance than has been assumed. In addition to novels, he is the author of five screenplays and two works for theater, and he has been deeply involved with three of the seven film adaptations of his work” (Peebles 2017, 2). I believe that the influence of art

⁴ Attributing human characteristics to the non-human.

and film as visual media affect McCarthy's use of natural descriptions, transforming them into a means designed to convey meaning.

The character of the natural description is defined both by the observer and the observed. While in his novels McCarthy employs a seemingly ethically neutral omniscient narrator, this perspective is frequently replaced by a view focalized through a character. The narrator often describes a scene, a vast area, from a distance, where the reader is given a privileged position (this perspective corresponds with Buell's above-mentioned definition of landscape). These images frequently precede or follow some violent action and provide a moment of contemplation and "for their duration, such landscapes are focalized from a static vantage point while the narrator's eyes move over the elements of the scene" (Luce 2017). The narrator becomes a sort of lens for the reader, transcribing what is there to be seen, seemingly unbiasedly as if becoming a device to mediate the image, i. e. a camera. See one of the opening images of McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965):

East of Knoxville Tennessee the mountains start, small ridges and spines of the folded Appalachians that contort the outgoing roads to their liking. The first of these is Red Mountain; from the crest on a clear day you can see the cool blue line of the watershed like a distant promise.

In late summer the mountain bakes under a sky of pitiless blue. The red dust of the orchard road is like powder from a brick kiln. You can't hold a scoop of it in your hand. Hot winds come up the slope from the valley like a rancid breath, redolent of milkweed, hoglots, rotting vegetation... (McCarthy 2010a, 10)

The passage continues and after several paragraphs easily transforms into the history of the central community of the novel. Being an opening passage, it clearly states a very exact location in the novel, partly based on real places, partly fictional.⁵ The area is portrayed from a vantage point, possibly distant. The omniscient narrator evokes an image of an undisturbed place which is shared only with the reader, thereby giving them a privileged position. Hence the emphasis on "you," on a place where there could be "one," which is not neutral but highlights this privilege of the reader. Yet the undisturbed place is not spared the human impact in the form of roads that permeate the landscape. The perspective changes as the overview of a vast area is followed by an immersion into the place in the following paragraph. A natural sense of time is implied by the mention of the season. The unstable boundary between nature and culture is established by a link between a wind and the breath. The visuality of the first paragraph is varied by other senses, touch and olfaction.

⁵ Red Mountain in the novel is based on Brown Mountain in Tennessee (Luce 2009, 1).

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When the description is focalized through a character of the novel, their historical context, point of view, psychology, and emotion come into play. The character's view is more frequently used in a scene where the character is surrounded by the natural environment or interacts with it, although they might also be seeing a vast area. These descriptions often lack any sense of appreciation or contemplation but focus more on emotion or on a psychological reaction provoked by the natural environment that can be either positive or negative. The bodily sensations tend to occur in this kind of description since the characters not only see nature but also hear, touch, and smell it as in the following excerpt from McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968), where Culla Holme, the novel's protagonist, enters a forest:

He came down out of the kept land and into a sunless wood where the road curved dark and cool, overlaid with immense ferns, trees hung with gray moss like hag's hair, and in this green and weeping fastness birdcalls he had not heard before. He could see no tracks in the packed sand he trod and he left none. (McCarthy 2010b, 122)

While the passage is narrated by the third-person narrator, Culla's experience is emphasized. The narrator highlights what Culla sees, hears, and feels, engaging him in the description. The mediated stimuli are a feature that recurs throughout the novels: the senses of the characters become ours and we join their experience. The nature-culture binary is established by crossing from the "kept land" to the wood, but it is immediately distorted with the image of moss hanging "like hag's hair." The lack of light creates tension between the beauty of the place and its possible dangerousness. The environment in this passage is not a silent and picturesque scenery seen from a distance, it is depicted in its complexity, even mentioning the organisms living in the environment.

The combination of narrator's and characters' views enables McCarthy to describe nature from different perspectives, to provide both the revisionist 20th century point of view influenced by two world wars and the environmental crisis, the immediate experience and impressions of a human being surrounded by nature, and the prevalent perspective on nature from the time in which the novel is set. This density of natural imagery also puts an emphasis on the reader. The references and changes in tone are quite easy to overlook, which shows how much their interpretation depends on the reader, who must follow McCarthy's technique. Dianne C. Luce comments on the role of the reader:

McCarthy expects so much from his readers that his works sometimes seem to be written for a specialized local audience, an audience of insiders. Read

with a knowledge of place, the works open out in unsuspected ways, and what may seem merely a realistic detail relegated to the hazy background of McCarthy's fiction – the displacement of a small landowner, a temperance parade, a flooded river, a passing reference to White Caps, a comically corrupt justice of the peace—comes into focus as a newly perceived foreground, one that was always there to be recognized. (Luce 2009, vii–viii)

The reader recognizes the subtle differences in descriptions and understands when the voice belongs to the narrator and when it is focalized through the character, which changes the meaning. Readers are expected to recognize the references and hints that uncover the ethical and ecological dimensions of the texts. Moreover, the details Luce lists frequently provide valuable information of a certain historical moment or social situation which is influenced by, or influences, the natural environment, such as the exploitation of natural resources, the extermination of a species, or the industrialization of the area. Nature is part of the action, of the plot, of the characters' actions and doings. Nature and culture influence one another constantly, frequently with serious consequences.

3. A New Perspective on American History

Traditionally, the history of the westward expansion tends to focus on the advancement of civilization and on humankind, excluding the nonhuman. In *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) Roderick Nash points out the significance of nature and particularly the concept of wilderness for American history and calls it “the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw material of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning” (Nash 1979, xv). The specifics of American nature were a crucial aspect that immensely influenced its history both on regional and national scales. McCarthy's fiction reflects this fact, providing a revisionist commentary implicating the human history in the natural one (Buell 1995, 7) as another facet of the nature-culture interdependence.

McCarthy's vision of history and of the advancement of American civilization does not correspond with the nationwide myth of a victorious process of claiming the promised land. His revisionist view narrates a different story, a story of conquest and destruction. While the Southern novels contain hints of the history of the region, the most complex vision of history is depicted in *Blood Meridian*, a novel set in the middle of the westward expansion. Luce comments on the fact that the landscape imagery in the novel destabilizes the ethos of the West:

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McCarthy's landscapes are not the renderings of the pastoral or picturesque or even the sublime west distributed to curious nineteenth-century Americans in the cultural centers back east. Rather, they tend to deconstruct and deromanticize the mid-nineteenth-century west and the imperialism that claimed, tamed and absorbed it as part of America. (Luce 2017)

McCarthy uses a view of nature culturally constructed through the visual arts and uses it to reinterpret the westward expansion, traditionally understood in terms of achievement and triumph, as a form of destruction leading to a major environmental crisis, thus suggesting a perspective on westward expansion as a crucial moment in American history with regard to the mutual influence of humanity and nature. Arguably, this expansion into the natural environment has never stopped, as is apparent in the Border Trilogy. What Cormac McCarthy does most noticeably in *Blood Meridian*, which reappears throughout his work, is to reframe American history from a different angle, from the environmental point of view. In this aspect McCarthy's perspective on the westward expansion in *Blood Meridian* strongly resembles a perspective several years later employed by New Western Historians.⁶ David Worster comments on the interest in the role of the natural environment as follows:

A second theme in the New Western History is this: The drive for the economic development of the West was often a ruthless assault on nature and has left behind it much death, depletion, and ruin. Astonishing as it now seems, the old agrarian myth of Turner's day suggested that the West offered an opportunity of getting back in touch with nature, or recovering good health and a sense of harmony with the nonhuman far from the shrieking disharmonies of factories, technology, urban slums, and poverty that were making life in Europe and the East a burden to the spirit. (Worster 1991, 18)

McCarthy's description of the actions of the Glanton gang⁷ provide anything but an image of harmony in any sense. Instead of colonizers seeking a new life, the author focuses on a group of violent individuals who commit very brutal crimes for the sake of the economic prospects offered by the authorities; this is obviously a story which tends to be overlooked by "mainstream" history since it does not fit into the mythmaking narrative.

⁶ I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Volker Depkat, who directed my focus to New Western History at the New Pathways in North American Studies conference in Brno.

⁷ A group of scalp hunters that is loosely based on historical persons (mainly the characters of John Glanton and Judge Holden). The economy of scalp hunting and the real Glanton gang are discussed in depth in John Sepich's *Notes on Blood Meridian*.

Blood Meridian challenges the notion of a separate setting and narration. Natural descriptions appear in the text either as what Luce calls “narrative commentary” or they can be themselves a means of narration. The occasional remnants of the progress of civilization appear in the novel in the form of the ruins of churches⁸ on the outskirts of towns (an image revisited in the second volume of the Border Trilogy, *The Crossing*, published in 1994) with “faded frescos” quite reminiscent of ancient paintings on stone walls later in the novel. The images are meant to be seen, to stay, but the text is full of other, unintentional remnants of civilization. In this aspect *Blood Meridian* again precedes New Western History and the statement Richard White makes in his essay “Trashing the Trails” that “[t]he New Western Historians – particularly environmental historians – have an affinity for trash as the evidence of human actions, the relics of culture. Where Old Western Historians see nature, New Western Historians see the debris and the consequences of human use” (White 1991b, 27). The following passage from *Blood Meridian* is an example of McCarthy’s attention to such relics:

They began to come upon chains and packsaddles, single trees, dead mules, wagons. Saddletrees eaten bare of their rawhide coverings and weathered white as bone, a light chamfering of miceteeth along the edges of the wood. They rode through a region where iron will not rust nor tin tarnish. The ribbed frames of dead cattle under their patches of dried hide lay like the ruins of primitive boats upturned upon that shoreless void and they passed lurid and austere the black and desiccated shapes of horses and mules that travelers had stood afoot. These parched beasts had died with their necks stretched in agony in the sand and now upright and blind and lurching askew with scraps of blackened leather hanging from the fretwork of their ribs they leaned with their long mouths howling after the endless tandem suns that passed above them. (McCarthy 2010c, 260)

As they ride across the area, the Glanton gang continuously finds scattered remnants of previous travellers’ possessions. The fact that they find these several times shows that human debris is a recurrent feature of the land. However, the environment is not only a passive place where these things lay, it is part of the process. The mice eating the rawhide, have co-created the image. The aridity and climate of the region has prevented the disintegration of both the machinery and the animal carcasses.

⁸ The ruined churches often contain the remains of human bodies and/or animal carcasses, creating images of other stories of death that have taken place in the area. The deserted architecture also resembles images of abandoned cabins that reappear throughout southern novels.

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On the other hand, the bodies of cattle, horses, and mules represent human creations, since they do not belong to the area.⁹ The carcasses themselves narrate a story of suffering with “their necks stretched in agony,” becoming a terrifying memento of the expansion to the West, a mummified image captured forever.

The nature-culture relationship is not depicted only by visual means but also through the characters’ attitudes and actions. As discussed in the first section, the combination of narrator’s and characters’ perspectives enables McCarthy to present the revisionist view in contrast with the societal attitude of that time. In terms of westward expansion, the attitude towards the environment is the basis of understanding the consequent actions. As Richard White points out in his monograph *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A History of the American West*:

To most whites nature existed largely as a collection of commodities. God, they believed, had created nature for individual human beings to use, and it was their duty to make use of it. Logically enough, they valued plants, animals, and minerals according to their utility, and to call something useless was to question its right to exist in a human-dominated environment. (White 1991a, 212)

This strongly anthropocentric understanding of nature as a mere resource directly implies that humankind has no responsibility to nature. It is perceived only in terms of its value for humanity. Judge Holden, arguably the most conspicuous character in *Blood Meridian*, represents this view of nature as a commodity in its most extreme form. In one of his speeches he says:

Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. [...] Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. [...] But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. [...] The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos. (McCarthy 2010c, 209–210)

Unlike the protagonists of southern novels who destroy or contaminate their surroundings, generally because they are ignorant of them, Judge Holden deliberately uses death

⁹ Even the horse, one of America’s canonical animals, was brought to America by Spanish settlers. They were not domesticized from wild American horses, on the contrary, wild mustangs as we know them are descendants of domesticated European horses brought to the continent (see White 1991a, 18–26). Hence the imagery of Native Americans as “natural” people proves unrealistic, since they ride horses that were obtained from European colonizers, and they have also altered the natural environment, i.e. by burning pastures for the horses (White 1991b, 33–34).

as an instrument of power and control. His desire for control is bound to a purely anthropocentric ethic. Holden represents an ideology of destruction, driven partly by the desire for economic success and partly by the desire to master the new land.

In a similar fashion the historical colonizers thoroughly believed they were entitled to own the land and to use it for their benefit. Their purpose was to “civilize” nature and to create it in their own image. This did not mean only to breed cattle on the land, but also to dispose of the indigenous population. And since nature was perceived as a commodity, for the purpose of divesting themselves of an obstacle in the form of the Indian tribes the buffalo was used as an efficient weapon. “The elimination of the buffalo by white hide hunters cut the heart from the Plains Indian economy. Various military commanders encouraged the slaughter of bison for precisely this reason. Without the buffalo, Plains Indians could not effectively resist American expansion” (White 1991a, 219). The species was hunted down so ferociously and systematically neither for its hide, for sport, nor for making room for the cattle and railways, but mainly as a means to suppress the defiance of certain Native American tribes. The bounty economy is in principle very similar to the one of scalp hunting. The Glanton gang is hired and payed by the government to slaughter the Native Americans and to bring the authorities the scalps as proof. Both are quite profitable businesses serving the same goal: to ease the hardships of westward expansion.

The description of the buffalo slaughter is brutal in way that is similar to the depiction of the Glanton gang’s encounters with Native Americans. The image of thousands of dead animals in *Blood Meridian* drastically rewrites the Old West romantic panorama:

[D]ead animals scattered over the grounds [...] and the tandem wagons groaned away over the prairie twenty and twenty-two ox teams and the flint hides by the ton and hundred ton and the meat rotting on the ground and the air whining with flies and the buzzards and ravens and the night a horror of snarling and feeding with the wolves half crazed and wallowing in the carion. (McCarthy 2010c, 334)

The apocalyptic image of scavengers feeding on countless carcasses of which only the hide was taken is hardly imaginable, yet completely realistic. While the bison population was already decreasing in the 1840s “not so much from overhunting, although that was increasingly a factor, as from a combination of drought, habitat destruction, competition from exotic species, and introduced disease” (White 1991a, 216), which still points to predominantly human inflicted causes, their numbers decreased rapidly in the following three decades with the arrival of professional hunters and the mechanization of the whole process. Hence the constant movement of the wagons is contrasted to the motionlessness of the carcasses accentuated by the repetition of the conjunction “and”

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giving the description a certain rhythm. Moreover, the image of busy wagons reappears in the epilogue with the image of bonepickers gathering buffalo bones, which were then turned into fertilizer (Sepich 2008, 67). Despite the short-term feast for the scavengers, the impact on the whole ecosystem is beyond the powers of the imagination. The development is completed in a short passage in the following novel, the first volume of the Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1991):

That was in eighteen sixty-six. In that same year the first cattle were driven through what was still Bexar County and across the north end of the ranch [...] five years later his great-grandfather sent six hundred steers over that same trail [...] In eighteen eighty-three they ran the first barbed wire. By eighty-six the buffalo were gone. That same winter a bad die-up. (McCarthy 2010d, 7)

The near annihilation of a whole species took only several decades. This was a drastic change for the western ecosystem, happening at such a speed that the organisms simply could not adapt (apart from the wolves who started to prey on cattle, making them highly undesirable and the next species to be exterminated). Prairies were turned into pastures surrounded by fences, animals considered vermin were trapped or poisoned. The grazing lands did not last long either, only after a couple of decades they would slowly be replaced by industrial enterprises.¹⁰ *Blood Meridian* describes “the violent birth of a national symbolic that has made heroes out of scalphunters and Indian killers and constructed the near extinction of the buffalo and massive deforestation as symbols of triumph and mastery, the proud heritage of the modern American citizen” (Spurgeon 2009, 104). McCarthy retails the Western myth in more realistic colours as the persistent and unstoppable advancement of civilization seen in a wider environmental context.

Blood Meridian and the subsequent Border Trilogy narrate the story of a conquest which did not end with the closure of the frontier, if such a thing ever existed.¹¹ The infinite struggle of humanity and the natural environment has continued far into the 20th century. Environmental issues, which appeared mainly as hints and passing remarks in the southern novels, become central topics of McCarthy’s Western novels. The notions that the history of humankind cannot be separated from natural history and that humanity exists in a much broader context also appear in the text. *Blood Meridian* begins and ends with two meteor showers. The first one takes place before

¹⁰ In the Border Trilogy, the cowboy life bound to cattle slowly disappears in favour of industry.

¹¹ New Western History abandons the still influential Turnerian concept of frontier based on ethnocentrism and suggests avoiding it since it is a simplification which does not aid in describing the complexity of the historical moment of westward expansion.

the beginning of the novel and is described by the father of kid, the novel's protagonist: "Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The dipper stove" (McCarthy 2010c, 3). Leonids really occurred in 1833 and the accounts speak about "the greatest shower ever recorded" (Sepich 2009, 51–53). At the end of the novel, before the kid dies, the natural phenomenon reappears: "The rain had stopped and the air was cold. He stood in the yard. Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness" (McCarthy 2010c, 351). The kid's life and the whole narration, which is reminiscent of a terrible nightmare, is opened and closed by a very distinctive natural phenomenon. The book, which might seem to be a feverish dream or horror at first sight, is actually based quite thoroughly on historical accounts. By setting the timeframe of the novel between two meteor showers, McCarthy clearly reinforces the importance of nature in the text. The human history is embedded in the natural one, providing the novel with a cosmological perspective.

4. Challenging Anthropocentrism

Since anthropocentrism places humankind at the centre of the world, the value of the nonhuman is subsequently determined by its utility to human beings. One of the direct consequences of an anthropocentric perspective on the world is the objectification of nature, understanding it as a resource, as a man's possession. Anthropocentrism is a spectrum from strong to weak, in which the weak form considers the possibility of biocentric values or an understanding of the value of the nonhuman (Buell 2005, 134).

In McCarthy, the superiority of humankind over nature is challenged. "What we do find in *The Orchard Keeper* is the first sign of McCarthy's attempt to create a narrative that escapes the confines of anthropocentrism and makes the world of nature, animate and inanimate, an equal principle in his epistemology" (Cant 2008, 70). As demonstrated above, the role of natural imagery in McCarthy's fiction exceeds the notion of setting, symbol, or beautiful interlude which is an end in itself. It is an active participant in the stories, it frames them in terms of time. McCarthy's vision of history takes the environment into account and offers a very different perspective than the traditional story of progress. "It is precisely the contrast between Judge Holden's will to master a nature conceived of as enemy and the horrendous environmental catastrophe of the closing of the frontier that constitute *Blood Meridian*'s challenge to normative thinking about the environment" (Estes 2013, 120). When nature is understood as a commodity designed for human use, it releases humankind from any ethical responsibility toward it, which leads to disastrous consequences.

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Once the economic principle rules not only decision processes, but also humanity's conception of nature, nothing more than gain is taken into consideration. The massacre of the buffalo is the most excessive description of a phenomenon that recurs across the novels: bounty hunting. The book *Trapping the Fur Bearers of North America* is mentioned both in *The Crossing* and *The Orchard Keeper*: "McCarthy's inclusion of the ancient pamphlet, with inaccurate drawings of the wild cats, shows the historical place of the lynx and bobcat as animals with bounty-value; the felines pelts are worth money to man. As such, the bobcat and the lynx have more value dead than they do alive" (Sanborn 2006, 40). The bounty hunting business, however profitable, is frequently not motivated only by the value of the hide on the market, but also by other factors, such as the above-discussed use of the buffalo to control the Native Americans, or the near extinction of wolves brought about for the protection of cattle used as a means of subsistence. The very same economy is applied to other human beings in scalp hunting. The ostensibly neutral narrator then parallels these actions, proving them both inherently morally wrong.

In this aspect, McCarthy's texts quite explicitly discuss that „the human interest is not [...] the only legitimate interest" and "[h]uman accountability to the environment" (Buell 1995, 7). In other words, if humanity is capable of the alteration and destruction of the natural environment and its inhabitants, it is our obligation to take into consideration other interests and other perspectives in order to avoid another catastrophe like the buffalo slaughter. Again, the point of view of the observer is crucial for understanding this. The following paragraph from *The Crossing* describes cattle as a human creation:

The wolves in that country had been killing cattle for a long time but the ignorance of the animals was a puzzle to them. The cows bellowing and bleeding and stumbling through the mountain meadows with their shovel feet and their confusion, bawling and floundering through the fences and dragging posts and wires behind. The ranchers said they brutalized the cattle in a way they did not the wild game. As if the cows evoked in them some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols. (McCarthy 2010e, 26)

In this paragraph, the point of view shifts between the omniscient narrator, the wolf, and the ranchers (Sanborn 2006, 70). From the wolf's point of view, the cow is described as a clumsy and stupid creature, a human-created species, an alien in the ecosystem. As with every human creation, cattle are destined to be imperfect. The image of a fenced environment only emphasizes the dependence of the animal on humans. Note the contrast with the following paragraph from the same novel, one that describes a pronghorn as a creature of natural origin:

At night she [the wolf] would go down onto the Animas Plains and drive the wild antelope, watching them flow and turn in the dust of their own passage where it rose like smoke off the basin floor, watching the precisely indexed articulation of their limbs and the rocking movements of their heads and the slow bunching and the slow extension of their running, looking for anything at all among them that would name to her her quarry. (McCarthy 2010e, 26)

Both species are described as the potential prey of the wolf. In the second paragraph, the reader is given an account of the wolf hunting the antelope unmediated by any other character. The antelope (pronghorn) is described as perfect in its natural unrestrained environment. The emphasis on the movement of both the cow and the antelope makes a clear contrast between them and highlights the included point of view of the predator: the wolf can kill a cow in full health but needs to choose a weakened individual from the pronghorn herd. The perfection of the natural creation is emphasized by the aesthetic division between the species.

The aesthetic distinction between natural and civilized is transparent when McCarthy comments on civilization penetrating the natural environment. All the way from *The Orchard Keeper* to *The Road* (2006), human creation is destined to be imperfect, be it cattle or the shacks built by the Red Branch community: “Even the speed with which they were constructed could not outdistance the decay for which they held such affinity. Gangrenous molds took to the foundations before the roofs were fairly nailed down. Mud crept up their sides and paint fell away in long white slashes. Some terrible plague seemed to overtake them one by one” (McCarthy 2010a, 11–12). Describing buildings as leprous is only one instance of the aesthetic division between the civilized and the natural. Everything created by man is frequently described in terms of constant decay or sickness, in stark opposition to the grandeur, majesty, and perfection of things of natural origin. Human settlement is, mainly in the southern novels, accompanied by waste and rot, constant reminders of the finality of man, emphasizing the discrepancy between the linear time of humankind and the cyclical time of nature.

While McCarthy frequently challenges the nature-culture binary, his aesthetics proposes a new one, much more in favour of its natural side. Things natural are things beautiful. Humanity can never come near to the perfection of things born in nature. However, this notion does not imply that nature is valuable only as an aesthetic object. McCarthy challenges anthropocentrism through aesthetics, through the concept of beauty created and utilized by humankind only. McCarthy’s approach suggests the idea of intrinsic value, meaning that nature does not have to be “useful” to humans and that it has a right to existence as such. It is also clear that

the anthropocentric hierarchy which ascribes humankind the highest priority is challenged in *Blood Meridian*:

The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence the very clarity of these articulated belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (McCarthy 2010c, 261)

In this passage, McCarthy probably most clearly undermines the anthropocentric hierarchy. Everything is equal, a stone, a plant, a human. “In its post-humanist ‘optically democratic’ representation of wilderness, *Blood Meridian* undertakes to imagine nature in its sheer materiality, beyond anthropocentric terms” (Guillemin 2004, 81). There is no notion of harmony, only of the equality of all things. And it is no accident that this notion of democracy and equality is inseparably bound to vision. The challenge of our perception of nature starts with our eyes. McCarthy makes the reader see the lack of human responsibility to nature through visual descriptions and thus posits the question of an environmental ethics.

While often focusing on the visual aspect of nature, the beauty of it is not an end in itself, as the above-discussed topics have demonstrated. The images of humankind’s irresponsible behaviour to nature and the fear embodied in thoughts of nature’s complete destruction pervade the works just as much as a sense of the author’s admiration for nature. However, reading McCarthy with attention to his method of describing nature and the environmental undertones in the works suggests reading McCarthy as an author contemplating the relationship between the human and nonhuman and the question of a nature-culture binary. Employing an ecocritical perspective for reading McCarthy’s fiction presents the texts as discussions of the pressing issues of environmental ethics and anthropocentrism instead of seeing them as elegies for an idyllic past.

In McCarthy’s world, the human and nonhuman are bound together and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. Nature and culture exist as a continuum in McCarthy’s fiction. However, the author re-establishes the questioned binary when challenging the anthropocentric perspective. In McCarthy’s world, nature is a powerful force, difficult to define, but existent

and having an impact on the human characters. However, the ethical responsibility for the future of nature is placed on human shoulders. This paper has primarily demonstrated the extensive potential offered by an ecocritical study of McCarthy's nature. The means of depicting the natural environment, both the content and method, are important tools for the author's broadening the meaning of nature to contain areas such as ethics and our perception of history. Once taken into consideration as an adequate topic of analysis instead of a background, nature presents many different ways to read McCarthy's work. The works themselves then become ecosystems where everything depends on everything else.¹²

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¹² The suggestion of understanding a literary text as an ecosystem is also proposed by ecocriticism and it fits the interpretation of McCarthy's works much better than understanding occurrences of nature in isolation or as a background. The ecocritical "method" is then much deeper than a study of isolated topics.

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Kateřina Kovářová is a PhD student at Charles University. In her research, she focuses on the interdependence between American nature and culture in Cormac McCarthy's fiction. She is a recipient of a 2018 EAAS Travel Grant and a William J. Hill Visiting Researcher Travel Award offered by The Wittliff Collections held in Albert B. Alkek Library in Texas. She has presented her research at three Cormac McCarthy Society's annual conferences, Austin 2017, Monterrey 2018, and Austin 2019.



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**LANGSTON HUGHES'S LITERARY AND
IDEOLOGICAL TURN IN THE 1930s:
POETRY AS A MEANS TO UNDERSTANDING AND
CONCEPTUALIZING THE POET'S IDENTITY AND
SELF-DEVELOPMENT**

Alba Fernández Alonso

Abstract

The connection between narratives, or other means of discourse production, such as poetry, and the capacity of self-development bring to light the extent to which the stories we tell become part of ourselves. Stories can indeed be instrumental in the stability and change of the self if we consider that the construction of narratives constitutes an engine for self-development and a tool for creating a sense of identity (McLean, Pasupathi and Pals 2006).

The poetic onset of the commonly named leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes (1902–1967), was based on a strong sense of race pride chiefly focused on depicting the everyday lives of blacks living under the shadow of racism, oppression and injustice. Frustration, subjugation and dependency together with feelings of resilience are featured as the centerpiece of his work during these years. However, towards the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Hughes “redirected his approach towards a more internationalist view” (Rampersad 2002, 266). His open sympathy to Communist ideology and his condemnation of imperialism were the inspirational bases of his revolutionary red poetry.

This study aims to illustrate in terms of social, political, and ideological grounds how this author exemplified this new perspective through the development of a new revolutionary poetry. The deep understanding of his unprecedented literary turn will shed some light on the whys and wherefores of his refinement as a poet and will give clear proof of the way in which his poetry helped to develop a sense of self-identity and encompassed an engine for self-development.

Keywords

Langston Hughes; Harlem Renaissance; racism; red poetry; communism; self-identity; self-development; understanding

* * *

AMIDST the writers and cultural contributors to the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes (1902–1967) stands out as a voice that succeeded in depicting the situation of African Americans in the United States from the days of his early career beginning in the 1920s. The admiration and respect he had for his people led him to portray a many-sided picture of the American society of his time, highlighting the hardship, oppression, and injustice endured by his African American peers. The development of his legacy concurs with the progression of the social, political, and economic circumstances of the time and reaches its most revolutionary peak at the beginning of the 1930s, a moment when he starts to develop a poetry of a more subversive and radical nature. This point in history coincides with the embracement of the Communist ideology in the United States by a substantial part of the African American community, who saw in its principles and ideas a mechanism to overcome racism in modern America.

The poetry of these years, as evidenced in the present paper, is a reflection of Hughes's stand on the strenuous and burdensome situation of his fellows, summed up in a long-standing racism and the subjugation of the working class. Through this rupture with the foundations of an oppressive society, including the weighty pillar of religion, Hughes guides the reader into an unprecedented turn in his poetry that can be conceived as a means to help the poet get to grips with a new self-concept, as well as a mechanism that provides him with a renewed self-understanding.

1. We Are the Stories We Tell

In one of his interviews, Uruguayan writer and journalist Eduardo Galeano read that human beings are not only made of atoms but also of stories¹ (2017, 0:08). In the same vein the American poet Muriel Rukeyser some years before in her evocative poem “The Speed of Darkness” had suggested that “the universe is made of stories, not of atoms” (1978, 486). In fact, these excerpts underline the importance of stories in our lives and the way they help us shape our own selves. The connection between narratives, or other means of discourse production such as poetry, and the capacity for self-development, bring to light the extent to which the stories we tell become part of ourselves. Stories can indeed be instrumental in the stability and change of the self if we consider that the construction of narratives constitutes an engine for self-development (McLean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007). All this furnishes evidence of the high degree to which stories and selves relate reciprocally at different levels.

¹ Original quote in Spanish translated into English by the author of the article: “*El mundo no está hecho de átomos, está hecho de historias.*”

Scholars have also focused their attention on the characteristics of the stories that are capable of having a long-lasting impact on the self, analyzing the stories more likely to be produced and more likely to impact the self (McClean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007). As a matter of fact, the experiences more inclined to be storied are those disruptive or unresolved ones, qualities that usually define them as memorable (Labov and Waletzky 1967, Zeigarnik 1935). It stands to reason that sad stories tend to be more captivating than plain boring ones with a lack of events and emotion. What is more, literary masters of all times have always taken advantage of this by evoking sentiments of sadness, grief, and sorrow, thus excavating the minds of their readers by doing so. Following Brunner (1990), narrating the events of distressing and problematic circumstances helps to make sense of the problems, becoming the narrative process by which humans can turn experiences into stories, or in other words, “to render the uncanonical, canonical” (McClean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, 272). Besides, individuals tend to draw meaning and reasoning from negative circumstances. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesized that negative and troubling events favor story qualities and contribute to the development of a self-concept and self-understanding.

At the point of the present discussion, and having considered the body of research focused on the ways stories help people make connections between their experiences and their selves and vice versa, we still fail to know what aspects of one’s self make the stories we tell more prone to be told and retold. In fact, the answer is more logical than expected: the stories more likely to be told and retold are the ones reflecting the enduring motives or themes of one’s life (Moffit and Singer 1994), those that “hold currency one’s self and one’s audiences” (McClean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, 272). What is more, “characteristics of events that make an experience more likely to be storied and told repeatedly also make it more likely to become part of the life story, perhaps because of the opportunity such experiences afford for meaning-making” (272).

Following the approach of self-construction through discourse production, a concept of vital importance emerges and that is plainly the concept of culture. Each culture has its own means and mechanisms to receive emotions through reading in the same ways that authors are, in most cases, aimed at expressing in writing what they know their audiences, in a determined culture or at least a portion of it, will receive and accept willingly and with pleasure. In other words, cultures, and by extension countries and social classes, play an important role in the stories we tell. In their study of this approach, scholars Qi Wang and Martin Conway (2004) posit as an example that Chinese writers are more liable to report fewer details on script-like narratives

and tend to emphasize morality to a greater degree in comparison with Western cultures. Qi Wang and James Brockmeier (2002) suggest that Westerners are more prone to create a self-story with an eye to expressing self-continuity whereas Chinese individuals tend to establish connectedness and adherence to moral principles. All the above-mentioned provides grounds for asserting that witnessing the construction of stories is a device that constitutes a tool for creating a sense of self and identity (Freeman 1997, Hammack, 2008, Josselson 1996, McAdams 1996, 2006, McLean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, Schiff 2002). Indeed, “sharing stories is the mechanism through which people become selves” (McLean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007, 275).

The bases of the theoretical frameworks we have reviewed can be applied to support the scope of the present work: analyzing Langston Hughes's most representative poetry of the 1930s as a means to understanding and conceptualizing the author. However, before reaching that point, some clarification on the nature of the analyzed works must be made. When tackling the work of a poet, it stands to reason that we are, by no means, analyzing prose but poetry. Equating prose and poetry by putting them on the same level in terms of form analysis would mean to undertake an arduous assignment that would need further theorizing and the performance of a deeper search and review of the contrasted literature. Nevertheless, if we are to equate prose and poetry by placing them at the same level of content analysis, it goes without saying that both of them can be outlined as expressive and communicative forms of articulating a discourse and therefore constitute authentic forms of expression. Since both poetry and prose are included in the circle of arts such that “however naïve or commonplace, in as far as they succeed, result in a work of art” (Scott 1904, 250), they come to represent the outcome of an attempt to disclose and convey ideas, feelings, and/or experiences. Accordingly, in terms of imagination, creativity, and emotional force, we can assume that prose and poetry rise to the same standards. In connection therewith, some other scholars have even stated that both concepts cut across each other, because “many poems are narratives, after all, and many narratives are poems” (McHale 2009, 12) and have additionally claimed that saying “many poems are narratives drastically understates the case, in fact, most poems before the nineteenth century, and many since then, have been narrative poems” (12). Actually, the huge tradition of narrative poetry is noteworthy and cannot be overlooked, as evidenced by “the entire epic tradition, primary and secondary, oral and written, as well as medieval and early-modern verse romances, folk ballads and their literary adaptations, and narrative verse autobiographies” (12).

In light of the above, we can state without hesitation that poetry can be equated to narrative when approaching the characteristics of the latter as described in the theoretical framework of this study. There is no doubt that since narrative has the potential to do so, poetry can likewise constitute the process by which humans find a retort

to tell their stories and from which their authors, and by extension the audience, can draw meaning and reasoning, especially from negative circumstances. Poetry is in this approach conceived as a mechanism that contributes to the development of a self-concept and self-understanding, a way to understand internal troubles and concerns to later shape and materialize them in written form. This statement is unmistakably seen in the poetry at the core of this study, that of Langston Hughes, which is nothing but the reflection of a conflict of a political and ideological nature in the mind of the poet, and whose characteristics of endurance have made it memorable.

2. The Awakening of Communism Among the African American Population in Modern America

In the wake of the Great Depression, the labor movement in America grew considerably both in size and militancy. The decade of the 1930s witnessed an attraction to the left-wing of the American Communist Party among many residents of Harlem, causing the Party to grow in size from “26,000 to 85,000 between the years 1934 and 1939” (Naison 1983, 45). The left-wing movement of the time went beyond the focus of the Communist Party and included other political organizations such as the NAACP and other Marxist groups that advocated social and democratic change. However, it was the Communist Party branch that provided infrastructure and monetary backing and the one that best seemed to materialize the changes minority groups had been advocating for so long, i.e. the end of racial distinctions in America and the advancement of the working class, by giving them tangible shape. The high levels of participation and commitment show the commitment and engagement of those in Harlem to this relatively new political sphere. As stated by scholar and historian Mark Naison (1983), the onset of the Depression sparked the engagement of this population in political activity and by the midpoint of the decade, public demonstrations overflowing with a spirit of determination and militancy filled the streets of Harlem where no prior militant spokesman had succeeded in disturbing post-war peace. The protests and public demonstrations grew hand in hand with the development of the Harlem Communist Party. Already in the 1930s considerable sympathy with The Soviet Union was to be seen among black American intellectual circles (Solomon 1998), and the Soviet intolerance for racism was widely and positively covered by the African American press with close attention, together with the many cases of African Americans leaving the USA and heading to the Soviet Union in those years as artisans, laborers, or engineers.

The efforts of the Party to secure and strengthen African American leadership between the years 1928 to 1935 were met with significant and sizable success.

While the Party mainly focused on training African Americans to be placed in organizational positions, it did not forget to focus its attention on a particularly special group: black artists and intellectuals, “whose creative energies it hoped to tap for political purposes” (Record 1951, 109). A constellation of musicians, painters, novelists, and poets came to the fore and were willingly supplied by the Party. In practice, the Party demanded their *de facto* commitment to the cause while recreating an aesthetic approach to Stalin’s definition of nation, i.e. “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up” (20). However, a great number of the creative African American writers in 1933 still had to face fierce criticism for supplying artwork that allegedly responded to the needs and tastes of white Americans while still perpetuating the stereotype of the black individual as the laughingstock of American society. Among them, the African American activist, journalist, and founder of the literary magazine *Saturday Evening Quill*, Eugene Gordon, found the one and only exception: Langston Hughes (Record 1951). By the same token, James W. Ford, organizer of the Communist Party in the Harlem section, stated that revolutionary black art was not emerging quickly enough. “Among the Negroes, who is there besides Langston Hughes?” he asked. (North 1932, 6). Communist writer, journalist, and former editor of *The Liberator*, Michael Gold, stated that black-American writers were called upon to exploit their talent outside the “gutter-life side of Harlem”, and in time “Negro Tolstoys, Gorkys and Walt Whitmans would arise” (1929, 17). The task of this group of writers was at the time to “eradicate the distorted stereotypes of the Negro people prevalent in American literature and drama, to create literature dealing with the struggle of the Negro masses for liberation; to portray the disintegration of the Negro petty bourgeoisie” (Clay 1932, 22). To this achieve this goal, identification with the Communist Party and the program it promoted based on national liberation for African Americans was required.

3. Langston Hughes and the Communist Ideology as a Focal Point of Interest

By the mid 30s, the Communist Party had succeeded in making a substantial impact on African American students and intellectuals who were undeniably affected by its principles not only as men of letters but also as men of political action (Record, 1951) By “impact,” a direct joining of the Party is not here implied, but a contact with an eye-opening structure that showed that the solution to the problem of discrimination and racism was inexorably bound to the advancement of the working class and its struggle, which could be shaped into a mass movement, thereby giving

them to understand the sovereign importance of militancy in trade unions. In fact, “Hughes was never a member of the Party, though indeed he once had been sympathetic to it” (Hughes and Berry 1973, xiii). The party would make sure to publicize this racial injustice he was condemning not only within American boundaries but also throughout the world via the skillful stratagems of the Kremlin’s propaganda. Whether affiliated or not, the Communist Party raised the interest of those witnessing the ongoing racism in combination with class inequality and unemployment, both in white and black Americans, in the Depression years. Those circumstances provided evidence that the white man was neither the owner of his own destiny any longer, as the struggle was also standing in his way and was leading him, as it was doing with thousands of black Americans, to experience circumstances to an unprecedented degree (Dawahare 1998). Hughes saw in the Communist Party a vehicle against racism supported by a consistent democratic program that could help the masses to arouse, move, and act in accordance with an alternative to capitalism, the leech of the working class. “If the Communists don’t awaken the Negro of the South, who will?”, he declared (Hughes and Berry 1973, 142). Hughes glimpsed in the Soviet Union a place to run away from the “racial terrorism” (Baldwin 2016, 386) and an ideological promise that could erase the racial inequalities and would definitely place the African American in the social *stratum* where he deserved to belong. Hughes was in fact not wrong when hoping to find in the Soviet Union a place where laws against racial segregation reportedly worked. In one of his essays in 1946, he remembers his first impression about the non-existent color line in the Soviet Union and compares it with the color prejudice still current in those days in America, emphasizing how the Soviet Union had completely erased any racism both towards Jews and blacks after the Soviet Revolution in 1917: “So there is a clear example in the world to prove to our American experts’ in race relations that IT DOES NOT TAKE A HUNDRED YEARS, it does NOT take generations to get rid of ugly, evil, antiquated, stupid Jim Crow practices – if a country really wants to get rid of them” (Hughes and Berry 1973, 86).

Hughes’s first manifest involvement with communism dates back to 1931, a complicity that would end with the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 (Jemie 1976). Although officially Hughes never joined the Communist Party, a statement he repeated *ad nauseam* and attested to at the McCarthy Hearings, his commitment to the cause is quite evident in the turn that his poetry adopted in the first years of the 30s and in the extent of his open support to the ideology. Although his first contact with Communist ideology might be traced back to the year 1931, Hughes had already shown an interest in the idea of class together with race in the second half of the

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1920s. Poems such as “Johannesburg Mines” (published in *The Crisis* in 1928), “Rising Waters” (*The Workers Monthly*, 1925), “To Certain ‘Brothers’” (*The Workers Monthly*, 1925) or “God to Hungry Child” (*The Workers Monthly*, 1925) are a few examples. These poems exemplify Hughes’s disillusionment and disappointment with the politics and futile efforts of the Harlem Renaissance period to improve African Americans’ status through a resilient struggle materialized in the cultural and literary production in which he wholeheartedly engaged. These verses already show a hint of what would become an irreparable rupture with both capitalism and God, the two pillars of American society. Besides, a growing concern about the injustice faced by the working class pursuing the uncharitable and selfish goals of not only white and black employers, whose only interests lay in exploiting and taking advantage of them, also started to be conceived. Those who had fallen into the clutches of capitalism and were denied the basic principles their religion advocates, especially captivated Hughes’s attention and held an outstanding place in his imagery, thus portrayed in his poetry as the victims of the system. The poem “Johannesburg Mines” reports the many workers exploited in the mines:

There are 240,000 natives working
What kind of poem
Would you make out of that?
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 43, lines 2–4)

Simultaneously, he intensely criticizes the oppressors of these victims, as exemplified in “To Certain Brothers”:

Dirt and ugliness
And rotting hearts
And wild hyenas howling
In your souls’ waste lands.
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 55, lines 7–10)

and in “Rising Waters”:

You are
But foam on the sea,
You rich ones
Not the sea.
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 48, lines 7–10)

Hughes even resorts to an aggressive irony to make his stand even clearer, as in the following extract of “God to Hungry Child”:

Hungry child
I didn't make this world for you.
[...]
I made the world for the rich
And the will-be-rich.
Not for you,
Hungry child.
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 48, lines 1 and 6–10)

These chosen poems evince how Hughes was already starting to adopt a firm approach based on race and class rather than on race alone, as he was not able to abide any longer the ethnic nationalism that blues aesthetics embraced (Dawahare 1998). This was an issue that led him to sacrifice art for politics, a shift that would imbue his literary career from then onwards and would shape him as a revolutionary writer and poet. In an effort to satisfy his audience, his critics, his publishers, and himself, Hughes “faced an ongoing inner struggle between what he wanted to write and what his audience expected him to write, between his public image and private self, between his performance and his integrity” (Hughes and Berry 1973, xi-xii). Before finding himself at these crossroads, he had already decided to devote his career to making his living as a writer. “I’d finally and definitely made up my mind to continue being a writer, and to become a professional writer, making my living from writing”, he would declare in his first autobiography (Hughes 1940, 335). This was in fact what Hughes always wanted to be, as he himself stated “a writer, recording what I see, commenting upon it, and distilling from my own emotions a personal interpretation” (Hughes 1988, 400-401). In this regard, and as his literary character Jesse B. Simple stated, it can be understood that Hughes was also “observing life for literary purposes” (Hughes 2015, 12) and fundamentally living “in terms of the external world and in with it” (Culp 1987, 240).

In that state of floundering and presumably overcome by the circumstances surrounding him, Hughes felt he could not support any longer what was being asked of him by his critics and particularly by his patron, who had always sought in Hughes the essence of the primitive, though he had never really felt it:

She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an

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American Negro who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa, but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. (Hughes 1940, 325)

In fact, this split with his patron, who supported him from 1927 to 1930, and whose name – Charlotte Osgood Mason – he never revealed in writing, is one of the pillars on which Hughes's first autobiographical work rests. Hughes himself describes the rupture with his patron and subsequent ideological turn in the making of his memoir by writing "that winter became the skein of poet and patron, youth and age, poverty and wealth-and one day it broke! Quickly and quietly in the Park Avenue [...] in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro-as do most relationships in America" (1940, 324–325). The defining moment of their split became more evident with Hughes's publication in 1931 of the poem "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" that satirizes the opening of the luxurious hotel in Park Avenue, built between the high-class elite of the area and the thousands of homeless beaten by the consequences of the Depression. Before writing this poem, Hughes had seen this blatant contradiction when witnessing how the city had become a two-sided place hosting winners on the one hand and victims on the other. His patron wanted him to avoid writing about the Depression, something that just did not fit into Hughes's commitment to literature, based on the principle of writing plainly for and about his peers. The following excerpts from the long "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" show how Hughes mastered irony and double entendre as a normal part of his poetic discourse and efficiently succeeded in mixing them with sarcasm by attacking capitalism and religion:

So when you've no place else to go, homeless and hungry
ones, choose the Waldorf as a background for your rags –
(Or do you still consider the subway after midnight good
enough?)

(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 144, lines 15–18)

[...]

Hail Mary, Mother of God!

the new Christ child of the Revolution's about to be
born.

(Kick hard, red baby, in the bitter womb of the mob.)

Somebody, put an ad in Vanity Fair quick!

Call Oscar of the Waldorf – for Christ's sake!!

(lines 97–102)

His inclination to Communism not only implied the dismissal of socialist and capitalist patterns, but also the rejection of the moral religious codes that had always

treated the black individual as a second-class commodity. This turning down of values is by far best exemplified in his poem “Goodbye, Christ!”:

Listen, Christ,
You did alright in your day,
I reckon –
But that day’s gone now.
They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
Called it Bible –
But it’s dead now.
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 166, lines 1–9)

This extract is a declaration of the intent to break with the foundations of religion and thus the collapse of the moral of the dominant and oppressive society, allowing a new conception of man to be created (Wagner, 1973).

In 1941, Hughes would attempt to defend himself of the accusations of atheism by writing an essay “Concerning Goodbye, Christ”, stating that he had written the poem as a consequence of witnessing the injustices and the rights African American citizens were denied during a tour through the American south. “To me, these things appeared unbelievable in a Christian country. Had not Christ said, ‘Such as ye do unto the least of these, ye do it unto Me?’. But almost nobody seemed to care” (Hughes and Berry 1973, 133). He adds that his subsequent sojourn to the Soviet Union strengthened this view in the setting of Marxist ideology, but that the poem, however, never represented his own personal views, though written in the first person singular.

In the same vein of “Goodbye, Christ!,” the poem “Christ in Alabama” (1931) constitutes one of his most radical poems tackling race, a hallmark that would go out of circulation by not being reprinted in his anthologies (Nelson, 2003). Hughes wrote this poem as a response to the public controversy about the Scottsboro Boys case, and actually entailing a manifest protest against the legacy of slavery in the south, being out of the protection of the Lord depicting “Christianity as a form of tyranny” (Nelson 2003, 73). Notwithstanding Hughes’s dogged attitude towards religion, it has been suggested that poems of the nature of “Goodbye, Christ!” and “Christ in Alabama” proved to be passing and temporary because his religious poetry, in a broad sense and without considering these “exceptions” is inspired by the folk traditions of his people, an essence Hughes could never have criticized (Wagner, 1973). This viewpoint arises in connection with the critics and scholars who consider Hughes’s poetry of this decade not representative of his aesthetics and have widely ignored or dismissed it. As stated by Faith Berry in her introduction to Hughes’s “Good Morning Revolution, Uncollected Writings of Social Protests” (1973), “his revolutionary prose represented

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an aberration, an isolated phase of his early career” although judging by his subsequent works, “the ‘phase’ actually lasted as long as he lived” (xi).

At the same time as Hughes was literally saying “goodbye” to religion, he was also saying “hello” to the revolution. His poem “Good Morning, Revolution” is a statement that sets revolution as the alternative to the contradictions experienced by African Americans calling for a new form of organization with the same goal: bringing down capitalism. This poem is a friendly address to a personalized revolution:

Good morning Revolution
You are the best friend
I ever had.
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 162, lines 1–3)

It, as well, gives testimony of Hughes’s poetic voice “that is not that of the individual narrator’s consciousness, but of a simultaneously unitary and multiple urban community” (Smethurst 1999, 94). At this same moment, the strong class consciousness starts to intertwine, as shown in his poem “Union”,

Not me alone –
I know now –
But all the whole oppressed
Poor world
White and black
Must put their hands with mine.
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 138, lines 1–6)

This poem highlights the wretchedness of the global working class who are to stand together as the international proletariat to get rid of capitalism. Likewise, the following excerpts of the poem “Always the Same” suggest how the workers worldwide are summoned to go into action:

Their faces, black, white, olive, yellow, brown
Unite to raise the blood-red flag that
Never will come down!
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 166, lines 46–49)

But Hughes’s keen eye for observing the mechanisms through which industrialism can result in the detriment of a social well-being did not awaken upon the emergence of Communism in America. In fact, it had already been manifested from an early age. The poem “Steel Mills”, written by Hughes at the age of fourteen “with

a lucidity seldom found in a child” (Wagner 1973, 427) gives a hint of what he would develop more firmly in his adulthood and conforms a sample of his responsive attitude towards any kind of injustice.

The mills
That grind and grind,
That grind out new steel
And grind away the lives
Of men, –
In the sunset
Their stacks
Are great black silhouettes
Against the sky.
(Hughes and Rampersad 1995, 43, lines 1–9)

In a similar vein, Hughes gave a speech at the Public Session of the First American Writers’ Congress in June 1935, where he outlined the guidelines that African American writers should follow in their work in order to show their skills as writers of the first order. Those skills could therefore lead them to enforce the potential they had to transform their realities.

We can reveal to the white masses those Negro qualities which go beyond the mere ability to laugh and sing and dance and make music. [...] Negro writers can seek to unite blacks and whites in our country, not on the nebulous basis of an interracial meeting, or the shifting sands of religious brotherhood, but on the *solid* ground of the daily working-class struggle to wipe out, now and forever, all the old inequalities of the past. [...] We can expose to the sick-sweet smile of organized religion-which lies about what it doesn’t know, and about what it *does* know. (Hughes and Berry 1973, 125)

This speech shows a resemblance to his previous essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) where Hughes criticized the black artists intending to serve the wishes and likes of white Americans ignoring that they “have an honest American Negro literature already with us” (Hughes 1985, 3):

If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (4)

This might be one the most evident examples of the display of the development of a black aesthetic in Hughes's works. By calling African American writers to create a literature of a racial nature born out of their own black culture and the expressive forms thereof, Hughes made clear the distinction between black and white Americans based mainly on their different forms of art, advocating that their art is "a recognition of the fact that Afro-Americans are distinct people within the American nation" (Jemie 1968, 103).

However, in this new decade the temples that Hughes referred to nine years before seemed to have been larded with a certain expression of militancy and determination, strong-willed enough to commit to the proletarian revolution. Hughes's purpose of unifying white and black Americans as a mass had a clear goal: making the world understand "the hypocrisy of philanthropy and of organized religion, the betrayal of workers by white labor leaders, and of the black masses by false Negro leaders who were controlled by the ruling class" (Jemie 1976, 13), and that could only be done by joining the revolution. "A Little Dialogue Between the Poet and the Revolution", a poem by Rafael Alberti, with whom Hughes shared ideological views, clearly illustrates the goal of joining the cause as a means to eventually overcoming fears and doubts. This is the poet's retort in this dialogue with the revolution:

I'll follow your example and look at you,
because if I lose you, red glory,
red glory, it's because I've lost myself.
(Alberti and Hughes 2014, 189, 12–14)

4. Conclusion

The poetry of this study is nothing but a reflection of a conflict of a political and ideological nature in the mind of the poet, and its characteristics of endurance have made it memorable. In fact, the enduring motives reflected in these poems constitute an opportunity for meaning-making (Moffit and Singer 1994), a process through which Hughes understands and makes sense of the social and historical events around him and about his own self. The poems revealed in the previous paragraphs, tightly bound to the cultural, social, and political context provided, will be the means through which the author understands and conceptualizes himself and also constitute the engine for his self-development both ideologically and literally. Moreover, this approach will help us to shed light on the whys and wherefores of the author in his refinement as a poet.

Taking up again Galeano's and Rukeyser's words and reflecting on the fact that we are the stories we tell, by extension we can say that Langston Hughes's

poetry of this time is, for better or worse, a reflection of his own self and spirit, and creates a sense of identity. Narrating the distressing and problematic circumstances that black people encountered before and after the Depression years helps Hughes to make sense of the problem. By turning the negative experience into poems, Hughes succeeds in drawing meaning and reasoning and leaves a remarkable story as a legacy, a story depicted as memorable because of being disrupting and unresolved that somehow shows the self-continuity Hughes wants to express by writing what is his life-story and his peers’.

I personally believe that as well as serving the purposes of this study, Hughes’s poetry of these years should be regarded highly as it helps us reflect on our historicity, and serve as a means to understanding the life of black Americans in a historical context because, as stated by Nelson, “every poem [is presented] to us together with a history of its reception” (Nelson 2003, 1).

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Alba Fernández Alonso (1987), University of Burgos (Spain)
Bachelor Degree in Translation and Interpreting (EN, DE>ES) in 2010, University of Valladolid. Master’s Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, 2012, University of Burgos. Master’s Degree in Medical and Biosanitary Translation (EN<ES), 2014, University Jaume I. Enrolled in the PhD program of Humanities and Communication, University of Burgos, since 2017.

Currently combining an Assistant Teacher position in the English Philology Department of the University of Burgos and freelance work in sworn translation and interpreting EN<ES services.

Alba Fernández’s PhD dissertation focuses on the literary production of Hughes during his time in the Spanish Civil War as a war correspondent. However, she has also explored and published part of her research on the resilience detected in Hughes’s early poetry, the aesthetics of the notion of dream in his works, and Hughes’s literary turn in the 1930s towards a more radical and revolutionary verse.



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**ALWAYS TO BE PASSED ALONG:
APORIAS OF WAGNER, HEIDEGGER, AND #METOO**

Jan Čapek

Abstract

Aporetic – the undecidable, undecided, that which collapses identity, that which denounces representation, clear perception, and straightforward reception. Stemming from the Greek mythos of Poros, Penia, and Eros, discussed by Plato in *The Symposium*, the concept has found new importance in post-structuralist thought as one of the constituents of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. Yet its application does not remain in the past. This paper presents a concise introduction to aporia from the original mythos to its application in post-structuralist thought. This paper then applies the concept in the investigation of the issue of the division between artists and their work, from “celebrities” of various strata throughout Western culture such as Richard Wagner or Martin Heidegger, to the culprits of the recent campaign #MeToo. The article discusses aporia, and our awareness of it, as something which does not bow down before decisive ideological and moral constructions and, instead, engenders the endlessly productive processes of debating, discussing, or simply thinking.

Keywords

Aporia; impasse; Jacques Derrida; deconstruction; #MeToo; cultural studies; ideology; post-structuralism

* * *

IT is those who are in between, and Love is one of them. For wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is love of the beautiful, so Love must be a philosopher, and a philosopher is in a middle state between a wise man and an ignorant one. The reason for this too lies in his parentage: he has a father who is wise and resourceful, and a mother who is neither. (Plato 2008, 40–41)

So writes Plato in *The Symposium*, an ancient philosophical text introducing the concept of aporia, “an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory” (Lexico n.d.), and a logical impasse. The aim of this article is to situate aporia in the contemporary socio-cultural climate leading up to and including the #MeToo movement. While the concept of aporia may be traced

back to Plato, whose *The Symposium* is invoked in relation to Sarah Kofman's discussion of the untranslatability of aporia, it was Jacques Derrida who, in the spirit of his proposal of *différance*,¹ revived the concept of aporia in contemporary philosophy. After the introduction of the conceptual lens of aporia, I launch an investigation into the famously controversial figures of Richard Wagner and Martin Heidegger. In a similar vein, the discussion then shifts to the present day as I ponder the controversy surrounding one of the most remarkable social movements of the beginning of the 21st century, #MeToo. This article arrives at an affirmation which hopes to lie outside of morality and emancipation for the sake of itself, as well as outside ideological misuse and, instead, finds itself on the path of a greater ethical project continuing one of the most distinct philosophical approaches of the 20th century, that of Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction. I propose aporia as a concept in accord with his general proposition for the dynamism of considering concepts constantly deferring set meanings and identities toward a fluidity of existence. In the grander scheme of things, the present discussion of aporia highlights the importance of thinking as a *process* to achieve knowledge not as a set of convictions but, rather, as a mode of dynamic perception of the world around the thinking subject in tune with the fluidity of the ever-changing world.

The journey of investigating aporia starts in ancient Greece and in the discussion of its nature in Sarah Kofman's commentary on the difficulties of translation and understanding aporia in her text "Beyond Aporia?" Therein, she contemplates the importance of aporia in Plato's texts – most notably in *The Symposium* – but also suggests that the concept was largely present in Greek philosophy in general. As Kofman hints, one shall remember the undecidability of Zeno's logical paradoxes. Achilles will never overtake the tortoise, whenever Achilles arrives somewhere the tortoise has been, he still has some distance to go before he can even reach the tortoise, *yet* it might seem that he can. The arrow will never reach its target, at every instant of time there is no motion occurring. If everything is motionless at every instant, and time is entirely composed of instants, then motion is impossible, *yet* it seems it is happening. Such situations are inherently aporetic, they exemplify aporia, the frustrating impasse, the unsolvable paradox. The inability to *arrive at something* presents itself as key to understanding aporia.

Kofman's explanation of the origins of aporia stems from her reading of the myth of the birth of Eros in Plato's *The Symposium*:

¹ The present discussion understands and utilizes Derrida's *différance* as a concept employing a combination of difference and deferral of meaning as a force working against set identity and a clear-cut centralization of discussed subjects in the systems of knowing (ontology) and of knowledge (epistemology).

When Aphrodite was born, all the gods held a feast. One of those present was Poros (Resource), whose mother was Metis (Cleverness). When the feast was over, Penia (Poverty) came begging, as happens on these occasions, and she stood by the door. Poros got drunk on the nectar – in those days wine did not exist – and having wandered into the garden of Zeus was overcome with drink and went to sleep. Then Penia, because she herself had no resource, thought of a scheme to have a child by Poros, and accordingly she lay down beside him and became pregnant with a son, Love. (Plato 2008, 39)

What Kofman suggests is a strange move out of character for both Penia and Poros, which starts to unveil the relation to Poros's opposite in the Greek pantheon, Aporia – the figure of Powerlessness:

All the characteristics which the myth attributes to Poros in fact belong in practice to Penia and vice versa. In other words, Penia is no more the opposite of Poros than is the aporia. The true, philosophical aporia, or Penia, is always fertile; in her all opposites are placed under erasure, she is neither masculine nor feminine, neither rich nor poor, neither a transition nor the absence of a transition, neither resourceful nor without resources. (Kofman 1988, 27)

If Kofman's investigation seems contrived, it is. Aporia is a contrivance and its explanation, meta-textually, may itself present an impasse and evoke perplexity and bafflement akin to the untranslatability that Kofman ascribes to it.

It was Jacques Derrida who brought the term back into the searchlight of philosophy. Derrida's whole *oeuvre* may be understood as a project towards conceptualizing aporias. Uncovering the internal struggles and discrepancies, internal controversies and tensions, would, indeed, make sense for a philosopher who was primarily concerned with the decentralization of meaning and with collapsing the illusory traditions of knowledge as found, for example, in the concept of representation. In "Sending: On Representation," Derrida uncovers representation in Martin Heidegger's thought as something that repeats (re-) an already established presupposition (-pre-) for something else (-sent/send) (1982, 307–308). Such thinking is heavily criticized by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*: "A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable" (Derrida 1997, 36). The revelation lies in understanding promiscuity as productivity, and narcissistic seduction as the illusory certainty. The bases of Derrida's Deconstruction are in its decentering of the subject, the un-making of the illusion of the natural proposition of language to carry meaning and the traditional ideas of identity, presence, and representation as misleading and contrived (Derrida

1997). The most difficult conception of the world as multiplicity and chaos, may be, paradoxically, the simplest one, one that does not rely on the intertwined web of signifiers establishing themselves constantly against every other signifier, in a hyper-complex web of self-establishing information.

Considering aporia as a piece of mythology, therefore a building block of the anthropological field of Structuralism, it is no wonder that it offers itself so well for Post-structuralist agenda as a subversive element. Aporia is a constant factor revealing itself when one is confronted with the world. “Can one speak – and if so, in what sense – of an *experience of the aporia*? An *experience of the aporia as such*? Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?” (Derrida 1993, 15, italics original). If one remains in the world of mythology, all trickster figures are aporetic, their liminal position, always cited as one of their principal features, is itself aporetic. For example, Prometheus’s position between humanity and the gods, or on the border between moral and amoral, mischievous and kind, always both yet never either, is aporetic. The act of bringing fire to humanity can be judged by the gods, the transcendental figures and forces, as immoral, as theft no matter the reason. But to the human, it will always remain a welcomed gift, one that has helped humanity leap forward, come to the light of discovery and progress. Just like other trickster figures with their mischief, Prometheus’s position is one of impasse and aporia. Eros is the same, as Plato writes in *The Symposium*,

His nature is neither that of an immortal nor that of a mortal, but in the course of a single day he will live and flourish for a while when he has the resources, then after a time he will start to fade away, only to come to life again through that part of his nature which he has inherited from his father. Yet his resources always slip through his fingers, so that although he is never destitute, neither is he rich. He is always midway between the two, just as he is between wisdom and ignorance. (Plato 2008, 40)

But the impasse does not stop anything, its abundance of difference and deferral does not provoke indifference. Rather, it provokes an abundance of affect or of sensation, an explosion that tears apart ontological constraints. The constant oscillation, the pendular movement between the conflicting emotions is infinitely productive since it cannot settle and is bound to continue swaying back and forth while remaining still, travelling at an incredible, imperceptible speed while never arriving anywhere. It is found seemingly still on the trajectory from nowhere to nowhere, from everywhere to everywhere, as movement on a trajectory that is infinitely short while remaining endless. It is, perhaps, not perceivable as a movement but rather as a vibration, a constant flux. It does not guide one anywhere and does not propose a clear answer

just like one should not confront it with a clear question and expect a resolution – it is rather the processes of fluctuation and the acts of questioning that are important.

Let us imagine finding ourselves presented with a question (perhaps an invitation to a discussion) focused on the division of art and the artist, for example “Do you think that Richard Wagner should be appreciated as a genius composer although he was an anti-Semite?” In this hypothetical situation, Wagner is the first aporetic figure that this text shall investigate. He is generally regarded as one of the greatest classical composers of all time and has had an immense influence on music ever since... Yet, he also wrote an openly anti-Semitic text about “Jewishness in music” and the anti-Semitic subtext of his *oeuvre* has been contemplated by many. “What arguments are fielded by the two contrasting points of view?” asks Hanan Bruen:

Those who support the playing of Wagner’s music claim that the programming of concerts should be based on aesthetic considerations. They maintain that Wagner’s work belongs to the very best compositions created in the European cultural tradition and that a work’s artistic quality should be the only, or at least the decisive, criterion for its inclusion in a concert program. These supporters also make largely educational claims [...] Those who are opposed to the playing of Wagner’s music claim that art does not occur in a vacuum but has to be seen in its psychological and social contexts. Believing that an artist’s work and personality cannot be separated, they point out that Wagner was not only an anti-Semite but in a number of his theoretical writings espoused ideologies that are close to National-Socialist race theories and their severe implications. (1993, 100)

One of the highly regarded texts that discusses the matter in more detail is Theodore Adorno’s biography of Wagner titled *In Search for Wagner*. In the first chapter, Adorno explores Wagner’s position in a focused manner, pointing towards his anti-Semitism and its historical roots and implications:

The contradiction between mockery of the victim and self-denigration is also a definition of Wagner’s anti-Semitism. The gold grabbing, invisible, anonymous, exploitative Alberich, the shoulder-shrugging, loquacious Mime, overflowing with self-praise and spite, the impotent intellectual critic Hanslick-Beckmesser – all the rejects of Wagner’s works are caricatures of Jews. They stir up the oldest sources of the German hatred of the Jews and, at the same time, the romanticism of *The Mastersingers* seems on occasion to anticipate the abusive verses that were not heard on the streets until sixty years later. (Adorno 2005, 12–13)

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As Slavoj Žižek writes in his introduction to *In Search of Wagner*, “[...] it is not enough to ‘decode’ Alberich, Mime, Hagen and so on as Jews, making the point that the *Ring* is one big anti-tract [...] the more basic fact is that the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew itself is not a direct ultimate referent, but is already encoded, a cipher of ideological and social antagonisms” (Žižek in Adorno 2005, xiv). Adorno, perhaps in order to decode such a cipher, invokes Wagner’s own various writings in order to uncover the various strata on which the Jewishness played a significant role for him, one of which is even simple spoken language:

The first thing that strikes our ear as quite outlandish and unpleasant, in the Jew’s production of the voice-sounds, is a creaking, squeaking, buzzing snuffle: add thereto an employment of words in a sense quite foreign to our nation’s tongue, and an arbitrary twisting of the structure of our phrases – and this mode of speaking acquires at once the character of an intolerable mumbo-jumbo; so that when we hear this Jewish talk, our attention dwells involuntarily on its repulsive *how*, rather than on any meaning of its intrinsic *what*. (Wagner in Adorno 2005, 13–14)

As Adorno concludes, “Jewish speech is thereby dismissed” (2005, 14).

After Adorno recalls the well-known rumor about Wagner laughing at the death of hundreds of Jewish patrons in the Vienna *Ringtheater* fire (2005, 16), he writes about the later alignment with Nazis more decisively: “[Wagner] differs from his ideological descendants only in that he equates annihilation with salvation” (Adorno 2005, 16). A quotation from Wagner’s text on the Jewish Question that reveals a proposition for the salvation, or in the discussed section, redemption, is again presented as very troublesome: “[...] he came among us seeking for redemption; he found it not, and had to learn that *only with our redemption, too, into genuine manhood*, would he ever find it. To become man at once with us, however, means firstly for the Jew as much as ceasing to be a Jew” (Wagner in Adorno 2005, 16). “And he is not content simply with the disappearance of the hated people itself,” continues Adorno, once again replying to Wagner himself: “‘If our culture is destroyed, that is no great loss; but if it is destroyed by the *Jews*, that would be a disgrace.’ The mode of existence that longs for the destruction of the Jew is aware that it is itself beyond redemption. Hence its own downfall is interpreted as the end of the world and Jews are seen as the agents of doom” (Adorno 2005, 17).

Already in the preface Žižek discussed the public confusion about the controversy and the aesthetic/ethical discrepancy in a similar way that in Bruen’s text, aesthetic *contra* socially-aware: “Is, then, the enjoyment of Wagner to remain an obscene secret to be disavowed in public academic discourse?” (Žižek in Adorno 2005, xxvii).

As can be seen, Žižek approaches the end of his discussion of the matter with a question, followed by the proposal that “The battle for Wagner is not over: today, after the exhaustion of the critical-historicist and aestheticist paradigms, it is entering its decisive phase” (2005, xxvii). When the reader remembers that Žižek wrote the final sentence of his introduction for the 2005 edition of *In Search of Wagner*, more than five decades after its first publication in 1952, the implication that the question shall be resolved seems quite naïve, since it has not been.

The aporia is so strong that even the state of Israel has been caught in the impasse with performances and presentations of Wagner’s works being constantly argued for and against, maintaining a great air of controversy and seeming irreconcilability. “The issue is appropriate for discussion in university seminars,” comments Bruen, “yet it also addresses the average citizen. At a time of severe external and internal crises in Israel, ordinary people suddenly started to think, talk, and hold opinions about Richard Wagner. Within a time span of two weeks, dozens of articles appeared in newspapers, and hundreds of readers wrote to their editors” (1993, 102). The productivity of aporia is uncovered in its provocative nature and even Adorno’s commentary itself points to aporia in Wagner’s habitus: “Wagner’s anti-Semitism is something he shared with other representatives of what Marx called the German Socialism of 1848. But his version advertises itself as a private idiosyncrasy that stubbornly resists all negotiations. It is the basis of Wagnerian humour. Aversion and laughter come together in a clash of words” (Adorno 2005, 17).

In a similar vein, another hypothetical: “Should we appreciate Martin Heidegger as a genius philosopher worth praising or condemn him as a despicable Nazi follower?” He did write *Being and Time*, one of the principal works in Phenomenology, challenging many philosophical positions on *being* that were held before its conception. Yet he also entered the Nazi party in the early 1930s, remaining a part of it until the end of World War II, never addressing the horrors of the holocaust. As reported in Daniel and Brigit Maier-Katkin’s article “Love and Reconciliation: The Case of Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger”, “in his post-factum construction of reality, Heidegger suggested that he had entered an inner emigration of spiritual resistance” (Maier-Katkin and Maier-Katkin 2007, 43), which is only one of many comments the authors have made regarding Heidegger’s evasive post-war denial of his pre-war accord with the National-Socialist Party:

For Heidegger, the Third Reich began with grandiose ambitions to lead a historic spiritual and intellectual rejuvenation of the German nation, but ended in disrepute and despair. The Nazis were pleased to have a leading philosopher among their ranks and he was appointed to the position of

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Rektor at Freiburg University, where he behaved atrociously: abolishing the faculty senate, instituting a Führer system of governance, firing Jewish faculty members, helping to align the university system with the Nazi regime, and lending intellectual respectability to a band of thugs. In public addresses he called upon students to undertake labor service and military service on behalf of the Reich, honored the exceptionalism and excellence of the German Volk and German language, thought, and tradition, often ending his speeches “*Heil Hitler*,” and on at least one occasion with this salute: “To the man of unprecedented will, to our *Führer* Adolf Hitler a threefold *Sieg Heil!*” (Maier-Katkin and Maier-Katkin 2007, 39, italics original)

Heidegger’s enthusiasm for Hitler as a statesman has been noted also in his private correspondence with his brother Fritz: “It can be seen from one day to the next how great a statesman Hitler is becoming. The world of our people and the Reich finds itself in a process of transformation, and all those who have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart for action will be swept along and put in a state of extreme excitement” (Heidegger in Soboczynski and Cammann 2016).

Other sources on Heidegger’s anti-Semitism (or, at least, his strong dislike of the Jewish population) have been rather recently uncovered with the publication of his *Black Notebooks*, a collection of notes and sketches. The *Black Notebooks* comment on “the worldlessness of Judaism” (2017a, 76), identify Jewishness with forceful appropriation of culture (2017a, 254), criticize Jews for “most vehement resistance to [the] unrestricted application [of the principle of race]” (2017b, 44), diminish the significance of “the psychoanalysis practiced by a Jew, ‘Freud’” (2017b, 171, italics original), or warn that “the question of the role of *world-Judaism* is not a racial question, but a metaphysical one, a question that concerns the kind of human existence which in an *utterly unrestrained* way can undertake as a world-historical “task” the uprooting of all beings from being” (2017b, 191, italics original). Fragments such as these exemplify Heidegger’s dislike of the Jews, perhaps especially due to their blasé nature. Yet there might be surprising defenders of his figure found even among the Jewish population, such as his lover Hannah Arendt: “Some of these men can also ‘be redeemed by genius or a talent so compelling that it will overrule everything else.’ Here, she offered as examples Brecht and Heidegger” (Maier-Katkin and Maier-Katkin 2007, 44). Comments like these, coming from such an intimate relationship, further complicate the judgment.

Moving along in time towards the present day in one of the most recent public discussions of the aporetic: “Is Harvey Weinstein one of the most respectable producers in Hollywood or a sexual predator?” “About a year after Kantor and Twohey first reported on the allegations against him,” writes Anna North for the server

vox.com, “Weinstein has not only lost his job at the company he co-founded – he has also been indicted on charges of rape and predatory sexual assault” (North 2018). Why mention them at this juncture? It is symptomatic of the confusion, of the irreducibility and inability to partition the two, or many, sides of the perceived identity opening to the public eye.

The role of #MeToo, a suddenly opening channel of communication through a sense of empowerment and togetherness, is instrumental. As has been recorded in the Weinstein scandal timeline on bbc.com, “Actor Tom Hanks says there can be no way back for Weinstein. ‘His last name... will become an identifying moniker for a state of being for which there was a before and an after,’ he tells the BBC” (“Harvey Weinstein Timeline” 2018). Yet it does not mean before and after the deeds Weinstein has been criticized and persecuted for, it means before and after the news broke, before the sudden rupture and the deafening flow of information uncovering Weinstein as aporetic.

The discussion of the matter has been further problematized not only by the aporia of the impasse and the crumbling of a perceived identity, it has also been problematized by the #MeToo movement itself. As discussed by Stavroula Pipyrou, “The #MeToo movement provided a platform for women to break what was in some cases decades of silence. Then, arguably, #MeToo started to spin out of control as it became clear that the boundaries of appropriate sexual behavior were a subjective matter” (2018). Pipyrou then launches an investigation into the suggested aporetic nature of the #MeToo initiative:

In this Shortcuts section, our contributors have been asked to address these opposing stances: On the one hand, #MeToo is little more than mob rule premised on vigilantism that foregoes judicial procedure in favor of public shaming. In doing so, it shifts the spotlight away from the crime and onto the individual character of perpetrator and victim, thus failing to tackle the structural problem of sexual violence. On the other hand, #MeToo provides a form of social justice that allows the sharing of taboo issues and helps break the silence surrounding serious crimes that can then be dealt with through official legal channels. (Pipyrou 2018)

In this sense one must understand that the action and consequences of #MeToo, being a public initiative shared on social media, may as well operate beyond the law. The “mob rule” aspect pondered by Pipyrou and her contributors compared against “social justice” effectively contrasts *populus* versus *socius*, the anti-social savage and uninformed popular aggression against the higher degree of reaction in a more considered social form.

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Although Pipyrrou never arrives to a convergent conclusion, her words suggest a support of the need for an aporetic approach by writing that, despite the movement's following, "All contributors acknowledge, for instance, the unhelpful role of stereotyping, of creating an essentialized other. This practice only creates bitterness, a feeling that all those who share an identity trait should be viewed as potential perpetrators, leading to a growing sense of victimization" (Pipyrrou 2018). Even the conclusion she reaches points in the direction of aporia: "It might not seem ideal that the stories are collated through a hashtag movement – with associated problems of moderation and verification – but this does provide an open-access archive and a legitimate channel for others to engage with their own harrowing experiences," writes Pipyrrou and concludes that "silence is the most striking evidence of violence, and if #MeToo potentially empowers people to tear down the walls of silence and interrogate archives of pain in the pursuit of justice, then this can only be positive" (Pipyrrou 2018).

Even when, or perhaps especially when, one reads "positive" as "productive" in an ethical sense, the double aporia of Weinstein *contra* #MeToo, aporia challenged by aporia, a guerilla war of the undecidable against the undecidable points to a fight outside the law. "And in this sense, it is impossible to have a full experience of aporia, that is, of something that does not allow passage. An aporia is a non-road. From this point of view, justice would be the experience that we are not able to experience" (Derrida 1990, 947). Is Louis C.K. to be considered a great comedian or forgotten for being a sexual predator? Is Kevin Spacey still to be considered a breathtaking actor or written off as a sexual predator? And should Robin Hood be considered a well-meaning anti-tyrant or condemned as a criminal? Is Banksy to be praised as an apt social commentator and artist or shunned for being a criminal? "Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule" (Derrida 1990, 947), and so the non-road of aporia cannot lead to the courthouse where something would be ruled, captured, or squandered with a stroke of the judicial mallet.

After all – who should decide what is *enough*, given the sheer number of people affected, involved, and having some stake in the process? Given the subjective approach to sexual behavior proposed by Pipyrrou, the greatest injustice of all might lie in the decision and the final word, finishing the project of #MeToo in some idealized final state. To avoid the trappings of set meanings, one shall not necessarily expect answers, only discussions, because aporias are always both and neither at the same time, always too much and never enough. The truth is always in-between, as one

supports the other while subverting it at the same time, constantly shifting and moving like the coils of a serpent. Coming out of the ancient transgression, aporia does not abide by any law or morals. There will never be a clear answer to the question “Which one?” without giving one of the conflicting features up, effectively bastardizing the elusive into a decidedly set, yet inherently fractured, mongrel.

One should not be misled – although aporia does not abide by law or morals, it does not mean that it cannot be instrumentatively used in order to convey moral messages or lawful warnings. If aporia is above law and morals, it is also above ideology, yet it is precisely for that reason that it can be harnessed as an *instrumentum* of ideology for any intended purpose, not as aporia but as the derivative and reductive perversity. The mongrels are welcomed in Hollywood, the bastion of what Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer called “the culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). The cult of personality and of exceptionality, hidden behind the masquerade of legacy, the institutionalized spectacle of award ceremonies, perhaps best embodied by the Academy lifetime award, is no less than one of the primary cogwheels in the immense machinery of commodification. The relationship between the actor and the audience has already been discussed by Walter Benjamin in his seminal 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility”, in which he proposes that the actor knows well that, through his performance, he will in the end confront an audience, the masses who will control him. “Not only does the cult of the movie star which it fosters preserve that magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character,” writes Benjamin, “but its counterpart, the cult of the audience, reinforces the corruption by which fascism is seeking to supplant the class consciousness of the masses” (Benjamin 2008, 33). The claim of the close relationship and the importance of mongrels is, perhaps, even better explained with a further quotation: “Under these circumstances, the film industry has an overriding interest in stimulating the involvement of the masses through illusionary displays and ambiguous speculations. To this end it has set in motion an immense publicity machine, in the service of which it has placed the careers and love lives of the stars; it has organized polls; it has held beauty contests” (Benjamin 2008, 34). The cult of personality revealed in the mongrel of “only exceptional artist” works as a self-propelling tool of the commodification of the images on the screens. It inspires a draw, a direct motion without the sway of the vibration of the flux, a focused vector that can, itself, be captured and investigated, commodified and exploited. “Thus,” concludes Benjamin, “the same is true of film capital in particular as of fascism in general: a compelling urge toward new social opportunities is being clandestinely exploited in the interests of a property-owning minority” (Benjamin 2008, 34). Yet the other mongrels, the repulsive, condemnable mongrel, or even the condemned and forgotten mongrel, work in the same way, as a diversion and

redirection of interest. The repressive apparatus of the audience's control may disown the personalities and expel them, but that leaves the opportunity for mere replacement, a relocation of resources and of capital and for further exploitation by the fascist apparatus of the culture industry. The aporia of the uncaptured, schizophrenic subject is the key against the exploitation. The aporetic impasse resists capture and pinning down, just like in the Aesop's fable having to do with Heracles trying to fight his way out when confronted with an aporetic impasse: "Athena saw him and said, 'O Heracles, don't be so surprised! This thing that has brought about your confusion is Aporia (Difficulty) and Eris (Strife). If you just leave it alone, it stays small; but if you decide to fight it, then it swells from its small size and grows large'" (Aesop 2008, 245–246). Here, fighting the impasse lies in the attempt to get rid of it, generally speaking in capturing, or rather pinning either of the aspects down with the brutish force of ignorance. Cutting the Gordian knot in half may "solve" the unsolvable, yet the result annihilates the inherently productive situation that is the most productive when left alone, unsolved, left-being-an-impasse, aporetic, controversial, and split.

The question of the division of the art and the artist may sometimes seem pressing but, in the light of thinking aporias, shall never be answered, "there is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate" (Derrida 1993, 20). Just as with the original Greek mythos, one feature defines the other. Is there really an art without its artist? Is there any artist where there's no art? The pressure of the questions "Which one?" or "How can I forget?" or "How can I forgive?" causes the vibration that leads to the productive discussion. "It appears to be paradoxical enough so that the partitioning among multiple figures of aporia does not oppose figures to each other, but instead installs the haunting of the one in the other" (Derrida 1993, 20). The importance of being pondered or being discussed makes itself clear when one, instead, writes it as the importance of *being-pondered* or *being-discussed*, forever tying the discussion to cultural existence and further social production.

But it may be the static-representative thought of more traditional philosophies, propagating their love of knowledge as a final product and an end-in-itself rather than a dynamic process, concerned with *being* as a state instead of a process of dialectic² productivity of aporia, that is the most dangerous to human subjectivity. What represents the human? What size, what sex, shape, or form of the body? And

2 An important distinction must be made: the dialectics which aporia accommodates are not Hegelian dialectics, which strive toward a final synthesis, but rather Adorno's negative dialectics which are much more concerned precisely with the process of the imaginary dialogue. As Adorno himself comments on the distinction: "[Negative dialectic's] motion does not tend to the identity in the difference between each object and its concept; instead, it is suspicious of all identity. Its logic is one of disintegration: of a disintegration of the prepared and objectified form of the concepts which the cognitive subject faces, primarily and directly" (Adorno 2007, 145).

at what stage in life should a human be held and judged as human, at what age? The brutality of the reduction of human life into any static representation negates its presence immediately. Static representation negates the existence or any “value” of the subject since any static representation speaks about human life to the same extent as though one chose the static representation of a deceased subject. Dead and alive – they are both united on a flat hierarchy because both reduce the subject to the same comparable fraction. Yet – the flow of history never stops, it is like the ever-changing waves of the sea or a river that one shall never enter twice, the waves of chaos and aporia that reflect the human in its impossibility to understand, know, or, in other words, to capture.

Such approaches of aporia may allow for critical ponderings of the multiplicity of every human being, not setting forth a transcendental feature but taking into account the chaos and the endlessness of human variety and difference. Or perhaps, rather of human *différance*, the constantly deferring feature of Derrida’s Deconstruction, not unlike the aporias mentioned. The present insistence on the importance of discussion and the *process* of acquiescence of meaning instead of the *moment* of acquiring it, is also quite similar to the #MeToo’s insistence on uncovering and opening channels of communication which are, arguably, much more desired than any kind of “justice” bestowed on the perpetrators. The open discussion of subjects approached as aporias frees the human from reduction, belittling, and slavery under the orders of justice, morality, or ideology. Just like Deconstruction it is always at work, so is aporia, it must always be at work in order to be at work. It is an impasse in the form of passage that shall never end, a forking in the road always ahead, never to be reached, never to be passed through, always to be passed along.

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Jan Čapek is a PhD candidate at the Department of English and American studies at Masaryk university in Brno, Czech Republic. His current doctoral research is concerned with a theoretical investigation into the processes of commodification of anxiety in the figures of the undead, specifically vampires and zombies, in the film and fiction of late-capitalist North America. He has devised and taught courses, as well as written and presented, on horror and sci-fi film and fiction.



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**AFTER THE GREAT FLATTENING:
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY SASKATCHEWAN
FEATURE FILM**

Martin Ondryáš

Abstract

Canadian prairies have been for long in the shadow of the dominant Central Canadian provinces that were considered crucial for the definition of Canadian identity since the late 19th century. This can especially be illustrated in a look at the province of Saskatchewan and its film industry. The history of Saskatchewan feature film started in 1987 with *Wheat Soup*, the first feature film created by local filmmakers. There were several feature films that were released in the years after *Wheat Soup*, but none of them received similar recognition. In an attempt to support the film industry in the province, the local government introduced a tax incentive that was in effect between 1998 and 2012. During this era many international producers created their films in the province. After the termination of the program the international producers left the province and since 2012 there have only been a handful of films created in Saskatchewan. The most successful films of the post-tax credit era were *WolfCop* (2014), *Another WolfCop* (2017), *Corner Gas: The Movie* (2014), and *The Sabbatical* (2015). The focus of this analysis is on recurring themes that can be seen as characteristic of the Saskatchewan feature film. These recurring themes, namely the role of landscape, the importance of place for the identity of the main characters, and the relationship between Saskatchewan and Central Canada, are then discussed as a possible reflection of the relationship between Canada and the United States.

Keywords

Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan cinema, feature film, identity, *Wheat Soup*, *WolfCop*, *Another WolfCop*, *Corner Gas*, *The Sabbatical*

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PROBABLY one of the most famous Saskatchewan exports is a joke about a dog that ran away from its owner. Because of the flatness and monotony of the landscape, the owner could see the dog running away for three days. This joke, made internationally famous by the *Corner Gas* series in its theme song, is only one of many that ridicule Saskatchewan and demote the entire Canadian province into a

punch line. Some of these, usually those created and used by people outside of the province, are concerned with social and cultural aspects of the province. For example, when a skeleton of *Tyrannosaurus Rex* was discovered in Eastend, Saskatchewan in 1994, a “front-page article in the [national newspapers] *Globe and Mail* about the find suggested that the dinosaur had died of boredom” (Calder 2001, 97). This approach of (mainly) Central Canada denotes Saskatchewan into the position of hinterland that requires the attention of bigger and culturally dominant provinces, and it is one of the reasons why Saskatchewan tends to be forgotten when it comes to defining the Canadian identity. This paper analyses the role of landscape and the importance of place connected with the identity in selected films created in Saskatchewan by local filmmakers, *Wheat Soup* (1987), *WolfCop* (2014), *Another WolfCop* (2017), *Corner Gas: The Movie* (2014), and *The Sabbatical* (2015).

The search for Canadian identity is not a straightforward task with a simple solution. One of the most visible issues of the alleged unique Canadian identity is the proximity of the powerful and culturally expansive southern neighbor that can be seen throughout the discourse of Canadian culture. Accordingly, the question of differentiating Canada from the United States is among the most discussed features of the national identity. Due to the borders being open for both people and cultural artefacts in both directions, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two cultural identities. However, the situation is different in the case of Canadian national cinema, especially because of the lack of Canadian films that would “address the Canadian realities and problems from the vantage point of their own experience” (Pospíšil 2009, 210). Instead, it is the American production that not only dominates Canadian theatres and supplies Canadian media with the representation of Canadians, but also provides the Canadians with “their self-image” created from the outside perspective (Saul 2005). The very few domestic films that are being produced constitute less than five per cent of the market share (“Canadian films’ share of the box office revenues” 2016), and even if a Canadian film dealing with Canadian experience is created, properly advertised, and makes it to the big screen, its running time rarely exceeds one week (Haupt 2014).

The films that are recognized as Canadian often reflect the unsuccessful attempt to provide a national self-representation and the United States play an important role of “[the other] that serves as a vantage point for one’s – positive or negative – self-definition” (Pospíšil 2009, 243). In this regard, the United States approach to Canada is the same as that of Central Canada towards Saskatchewan. Although Saskatchewan producers tend to refuse the ideas associated with the province produced in other parts of Canada, in the majority of the contemporary Saskatchewan feature films these connotations appear as recurring themes and symbols. Therefore, similarly to the Central Canadian production that is profoundly entangled with the American film realities, Saskatchewan films are connected with

the Central Canadian perspective. It is not without interest that the history of Saskatchewan cinema to a large extent reflects the history Canadian federal tax shelter introduced in 1975 and cancelled in 1982.

1. The Great Flattening: *Wheat Soup* (1987)

Saskatchewan has a rich tradition of short and documentary films, represented by the Saskatchewan-based Yorkton Film Festival, the longest running film festival in North America. However, feature films created in the province are often underappreciated, if not completely ignored. To discuss and analyse the contemporary Saskatchewan feature film, it is necessary to address the very first feature film created in the province that set the course for all locally produced feature films. The producers of *Wheat Soup* (1987), Gerald Saul and Brian Stockton, at that time students at the University of Regina, formed their film around the images of Saskatchewan that were popularised by Central Canadian films depicting the province from the outside perspective.

Wheat Soup is divided into six parts and follows two protagonists. In the first part, named “The Agoraphobic”, the protagonist is a young artist that is unable to leave the basement of his house due to fear of open places. After he finally manages to overcome the phobia and leaves the house, he is killed by a falling anvil. The rest of the film is set in a post-nuclear future and follows the story of Sam, a young farmer that refuses the traditional way of life. The event of the nuclear catastrophe itself is referred to as the Great Flattening and in several scenes the characters of the film discuss the difference between the world before and after the Great Flattening. On his journey from the wheat farm, Sam meets people who do not live in the region of wheat fields and he differentiates himself from the foreigners using place as the key element of his identity.

Saul and Stockton’s approach towards the plot of the film mocks the obsession of the foreign filmmakers with the two-dimensional image of Saskatchewan and its portrayal as a completely flat, hostile landscape, which is, most importantly, filled only with wheat and emptiness. These motifs, highlighted by the sarcasm of *Wheat Soup*, can be traced throughout the earlier foreign cinema, such as in *Drylanders* (1963), *Why Shoot the Teacher?*, or *Who Has Seen the Wind* (both 1977), but also in the post-2012 Saskatchewan cinema. The motifs of hostile landscape and place as the key aspect of identity are some of the defining elements of contemporary feature films set and created in the province.

2. Without the Tax Incentive: *WolfCop* (2014) and *Another WolfCop* (2017)

There was only a handful of feature films created in Saskatchewan after *Wheat Soup*, but none of them made it out of the shadow of the province’s first feature film. In

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order to support the film industry and compete with the National Film Board studios in Manitoba and Alberta, the Saskatchewan government introduced a tax incentive that to a large degree resembled the federal tax shelter from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Saskatchewan Film Employment Tax Credit was active from 1998 to 2012 and promised tax deductions to any film productions that would create film in the province. During this period, over sixty feature films by foreign productions were created in the province (Lampard 2013), which makes it the most prosperous time in the history of Saskatchewan film industry. Nevertheless, the international and often economically successful films were created at the expense of the regionally produced films. The Saskatchewan cinema lacked its own filmmakers that would create regional films that would receive national or even international recognition.

Despite the tax incentive being considered as beneficial for the province's economy, the provincial government ended the program in 2012. The termination of the tax credit caused a major exodus of people employed in the film industry to other provinces and there has not been a single international production in Saskatchewan since. The end of the tax credit can be considered a restart of the Saskatchewan cinema, with void left by international productions to be filled by local filmmakers.

WolfCop (2014) represents a transition in Saskatchewan cinema between films created under the Saskatchewan Film Employment Tax Credit and films created without the tax incentive: although the filming of *WolfCop* started only after the termination of the tax credit, it was created under the tax program due to a loophole discovered by the films production ("Film Makers Snag Tax Credit Money to Make 'WolfCop' Flick" 2013). Despite the film being recognized as Saskatchewan, with the director, lead actors, and technical crew being from Saskatchewan, its funding came from a Vancouver-based CineCoup production company. This creates a rather ironic situation where "an example of a Saskatchewan film industry success story" is funded from outside of the province ("WolfCop 2 to start filming in Saskatchewan" 2015).

The protagonist of *WolfCop* is a constantly drunk cop Lou Garou who works in a small town of Woodhaven. Lou works in the shadow of his police partner, Tina, and he does not show any interest in police work and prefers to spend time in a bar. This all changes when he is ambushed in the woods outside of the city and wakes up the following morning with a pentagram carved into his chest. As he later finds out, the pentagram was a part of a turning ritual that infected him with lycanthropy. His senses sharpen, Lou turns into a vigilante and, accompanied by his side-kick Willie Higgins, he fights crime in the Woodhaven area. His fight against crime meets with resistance from shapeshifters that have been running Woodhaven for decades and impersonating influential characters, such as the mayor or the chief of the police. As the plot unfolds, Lou gets kidnapped by the shapeshifters who attempt to sacrifice

him and drain his blood to strengthen their powers. In the finale of the film, however, Lou and Tina defeat the shapeshifters and end their rule over Woodhaven.

The first film offers several themes that are typical for Saskatchewan productions, especially the important role of landscape. In *WolfCop*, the scenes that are crucial to the development of the main character and the film plot are set outside of the city in a woodland area. First, Lou is captured in the woods and turned into a werewolf, and he investigates his first crime after the ritual at the same location the following day. After realizing that his senses have been strengthened, Lou becomes a responsible police officer and for the first time in the film he properly investigates a crime scene. Finally, it is also the place where the film climaxes in a huge battle against the shapeshifters. The small woodland area outside of the city thus acquires the status of a key motif of the film and supports the idea that landscape is a key element in creating the Saskatchewan identity.

The success of the first film prompted the director Lowell Dean to create *Another WolfCop* in 2017. The sequel offers the same set of main characters as the first film. Set one year after the plot of *WolfCop*, Lou shares his secret with Tina who was promoted to the role of the police chief and the two work on cases together, either as a human duo or a human-werewolf team. The film works with the return of shapeshifters to Woodhaven, this time led by a rich businessman Sydney Swallows who comes to the city to open a brewery. As the story unfolds, Swallows executes his plan to impregnate humans with shapeshifter embryos through the consumption of beer and breed new shapeshifters. In a climax in a hockey rink, Lou defeats Swallows' hockey team and Swallows escapes.

The setting of the first film is a rather controversial as the entire town of Woodhaven is portrayed as a generic American town with American flags on displays, pins of American flags on the collars of police officers, and commendation bars with the American flag on their shirts and jackets – in fact, the only thing that hints at the film being made in Saskatchewan are the province number plates on Lou's car. The forced American setting is the result of CineCoup pushing for the plot to be set in the United States rather than Saskatchewan in order to achieve bigger audience (Hignite 2018). This approach is an example of the foreign film companies that created films under the province's tax credit without necessarily acknowledging the film's origin. In the sequel, the generic American town was exchanged for a generic Canadian town with as many Canadian symbols as included. This, however, is at the expense of acknowledging the Saskatchewan origin of the film; apart from the fake welcome sign of Regina with a quote by the fictional character Deadpool from the film of the same name – “The city that rhymes with fun” – and a few Saskatchewan flags on display in the hockey arena, there is nothing that

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would promote the film as a significantly Saskatchewan feature. This exchange of the generic American setting for a generic Canadian setting illustrates the similarity between the struggle for the image of Canada against the American representation and the Saskatchewan struggle against that of Central Canada.

The question of identity is present in both *WolfCop* films, but whereas in the first film Lou deals with his position of an outcast from society that later turns out to be consisting solely of shapeshifters, the sequel offers a full-fledged differentiation of the main characters against the Other based on place. The central point of reference as the Other against the Saskatchewan is the character of Sydney Swallows, a billionaire who opens a brewery in Woodhaven, sponsors the local hockey team, and who in the end turns out to be the leader of the shapeshifters from first *WolfCop*. As a rich businessman coming from outside of the province, Swallows positions himself above the local citizens. In the opening scene of the film, Swallows shoots a commercial where he addresses locals as “losers” and that is to be aired in Woodhaven: “You’re a loser. It’s just a fact. But what if I told you that I could help you change all of that. I’m a winner, but then you probably already know that. I’m also a connoisseur and a curator of the best life has to offer. Everything that you’ll never get to experience, until now” (*Another WolfCop* 00:00:16–00:00:41). Swallow’s openly colonial attitude to Woodhaven introduces new approach towards the question of identity and the sequel thus, to a limited amount, explores social divisions in the city that are based on the sense of place; the long-time citizens of Woodhaven stand against an outsider magnate from the culturally and economically dominant parts of the country. This approach is further strengthened in a television interview where Swallows attempts to seduce a local news reporter and his first question is where she is from. He is rather unhappy to learn that she is from Woodhaven as he considers place to be the most important element of one’s identity. While in most situations it is the newcomer to the community that is assigned lower social status, in *Another WolfCop* it is vice versa. Although this could be ascribed to his economic status, Lou and Tina dislike Swallows from the beginning despite his investments in local brewery and ice-hockey team. This suggests that the character is not perceived mainly as a magnate, but as an outsider to the community.

Dean’s films reflect the defining influence of the Central Canadian film production. The settings of the films play a crucial role in this duality. Whereas in *WolfCop* Woodhaven is an American city with Saskatchewan identity, in *Another WolfCop* Woodhaven becomes a city in Saskatchewan portrayed as a generic Canadian town. As a result, the Saskatchewan-Central Canadian relationship reflects that of Canada and the United States.

3. The Province's Main Cultural Export: *Corner Gas: The Movie* (2014)

The 2014 film *Corner Gas: The Movie* is the most prominent film that has been created in the province since the termination of the Saskatchewan tax incentive both budget and audience-wise. The film is based on the television series *Corner Gas* that was running on the CTV Television Network from 2004 to 2009. The series was popular not only during television premiere of each new episode, but also during numerous reruns on the state CTV TN. Brad Wall, the Saskatchewan premier (2007–2018), considered the series to be “one of the most successful TV series ever produced in Canada” and proclaimed 13 April, when the finale of the series aired in 2009, to be the official Corner Gas Day in Saskatchewan (Hopper 2014). Since the main theme of this subchapter is *Corner Gas: The Movie*, the essay will refer to the film in short as *Corner Gas* and to the series as “series.”

The screening of the *Corner Gas* was successful all-around Canada. The original plan was to have the film screened in selected theatres over five days (Harris 2014), but due to large demand, additional three days were added (Sirotich 2014) before the film aired on television. It is important to note that while the time it spent in the cinemas is disproportionately short in comparison to Hollywood productions, for a Canadian and especially Saskatchewan production it was a great success.

The story is set in Dog River, a fictional city in Saskatchewan, and revolves around the relationships of its citizens. The main character of the series, Brent Leroy, is the owner of the gas station called Corner Gas that serves as a social centre of the community. The other two places that act as the centres of social centres are Ruby Café, run by a Toronto expatriate Lacey Burrows, and a bar situated in a local hotel. As the film builds on the series, the film does not introduce the characters and instead picks up where the series left off. The mayor of the city lost all the town's money in gambling and Dog River is cut off electricity and there are no available funds to repair a broken water pump. Lacey suggests that Dog River participates in the competition for the quaintest town in Canada, but her idea is left without response from the citizens. It is only after a big doughnut corporation Coff-Nuts plans to first open a bistro in the town and later to completely take over the city to build a Western Canadian depot in its place that the people of Dog River unite to fight against the corporation and cooperate in the contest. Nonetheless, in spite of their best efforts, they fail miserably, Brent is sued by a Coff-Nuts representative, and the town has to be saved by a reporter of the national newspaper that came to Dog River as a judge of the contest.

During the opening scene of the film, there is a situation at Corner Gas that serves as a commentary on the state of Saskatchewan cinema after the end of the tax credit.

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Hank, one of the central characters, asks how long it has been since anything exciting has happened in Dog River. Few moments later, an armed man enters Corner Gas and in a quick turn of events he turns into a werewolf. To confirm this scene as a reproduction of *WolfCop* that screened only months before the shooting of *Corner Gas*, the werewolf is played by Leo Fafard, the actor who played Lou in both *WolfCop* films. Similarly to Lowell Dean's films, *Corner Gas* was also created outside of the regular scheme that was suggested for the local filmmakers by the Saskatchewan government, which would provide maximum of \$250,000 for a feature film. The absence of any form of tax incentive in Saskatchewan was a huge problem for the producers who even considered shooting the film in the neighbouring province under the still active Manitoba tax credit. However, with the threat of shooting *Corner Gas*, a film-sequel of the series that were deeply rooted in public awareness as the most successful Saskatchewan artistic export, outside of the province, the government chose to avoid a political threat to its voting base and voted to support the production with special grants. From the film's total budget of \$8.5 million, Creative Saskatchewan contributed with \$500,000, double the usual limit, and the Saskatchewan government released another \$1.5 million from other organisations run by the government, such as Tourism Saskatchewan (Hopper 2014).

A part of the agreement between the Saskatchewan government and the film production for the exceptional grant, consisting of terms listed by the government, became known as the "sunset clause." In this agreement, the *Corner Gas* producers agreed "to consider storyline that will allow for opportunities to include positive visual aspects that promote Saskatchewan as a tourism destination, e.g. sunrises/sunsets, unique vistas or locations, etc." (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Tourism 13, 2014). Consequently, the film features several shots of landscape, wheat, sunflowers, sunrises and sunsets that are not connected to the film plot. For the understanding of the role of these images that are classified within the sunset clause it is important to note that none of these shots nor any similar visual portrayal of the landscape were included in the original series (unless they were a direct part of a punchline). Moreover, the artificiality of the implementation of the visual representation of the landscape is further emphasized by the fact that the entire introduction of the film consisting of aerial shots of crops and the landscape. Although the series was recognizable by its opening theme, the film producers did not employ the original theme and instead opted for these random sceneries. This imagery is present also during the film, although in limited numbers. The landscape aerial shot of landscape is again used after the film credit, which is incoherent with the original series that focused solely on the building of Corner Gas and the city of Dog River without acknowledging the landscape in any way. Therefore, it can be

concluded that the shots of sunsets at random places in Saskatchewan that are not connected to the plot of the film or the series are artificially added to the film because of the sunset clause.

Because most of the characters have been dealing with identity issues during the series, identity is not explored on a personal level. Instead, the film explores the identity of the people of Dog River juxtaposed against Jerome, the representative of the Central Canadian corporation Coff-Nuts, who in the film acquires the role of the Other. Thus, similarly to *Another WolfCop*, the key attribute in defining identity is the place. Nevertheless, Jerome, unlike Swallows, is not depicted as hostile towards the people of Dog River, as his motivation for the lawsuit against Brent is not the destruction of the city but a personal revenge. Although Jerome argues that he does not plan to destroy Dog River and that he in fact supports them in their attempt to save the town, it does not affect the locals' resentment. Moreover, as the story unfolds, Jerome tries to flirt with Lacey and recognizes her origin outside of the province as one of her key traits: "What is a girl from Toronto doing in a small town like this? You're smart. You're pretty. You deserve better than this" (*Corner Gas* 01:05:47–01:05:58). Jerome, an outsider who is only temporarily visiting the community, tries to impress Lacey by acknowledging that she is not from Dog River and suggesting that she has a potential to be successful in Central Canada.

The sense of place is further emphasised by the fact that the lawsuit of the Coff-Nuts corporation cannot be repulsed by anyone from the town or the province, but only by another person of similarly placed identity as Jerome. In this case, it is the news reporter who judges the contest for the quaintest town in Canada that saves the day as she supports the people of Dog River by publishing an article about the situation in national newspapers.

In accordance with the previous films, the representation of landscape appears in *Corner Gas*; however, unlike in *Wheat Soup* and *WolfCop* films, the landscape in *Corner Gas* acquires the form of illustrations rather than important factors relevant to the story. The implementation of the visual aspects of the environment was demanded by the government of Saskatchewan in the sunset clause, suggesting that the role of landscape has been accepted as the defining element of Saskatchewan cinema. Notwithstanding the government's intervention in the question of landscape, the issue of place and identity is still relevant in the film.

4. The Saskatchewan New Independent Wave: The Sabbatical (2015)

Brian Stockton, the co-director of *Wheat Soup*, director of *The Sabbatical*, and a renowned author of short films about Saskatchewan, believes that the regional cinema is

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undergoing a form of a revival: “I think things are starting to look up for the film industry in Saskatchewan [...] We are seeing more productions picking up. I think we are in a rebuilding phase and I see this as an opportunity to build from here” (Stockton as cited in Maragos 2015). From this point of view, the void left by the international companies is open to, and slowly filled by, local independent filmmakers.

One of the typical features of the new wave of independent films is the low budget that limits the setting of the film. *The Sabbatical* is an example of such film. This can be illustrated by the fact that to minimize the expenses for scenery, parts of the film were filmed at the University of Regina campus, in the town of Regina, or at Stockton’s house (Whyte 2015). Moreover, since the limited budget did not allow for a professional crew to be invited to the province, the film was created with the help of many of Stockton’s students or graduates who were shooting in their free time for more than a year (Maragos 2015). The film thus became a virtue of necessity as it allowed many young filmmakers to get involved in creating a feature film in their home province.

The main character of the film, a university professor of photography James Pittman, is leaving for his long-awaited sabbatical. However, before he takes the sabbatical, he is told that he either returns with a new book or else he will lose his position at the university in the next budget cuts. James struggles with his motivation and although he forces himself to start with the project, he is not satisfied with any of his photographs. Meanwhile, James’s wife Jillian is in the middle of a successful science project and all of her free time is devoted to her work and she also insists on James undergoing vasectomy. The combination of these elements triggers James’s midlife crisis. Having his driver’s license revoked, James asks a young university student Lucy to drive him around the town. The two soon become friends and their relationship helps James handle the crisis, but eventually the platonic relationship comes to an end when Lucy and her boyfriend move outside of the province.

Even though the film is set in Regina, the second biggest city in the province, landscape plays an important role in the film. James considers himself a street photographer; however, whereas James’s first book named *Street* consists of black and white photographs of architecture and street life in the urban sense of the word, he places his new project in the city parks rather than on the streets. Similarly as in *WolfCop*, also in *The Sabbatical* most of the key and character-changing situations take place in non-urban locations, even though the essential setting is the town; where the landscape in *WolfCop* is represented by a nearby woodland area, in *The Sabbatical* it is either parks or the vistas along the river.

The first situation crucial to the development of the film plot that is set in the park is James’s encounter with Lucy. He meets her during one of his first attempts to take pictures for his book, while she is rather unsuccessfully busking in a park. Another scene that is important for the development of James’s character is the fireworks

battle with Lucy and her friends in a forest. Full of bright colors and loud music, the scene represents the point in his midlife crisis where James feels young and full of life energy. The role of the landscape is further emphasized after an argument with Lucy, after which James returns to his initial plan to create material for his new book in the parks. Finally, the climax of James's crisis is depicted by his attempt to take a picture of a sunset with his black and white camera as he talks to himself: "Sunset shots in black and white, James, really?" (*The Sabbatical* 01:02:59–01:03:03). The act of taking sunset pictures as a last resort to gather material for the book could be considered not only a clever reference to Stockton's feature film debut *Wheat Soup*, which was shot in black and white and featured a scene of sunset that was over ten minutes long, but it also relates to the sunset clause of *Corner Gas*. In this understanding, the sunset photo is a desperate attempt to portray Saskatchewan after all other attempts to find representations of the province had failed. The frustration of unsuccessful attempts to depict the province's specifics results in the sunset being considered the only thing that the province has to offer.

Consistent with Stockton's focus on the people, the topic of identity is explored through various aspects that were not present in the previously discussed films, especially gender and age. Nevertheless, as James undergoes and overcomes the midlife crisis, the place, typically for Saskatchewan film, remains the only omnipresent aspect of identity. This can be seen when Lucy calls James and asks him to give her a ride. It is then that Lucy suggests they all go to Calgary, where she and her boyfriend plan to start new lives: "Do you know when you just get like tired of a place and you gotta get out of it?" (*The Sabbatical* 01:15:59–01:16:06). James refuses to leave Saskatchewan and agrees to take Lucy and her boyfriend only to the nearest highway. Lucy's departure has a special meaning for James as she was the inspiration for his book. However, James dedicates his newest piece to his wife rather than to Lucy. The dedication illustrates that by her departure from the province, she is no longer relevant for him, even though pictures of her appear on several pages in the book. This highlights the importance of place as one of the defining elements of not only James's new book, but also of Saskatchewan film in general.

Representative of the new wave of independent films in Saskatchewan, Stockton's film adheres to the attributes typical for bigger budget films of the post-tax credit era, namely the crucial role of the landscape for character development and the role of place in forming one's identity. The landscape in *The Sabbatical* has similar features as in *WolfCop*, but its representation is more subtle and figurative than in either *WolfCop* or *Corner Gas*. Unlike the other films, *The Sabbatical* implements several aspects of identity that trigger James's midlife crisis, but nevertheless place retains its status as the most important one.

5. Conclusion

The history of Saskatchewan feature film started in 1987 with *Wheat Soup*, the first feature film created by local filmmakers. Although the film was praised for its artistic and cultural qualities, it has never received proper distribution comparable to the American films and its audiences were limited. There have been several features that were released in the years after *Wheat Soup*, but none of them received similar recognition. The period of the tax credit between 1998 and 2012 was the most successful and prosperous in the history of the province and helped the development of the film infrastructure. Nonetheless, after the termination of the program the international productions left the province and since 2012 there have been only a handful of films created in Saskatchewan.

The main problem of the contemporary film industry is the lack of available financing. The most successful films, such as *WolfCop*, *Another WolfCop*, or *Corner Gas: The Movie*, have been funded outside of the regular schemes for financing regional films, either with the support of private organizations outside of the province, or exceptional grants provided by governmental agencies. In addition to these films, there is a new wave of independent films represented by Stockton's *The Sabbatical*. These films are typical for their local settings and are works of local filmmakers that believe in the revival of the provincial cinema.

There are two recurring themes characteristic for the contemporary Saskatchewan cinema: the role landscape that is crucial for the development of the film characters, and the specific aspect of place in defining the Saskatchewan identity. These features were present in *Wheat Soup* as the province's first feature film and they can be found in all the discussed feature films created in Saskatchewan. The issue of identity is connected to the original argument that the relationship between Central Canada and Saskatchewan reflects the role of the United States as the other in films produced in Central Canada. In addition to the role of place as a tool for self-representation, place and landscape are also the only recurring themes that can be tracked in all of the analysed contemporary Saskatchewan feature films.

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During his studies at the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University, Martin Ondryáš spent one semester as an exchange student at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada, where he became interested in the social and cultural aspects of the province, its peoples, and especially its film industry. After his return to the Czech Republic, Martin successfully defended his thesis titled Saskatchewan (and) Film: Place-image and Identity in Saskatchewan Feature Film, of which this article is an abbreviated version. Martin has decided to pursue the career of an English teacher and started his second master's degree studies at the Faculty of Education. Currently he is learning about Indigenous peoples in New Zealand on another student exchange.



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JAPANOPHILIA: BECOMING THE OTHER*Marcel Koniček***Abstract**

Even before the dissolution of Shogunate and the Meiji Reforms around 1868, which opened Japan to the world, Japan has been of considerable cultural influence on the English-speaking world. This remote country in East Asia has for a long time been a foil to the Western view of the world in the 19th century, with its isolated culture that willingly refused “superior” western culture and religion and was perceived as developing in a unique condition of complete isolation.

With its opening Japan aimed to embrace modernity and distance itself from its tradition, but its efforts attracted various artists, such as van Gogh and Monet, who admired the traditional Japanese art and incorporated it into their works. At the same time, foreign scholars invited by the government to industrialise Japan and teach the young elite, started to see Japanese art and culture as superior to the European. They not only regarded Japan as their new homeland but also strove to become Japanese themselves.

Today Japanese culture is again gaining popularity, this time the interest being centred around animation and popular culture. This current wave of Japonophilia shares many similarities with the 19th century one. Current fans of all that is Japanese also frequently strive to attain Japanese identity and also interact with the fantasy of an “eastern Other” in complex ways.

This paper will discuss the comparison of these waves and how this relates to historical and cultural issues surrounding the relationship between the Anglophone and Japanese cultures.

Keywords

Japanophilia; Japonisme; Anime; Otaku; acculturation; impressionism; Meiji period

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SINCE the end of the 20th century Japanese popular culture has become very influential around the world. This can not only be seen in its influence on many successful Hollywood productions such as *The Matrix* series, but also in the proliferation of the direct consumption of Japanese video games, comics, toys, and animation by the global public. This rise to the mainstream can be best seen in the change in consumption of Japanese animation. What used to be the domain of DVD bootleggers and fan-made subtitles has become a multi-billion-dollar market within the

domain of internet streaming platforms such as Crunchyroll and professional voice-acting. In 2018, overseas sales of Japanese animation were estimated to be \$8.81 billion, more than tripling since 2014 (Blair 2018). However, this swelling of interest in Japan had a precedent in Japonisme, an artistic movement of the second half of the 19th century promoting the collection and imitation of Japanese art creations called Japoneries. Many famous European artists, such as Monet, Gauguin, and Van Gogh were part of this movement and shared the same interests in Japanese art. This article focuses on various parallels between these two waves of Japanophilia, how Japanese products were consumed in both periods, how this influenced culture both in Japan and the Western countries, and how in both cases the fans of Japan incorporated “Japaneseness” into their own identity.

Even before the advent of modernity in Japan, heralded by the Meiji revolution and the restoration of imperial power in 1868, Japan had played the important role of the Eastern Other to the Euro-American worldview as an isolated country on the other side of the world that actively refused Christianity and Western civilisation to focus on its internal matters and starkly opposed any outside intervention. Japan, however, was much less isolated from Western civilisation than it seemed since throughout the isolationist period of 1639–1853 it never terminated its trade with the Netherlands. The Dutch also kept regular diplomatic ties with the Japanese in the form of regular tributary missions to the Shōgun. Japanese physicians and intellectuals learned of the developments in the western sciences and an gained appreciation for them, and the importance of these Dutch studies, *rangaku* in Japanese, steadily increased throughout the period (Kazui and Videen 1982, 283–285). Conversely, the works of authors in Dutch employ such as Engelbert Kaempfer in the 18th and Philipp von Siebold in the 19th century also served as the principal source of information about the realities of Japan for Europe. However, their intermittent publications could not do much to dispel the prevailing mystique surrounding Japan.

This mystique was highly appealing to many Americans and Europeans around the middle of the 19th century. This is clearly shown by the role Japan plays in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Therein, Japan stands among the exotic places as a location of “danger, seductive mystery, and frustrating impenetrability” (Reising and Kvidera 1997, 288). Events such as the *Morrison* Incident of 1837 where a British ship carrying Japanese castaways was attacked on sight by Japanese coastal defences (Jansen 1989, 137), or the harsh treatment of American castaways from the ship *Lawrence* in 1846 by the Japanese which led to the death of several of the castaways only deepened this image of “a harsh, threatening, impenetrable land” (Reising and Kvidera 1997, 289). However, the arrival of the American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 forced this impenetrable land to open itself and find a new place in the international order.

After the opening of the country and the end of the Shogunate government, which led to the reestablishment of the imperial power in 1868, the Japanese government embraced a policy that appeared to show that the true way to resist colonialist pressures was to embrace western technology and concepts and to make them their own. This policy, embodied by thinkers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, whose cultural hero “was [...] Peter the Great” (Jansen 1989, 337), aimed not only to match the Westerners in military and economic power, but also to transform Japan into a modern country that could leave what they viewed as a backwards Asia behind and enter the ranks of a civilised Europe. To gain the recognition of the Western powers the Japanese started extensively promoting Japan abroad. The diplomatic Iwakura Mission of 1871 and the Japanese exhibits at the International Exposition 1876 in Paris were, in that regard, great successes, as was the visit of US President Grant in 1879. The Japanese would have preferred showing the rest of the world the fruits of their modernisation at the International Exposition, and of “beating the West at its own game” (Napier 2007, 15), but in the absence of these they exhibited mostly their own traditional culture and art. However, it turned out to be an excellent choice, gaining them more than just a few admirers.

The Japanese presence at the International Exposition in 1879 created “a fascination with Japan, that was sweeping over Europe” (Napier 2007, 23), a fascination that turned many of the artists of the time like Monet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Degas, and later Klimt and Proust into avid collectors of everything Japanese. These artists not only collected Japanese art, but they also included their collections in their own works such as Monet’s *La Japonaise*, where he portrays his wife in Japanese clothing surrounded by fans hanging on the wall flaunting his collection, or Van Gogh capturing his Japanese prints in background of *Portrait of Père Tanguy*. They were also influenced by the aesthetics and techniques of the Japanese artists. For example, Van Gogh’s paintings of flowering trees not only follow the long Japanese tradition of cherry and plum trees as art objects, but he also tried “to learn to paint lines in the Japanese fashion as well as to learn Japanese methods of composition” (Walker 2008, 96). These Japonists also regarded the authors of these prints as their artistic equals or even superiors. This can be illustrated by a quote from Pissarro where he claims that: “Hiroshige is a marvellous impressionist” (Napier 2007, 11).

Japonisme didn’t remain limited to the artistic world but also spread to a wider audience. As Napier states: “Ultimately the cult of Japan would spread from the bohemian artists and intellectuals, who became fascinated by the new vision that Japanese culture seemed to present, to upper-class women wearing the latest kimono-inspired fashions, to newly emergent middle class, who would decorate their parlours with Japanese curios and fans” (2007, 24). For some time, Japanese art or

their imitations were almost omnipresent. This does not mean that the attitudes of this wider audience towards Japan was not influenced by their preconceived notion of Japan as a foreign, primitive, and ultimately inferior, in Saidian terms Orientalist, Other. This is shown by the 1885 comic opera *The Mikado*. *The Mikado* is set in a faux-Japan which is used as a primitive and exotic foil to masquerade its critique of British institutions, society, and is a satire of the Japanese fad itself. Its portrayal of the country had more to do with the preconstructed fantasy of Japan, as their Eastern Other, or the enjoyment of its aesthetics, than with any real interest in the culture of the country. This opera even sparked some degree of controversy in Japan and has led to this play not being performed in Japan until very recently.

The Japanese sellers of traditional art used this ignorance to their advantage and catered to the Orientalist perception of Japan as an exotic and foreboding place to heighten the desirability of their wares. The scope of their operation was extensive, as in Japan “literally millions of fans were made in 1880s for the export market” (Napier 2007, 24), and these fans would be seen in Europe as objects of genuine artistic value rather than a mass-produced profit-oriented kitsch. The critique of the times was not oblivious to that fact. Even Oscar Wilde famously said: “The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country” (Wilde 1923, 22), implying that the reality of Japan was much different from the projections of the people outside the country.

This does not mean that Japanese art was simply a fashion to be appropriated and consumed by western audiences while Japanese culture was considered inferior. On the contrary, the Japonists found the Japanese decorative arts superior to their counterparts in America and Europe and something to learn from. For example, Ernest Chesneau when viewing the Japanese exhibition in 1876 felt, “‘humiliation’ and ‘discouragement’” (Napier 2007, 29) when comparing it to the French art. Chesneau, one of the leading Japonists, argued that since the Japanese were now learning from the West about “our mechanical arts, our military art, our sciences [the West should in exchange] take their decorative art” (Napier 2007, 28). For him Japan represented an equal partner to Europe and America and their relationship was one of equal cultural exchange – technology for artistic vision. And this vision was employed by his contemporaries. Monet used Japanese elements to add a sense of exoticism and eroticism (clearly inspired by the Japanese erotic art he collected) and Van Gogh found his ideal of the simple artist in Hokusai, a famous woodblock print artist, and tried to emulate his style. Japanese art served as an alternative font of inspiration and technique to the art of the time which the post-impressionist artists wanted to distinguish themselves from.

It is not surprising that sooner or later some of the intellectuals with an interest in Japanese art went on to study it in Japan itself. To do so, they frequently managed

to find employment in Japan; up until 1900 the Japanese government hired hundreds of professionals and scholars, from civil engineers to art critics, who would teach various subjects at newly established universities and even manage government institutions. Hundreds more were employed by private educational institutions, sometimes helping to found them (Jansen 1989, 480–481). These Japanophiles however had a profound influence on dispelling the Japanese inferiority complex that the Japanese had felt since the forceful opening of the country in 1853. Two influential thinkers who show how people influenced by Japanese art could, in turn, influence Japan are Ernest Fenollosa and Lafcadio Hearn. With these two Japanophiles we can also see how the Japanophiles strived to embrace the Japanese identity as their own.

Fenollosa, an American Hegelian, came to Japan in 1878 to teach philosophy and economics at the Imperial University in Tokyo. However, very soon he and his students started working in another field: the study and preservation of traditional Japanese art, an art that was viewed as obsolete by many Japanese at the time. Fenollosa had a different view. Similarly to Chesneau, he considered Japanese art to be superior. He stated his beliefs in a famous lecture *On the Truth of Art* in 1882 which with the works of his contemporary philosopher Nishi Amane is now considered the basis of the modern study of art in Japan. In this lecture, Fenollosa stated that “techniques of Japanese painting are preferable to those of Western painting because they allow the artist to manifest the Idea more clearly. He predicts that Western artists will begin to borrow these techniques and use them themselves” (as cited in Marra 2002, 101) and that the Japanese should try to pledge more support to the export of the current Japanese paintings. He also proposed that new institutions should be founded to support Japanese art and the standing of Japan as a nation. He urged Japan to get rid of its inferiority complex and he wanted the traditions of Japan “[to] be renewed, revived, in order that a new Idea (might) come into being” (107).

Fenollosa embraced his role as the defender of Japanese art very seriously. He studied traditional Japanese painting under the guidance of the Kanō school, a prestigious school of the Shogunate, and his artistic vision found realisation in a novel style of painting called nihonga, a “neoclassical” (Anderson 2009, 77) style of painting combining Japanese techniques and materials with the western concept of “painting as representation” (Anderson 2009, 77) to create the style of art, both modern and Japanese, he was promoting. He also became a Buddhist monk, receiving the name Teishin, and helped found the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1887 which became the public institution supporting Japanese art that he had spoken of in his lecture.

Fenollosa did not just passively appreciate Japanese art as a pretty curiosity, his appreciation of Japan had led to him to gain a very much Japanese perspective of the world and to act as a paragon of Japanese art and towards the national cause

of promoting the idea of cultural and political emancipation for Japan on the world scene. This acquisition of a Japanese identity, becoming the Eastern Other himself, is even more clearly visible in the case of Lafcadio Hearn an American who came to Japan in 1890 as a journalist. Even though his work as a journalist was quickly terminated, he stayed in Japan as a high school teacher. Disillusioned with his earlier life, he became enamoured with the old Japan and its spiritual heritage, which he viewed as being free of unrelenting modernisation, and he started studying and collecting both the old art of Buddhist monasteries and folk stories. Through his collection, a defining feature of Japonists of the time, he constructed for himself a new, Japanese, identity. He married a local woman of samurai descent, converted to Buddhism and after becoming a Japanese citizen in 1896 started using the name Koizumi Yakumo, the name he is known by in Japan even today. He fully embraced his new Japanese identity and started seeing himself as a native Japanese who only later in life “found his way back home” (Napier 2007, 63). Thus, the previously exotic Eastern Other became Hearn’s new identity.

Unlike Fenollosa, Hearn was not supportive of Japan becoming a modern country and he saw modernisation as the ultimate end of the spirituality of the old Japan he had adopted as his new homeland. He despised modernised Tokyo, finding it “soulless” (Napier 2007, 65), and although he was forced to accept the Japanese success in modernisation, his writing on the topic was “tinged with sadness, even bitterness, rather than celebration” (Napier 2007, 62). Hearn was more interested in a Japan that was than in a Japan that is, in his fantasy of it rather than in the reality of it. However, it cannot be said that this position was an unproductive one. To stave off modernisation, Hearn put much work into preserving his disappearing old Japan for posterity. He was a very active writer and he wrote around a dozen books between 1890 and 1904. Among them his collection of Japanese supernatural folk tales, *Kwaidan*, which formed the basis of a scholarly understanding of the genre even in Japan.

The modernisation despised by Hearn was incredibly successful in making Japan a western superpower. After a series of military successes, first against the Chinese in 1895, and then against the Russians in 1905, the fact that Japan had become the major colonial power of East Asia could not be ignored. However, this change of position from being source of artistic curiosities into being a colonial empire also changed Western attitudes towards Japan, which shifted from admiration and interest to the fear and hate frequently hidden in the guise of a “Yellow Peril” rhetoric. This was not left without a response by the Japanese who, during these years, embraced a more confrontational policy towards the white colonialist powers and led to the rise of fascism and to Japan becoming one of the Axis powers. The Japanese became an “inhuman brutal enemy” (Napier 2007, 16) and any sympathy for them was out of the question. With this, the first wave of Japanophilia came to an end.

The Second World War became the moment when the history of the cultural interaction between America, Europe, and Japan was severed and, of course, it constituted a great watershed moment for Japanese culture itself. In any case, after the war Japan once again became a mysterious and foreboding country to the Americans. The main exception to this were the Beatnik writers such as Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder who were influenced by the writings of D. T. Suzuki on Buddhism. For them, Japan was a fantastical land of Eastern spirituality embodied in Zen and was seen as an alternative to the reality of America. In their interest in Buddhism they mirrored Hearn, and Snyder also mirrored Hearn in travelling to Japan and living there both in Buddhist temples and hippie communes. The few crossover hits in America like *Godzilla* (1954) and the pop song “Ue wo muite arukō” (1961)¹ only managed to change American perceptions of Japan from being an enigmatic WWII aggressor to being a weird foreign country “that was for some reason under almost constant attack by giant mutated creatures” (Napier 2007, 78). However, barring these, Japan remained in the cultural background, or what Kelts calls “the cultural backwater” (2006, 181), until the 80s when the popular cultural produce of a newly economically resurgent Japan reached the US again.

The situation has changed with the current wave of Japanophilia the beginnings of which we can trace back to contacts between an American audience with Japanese animated films and series such as *Akira* (1988), *Sailor Moon* (1995), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), and more recently *Naruto* (2002), as well as Japanese videogames and electronics. A telling sign of this is that the number of people studying the Japanese language in America sharply rose from “127, 000 in 1997 to an estimated 3 million in 2006” (Kelts 2006, 179). This rise of a new wave of Japanophilia has not remained unnoticed by the cultural critique in Japan, of course. For example, Ryūichi Sakamoto claims that: “For three to five hundred years there has never been a period where Japanism was as trendy as it is now. Even more so than the popularity of the [19th century] woodblock prints” (Okada 2008, 230). However, the comparison between the waves is not as straightforward as it may seem.

This wave is, of course, similar in many respects to the 19th century one, mostly in the way Japanese production is consumed, the focus on collection cultural artefacts, and the fact that western fans embrace many aspects of what they perceive to be the Japanese identity as their own, but it is important to state that the Japan of today, or even the fantasy of the Japan of today, is very different when compared with that of the

¹ The curious fact that the song was retitled in America to “Sukiyaki”, a popular Japanese dish that has nothing to do with the original content of the song, further shows how obscure Japan was to Americans.

19th century. In the 19th century the identity was connected to the lauded aesthetic ideals of Zen Buddhism and of the Samurai, the woodblock prints and fans that were collected, while today these have been replaced by toys such as robots from the series Gundam and new terms such as *kawaii*, meaning “‘cute’, as well as chic, hip, and kinky-sexy” (Yano 2009, 682), symbolised by the mouthless fashion mascot Hello Kitty, and *moe* (childlike quality eliciting affection), symbolised by big-eyed anime characters. The beauties on prints by Utamaro have been replaced by the virtual singer *Hatsune Miku* bearing the quintessential aesthetics of current Japanese animation.

The cultural critique calls this shift of sensibilities “the complete transformation of Japanese culture after the war by the wave of Americanization and consumerist society” and “a pseudo-Japan manufactured from U.S. produced material” (Azuma 2009, 20) but that does not mean that Japan has become more of a familiar cultural landscape for American Japanophiles. Of course, Japan is much more accessible today than it was in the times of steam ships, but the fantastic quality of Japan has not been reduced, even though now its fantasy seems to be a pink land of neon cuteness rather than the stern but pure land of the samurai. Paradoxically this “pseudo-Japan” seems to be more fascinating than ever before and its cultural produce is once again considered superior by Japanophiles.

Many Japanophiles cite the reason for their interest in Japanese cartoons as being “characters that are complex and three-dimensional” (Napier 2007, 173) compared with their American counterparts and generally see American production to be inferior in the same way that Chesneau saw the inferiority of the French art of the time in 1876. However, in contrast with the woodblock prints, Japanese animation mostly does not seem to be explicitly Japanese and carries many universalist notions, “the final human feelings are the same” (Napier 2007, 172). And in the same way many of the collectors of Japanese art have also travelled to Japan and embraced Japanese identity. Many current Japanophiles dream about living in Japan or at least about a “pilgrimage” to Akihabara in Tokyo, the Mecca of Japanese popular culture.

Both groups have also created an art which imitates Japanese production, be it the Japonerie of the Japonists or the original English manga of the current Japanophiles. However, there is a significant difference between them in their levels of success. While the Japoneries were highly regarded, international manga has never really caught on despite extensive support by the Japanese government and the use of the manga format to bring English classics such as Shakespeare to young audiences. “The international manga production never reached the success of the translated Japanese comics and (somewhat ironically) of various drawing textbooks for the manga style for its aspiring authors” (Křivánková et al. 2017, 277). A much greater success has, however, been garnered by works that do not try to be mere copies of Japanese production but still bear a clear resemblance to the mainstream Japanese style, such as

the *Matrix* movies, James Cameron's *Avatar*, or the Nickelodeon show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* which are all highly regarded by critics and audiences.

Another point of comparison can be made in relation to how the Japanese government is curiously involved in the spread of Japanophilia overseas. In the 19th century it was the continued support of various diplomatic missions and artistic exhibitions by the government that was instrumental in igniting the Japonisme craze and fuelled the vision of Japan as an exotic country, but the current involvement of the Japanese government has reached a much larger scale. The Japanese government has embraced the anime aesthetics as their own and is using it in their diplomacy. For example, in 2008 the fashion mascot Hello Kitty was named “the cultural ambassador to China” (Křivánková et al. 2017, 201) because of its popularity there, and in 2009 three young fashion designers were named “Japanese ambassadors of cuteness” (206) to promote Japanese popular culture, and the notion of *kawaii*, abroad. Each of them symbolises one of three different fashion styles that Japanophiles all over the world are interested in: the Lolita style,² the schoolgirl style³ and the style of the fashion district Harajuku.⁴

All these initiatives are part of a comprehensive government project called *Cool Japan* that started in 2010. This project has a considerable budget and even though many of its aims are economic, intended to increase Japanese exports in the area of fashion, comics, animation, and movies, its central aim is to use the identity-transforming qualities of Japanese cultural produce as a form of “soft power” to “increase (the) prestige of Japan and improve its position upon the global stage” (Křivánková et al. 2017, 120). However, the results of this approach have been debatable at best. It is seen by many as “a downward spiral of wasted tax money” (SoraNews24 2018) or as lacking in a “sophisticated strategy” (Saito 2017). Even those who do not view it as a financial black hole or a symbol of systemic corruption are sceptical towards its political goals and view it only as something creating more Japanophiles:

It is not clear if *Cool Japan* project has reached its goal and proven itself as a true “soft power”, but it is clear, that it has been a positive influence on

² Lolita fashion is a culturally hybrid style of clothing using romanticised Western 19th century clothing to express the Japanese ideas of sweetness, cuteness, and innocence that, besides the name, “has no direct reference to Nabokov and his novel, and generally in relation to the fashion, it has no sexual connotations” (Monden 2008, 28).

³ A style of fashion inspired by the Japanese school uniforms using elements such as miniskirts, high socks, and ties. Examples of this style can be seen in the costumes of the idol group AKB 48.

⁴ Harajuku is a district of Tokyo viewed as the hub of youth culture and fashion. The multitude of eclectic fashion styles originating there, characterised by a high usage of accessories, colourfulness, and layered clothing, all fall under the designation of Harajuku style.

the image of Japan as a country, proven by the increased interest of the public in studying Japanese as well as traditional Japanese culture, but its real influence on the position of Japan on the global stage is close to zero (Křivánková et al. 2017, 120).

On the other hand, the fact that it is not only Japan, but also South Korea, for example, that is trying to employ similar policies, shows the perceived importance of spreading interest in popular culture as a political tool to build a positive global image.

Japanophilia still seems to be on the rise. Recent Hollywood adaptations of Japanese animation classics such as the 2019 *Alita: Battle Angel* that features a female lead bearing all the characteristics of *moe* and *kawaii* sensibilities are evidence of that. It might lead to American culture getting Japanized, as theorists such as Eiji Ōtsuka are suggesting is happening already, with *kawaii* becoming a much more widely spread phenomenon and Japanese sensibilities becoming an accepted part of American culture without people even considering them Japanese. Japanophilia is thus not just a fascination with the exotic Other, but also an acceptance of that Other as an integral part of our own culture, and its far-reaching cross-cultural influence surely deserves attention.

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Marcel Koniček is currently a PhD student specialising in modern Japanese literature at the Institute of East Asian Studies of Charles University, Prague. His research focuses on authors such as Kenzaburō Ōe and Haruki Murakami and how their use of the fantastic relates to Japanese tradition and world literature.



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