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CHANGE

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Mutation as Metaphor in *Annihilation*

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Abstract

Fukuyama posits that the greatest risk associated with contemporary biotechnology lies in its potential to fundamentally alter human nature, ushering in a "post-human" era that will raise new questions concerning human identity. The biotechnological revolution is currently advancing in three primary directions, with a central focus on genetic manipulation that enables the selection and modification of embryos to enhance physical performance and disease resistance. Popular films such as *Patient Zero* and *V-Wars* depict the emergence of new, mutated species and the downfall of the old world order. These new entities, while physically superior and more intelligent, are often detached from human values and treat humans as subordinate beings, reflecting and avenging humanity's own tendencies toward racism and speciesism. In other works, such as the *Helix* series and *The Titan*, mutations are portrayed as responses to climate change, where genetic modifications are employed to help humanity adapt to an evolving environment, leading not only to biological transformations but also to significant social and ecological shifts. In *Annihilation*, mutation triggers an accelerated form of evolution, in which the creation of new species seems to herald the emergence of a new order within 'natureculture,' resonating with Haraway's notion of the 'Chthulucene.' Through these biological transformations, the films explore questions of responsibility, (bio)ethics, and politics, highlighting the shifting power dynamics in a world where humans are no longer the dominant species.

Keywords: adaptation, climate change, mutation, Chthulucene, speciesism

Posthuman Future

According to Francis Fukuyama, one of the most significant threats posed by contemporary biotechnology is the potential alteration of human nature, which could usher in a "posthuman" era (2002, p. 7). Fukuyama identifies three major strands of the biotechnological revolution, each aiming to transcend the boundaries of what he terms "human nature." Among these, he highlights the rapid advancement of genetics as the most consequential and alarming, particularly because it allows for the selection or modification of embryos based on their genetic makeup to enhance physical endurance or resistance to disease (Fukuyama, 2002, p. 9).

This drive toward unpredictable changes in human capabilities resonates with themes explored in recent popular films. The series *Helix* (2014–15), *V-Wars* (2019), *The Passage* (2019) and *Zoo* (2015–2017), the Danish *The Rain* (2018–2020), the South Korean *The Sea of Tranquility* (2021), and *Sweet Tooth* (2021–2024), along with films like *The Titan* (2018), *Patient Zero* (2018), *Gaia* (2021), or Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022) present stories in which characters undergo transformations—whether accidental or deliberate—into new, hybrid species. These creatures are often portrayed as more advanced than *Homo sapiens*, characterized by enhanced physical capabilities or superior environmental adaptability, and their emergence typically precipitates the collapse of the existing world order.

While the films and series mentioned above will not be analyzed in detail in the present study, they are referenced to outline a broader corpus of contemporary sci-fi and horror films that engages with themes of mutation, hybridity, and the destabilization of fixed human identity. *Annihilation* (2018), which will be examined more closely in the following section, exemplifies the central concerns of this corpus. This paper aims to analyze *Annihilation* through the lens of posthuman ecocriticism, with particular emphasis on the metaphor of mutation as it relates to ecological crisis and the dissolution of human exceptionalism. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as posthumanism, the Chthulucene, and climate fiction (cli-fi), the study situates *Annihilation* within a broader corpus of contemporary sci-fi and horror cinema that explores mutation as both a destructive and generative force. The analysis seeks to demonstrate how the film departs from Anthropocene narratives of environmental degradation and instead imagines a speculative, post-Anthropocene world defined by hybridization, multispecies entanglement, and ontological instability.

While becoming a superhero in genre films often involves some form of genetic change, these narratives more frequently evoke monstrosity not merely as a source of fear or deviation (as is also evident in the portrayal of "superwicked" antiheroes), but as a powerful

metaphor for ontological disturbance—signaling the collapse of established boundaries between self and other, human and nonhuman (Bishop, 2013, p. 75; Dudenhoeffer, 2014, p. 4; Schmeink, 2016, p. 132; Parker & Poland, 2019, pp. 4–5). Moreover, many of these works may also be categorized as climate fiction (cli-fi), a subgenre of science fiction that directly addresses the ecological and existential consequences of climate change (Leikam & Leyda, 2017, p. 111). As such, cli-fi functions not only as a speculative genre but also as a cultural barometer, interrogating the imagined futures that arise from environmental collapse and frequently offering unsettling visions of what might succeed the Anthropocene (Trexler, 2015; Johns-Putra, 2016).

While in many films and series, mutation is portrayed as synonymous with the physical transformation of a living body, *Annihilation* employs the term with greater scientific precision, associating it with cancerous changes. This usage is consistent with the medical understanding of cancer as "a complex disease characterised by mutations in genes that control various hallmarks of the disease, including escaping programmed cell death, promoting genome instability and mutations, and proliferative signalling" (Sinkala, 2023). In *Annihilation*, the proliferation of such mutations accelerates evolutionary processes, giving rise to novel species that embody a radically altered biosphere. These transformations invoke not only ecological change but a distinctly posthuman horizon—a condition in which the traditional human subject, defined by autonomy, rationality, and species integrity, is profoundly decentered. The posthuman does not merely signify technologically enhanced or biologically altered humans; it entails a fundamental reconfiguration of subjectivity, agency, and relationality in a world increasingly shaped by nonhuman forces, multispecies entanglements, and technological infrastructures (Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010). It insists on the recognition of human embeddedness within complex ecological and material networks, dismantling the illusion of human exceptionalism and mastery.

Annihilation thus resonates with Donna Haraway's concept of the Chthulucene—an epoch defined not by human supremacy but by interwoven survival and the imperative of "staying with the trouble" through multispecies becoming (Haraway, 2016). Haraway's framework explicitly resists the logic of the Anthropocene, the term commonly used to describe our current geological era, marked by the far-reaching and often destructive impact of human activity on Earth's systems (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Indeed, while the Anthropocene haunts the film's thematic backdrop, *Annihilation* does not dwell on industrial pollution or explicit ecological degradation. Rather, it presents a deeper, more enigmatic response from the nonhuman world—one that operates outside the coordinates of human understanding or control.

In this sense, the methodological approach adopted in this study to analyze *Annihilation* is not arbitrarily applied, but emerges organically from the material itself: The films under discussion seem to demand a posthuman ecocritical perspective—one capable of addressing their complex representations of interspecies entanglement, ecological disruption, and the possible futures that emerge from these conditions. Such an approach enables a reading that goes beyond anthropocentric frameworks, attending instead to the ways these narratives imagine futures where the collapse of human-centered worldviews gives rise to posthuman forms of life and meaning. The films referenced above can thus be read as cultural responses to shifting ontological and ecological paradigms, challenging the presumed centrality of the human and envisioning speculative worlds where multispecies futures take shape from the ruins of anthropocentric modernity.

These films and series often fall within the "invasion fantasy" genre, which centers on the theme of "normal" humans being overtaken by mutants (Kérchy, 2018, p. 70). Péter H. Nagy posits that these narratives, which can be placed within the context of the myths of Pygmalion and Frankenstein, mark the transition from the age of humanity to that of chimeras, signaling the posthuman era and the emergence of hybrid identities (H. Nagy, 2019, pp. 135–136). Frequently, these stories begin in medical or research settings, where characters either inadvertently encounter a pathogenic agent that triggers their mutation or deliberately attempt to engineer such transformations, often in hopes of gaining political or economic advantage. However, as the narrative typically unfolds, the characters' plans are thwarted—scientific ambition is corrupted by profit motives, and the medical oath to heal becomes subverted. Large-scale infections often lead to mass death in pursuit of a positive outcome, while the mutated beings that survive are generally "better" only in terms of their physical attributes. These films could be aptly categorized as *transhuman monster movies*, reflecting and critiquing the ethos of transhumanism, which "hope[s] to add the fruits of advanced technologies to the limited toolkit of traditional humanism, believing that prospective developments in (…) technologies will soon allow humans unprecedented control over their own nature and morphology" (Roden, 2015, p. 13).

In the 2010s, cinema and TV shows mutations frequently served as a lens for exploring ecological concerns, either as deliberate responses to environmental collapse or as unintended consequences of scientific intervention. The series *Helix* depicts transhumanist elites engineering viruses to replicate past mutations, granting immortality and raising ethical questions about whether such a transformation could foster a more just world. The show suggests that, as immortal beings, these new entities are liable to assume greater ethical responsibility for the Earth, presupposing that human exploitation of

natural resources has historically been shaped by the brevity of life. However, rather than embodying a new ecological ethic, the transhumans in *Helix* replicate speciesist hierarchies, asserting their superiority and assuming control over life and death. This narrative reflects broader anxieties about transhumanism's capacity to address the challenges of the Anthropocene—a geological epoch defined by profound human impact on Earth's systems (Biermann & Lövbrand, 2019, p. 1). Similarly, *The Titan* and the series *The Silent Sea* explore genetic interventions in response to resource depletion, with governments employing biotechnology as a means of planetary survival. Yet, these experiments often result in unintended ethical and ecological dilemmas, as seen in *The Silent Sea*, where a genetically engineered girl becomes the only survivor of a virus meant to secure humanity's future.

These films interrogate the boundaries of humanity, the ethics of biotechnological transformation, and the limitations of transhumanism as a solution to the ecological crisis, ultimately challenging the notion that overcoming human biological constraints can lead to an ethical or sustainable utopia. Rather than framing the conflict as a simple opposition between "human nature" and (transhuman) monstrosity, these films introduce characters that embody a "livable ideal" of *posthuman* ethics. Such narratives resonate with critical posthumanist thought, which questions hierarchical species relations and urges a rethinking of ethical coexistence in the Anthropocene. As Nayar posits, "critical posthumanism calls for an ethical question: how do we live with others on Earth?" (2014, p. 48). In these films, survival is not merely a matter of genetic adaptation but of cultivating new ethical paradigms that transcend the exploitative tendencies embedded in human history.

Mutation and the Ecological Crisis

When the biological process of mutation was discovered in the late 19th century, it was considered a positive force. At that time, mutation was primarily understood within the framework of evolutionary theory. It was thought to be an essential mechanism through which natural selection operates, with the key idea being that environmental changes necessitate new mutations for selection to function (Bowler, 2005, p. 25). However, the experience of World War II reshaped the concept of mutation, shifting its associations from evolution to degeneration. The horrors of the atomic bomb, coupled with the ongoing threat of nuclear warfare during the Cold War, reinforced a negative perception of mutation, portraying it as a process that led to defective cellular changes, disease, and death. This narrative is reflected in films such as *Them!* and *Godzilla* (1954).

Maurice Yacowar, in his seminal 1977 essay, classifies films that depict "a human community against a destructive form of nature" as a subgenre of disaster cinema. Within this subgenre, he identifies three subcategories: when the disruption is caused by "an animal force," by "the elements," or by "an atomic mutation" (Yacowar, 2003, pp. 277–278). The last category is particularly significant in Yacowar's work, as it became especially prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, when a surge of films depicted the catastrophic consequences of nuclear experimentation (Masco, 2020, pp. 519–520). These films often featured oversized insects and other mutant creatures, resulting from atomic radiation, that subsequently threatened humanity, framing the invasion as a global crisis (or at least one centered on the United States). The depiction of insects as antagonists in these films carried political undertones, symbolizing communist "hive societies." At the same time, these portrayals reflected broader socio–economic anxieties of the era, particularly concerns over the widespread use of pesticides and insecticides (Tsutsui, 2007). The fear of communist invasion, which shaped the narratives of the 1950s "bug films," later gave way to growing concerns about chemical pollution and environmental degradation (Buell, 1998, p. 645; Orr, 2002, p. 79).

The extensive use of chemical agents, including napalm, by the United States military during the Vietnam War (1965–1973) caused severe and long-lasting ecological damage (Collomb, 2012, p. 61). The publication of Rachel Carson's groundbreaking *Silent Spring* (1962), which exposed the dangers of chemical pollutants, marked a pivotal moment in the evolving discourse on mutation (Eckersley, 1992, pp. 9–11; Nash, 2007, p. 1). Carson's work revealed how pesticides, initially designed to control insect populations, were seeping into ecosystems, polluting rivers, entering the food chain, and causing widespread poisoning, disease, and genetic mutations. The burgeoning American environmental awareness of the 1960s and 1970s was further fueled by a series of ecological disasters, which, unlike similar events in previous decades, were widely broadcast on television, capturing the attention of a national audience.[1] These concerns increasingly suggested that the world is threatened by a global environmental crisis.

Environmental degradation has become a recurring theme in cinema, particularly in horror films. The depletion of the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect emerged as prominent anxieties in the 1970s, exacerbated by the oil crisis resulting from the 1973 oil embargo. Within the horror genre, this period also saw narratives in which animals,

[1] For example, the garbage spill on the Cuyahoga River in Ohio in 1969, or the Santa Barbara oil spill off the coast of California at the same time. The Love Canal chemical spill crisis was publicized in 1978, while the Three Mile Island nuclear accident was publicized in 1979.

previously symbols of nature's tranquility, became threats due to human disruption of their natural habitats (Salmose, 2015, p. 160). With the rise of "toxic consciousness" (Deitering, 1996, pp. 196–197; also see Buell, 1998, pp. 639–665), the Frankensteinian nightmare of giant mutant monsters persisted as a dominant theme in horror cinema. However, the cause of these mutations was recontextualized: monstrosity increasingly came to be depicted as a consequence of environmental pollution (Bellin, 2009, pp. 145–168).

In the Japanese film *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (1971), the antagonist, an extraterrestrial creature, is sustained by pollution and releases toxic byproducts, symbolizing the destructive consequences of environmental negligence. Similarly, films such as *Omega Man* (1971) and *Godmonster of Indian Flats* (1973) explore the impacts of chemical warfare and mining, respectively, on human health and the environment. Other films, such as *Day of the Animals* (1977), depict animals turning hostile due to ozone depletion, while *Alligator* (1980) and *Prophecy* (1979) feature creatures mutated by industrial waste and chemical pollutants.

While transformation and metamorphosis have long occupied a central place in mythology and literature—historically construed as either miraculous or cursed—the scientific concept of mutation has been predominantly associated with degeneration in 20th-century cinema. In many cases, mutated creatures exhibit unconventional appearances or behaviors, often bearing visible signs of decay, decomposition, and disintegration. However, even in these films, mutation is frequently depicted as a paradoxical phenomenon, endowing the afflicted creature with extraordinary abilities rather than merely signifying its deterioration. As Gruson-Wood argues, this recurring motif of "supernatural disability" stems from a broader cultural tendency to perceive physical or biological deviations from the norm as inherently threatening: "Hence, the monster's super-disabled, hyper-flexible, 'deformed' body becomes an enthralling freak show act for viewers to gawk, gape, and stare at in simultaneous wonder and terror" (Gruson-Wood, 2016, p. 93). In the 21st century, this notion has evolved further, with mutation increasingly represented as an adaptive mechanism—a necessary response to a changing concept of "nature," which is no longer seen as static, eternal, and unchanging, but rather creative, constructive, and inventive. Species are

> no longer eternal essences but statistical effects of random mutations in individuals passed on in a population as a result of natural selection and geographic isolation. In this regard, deviation–mutation is no longer seen as monstrous but as inventive. Here 'nature' begins to look more and more historical, and it becomes increasingly difficult to contrast the natural with the artificial. (Bryant, 2013, p. 297)

The notion of a "pure" human essence is increasingly portrayed in contemporary cinema as an expression of hubris—an illusion that ultimately precipitates cultural downfall. This ideological shift is reflected in the evolving representation of mutation. In contemporary ecohorror, mutation is no longer embodied by the monstrous 'other' but by *Homo sapiens* itself, suggesting that humanity, rather than nature, is the true site of existential crisis.

Annihilation and Cancer as Metaphor

The 2018 film *Annihilation*, directed by Alex Garland and based on Jeff VanderMeer's novel, follows a government-organized expedition investigating a mysterious zone that has been infiltrated by an alien life form. After the sole surviving member of the first team returns—critically ill—a second team is dispatched. Among them is Lena, a biologist and the wife of the surviving soldier, who joins the mission out of guilt for cheating on her husband. Within the zone, called the Shimmer, the alien entity's effects gradually become apparent, intensifying as the team moves toward its center. The film culminates in the creation of a doppelgänger of Lena, whom she ultimately destroys. However, the alien presence has already embedded itself within her, mirroring the fate of her husband, who, as it is later revealed, is not the original man who left on the expedition but a clone created by the alien entity. This transformation challenges conventional notions of good and evil, leaving the nature of the alien force open to interpretation.

Annihilation engages with the evolving discourse on mutation, particularly through its central leitmotif: cancer. The film explicitly introduces this theme in its opening sequence, where Lena, in her role as a university biology professor, delivers a lecture on cell division. The rhetorical structure of her monologue initially suggests a discussion of life's origins and the biological mechanisms that sustain it. However, as the lecture progresses, it becomes clear that she is describing cancer—a pathology in which cellular mechanisms designed to preserve life are subverted, leading instead to the destruction of the host organism. This thematic parallel between mutation and malignancy recurs throughout the film (Parker, 2020, p. 160).

A significant reinforcement of this metaphor occurs when Lena, inside the anomalous zone, extracts a blood sample from herself to analyze the impact of the alien phenomenon. Under the microscope, she observes—and the audience, through a direct visual cut, witnesses—the same pattern of uncontrolled cell division she had previously examined in her classroom. Later, when questioned by her team, Lena acknowledges that her findings indicate the presence of cancer. At this juncture, the film also reveals that the expedition's

psychologist, whose motivations for embarking on the mission had remained enigmatic, was already suffering from cancer before entering the zone. This revelation further solidifies the film's metaphorical alignment between the alien force and the disease.

The alien entity's infiltration of the natural world within the film appears as the unchecked spread of cancer, illustrating its capacity to proliferate from a single point, disregard the integrity of its host environment, and ultimately threaten all life forms within its reach. As in many horror narratives that externalize internal anxieties, *Annihilation* transforms the concept of the "evil within us" into a literalized threat. The film's narrative extends beyond its explicit representation of cancer as a biological phenomenon, incorporating metaphorical and psychological dimensions of the disease. While the theme of cancer is most directly explored through the microscopic examination of cells within the alien zone, it also emerges in indirect and symbolic forms through the characters' backstories and motivations. The expedition to the zone is repeatedly framed as a "suicide mission," undertaken by those seeking punishment or self-destruction.

The leader of the team, a military psychologist, actually suffers from cancer, but all the other team members reveal hidden motivations tied to personal loss or suffering, mirroring the self-destructive tendencies associated with the disease. One character's daughter, who also had cancer, has died, leaving her mother unable to find meaning in life; another character engages in self-harm; a third struggles with drug addiction. Lena, as the film reveals, has cheated on her husband—an act that, according to the psychologist, represents a betrayal that destroyed her once-happy marriage. These characters' actions are linked to the metaphor of cancer as a form of "turning against oneself." Ultimately, only Lena survives, though she emerges fundamentally altered, suggesting a parallel to the transformative experience of surviving a terminal illness.

The metaphorical resonances of cancer underscore this interpretation. Early in the narrative, shortly after the discussion on cancerous cell division, Lena is shown conversing with her husband about aging and death, which, in her view, stem from a built-in "suicidal" genetic program. She suggests that, without this program, eternal life could be possible. In her formulation, death itself becomes a manifestation of the body's inherent tendency toward self-destruction, with cancer symbolizing mortality more broadly. The subsequent events of the film explore this central claim through a series of thematic developments. However, this raises broader socio–historical questions: under what conditions has the metaphor of cancer come to be associated with life itself? And why does the trope of an alien invasion serve as an effective lens for exploring this existential dilemma?

Initially, the invaded zone evokes imagery of an untouched, Edenic wilderness. Later, however, it becomes evident that this lushness is not a utopian vision of nature but a pathological one—a deadly, terrifying excess. The nature within the zone evokes the unimaginable "postnatural" condition of the Earth, the "New World" or "Tough New Planet" that McKibben describes in *Eaarth* as a result of climate change: "This is not some mere passing change; this is the earth shifting" (McKibben, 2010, p. 4). The creation of the Shimmer echoes what Mosey terms the "coming tumult" (Mosey, 2009), characterized by "sudden changes in the climate system" and the "irreversible" nature of the transformations (Leggett, 2014, p. 112). In this context, the "threat" of environmental collapse transitions from a distant possibility to a present reality—one that, according to many climate critics, is no longer avoidable (Hageman, 2019, p. 260). Thus, the film's depiction of the zone can be interpreted not only as a metaphor for a terminal disease but also as a reimagining of climate change as a terminal illness.

In environmental literature, the ecological crisis has often been described using the imagery of terminal illness. In his 1991 book *Gaia, The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine*, Lovelock claimed that the planet is becoming "sick" due to the destructive behavior of modern humans (p. 153). Similarly, the ecophilosopher Erazim Kohák ponders whether "there are too many of us, that we are too powerful and want far too much for the Earth to sustain. We have become a cancerous growth" (Kohák, 1998a, p. 254). However, in another paper, he suggests that this may be humanity's fate:

> All through the history of life upon this earth, one species has replaced another. Nature's way of maintaining a balance of life is to overproduce and overkill, mocking our attempts at conservation and preservation alike. Time and time again, species have overexpanded and self-destroyed. Cancer, it seems, is not an anomaly but the metaphor of life. (…) [W]e move inexorably toward destruction, seemingly powerless to do anything about it. Here it is hard to avoid a sense of the ecological crisis as fate. (Kohák, 1998b, p. 264)

The narrative of *Annihilation* draws a parallel between the mutations occurring within the zone, the cancerous process within the human body, and the self-destructive tendencies of Western civilization, particularly as expressed through urbanization and consumerism in ecological discourse. Paradoxically, the film's visuals do not convey only doom and gloom. The vibrant vegetation within the alien zone may be merely a facade, and Lena's description of it as "amazing" could reflect her altered perception

under the influence of the infection. However, the viewer's response may parallel Lena's, as the filmmakers' deliberate use of aesthetics—at times painterly, at other times awe-inspiring—is undeniable.

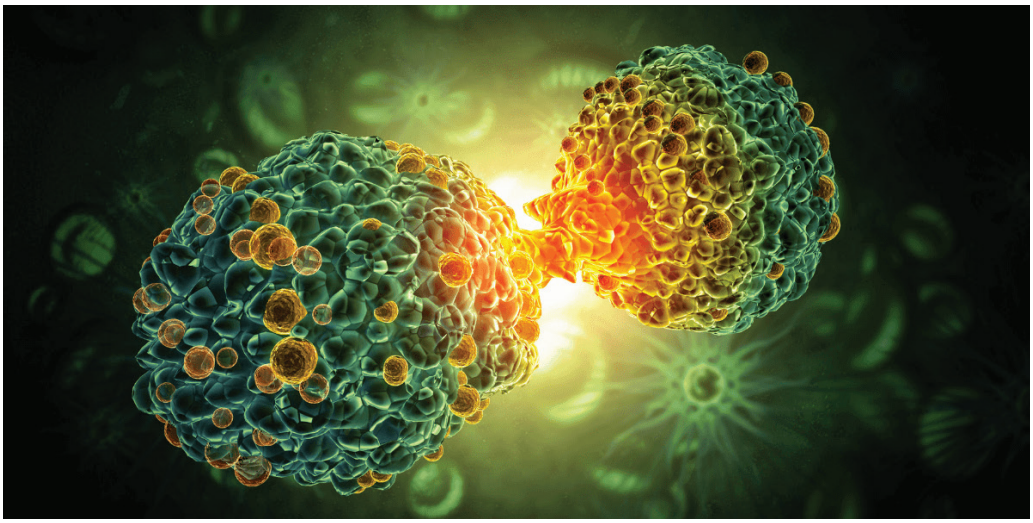
The mold-like stains on the walls and trees, which produce striking and fantastical color effects, can be seen as an attempt to aestheticize phenomena traditionally viewed as "abject."

Figure 1
Mutant creatures in the Shimmer

Source: Public domain.

Similarly, while the initial depiction of cancerous cell division is shown in stark black and white, within the zone, these cells are rendered in vibrant, almost surreal colors. This shift is not merely a product of the filmmakers' creative license; rather, it reflects how scientists have historically depicted cancer cells in electron micrographs, artificially enhancing their colors for research purposes. The film elevates these scientifically produced images into aesthetic objects, drawing attention to their visual impact and the sense of wonder they evoke—an experience typically reserved for scientists like Lena. In an online article about the latest electron microscope models, a scientist remarks: "As a professor of microscopy, I see this every day and, to be honest, I never cease to be amazed at what kind of features one can see in different kinds of materials. We want to share that sense of wonder" (Hemsworth, 2022).

Figure 2
Cancer Cells



Source: USC Viterbi.

The remains of those claimed by the zone often resemble contemporary art installations that explore the human body—works that, like the Body Exhibitions, seek to reframe the human form as an object of contemplation. Such installations typically challenge Western civilization's long-standing discomfort with corporeality while simultaneously critiquing the irrationality of ecological destruction and affirming the cyclical nature of life, even at the expense of individual existence. However, this aestheticization of death and mutation raises critical questions: Does the film's visual approach to cancer and death soften the dread traditionally associated with these phenomena? By portraying cancer as a systemic, almost inevitable process rather than an isolated anomaly, does the film attempt to beautify or normalize death, presenting it as a fundamental—perhaps even necessary—part of life-support systems? Should we look at cancer as a metaphor for the natural yet unsettling process through which ecosystems "dispose" of species that fail to adapt to changing conditions? *Annihilation* demonstrates how cancer can be made beautiful, but the question remains: why?

Mutation as Adaptation

In evolutionary theory, mutation is recognized as a key mechanism of adaptation, with the principle of large numbers ensuring that new genetic variations continually emerge—some of which may prove more viable than their predecessors. Mutation, therefore, is not solely

a destructive force; it is also a generative one, gradually reshaping the very systems upon which life depends. As the narrative of *Annihilation* unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that the radiation within the Shimmer functions as a transformative force—scattering, selecting, and recombining genetic material to produce new life forms. The accelerated transformation mirrors genetic mutation but unfolds at an exponentially faster rate—a phenomenon particularly relevant in environments where organisms must rapidly adapt to unpredictable conditions, such as those generated by impending climate change.

The mutants within the Shimmer frequently arise from the fusion of genetic traits drawn from vastly different organisms, resulting in improbable "crossbreeds," as Lena observes. While many of the newly formed creatures are unique and ultimately doomed to extinction, some—like Lena and her husband—survive. These hybrids occasionally resemble benign experiments of nature; however, they are just as often unstable or non-viable. Some suffer physically and perish, as exemplified by the soldiers of the first expedition, while others undergo psychological disintegration as their fixed identities are eroded through hybridization. This is notably the case with Cassie, a member of Lena's team, who becomes fused with the bear that killed her—a transformation marked by terror and the dissolution of self. The pain associated with transformation appears intensified when met with fear or resistance. This contrast is illustrated by another team member, Josie, whose mutation into a plant-like form occurs without visible suffering. She becomes a human-shaped shrub, positioned among similar figures who may once have been human as well. Unlike Cassie, Josie embraces the transformation, and her surrender to the process renders her transition peaceful—even serene.

The film emphasizes that these transformations are structurally analogous to the processes of cancer. Yet rather than depicting cancer solely as a pathological condition or agent of destruction, *Annihilation* reimagines it as a force of emergent creation—one that counterbalances the anthropogenic disruptions characteristic of the Anthropocene. This reframing stands in stark contrast to Susan Sontag's influential and oft-cited assertion that "[n]obody conceives of cancer the way TB [tuberculosis] was thought of—as a decorative, often lyrical death. Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease" (Sontag, 1978, p. 20). In the context of an escalating ecological crisis, however, the idea that mutation—including cancerous mutation—could possess evolutionary or aesthetic significance no longer appears entirely implausible. In *Annihilation*, illness becomes paradoxically aligned with cure—an idea that would later resonate with certain ecological discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit independently of the film's release.

The film ends with the apparent dissolution of the Shimmer, a possible remission of the illness of the world; however, Lena and her husband are released back into civilization transformed (in this case, probably cloned). This implies that the Earth can no longer be "cured" of the changes to come. As with metastatic cancer, where the mutation spreads throughout the body, transformation will now be carried by the newly emergent post-human species. The Shimmer may eventually give rise to a fully realized "postnatural" ecosystem—a possible allegory for the planetary conditions that climate change may soon produce.

The cancerous transformations in the Shimmer also suggest a new form of inter-dependence and interspecies collaboration. These transformations evoke the concept of symbiogenesis, as developed by biologist Lynn Margulis. Collaborating with James Lovelock on the Gaia hypothesis, Margulis challenged the orthodox Darwinian view that new species arise primarily through random mutation. Instead, she proposed that evolution is driven primarily by symbiosis—the merging of two or more microbial species (Hayles, 2024, p. 90). This vision also informs the work of Donna Haraway, who in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016, p. 60) articulates the concept of the Chthulucene—a framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness and multispecies collaboration essential for survival. Haraway contrasts this with the Anthropocene, which she critiques for its anthropocentric orientation (2016, p. 31). *Annihilation* aligns closely with the Chthulucene's embrace of entangled, often "monstrous" relationships as foundational to life on Earth.

The final union of Lena and her husband's clone suggests that the alien presence may serve as the origin point of a new form of life, reminiscent of the biblical myth of Adam and Eve (Parker, 2020, p. 162). The comet's impact at the lighthouse evokes apocalyptic imagery, alternatively, a symbolic Big Bang—signifying not merely the destruction of the old world but the birth of a new one, thereby rewriting the biblical account of creation. Yet, in this process of creation, the human species is no longer central. Lena's initial reflections on biotechnology as a tool to eliminate genetic defects and extend life reinforce a belief in human exceptionalism. However, within the Shimmer, human development becomes indistinguishable from other natural processes; it is merely one of many possible evolutionary outcomes. Consequently, the protagonists become increasingly "less human." Rather than advancing toward a "transhuman" state—where technology augments human capabilities—the transformation depicted in *Annihilation* moves toward a "posthuman" paradigm, in which human identity dissolves into broader ecological and biological processes.

Haraway invokes ancient mythologies to celebrate the neglected rhythms and necessities of organic life. In a similar vein, *Annihilation* employs mythological symbolism to highlight the creative processes at work within the Shimmer, positioning them in stark opposition to familiar traditions of creation. In Greek mythology, female deities such as Gaia, Mother Nature, and Demeter personify different aspects of natural generativity. In *Annihilation*, the mysterious presence within the lighthouse bears distinctly feminine associations. The film's central transformative force is imbued with vaginal symbolism, marking a break from traditional male-centric creation myths. The radiance emerges from a dark, organic space beneath the lighthouse, its walls resembling bodily organs. The fissure leading into this space has an aperture-like shape, bordered by a formation reminiscent of pubic hair. Within, the interplay of fire and luminescence evokes the womb—frequently symbolized in mythology by furnaces or volcanoes. This imagery suggests that the cave functions as the generative heart of the Shimmer.

This model of creation directly opposes the patriarchal notion of *creation ex nihilo*—the idea of creation "from nothing," often associated with the father figure in ecocriticism. This framework privileges spirit and consciousness over matter, relegating the biosphere to a subordinate role. In contrast, creation within the Shimmer does not emerge from nothing but through transformation, recombination, and variation. Yet the reproductive logic at play is not traditionally human: the act of creation within the lighthouse resembles neither the pain of childbirth nor a sexual antecedent. Instead, an alien entity forms a clone of Lena from a single drop of blood, with the process unfolding cell by cell. This provokes a crucial question: What kind of Mother Nature emerges in this new paradigm—one who creates not through sexual reproduction but via cloning and genetic manipulation? Why does the film bypass traditional representations of human birth, where life emerges from the female body, as envisioned in many nature-centered religious systems?

The answer may lie in Andrew Hageman's provocative question: "If an ecological cultural revolution is needed on Earth, wouldn't that include re-imagining the structures of human love and reproduction?" (2019, p. 260). The tumor Lena examines at the film's outset—identified as "cervical cancer in a woman in her thirties"—is explicitly linked to fertility. If cancerous cell division constitutes the primary mode of creation within the Shimmer, it may be interpreted as an allegory for ecological crisis—perhaps even a form of cervical cancer afflicting "Mother Nature." Indeed, cancer has long served as a metaphor for environmental destruction within ecological discourse. Early ecocritical texts frequently portrayed urban environments as malignant tumors parasitizing the body of Nature. In contrast, *Annihilation* presents a more ambivalent vision of cancer—as both

mutation and adaptation. The biological transformations that occur, particularly in the film's climactic scenes within the cave, do not signify sterility or collapse. Rather, they point to an alternative model of reproduction—one that is non-normative, unsettling, and disruptive of gender binaries and traditional reproductive logics. This vision resonates with Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, in which she writes, "We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the Utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender" (1987, p. 37). If humanity is to survive within this new paradigm, *Annihilation* suggests that the erasure of gender itself may be among its transformative possibilities.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the concept of "the human" has undergone a profound transformation in both interpretation and value. The human sciences have developed a new, post-anthropocentric vision of the living world. In this framework, humanity is no longer positioned as a privileged species above all others, defining itself through separation from the world as "Other."[2] Instead, the notion of immersion in the natural world has shaped ecocentric ethics, while the recognition of technological entanglement has led to the emergence of posthumanist philosophies.

Posthuman ecocriticism is "replacing well-established dualisms with the recognition of deep zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 71), which also includes the technological other. As Braidotti claims,

> The posthuman predicament is such as to force a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance, between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems. (2013, p. 89)

According to Serpil Oppermann, it is high time for posthuman ecocriticism to "scrutinize the intertwined experiences of emerging naturecultures to build novel forms of post-anthropocentric discourses" (Oppermann, 2016, p. 33).

In *Annihilation*, these "intertwined experiences of emerging naturecultures" are rendered through the hyperbolic effects of the Shimmer. The transformations and mutations

[2] "the impending 'end' of humanity, like the notorious final paragraph of Michel Foucault's The Order of Things, in which Foucault contemplates the possibility that 'man' might 'be erased' (…), are not to be taken literally. They instead invoke 'the end of a particular image of us', which casts us as a 'hard Cartesian Ego' radically distinct from the world" (Hauskeller, 2015, p. 2).

occurring within the zone evoke the impact of biotechnology—the defining feature of "our posthuman future," as Francis Fukuyama argues—aligning with Eduardo Kac's observation that,

> In the age of molecular biology, rather than operating at the glacial pace of geological time, evolution both annihilates a percentage of the extant flora and fauna and produces new life and new relationships (symbiosis, parasitism, assistance, predation, hybridization, infection, cooperation) within the life cycle of a single human being. (Kac, 2007, p. 4)

However, the strange phenomena occurring within the Shimmer are not the direct result of human (or extraterrestrial) intervention into life, but rather symptomatic of a larger, interconnected web of life that encompasses both human and nonhuman entities—a vision that Donna Haraway's notion of the *Chthulucene* urges us to embrace. Although the film does not explicitly foreground ecological concerns, it is not implausible to draw parallels with climate change, particularly in its depiction of an irreversible, "postnatural" state of existence.[3] This claims that the Shimmer is "the ideal metaphor of the Anthropocene epoch" (Nemes, 2018, p. 7), both compelling and yet ultimately incomplete.

While the film's rapid mutations reflect the ecological disruptions characteristic of the Anthropocene—an era shaped by human-induced environmental instability—the changes depicted are not simply destructive. Rather, they can be understood as reactive processes: examples of the planet's positive feedback mechanisms that strive to restore ecological balance. In this sense, the Shimmer functions less as a metaphor for Anthropocene destruction and more as a site of recovery from it. It is, in effect, an allegory of the post-Anthropocene. This dystopian-turned-utopian dimension of the film is powerfully encapsulated in the tension between its central motif—cancer—and the lush, mesmerizing visual imagery through which this motif is expressed.

At first sight, Susan Sontag's assertion in *Illness as Metaphor*— "cancer is degeneration" (1978, p. 13)—aptly applies to the organisms within the zone. Yet, in a striking reversal of this characterization, the mutated landscape remains picturesque, and the protagonist, like others, does not view the transformations occurring within them as inherently negative. At the beginning of this study, mutation was introduced as a central concept linked to posthumanism, challenging traditional humanist ideals by questioning the boundaries between human, non-human, and technological entities. The concept of the Chthulucene

[3] The film is a frequent target of posthumanist and ecocritical approaches: see for example Parker, 2020, p. 158–163; Blazan, 2021, p. 67–90.

complements this view by emphasizing the interconnectedness and multispecies collaboration necessary to navigate these accelerating transformations. In the context of *Annihilation*, mutation appears as a strange form of "multispecies collaboration" and adaptation, accelerated to an extreme by the mysterious phenomenon of the Shimmer.

This collaboration is echoed on a social level as well, although *Annihilation* does not offer a clear moral endorsement of an ethics of solidarity—often considered by critics to be a fundamental aspect of "posthuman ethics" (cf. Nayar, 2014, p. 48; Braidotti, 2013, p. 185). However, the dissolution of the binary between self and other opens up the possibility that care for the self need not be opposed to care for the other. The film's final moments, in which the estranged protagonist and her partner re-encounter one another, gesture toward this transformation. Their tentative reunion can be interpreted as a metaphor for a new form of belonging—one grounded in the recognition that survival in a transformed world requires cooperation, permeability, and relationality, rather than isolation and mastery. Through this lens, *Annihilation* not only reflects the challenges posed by posthumanism but also underscores the urgency of confronting ecological crises by rethinking our relationship with both the environment and the technologies we have created. The monstrous yet fascinating aspects of the Shimmer emphasize the need to embrace the complexity and unpredictability of our world, fostering a more symbiotic and respectful coexistence with all life forms.

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Digital Theseus: The Ship, the Self, and Cybernetic Transformations in *Neuromancer*

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Abstract

It is inconceivable to fantasize about a world where everything is stationary. This paper will utilize Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of *becoming* as a foundational framework to analyze the themes of identity and transformation in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The novel, written in 1984, explores the philosophical contradictions surrounding change and can be linked to the paradox of Theseus' Ship. It explores how technological advancements challenge and redefine personal identity through specific examples such as cybernetic augmentation, mind uploading into the virtual, and body enhancements. These themes reflect Rosi Braidotti's Posthumanist discourse and align with the perpetual change in human ontology. The novel highlights the disruptive forces that push the conventional borders between organic and artificial to their limits. *Neuromancer* interrogates the idea of continuous change in the context of technological enhancements. It replaces and redefines physical and cognitive capabilities by focusing on the fluidity and fragmentation of the self. Gibson challenges Cartesian dualism by portraying characters whose identities are merged with technology, thereby testing the capabilities of the human–machine individual. His work foreshadows contemporary debates on artificial intelligence and regulations governing body enhancement. Gibson extends the paradox of the Ship of Theseus beyond materiality, questioning identity as an ever-changing construct within the age of advanced cybernetics.

Keywords: posthumanism, becoming, cyberpunk, identity, Ship of Theseus

Introduction: Towards the Ephemeral

Change is an inherent property of being, acting as a central driving force that impacts the physical world and the nature of human existence. Both scientific and philosophical viewpoints imply that change should be viewed as anything but an exception. It should be

a defining characteristic of being. The process of constant change is evident in various fields, including biological evolution and technological advancement. This changing property is extended to identity, making the classical notion of an immutable and singular self increasingly problematic. In a modern context increasingly defined by technological advancement, the boundaries between human and machine are constantly transgressed and conquered, thus necessitating a redefinition of the boundaries of humanity. Literature has long grappled with such intricate tensions, and few works capture the nuances of identity change in a cybernetic age as thoroughly as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984).

Neuromancer is an early work in the field of cyberpunk fiction, one that depicts in imaginative detail an existence where the human consciousness is interfaced with an artificial one, where flesh is augmented or replaced, and where individuality ceases to rely on the organic. The novel's description of cybernetic implants, mind uploads, and body transformations induces fundamental questions regarding identity in the face of high-tech civilization. Gibson's narrative delves into paradoxes of selfhood amidst an era of constant development. He anticipates contemporary debates regarding the artificial mind, virtual existence, or the fusion of human and machine, and identity crises.

This analysis explores *Neuromancer* in the context of three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's articulation of *becoming*, Rosi Braidotti's *posthumanism*, and the philosophical *Paradox of Theseus' Ship*. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of becoming overthrows traditional, static models of identity in favor of an understanding of self that is dynamic and fluid, constantly in the process of changing. This is precisely the conception illustrated by Gibson's presentation of characters whose identities are continually reshaped through cybernetic enhancements. Braidotti's posthumanism takes this discussion further by emphasizing the need to rethink human ontology outside anthropocentric concerns. Lastly, the Theseus' Ship paradox, a classic philosophical question about the continuity of identity in the face of replacement of all components, provides an engaging paradigm for discussing the way *Neuromancer* challenges the ephemeral state of identity in the context of technological progress.

On Becoming and Other Interbeings

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are known as the creators of the concept of *becoming*. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the philosopher Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Guattari antagonize an entire plethora of ideas that are usually associated with being. They do not just bring arguments that sustain becoming as an endless transformation. Still, they

create an entirely different framework for what we think we know about becoming as a concept. They change our views of what we think becoming is. Deleuze believes in the consistency of becoming as a concept, as something more than what we usually associate it with, a process, flux, or change.

They start the argument by analyzing the grammar of becoming. The first notion they set aside is the idea of an object becoming, transforming into something else. Becoming is not a temporary state between two static elements, but, as they state, "there is no terminus from which you set out, none which you arrive at or which you ought to arrive at. Nor are there two terms which are exchanged. The question 'What are you becoming?' is particularly stupid" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 2). Becoming is never static, but always in transition. Becoming is never a noun, but, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, "is a verb with a consistency all its own" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 239). The notion of becoming as a verb is a trait that Deleuze discusses in *Logic of Sense*. Moreover, he refers to becoming not as any verb, but as part of the order of infinitive verbs. He states that "verbs in the infinitive are limitless becomings" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 48). But why the choice of the infinitive? What is important to note about the infinitive is that these kinds of verbs do not need a subject. Deleuze argues that "infinitive-becomings have no subject: they refer only to an 'it' of the event (it is raining) and are themselves attributed to states of things which are compounds or collectives, assemblages, even at the peak of their singularity" (2007, p. 48). The verb is independent of any agent; therefore, it is not the agent that transforms, but rather an endless becoming which refers only to itself and functions only concerning itself.

Becoming is often associated with change. However, to strengthen its ephemeral state, this association needs to be challenged. If becoming does not require any subject, change needs a subject to which the phenomenon must be applied. Considering this connection, the essence of becoming is different from that of change. Deleuze explains this rupture between these two terms in an interview with Toni Negri, where he discusses the difference between becoming and history. He explains that, "what history grasps in an event is the way it's actualized in particular circumstances; the event's becoming is beyond the scope of history." Furthermore, "becoming isn't part of history; history amounts only the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become,' that is, to create something new," therefore becoming is beyond history (Deleuze & Negri, 2011, para. 4). If becoming is beyond history and, therefore, not a change that happens to something but rather an endless transformation, then Deleuzian becoming is keener on the unchanged. Hence, in *Logic of Sense*, becoming is associated with the eternal.

He brings into discussion the Nietzschean opposition of history, touching upon terms like *Untimely*. Another approach to this matter is by looking through the lens of opposites rather than similarities. As Deleuze points out, "forgetting as opposed to memory, geography as opposed to history, the map as opposed to the tracing, the rhizome as opposed to arborescence" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 296). However, if one analyses these carefully chosen terms, except forgetting, the other concepts are related to space rather than time. Map, geography, and rhizome are concepts that deal with spatiality. Becoming gradually progresses from a metaphor of time to a geographical one. This transformation will be seen throughout the whole Deleuzian discourse. Forgetting is addressed directly by Deleuze and Guattari by stating that "becoming is antimemory" (Deleuze & Guattari, p. 294). Anti-memory refers to the fact that history is static, but also "history is made only by those who oppose history" (p. 295); therefore, breaking with the present. The separation from the present is stated in earlier work, *Logic of Sense*, where becoming is "not tolerating the separation or the distinction of before and after, past and future" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 1). The infinitive verb is again brought into discussion because it proves the untimely aspect of becoming and its persistence through time.

Deleuze did not discuss *becoming* just in negative traits, such as the infinitive without a subject or antimemory. It is only the moment he employs terminology related to spatiality that he starts talking about becoming in positive terms. The vocabulary seems to be advantageous for becoming because it is enriched with words like territory, middle, and interbeing. Moreover, Deleuzian terminology symbolically related to becoming evolves more drastically with words like contagion, theft, and epidemic. The spatiality of becoming is portrayed beautifully by Deleuze and Guattari through their wasp–orchid symbiosis, where two different species create a relationship in which both benefit but neither has more advantages over the other. The orchid mimics a female wasp, attracting males and increasing pollination; the multitude of wasps attracted to the orchid facilitates reproduction. "Although the wasp and the orchid belong to quite different realms, the deterritorialization that they share allows them to find a common zone of proximity" (Beaulieu, 2011, p.78). The wasp does not become an orchid or vice versa, but rather, they enter each other's zone of proximity. This interaction between forms of life creates a new assemblage in which both benefit and create new possibilities. The wasp and orchid break out of their predefined genetic code and role, and deterritorialize into a shared dynamic, thus establishing a new connection. François Zourabichvili stresses that becoming is not an individual experience. It is not about one thing transforming into another, but rather a process that involves and affects both participants (Zourabichvili, 2012). Deleuzian becoming-animal does not mean

humans literally becoming animals but rather entering the proximity zone of the other. The wasp–orchid example is important and a steppingstone when discussing Deleuzian *becoming*; therefore, it is the reason it is appreciated by the posthumanist discourse.

Reworking Deleuzian Subjectivity Through Posthumanism

Rosi Braidotti extends Deleuze and Guattari's ideas by addressing the humanist subject in the face of technological and environmental transformations. As she states, "the post-human knowing subject has to be understood as a relational, embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity and not only as a transcendental consciousness" (Braidotti, 2018, p. 1). Humans should not be perceived as static objects in a void, but only in connection with other entities, leaving aside their self-created exceptionalism. Braidotti interacts with and reworks Deleuzian philosophy to bring out the relational and dynamic aspects of human and non-human entities in an environment characterized by advanced technologies and ecological crises. As Braidotti emphasises, "the posthuman condition implies that 'we'—the human and non-human inhabitants of this particular planet—are currently positioned between the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Extinction" (2019, p. 10). Her work comprehensively examines posthuman subjectivity by moving beyond anthropocentric and dualistic models, making extensive use of Deleuzian theory to develop an understanding of subjectivity that is fluid, relational, and immanent. Braidotti argues that the modern concept of human subjectivity requires rethinking. She questions the traditional humanist view of the subject, which is often defined by rationality, autonomy, and individualism. Instead, she advocates a posthuman subjectivity that exists in complex webs of relations with non-human others, such as animals, machines, and environments. "Life is not exclusively human: it encompasses both bios and zoe forces, as well as geo- and techno-relations that defy our collective and singular powers of perception and understanding" (2019, p. 53). Humans should no longer be perceived as different, independent individuals, but rather as entities in a complex relationship with all other entities. This view extends Deleuze's rejection of fixed identities and resonates with his emphasis on relationality, multiplicity, and the proximity zone.

Furthermore, Braidotti's study of posthumanism engages with Deleuze's concentration on assemblages through a systematic investigation of the ways the posthuman is generated within relational ontologies. She defines the posthuman as a transversal being that escapes anthropocentrism and is involved in affirmative ethics, arguing that change implies not the negation of the self but rather a fruitful supplement to subjectivity. "I emphasize the embodied, embedded and transversal selves that we are, bonded by ontological relationality.

Embodied and embedded because we are deeply steeped in the material world. Transversal because we connect but also differ from each other" (p. 52). This position contradicts the established standpoint that describes the human being as separate from the environment and points to the entanglements among human and non-human players, which relates well to Deleuze's rhizomatic schemata, which works through network-based relations in opposition to tree-based hierarchies. Francesca Ferrando locates Braidotti's formulation of posthumanism in the larger field of posthuman studies, stressing that posthuman thinking, in concert with Deleuze, troubles traditional ontological distinctions and offers a feeling of togetherness among human and non-human entities. Ferrando conceptualizes and strengthens the idea of Braidotti that not only has the human changed, but also the framework in which we analyze the individual should be changed. "This shift in the social and individual perception of the human is one of the most important challenges we are currently facing as a species and requires a deeper analysis" (Ferrando, 2020, p. 99). She refers to the term *posthumanities*, which "exceeds the notion of the human, and it turns into an open framework, which is invoked to inclusively address future developments of humankind" (p. 125).

From an Ancient Paradox Towards a Digital Dilemma

The *Ship of Theseus* paradox originates in ancient Greek metaphysical philosophy and raises fundamental questions about the transformation of identity. This paradox launches "the idea of being able to perpetuate indefinitely an object/artefact resulting from the assembly of several parts through a continuous renewed replacement of all elements composing it" (Geretto, 2024, p. 5). In the context of Deleuzian *becoming* and the post-humanist discourse, it brings up questions regarding human identity and how it has been shaped by advanced contemporary technologies. This paradox questions whether an object, which has experienced a total replacement of its components, can be considered the same with respect to its essential nature. The historical introduction of this paradox seems to be a fragment from *Vitae Parallelae* of Plutarch.

Both Deleuze and Braidotti often use interdisciplinary arguments, especially from biology, the only scientific field that deals with human evolution. Therefore, from a biological standpoint:

> In our organism, a large number of 'parts', dead cells, for example, are continually replaced by others, to the extent that it is easy to think that an adult individual no longer retains any of the cells they had as a child. (p. 78)

However, the human is not just the organic body. "The use of aids, such as contact lenses to improve vision, or dental implants are common example of the progressive tendency toward ever greater hybridization between man and inorganic nature" (p. 78). The integration of everyday artificial elements in our innate body, from everyday objects to organs and ability-enhancing machines, seems more natural in our contemporary world. Furthermore, the relevance of this paradox transcends metaphysical investigations of identity, extending to contemporary debates in posthumanist theory. Braidotti's philosophical posthumanist ideas seek to undermine traditional assumptions about subjectivity and selfhood, arguing that identity is never a static construct, but rather relational and intertwined in networks.

The *Theseus* paradox, with its discussion of identity in the face of material transformation, finds resonance with posthumanist positions that eschew essentialism for processual and relational understandings of existence. When all the planks of a ship have been completely replaced over the years, can one still claim that it is the same ship? If the replaced planks are then assembled into another ship, which ship maintains the original identity? In a traditional humanist context, identity is generally understood as inherent and enduring, as if it were a metaphysical essence that abides despite changes in material parts. By a posthumanist approach, identity is described as neither fixed nor singular; instead, it is conceived as a dynamic construct influenced by both external and internal exchanges. Braidotti argues that contemporary subjectivity should be understood in terms of relational assemblages, as opposed to independent individualism. "The knowing subject is not Man, or Anthropos alone, but a more complex assemblage that undoes the boundaries between inside and outside the self, by emphasizing processes and flows" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 53). A post-anthropocentric approach is required because "subjects are embodied and embedded, relational and affective collaborative entities, activated by relational ethics" (p. 53). The Ship of Theseus problem is a powerful example of this posthumanist view because it argues that identity is not an essential property; instead, it is relational and dependent upon material conditions. If identity can survive even with dramatic material transformations, it logically follows that the nature of identity is not a fixed property but a web of relations, an argument that is at the center of posthumanist theory. This theoretical stance addresses the critical question posed by the paradox: Is transformation compatible with identity, or does it necessarily destroy it? From the posthumanist point of view, identity is by nature changeable, and adjustments serve to increase rather than destroy the essence of a thing. Similarly, while the ship is modified in its material structure, it remains the Ship of Theseus.

Becoming Neuromancer

Science Fiction literature often deals with speculation. However, Gibson counts himself out of this speculative wave by posing his writings not as prophetic, but as writings about the present. Moreover, the present in which he writes is one marked by the technological product of what will be known as the internet. He creates a literature that is fragmented, hyperreal, and has a collage-like structure. This is the cyberpunk literature, a product born as an answer to human-centered, space-exploring *hard science fiction*. It emerged as a distinct aesthetic and philosophical response to the rise of globalized technoculture in the late twentieth century. Set in decaying urban landscapes and saturated with digital technology, cyberpunk does not simply speculate about the future; it encodes the tensions, dislocations, and transformations of its historical moment. Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism provides a crucial lens for understanding the cultural significance of cyberpunk. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson describes postmodernism as a periodizing concept that reflects the structural changes of global capitalism, characterized by the waning of affect, the collapse of historicity, and the proliferation of pastiche. According to Jameson, the postmodern subject struggles to achieve *cognitive mapping*, a way to situate the self within the totality of a fragmented, decentered world system. Gibson's *Neuromancer* exemplifies this condition: the protagonist, Case, alienated from his physical body and immersed in the disembodied flows of cyberspace, becomes a figure for postmodern disorientation. The cyberspace matrix, a simulated reality of global information networks, echoes Jameson's conception of the postmodern *hyperspace*, which "has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself" (Jameson, 1989, p.83). This new fragmented environment challenges our position as humans in this unrecognizable world. Complementing Jameson's structural diagnosis, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. investigates the aesthetic and philosophical implications of cyberpunk's engagement with technology and subjectivity. In his essay *Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism* (1992), he contends that cyberpunk reflects both a fascination with and a resistance to the technological sublime. It stages what he calls *neuromanticism*, a longing for transcendence through technology, even as it reveals the posthuman dissolution of stable identity. Cyberpunk, as Csicsery-Ronay argues, "is part of a trend in science fiction dealing increasingly with madness, more precisely with the most philosophically interesting phenomenon of madness: hallucination (derangement)" (Csicsery-Ronay, 1992, p. 5). The genre's protagonists, often hackers, cyborgs, or artificial intelligences, inhabit a liminal space where human agency is distributed across networks and systems beyond individual control. A plethora of metaphors are linking the organic to the electronic,

where "psychology and even physiology are wiring, nerves are circuits, drugs and sex and other thrills turn you on, you get a buzz, you get wired, you space out, you go on automatic" (p. 5). This ambivalence between the seductions of technological power and the loss of humanist coherence makes cyberpunk a privileged site for theorizing the posthuman condition. Cyberpunk texts are often deeply skeptical about the ideology of control and portray technology as both enabling and alienating.

Veronica Hollinger reads cyberpunk as a distinct form of science fiction that deconstructs traditional binaries and humanist certainties. In her view, cyberpunk texts deliberately challenge the limits between human/organic and machine/technological, undermining the very oppositions that classical SF tended to uphold. Hollinger illustrates this with Gibson's *Neuromancer*, considered a foundational work of cyberpunk literature. Its opening scene shows Case perceiving city streets as "the dance of biz, information interacting" and "data made flesh," (Gibson, 1984, p. 18), so that "the human world replicates its own mechanical systems, and the border between the organic and the artificial threatens to blur beyond recuperation" (Hollinger, 1990, p. 31). In short, cyberpunk "invokes a rhetoric of technology to express the natural world" (p. 31), collapsing organic and artificial into one continuum. Linked to this collapse is cyberpunk's ambivalent attitude toward technology. Hollinger notes a "celebratory and anxious fascination" (p. 31) with high tech in cyberpunk, an obsession with technology's immediate (often unmediated) effects on everyday life. This double-edged technophilia is itself cyberpunk's generic hallmark. As Hollinger puts it, the emphasis on human–technological interconnections "is perhaps the central 'generic' feature of cyberpunk" (p. 31). Cyberpunk heroes and settings evoke street-wise, popular culture *punk* sensibilities even as they dramatize near-future tech. For example, Hollinger cites Bruce Sterling's description of cyberpunk as *posthumanist* SF that explores humanity's interface with its own technology, giving rise to hopeful or monstrous hybrids.

The action follows Henry Dorsett Case, a disillusioned hacker who lives in Chiba City, Japan. Once acknowledged as an efficient cyberspace *cowboy*, Case faced a catastrophic downturn when he was caught stealing from his boss. As a punishment, he damaged Case's nervous system, making him incapable of accessing the matrix, a huge virtual world of interconnected data. Now addicted and on the fringes of society, Case is given a chance for redemption by Armitage, a mysterious former military officer, who offers to cure his neural pathways in exchange for performing a hacking task. Case is aided by Molly Millions, a *street samurai* with cybernetic enhancements, who has the ability to retract her claws and augmented reflexes. Wintermute, their employer, is an AI whose goal is to combine with its counterpart, Neuromancer, and achieve increased sentience.

However, the development of AI is limited by the Turing Police, a law enforcement agency that prevents machines from gaining too much autonomy. As the story unfolds, Case and Molly navigate a world of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and corporate intrigue. The ending of the novel is indeterminate, with Case returning to his former state of being even as the digital persona of the AI provokes him from beyond the bounds of human vision.

Released in the early 1980s, *Neuromancer* coincided with an era marked by rapid technological advancement, growing corporate power, and rising fears about artificial intelligence. Gibson's vision of cyberspace as a virtual and linked digital world was new and foresighted in light of the advent of the Internet. The novel reflects anxieties about corporate control, as multinational megacorporations dominate society, often wielding more power than governments. This theme resonates with the 1980s, a decade of neoliberal economic policies, deregulation, and globalization. The Cyberpunk genre, which *Neuromancer* helped define, often portrays a world where technology benefits the elite while the underclass struggles in decayed urban landscapes. The book's setting is filled with neon lights, high-tech gadgets, and cybernetic enhancements, influenced by Tokyo's technological environment.

One of the dominant themes of *Neuromancer* is the examination of the interface of humanity with technological advancement. Gibson creates a world of virtual reality characterized by cybernetic alterations, with individuals redefining their concept of self. In this technology-saturated world, cybernetics moves beyond the realm of augmentation and becomes a prerequisite for sustenance. Characters like Case and Molly, as we see in Gibson's work, typify the degradation of strictly organic identity for a hybrid concept of identity, hence exemplifying the Deleuzian idea of the concept of being, a never-ending evolutionary process with fluidity and responsiveness, devoid of a fixed identity. In contrast, the body alterations that Case experiences allow for his interaction with cyberspace. "He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" (Gibson, 1984, p. 2). The modification of his neural connections transforms his life beyond the ordinary human, making him a product of the world of cyberspace in which he exists. However, this enhancement comes with steep prices, resulting in the inevitable attachment of Case's identity to his ability to function in cyberspace, thus echoing the novel's overriding theme of a fragmented sense of identity.

This opening line already stages one of cyberpunk's central concerns, the dissolution and reconstitution of the human subject through technology. Cyberpunk situates its characters at the liminal boundary between flesh and code, where the body becomes both apparatus and obstacle to fragmented identity formation. Case's very proficiency, his youth combined

with technical virtuosity, thrives on precisely this boundary: every push of biochemical thrill dovetails with the virtual extension of self. This hybrid subject is a hallmark of cyberpunk's posthuman sensibility: characters are no longer simply embodied agents but participants in the web of cyberspace, endlessly reproducible and reprogrammable. The consensual hallucination is not merely a fanciful setting, but a paradigm for how reality itself is negotiated through code. In Gibson's world, perception and meaning, much like identity, are constructed by shared protocols rather than grounded in any stable referent. The language of *projection* and *deck* underscores cyberpunk's fascination with interfaces as both sites of liberation and vectors of control. The deck is emblematic of a broader posthuman irony: the very tools that allow characters to escape the limitations of the flesh also render them vulnerable to new forms of surveillance, commodification, and alienation. Case's rush of adrenaline may feel like emancipation, but it is inseparable from the ideological strings embedded in every byte of cyberspace, a terrain where subversion and addiction often merge.

In contrast, Molly has undergone immense changes to her body, gaining retractable blades hidden under her fingernails and her reflexes being enhanced. "She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails" (p. 16). With such enhancement of capabilities, she is positioned as a posthuman character precariously balanced on the boundary of organic and synthetic life. Molly's hands become both emblem and enactment of cyberpunk's fascination with the body as a site of technological inscription. The *barely audible click* that releases *ten double-edged, four-centimetre scalpel blades* transforms her palms, seemingly soft, vulnerable flesh, into lethal, precision instruments. Cyberpunk repeatedly stages the body as modular and engineered, and Gibson literalizes that modularity: the boundary between organic fingertip and steel blade dissolves, revealing the seamless interface between flesh and machine. Moreover, the juxtaposition of *white fingers* and *burgundy nails* with surgical hardware underscores a gendered dimension of cybernetic enhancement. Cyberpunk's aesthetic often plays on the commodification of the body, especially the female form, as both object of desire and site of violence. Molly's manicure, at once decorative and functional, embodies this paradox: her hands are feminized by color yet weaponized by technology, signaling how empowerment and exploitation are inextricable in a world of high-tech modifications. Finally, the clinical precision evoked by *scalpel blades* invokes medical discourse, suggesting that bodily transformation in the matrix is as much surgical as it is cybernetic. Such imagery can be seen as a critique of narratives that promise liberation through technology, only to uncover new regimes of control. Molly's hidden armament thus both empowers her as an agent of subversion and binds her ever tighter to the circuits and markets that animate the matrix.

In these individuals' descriptions, Gibson examines the implications of cybernetic enhancement on the sense of individual identity. As such, it poses the critical question of whether the individuals of Case and Molly become the same people after the enhancements or have become totally new individuals. This question is linked to the *Ship of Theseus* paradox, which is the problem of preserving identity through changes involving the body and the parts of the ship.

The Ship of Theseus paradox questions whether something remains the same if all of its components are altered. In the futuristic world of cyberpunk, the concept of self is not based on the retention of physical form but is instead focused on the ongoing process of change; thus, acknowledging the inherent instability that comes with the self. With body modifications and virtual minds, Gibson's characters question whether they can maintain a consistent identity when body and mind constantly shift. As far as Case is concerned, technology is used to assist and recreate the protagonist's body. Molly's cybernetic implants incorporate both human and machine parts, creating an experience whereby she is more truly herself and yet increasingly not herself. Case's neural implants enable him to transcend the physical world but also link him to a system that he cannot control. This reality destabilizes deeply held assumptions about humanity, arguing for a different understanding of existence in which becoming is prioritized over being.

> Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialities. Then you could throw yourself into a high-speed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, and all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market. (Gibson, 1984, p. 2)

The intertwined spaces between urban landscape, identity, technology, and biology are reunited in the final *data made flesh*. Cells are transformed into bits, bodies into avatars. Gibson argues that a possible transfer between these media might be an escape from the dangers of physicality.

The concept of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* extends the discussion of identity beyond the physical world and into a virtual environment where people can exist separate from their bodily forms. This transformation pinpoints the traditional Cartesian dualism that has long defined the distinction between mind and body, as characters like Case interact with cyberspace as a virtual reality, allowing their existence to be separate from their physical bodies. This separation engages with the post-dualist paradigm of posthumanism, as it is

"rather than non-dualistic, in the sense that, within hegemonic systems of thought, the episteme has been repeatedly dualistic—think of the classic sets: body/mind, female/male, black/white, east/west, master/slave, colonizer/colonized, human/machine, human/animals" (Ferrando, 2020, p. 61). Cyberspace is more than a simulation; it creates a space where consciousness can detach from the body and take on different forms. The virtual world allows for the creation of multiple identities, highlighting, thus, the fact that self-identity is not a fixed entity but one that is defined in relation to its environment. Case's interaction with cyberspace radically alters his perception of reality to the point where the importance of the physical world is lost. In addition, the ability to move through cyberspace raises the question of whether identity is necessarily tied to the physical body or can be independent as information. "In Neuromancer, the narrator defines cyberspace as a 'consensual illusion' accessed when a user 'jacks into' a computer" (Hayles, 1999, p. 36). Through his reliance upon cyberspace, Case creates a disconnect with his flesh body, the more he invests in his electronic self. Case feels himself a prisoner within the material universe, seeking release through the gateway of cyberspace. Gibson complements Western metaphysical values like "The famous cogito set the privilege of the mind over the body: 'I think, therefore I am'" (Ferrando, 2020, p. 37). In Case's narrative, physicality is a prison, and virtuality means escaping the struggles of the real world. However, Case is never entirely physical or virtual; he remains in a state between the two, not being able to choose. This interbeing aligns with the posthumanist post-dualistic paradigm. "Although dualism does not have to be hierarchical, in the history of Western thought, the two sides have been placed in a value system according to which one side would be the positive, the other the negative" (p. 37).

The breakdown of identity is also seen in the way characters build and rebuild their identities. The use of *becoming* as a motif appears in the continually changing nature of people as they conform to the effects of technology. The novel highlights the changeability of identity over an essential interpretation through its use of characters who actively seek changes in order to conform to their environment to a greater extent. Therefore, *Neuromancer* promotes the sense of identity as being subject to change, developed by outside forces of technology in place of a core, innate essence. A crucial question asked by Gibson is the degree to which technological innovation works to liberate or oppress individuals. While through his neural implants, Case gains incredible abilities, he nonetheless remains beholden to the interests of those who control the technology. Similarly, artificial intelligence entities like Wintermute exercise a degree of influence over human thought, raising questions about the viability of human agency in a context in which technological innovation can alter thought and perception.

"Wintermute was a simple cube of white light, that very simplicity suggesting extreme complexity" (Gibson, 1984, p. 67). Gibson's vision of the future is both enthralling and unsettling. Cybernetics, on the one hand, creates limitless possibilities to augment and reframe what human existence is about. On the other hand, it poses significant existential questions to the nature of humanity in a world where the organic self continually changes. Hayles acknowledges that the posthuman challenges some foundational ideas of liberal humanism because "in many ways the posthuman deconstructs the liberal humanist subject" (Hayles, 1999, p. 5), especially the notion of a stable, autonomous, rational individual. In liberal humanism, the subject is seen as a unified self, capable of reason and moral agency. The posthuman deconstructs this by suggesting that consciousness can be distributed, that identity can be networked or fluid, and that the interface between human and machine is no longer static. This line signals a shift away from Enlightenment-era subjectivity toward a more fragmented, technologized self. However, it still prioritizes the mind over the body, as "it thus shares with its predecessor an emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment" (p. 5). Both traditions emphasize the thinking self (cognition) as the essence of identity, while downplaying the body as secondary or even irrelevant. Although posthumanism claims to overturn humanist ideas, it often preserves the very mind–body dualism it claims to transcend. In cyberpunk literature (and in real-world discourse on AI), we often see intelligence and consciousness treated as detachable from the body. The phrase *data made flesh*, captures the fusion of code and corporeality that defines the cyberpunk aesthetic. In this vision, the body is not just a vehicle for the mind, but is literally *formed by* data, suggesting that information is the fundamental substance of identity. Hayles considers this a vivid example of how posthuman discourse transforms the human into a pattern-based entity. While poetic, it also reveals the dangers of reducing the body to merely a visualized or encoded surface.

Hayles warns that "the posthuman constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information, it continues the liberal tradition rather than disrupts it" (p. 5). Instead of producing a new way of thinking, it often reframes embodiment as merely a way to run or perform information. It is as if the body were just hardware for software-like thought. In this logic, the body is only meaningful as a container or platform for informational patterns (like neural code or consciousness). Hayles is highly critical of this perspective because it perpetuates mind-over-body hierarchies, reinforcing Cartesian dualism in a more technologically seductive form. Even though the posthuman condition is post-dualistic, it seems that it extends the importance of the mind over the body. Although it appears to shift radically our understanding of the human, it often repeats the old logic of liberal humanism in a new, digital guise. Instead of liberating us from humanist binaries, it reinscribes them,

especially the idea that identity resides in the mind alone, not in flesh or experience. For Hayles, a truly transformative posthumanism must reclaim embodiment, acknowledging the body as central, not incidental, to what it means to be human or posthuman.

Conclusion: Foreshadowing Contemporary Fears

With the growing sophistication of artificial intelligence, it is likely that human identity will increasingly be interlinked with AI consciousness. Machine learning and neural networks are currently integrated into human decision-making processes. Gibson's vision suggests that the lines between artificial and biological intelligence will merge further, entering each other's Deleuzian proximity zone. The question remains whether AI may eventually be viewed as a continuation of human identity rather than as a separate entity.

A recurring theme in *Neuromancer* is the corporate control over technological enhancements and identity. Case's neurological repairs and Molly's cybernetic augmentations highlight how individuals become products of a system that dictates their transformations. The novel warns of a future where identity is no longer an inherent personal trait but a commodity controlled by those who design, manufacture, and regulate cybernetic enhancements. The contemporary implications of this subject are starkly evident in debates over data privacy, biometric surveillance, and genetic engineering. If identity is vulnerable to change, commodification, or violation in digital spaces, what remains of personal agency? Gibson's vision of a cybernetic age underscores the ethical dangers of a world in which identity is increasingly determined by economic and technological imperatives rather than by human ethical considerations. Both body and mind augmentation go beyond simple individual autonomy, including wider societal implications. Gibson's *Neuromancer*, without meaning to, predicts a future world where those who are enhanced have considerable benefits over those who are not, thus creating a possible divide between augmented and non-augmented populations. The story foresees concrete real-world concerns of accessibility, inequality, and the ethical implications of human enhancement technologies and genome modification. With the rising ubiquity of gene editing, neuroprosthetics, and cognition enhanced by artificial intelligence, ethical questions arise as to their use. Should access to such enhancements be available universally or limited to those who have the necessary financial resources? Will unmodified people suffer in a world where cognition and physical ability are augmented through cybernetic technology? *Neuromancer* forces one to consider such implications, noting that identity shifts involve not just philosophical questions but also major social and ethical concerns.

The potential evolution of human identity, as illustrated in *Neuromancer*, is a continuous process of redefinition. The novel demonstrates that identity is not static; rather, it exists on a continuum of change influenced by technological advancement and outside forces. As cybernetic integration continues to advance, traditional concepts of self will be challenged, forcing people to redefine the nature of the human condition. Rather than presenting a simple representation of either a dystopian or utopian world, Gibson builds a complex setting in which identity is fluid, fractured, and constantly in motion. In doing so, he challenges readers to rethink the very definitions of personhood in a time when change is not an exception but a defining feature of life.

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Familial Change and Crisis in Elizabeth Strout's Pandemic Novel *Lucy by the Sea*

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Abstract

Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) captures the unsettling experience of forced change during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring both personal and societal transformation through the lens of its introspective protagonist, Lucy Barton. This paper examines how the novel portrays intergenerational shifts and psychological adaptation in response to crisis, situating it within broader discussions of pandemic literature. The novel foregrounds the ways in which different generations experience and process global upheaval. Lucy and William, as aging individuals, are confronted with their own vulnerabilities and shifting priorities, while their daughters navigate the uncertainty of young adulthood. At the same time, *Lucy by the Sea* reflects on crisis as a catalyst for change, showing how external instability forces a reconsideration of relationships, emotional resilience, and the self. Through Lucy's deeply personal yet universally resonant narrative, Strout engages with themes of isolation, loss, and adaptation, raising questions about how individuals and families reconfigure their identities in the wake of collective trauma. By analyzing Strout's exploration of intergenerational change and psychological resilience, this paper considers how *Lucy by the Sea* contributes to contemporary literary responses to crisis and the evolving cultural memory of the pandemic.

Keywords: pandemic literature, Elizabeth Strout, grief, coping mechanisms, familial change

Introduction

Many truisms express that change is inevitable. As Heraclitus explains in *Cratylus*, one cannot walk twice in the same stream (Plato, 1892, p. 269). Even so, there are some events in a person's life that they cannot prepare for. Although changes such as the sudden

loss of a loved one, a traffic accident, or an unanticipated illness can shake up a person, they are not entirely outside of the realm of possibility. Comparatively, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen event in most people's lives, both on a physical and philosophical level. Suddenly, the interwovenness of humanity turned from a guarantee to a threat, uncertainty became a norm, and isolation quickly settled in across the world. Slavoj Žižek (2020) notes that "after the SARS and Ebola epidemics, we were told again and again that a new much stronger epidemic was just a matter of time, that the question was not IF but WHEN" (p. 64). He notices that despite all the warnings, "we somehow didn't take them seriously and were reluctant to act and engage in serious preparations—the only place we dealt with them was in apocalyptic movies like *Contagion*" (Žižek, 2020, p. 64). This sentiment starts off Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* (2022). The main character, Lucy Barton, opens her lockdown memoir with this statement. "Like many others, I did not see it coming. But William is a scientist, and he saw it coming: he saw it sooner than I did, is what I mean" (Strout, 2023, p. 3).

Lucy by the Sea is the fourth novel in the Amgash series, following Lucy Barton, a novelist whose life gets tied up with her ex-husband William's as the pandemic sets in. Elizabeth Strout's novel is written in the first person, singular; it reads like a memoir of Lucy, who recounts her experiences during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anca Peiu (2023) describes the novel as "a poem of reality in prose of the mind" (p. 109). She explains that "this is achieved as a candid confessional text, devoid of sensational sentimentalism, often likely to remind us of Sylvia Plath's haunting metaphorical voicing" (Peiu, 2023, p. 109). Peiu also notices the characteristics of bildungsroman, realist novel, conversational fiction, and metafictional novels. Upon first glance, the novel promises only the thoughts of an aging American woman during the pandemic, but it delivers much more. Strout gives a poignant analysis of the class divide, violence, fear, political turmoil, and much more as her protagonist lives through historic events (e.g., George Floyd's murder and the following protests, the January 6 riots, the 2020 presidential election, etc.).

Grief in Lockdown

In Lucy Barton's life, the changes brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak seem to be outside of her understanding. Lucy does not feel the panic settle in as much at first. She is not ready to leave her New York apartment; seemingly, she does not feel the need to move. When her ex-husband brings up the possibility of moving to Maine, she resists but finally lets William take control of the situation. "It's odd how the mind does not take in anything until it can" (Strout, 2022, p. 7), she notes as her daughters start making changes in their lifestyles and living situations. Even when William lets her know that his old friend

died from the virus and his wife is in the hospital, she "did not get it, the importance of what was happening" (Strout, 2023, p. 7). Finally, after the death of William's friend, he insists on taking Lucy out of New York, "[j]ust for a few weeks" (Strout, 2023, p. 7). In a review for *The Guardian*, Alexandra Harris (2022) points out that "Lucy goes where she is put, resisting engagement in a way that is hard to fathom until we understand how deeply it is connected with grief for her second husband, and separation from the city they shared (para. 3). Lucy is already in a state of tremendous change: she lost her second husband, David, quite recently, and she is still working through her grief. This is shown in the shift in her behavior and the muted understanding of the world around her. David was a cellist for the Philharmonic. With his loss, Lucy's relationship with classical music changes as well. She confesses that she:

> could not listen to the classical music he had played. I had the station on my phone, and once when I turned it on during a walk to listen through my earphones, the music seemed to absolutely assault me with a screeching kind of vengeance. (Strout, 2023, p. 37)

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion describes the grief after the loss of her husband as a strange clash between reality and the unreal. She remembers insisting on spending the first night alone after her husband had passed. "I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking" (Didion, 2005, p. 33). While Didion is fully aware that her husband is dead and not coming home, she experiences flashes of what she calls "magical thinking", where this reality is not settled in. For example, she is disturbed by the obituaries written about her husband. "I had allowed other people to think he was dead. I had allowed him to be buried alive" (Didion, 2005, p. 35). In this instance, the changed reality of Didion's condition as a widow clashes with the normalcy of her married life in which her husband was alive and in the right place, so to speak. Lucy Barton also reports experiencing this so-called magical thinking when William moves her away from her New York apartment. Her changing condition is twofold. Not only does she feel a sense of unreality due to the passing of her husband, but she also drastically changes her environment: from the hustle and bustle of New York City to the grey seaside of Crosby, Maine. Lucy reports that the Philharmonic, where David used to work, is no longer open. "All Lincoln Center was closed down. This baffled me, I could not grasp it; I mean it made David seem even more gone to me somehow. When I went for my walks, I would think: David! Where *are* you?" (Strout, 2023, p. 37). Moreover, Lucy reverts to a life with her first husband, William, whose infidelity ended their relationship. Although they were friendly for the twenty years after their divorce, William and Lucy only truly became close after David's passing and William's third divorce. In *Lucy by the Sea*, William himself is in a state of uncertainty.

In most of her relationship with William, even through what she calls the "Difficulties" (Strout, 2022, p. 132), Lucy views her ex-husband as a figure who has authority. She likens them to "Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods, I always felt safe in his presence" (Strout, 2022, p. 132). The third book in the Amgash series, titled *Oh William!*, focuses on William and Lucy's losses. Lucy notes that William lost his authority after his younger wife left him, and he discovered that his mother had abandoned an infant daughter to start a life with a German ex-soldier. William struggles to come to terms with this reframing of his life, the knowledge that he has a half-sister who refuses to meet him, the dark past of his family, and the loss of his third wife and young daughter. Megumi Tanji (2024) points out that while Lucy was grieving her second husband at the beginning of 2020, "William mourned the prime of his life" (p. 18). At the culmination of *Oh William!*, Lucy recognizes that William no longer exerts this aura of authority, which shocks her. The illusion of Hansel and Gretel in the woods shatters. "I was no longer the kid looking at Hansel as a guide, William was just—quite simply—not the person who made me feel safe any longer" (Strout, 2022, pp. 235–236).

Changing Familial Relationships

William is viewed as the dependable, safe head of the family unit that consists of him, Lucy, and their two adult daughters, Chrissy and Becka. William seemingly enjoys this perceived authority and feels comfortable in the role, so he is not ready to relinquish it. He goes through his pain alone, without involving his immediate family. For example, when Lucy notices that he washes his jeans very often and inquires about it, William tells her that he had prostate cancer. "Then he closed his computer rather hard, I thought, and looked out the window at the dark. He glanced at me and said, 'I had my prostate out, Lucy. I had prostate cancer in late October. I found out a few weeks after you and I had gone to Grand Cayman. And I had it out'" (Strout, 2023, pp. 89–90). William's authority and self-respect are affected by this health scare as well. "Swiping his hand down toward the lower middle of himself, 'I'm through,' he had said" (Strout, 2023, p. 91). Although Lucy reconnects with William and even goes on a trip with him to help him come to terms with the loss of his marriage and the discovery of his family secret, she can only notice such small changes in his behavior when they quarantine together.

Although Lucy and her family go through some major traumatic events during the first year of the pandemic (e.g., cheating, separation, physical distancing, a miscarriage, etc.), the main character's tone remains calm and intimate. Hamilton Cain describes Strout's voice as conversational, "evoking those early weeks and months of the pandemic with immediacy and candor. These halting rhythms resonate: Physically and emotionally,

Lucy is all over the map. Her feelings swing, pendulum-like, stirring up discord" (Cain, 2022). Lucy's musings about lockdown are much less collected and thought out. Strout gives her character a sense of uncertainty and disconnectedness not characteristic of her earlier works. Lucy is isolated from everything that gives her comfort, her home, her children, and her social circles. Still, this isolation does not stop her from reaching out to others.

Katherine Montwieler (2022) views Elizabeth Strout as "an explicitly social writer" (p. 11). She points out that Strout's characters often simply listen to other voices. These qualities are best personified in media by Oprah Winfrey, as Montwieler explains. Both Winfrey and Strout use their privilege "to listen and to elevate others" (Montwieler, 2022, p. 11). Lucy Barton, who Anca Peiu (2023) speculates could be "a possible alter-ego for the writer herself" (p. 109), represents this philosophy well. Montwieler (2022) claims that Strout's work "shows us we bear a collective responsibility for others" (p. 11), and Lucy's interactions with her close family, friends, neighbors, and passersby in her life support this auctorial goal. Although Lucy does not initially participate in the decision-making process, she allows her ex-husband, a parasitologist who understands how viruses spread, to take her to safety. As mentioned previously, William suffers through his own identity crisis during this time, which Lucy calls "some sort of midlife crisis, or older man crisis" (Strout, 2023, p. 4). Still, William has to fulfill the role of calm head of the family. In *Oh William!*, Lucy finally sees through the myth of William after over forty years of knowing each other, but she is also keenly aware of the fact that their daughters have yet to dismantle their own myths about their father.

> I thought of our girls. I thought of how Becka was the one who needed him most: the sense of her father as having authority, although she had never used that word. But it touched me deeply as I sat and thought of her sweet, childlike face. And I thought of Chrissy, who also, probably, still thought of him that way; he was her father, after all. But she seemed—to my eyes—more prepared to deal with him than dear Becka had ever been. And who knows why? Whosever knows why one child turns out one way, and another a different way? (Strout, 2022, p. 236)

These thoughts end Lucy's musings about William and his personal mythologies in *Oh William!*, but they do not seem to carry through into *Lucy by the Sea*. Lucy does not question William much at all. She also notices that the relationship between her and their daughters and William and their daughters is different. Their roles as parents within the family unit are in contrast: Chrissy and Becka instinctively look to William for action, while Lucy remains their source of emotional support. William's scientific background and more composed demeanor make him the default authority figure during the pandemic.

Around the first week of March 2020, William asks the girls, who both live in Brooklyn, to leave the city and spend a few weeks away from their crowded living situation. He also instructs them not to tell their mother about their move, and the girls respect his wishes. "And so they hadn't told me. Which is interesting because I feel that I am close to our girls, I would have said closer to them than William is. But they listened to him" (Strout, 2023, p. 6). While these roles are representative of traditional gender roles within a family unit, Strout does not devalue Lucy's role in the family. Montwieler (2022) praises Strout's ability as a "social writer" (p. 11) to connect different parts of society seamlessly. "The affluent New York parasitologist and socialite share a world with the family who eats beans and bread for dinner" (Montwieler, 2022, p. 11). In the case of Lucy Barton, this starts within the family unit. Montwieler (2022) notes that "willingness to listen is often coded as a particularly feminine virtue; women are socialized to listen, to help others, to put others before themselves" (p. 11), but these virtues are not viewed as less than William's more collected approach. The girls select who to contact depending on their needs; they do not play favorites with their parents.

A good example of these roles in action is when Becka, the younger daughter, goes through a crisis. She first calls her mother, who offers her emotional support, listens to her, and gives her space for her feelings.

> As I came through the door after my morning walk, this was toward the end of April, my telephone rang; it was Becka, and she was screaming, crying, "Mom! Mom! Oh Mommy!" She was crying so hard it was difficult for me to hear her, but the gist of it was this: Her husband, Trey, was having an affair, he had been planning on leaving Becka, he told her, but now they were stuck in lockdown. Becka had found texts in his phone. (Strout, 2023, p. 61)

When the big emotions are expressed and talked through with her daughter, Lucy gives the phone to William, who has a very different approach. "William spoke with precision. He asked her certain things: how long had it been going on, where had Trey thought he was going to live, was the other person married" (Strout, 2023, p. 61). Lucy even notes that William asks her questions that she could not even think of, but his methodical approach helps calm Becka. "And I could hear her voice getting calmer as she spoke to him" (Strout, 2023, p. 61). However, when William hands the phone back to Lucy, the tears come back again. "And I listened and I said, I know, I know. I took the phone and went back outside with it, and I walked back and forth as my poor child sobbed" (Strout, 2023, p. 62). Therefore, while William is the family's more pragmatic, steady planner, Lucy's emotional support is just as important for the girls.

Coping Mechanisms

As mentioned previously, from the beginning, Lucy has trouble grasping the reality and dangers of the pandemic. The experience of grief compounds her inability to process the very real threat of living in a megacity during such times. Lucy's "magical thinking" (Didion, 2005, p. 33) is defined by her inability to accept the loss of her husband, which in turn leads to a sense of disorientation. She struggles with the changed reality of David's absence and the turmoil of the world. Fear and grief function similarly in that they can make the mind recoil. We are prone to look away and not acknowledge difficult things. Lucy's coping mechanism is to look down and turn her gaze away from the news about the pandemic. Even though she is exposed to it (she talks to people, she watches the news with William, etc.), she reports that there seemed to be a distance between her and reality in the early days of the pandemic. For example, when a doctor tells her that he expects the lockdown to last a year, she feels concerned, but the feeling seeps in slowly.

> This was the first time I felt really—really—deep apprehension, and yet it was slow, that piece of knowledge, making its way into me, weirdly slow, and when I told William the doctor had said that, William was not surprised. "Did you know that?" I asked him, and he only said, "Lucy, none of us knows anything." So what came to me then was the—slow, it seemed very slow—understanding that I was not going to see New York again for a very long time. (Strout, 2023, p. 26)

Lucy's response to the pandemic is marked by a paradox: while she acknowledges the crisis intellectually, she resists fully absorbing its implications on an emotional level. This distracting mechanism allows her to maintain a sense of normality even as the world around her becomes increasingly unrecognizable. In *Pandemic 2*, Žižek (2021) claims that the "rejections of the lockdowns are a rejection not of stillness but of change" (p. 110). He also criticizes the way people cling to the idea of normality. "To ignore [the reality of COVID-19] means nothing less than a kind of collective psychosis. I hear in the outcries against lockdown an unexpected confirmation of Jacques Lacan's claim that *normality is a version of psychosis*" (Žižek, 2021, p. 110). Of course, it is worth clarifying that Žižek speaks of Covid deniers and conspiracy theorists, but in the case of Lucy Barton, a similar coping and survival strategy takes place. While Lucy does not deny the existence of the virus, and she does not fight against quarantining and lockdowns, she is also aware of her strange psychological response. As she watches the news with William, she notices that she feels detached from the information:

> It was as though there was a distance between the television and myself. And of course there was. But my *mind* felt like it had stepped back and was watching it from a real distance, even as I felt the sense of horror. (Strout, 2023, pp. 27–28)

Lucy also mentions a physical change in her behavior as she watches the news on TV.

> Which is that my eyes would drop to the floor, I mean I could not look at it all the time. I thought: It is as though somebody is lying to me. I did not think the news was lying to me—as I said, I understood it was all true; I only want to tell you that for a number of days—and it turned into weeks—I looked at the floor frequently as we watched the news at night. (Strout, 2023, p. 29)

Lucy exhibits a selective engagement with reality. While she avoids direct confrontation with distressing information, she continues to watch the news, even reporting that she feels addicted to it. Lucy's descriptions of these feelings of uncertainty and unreality align with Freud's theory of the uncanny. "The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud, 2003, p. 124). Watching the news, going for a walk, talking to friends on the telephone or in the yard are all familiar concepts. However, they become strange and frightening when the new element, the virus, is introduced into the regular interactions. Zhang uses the psychoanalytical term "uncanny" to better understand the traumatic impact of lockdown on our psyche. "The pandemic itself engendered a new 'norm' that overturned what was previously familiar within society. As a result of this sudden invasion of overwhelming unfamiliarity into familiar life, a feeling of uncanniness arose" (Zhang, 2024, para. 12). Zhang highlights the weirdness that clashes with the normalcy of everyday life as examples of the uncanny. This is also found in Lucy Barton's experiences. For example, she is shocked by the doctor's suggestion that they should wash their clothes every time after going grocery shopping. William's early prevention methods also put her off. On their way to Maine, she notices that her ex-husband has surgical gloves and masks in the backseat of the car. When she asks William to explain what they are, he simply tells her not to worry about it.

> But he put on a plastic glove to hold the gas nozzle, I did notice that. I thought he was really overreacting to all of this, and I kind of rolled my eyes, but I did not say anything to him about it. (Strout, 2023, p. 14)

Lucy's early reactions to the pandemic and her grief take place at the same time, so her coping mechanisms reveal the complex interplay between grief and magical thinking. Just as she struggled to accept David's death, she hesitated to accept the full weight of the pandemic's reality. "It's odd how the mind does not take in anything until it can" (Strout, 2023, p. 7), Lucy comments as she reflects on her early reactions. Her resistance to integrate within this new world is subconscious, but it also keeps her from a deeper understanding and results in disorientation. Time moves strangely, understanding

comes in waves. This is only fixed by the process of habituation. As days become weeks and months, Lucy settles more and more into her new environment. She no longer misses the life she left behind in New York; moreover, she decides to settle in Maine with William—an act that she could not even fathom at the beginning of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* is an intimate portrayal of grief, change, and the shifting dynamics of familial relationships during a period of global crisis. Through Lucy Barton's perspective, Strout captures the disorientation and emotional weight of the COVID-19 pandemic, intertwining personal and collective trauma in a narrative that is both deeply introspective and socially engaged. Lucy's journey, marked by her move to Maine and her evolving relationship with her ex-husband William, highlights how grief and uncertainty shape human behavior, often in ways that defy rationality.

Strout's novel not only recounts the pandemic's effects, but it also situates these changes within the broader themes of identity, loss, and adaptation. Lucy's "magical thinking," similar to Joan Didion's reflections in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, reveals the psychological complexities of mourning, further complicated by the external upheaval of a world in crisis. Meanwhile, William's struggles with his identity and authority illustrate the fragility of perceived control in the face of life's unpredictability.

Ultimately, *Lucy by the Sea* serves as a meditation on how people navigate change and loss, finding meaning in relationships, memories, and shared experiences. Strout's signature conversational prose makes Lucy's reflections feel both deeply personal and universally resonant, offering a quiet but powerful commentary on how crisis reshapes our understanding of self and community. As Lucy comes to terms with her past and present, her story underscores the enduring human need for connection, empathy, and the acceptance of life's inherent uncertainties.

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Reactions to Change in Graham Swift's Works

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how, for Swift's characters, personal crises serve as turning points, prompting them to reexamine their identities by revisiting and reinterpreting their life narratives. The story consists of their self-analysis. There is always a change in the characters' lives that leads to a crisis, which in turn prompts the characters to explore themselves further. Psychological theories about crises and personal change will help us examine the situations of Swift's characters and the ways they transform. Erik Erikson's stages of psychological development outline the development of identity across life stages, which are characterized by crises that must be resolved. Resolving relationship issues leads to a stronger sense of self. J. William Worden's crisis theory suggests that individuals go through a process of adaptation and reevaluate their personal worldviews. Prochaska and DiClemente's stages of change model includes precontemplation, contemplation, action, and maintenance. In contrast, William Bridges' transitional model claims that personal change happens in three phases: acceptance of issues (ending, losing, letting go), uncertainty (the neutral zone), personal reinvention, and a new beginning. These theories can bring more profound insight into understanding Swift's traumatized narrators. The novels *Shuttlecock*, *Ever After*, *Out of This World*, and *The Light of Day* will be analyzed.

Keywords: crisis, trauma, psychology, identity, adaptation

Introduction

Knowledgeable readers of Graham Swift's novels, according to reader response criticism (Mart, 2019), are familiar with his traumatized narrators (Mărginean, 2014). They also recognize the tendency to begin his novels in medias res (Bernard, 1990), during moments when the characters take time to reflect on their problems. These characters face psychological

crises as a result of their reactions to various external life events. Such events can stem from wars and, in particular, their aftermaths and the relationships that follow. A significant change in the world around them and in their own lives represents the trigger for their crises. This crisis, in turn, serves as the starting point or motivation for their story. Critics have noted the contrast between public and private histories in Swift's novels. They primarily refer to his best-known novel, *Waterland*. Here, the topic is treated explicitly by the history teacher, Tom Crick, who attempts to raise his students' awareness of how, for any incident, both in public history and in personal history, there is a cause and its consequences. The consequences then lead the characters in his novels to search for an understanding of how the current state of affairs developed in the present moment of the novel. From the present, the story moves backward and forward in time, based on the narrator's analysis.

The present paper offers a distinct analysis of the structure of Graham Swift's novels, focusing on the element of change, which serves as the driving force behind the crises characters undergo and prompts them to react to them. The crises lead to self-analysis of the characters. The passage from one state to another marks the starting point of the story, prompting the characters to react, understand their reactions, and find solutions to adapt to the new situation. This is achieved by revisiting their life story up to the present time in the novel.

The analysis of changing life scenarios and reactions to them is applied to a selection of Swift's novels, namely: *Shuttlecock*, *Ever After*, *Out of This World*, and *The Light of Day*. The life stories of the characters take a dramatic turn at a moment of crisis, related to the loss of a person, value, a belief, or all of them taken together, making them aware of a turning point in their lives. They start to reflect, a moment that coincides with the one when they begin to tell the story in the novel. When they reflect, they gradually become someone else and try to find solutions to adapt to their new life scenario.

What is common to these novels is the focus, in the majority of cases, on one narrator and his experience of a life crisis in reaction to a changing context in his life, the resulting change in his inner world, a different attitude towards life after the crisis, and a visible transformation in his identity. In *Shuttlecock*, Prentis is faced with the possibility that his father may not have been the war hero he is publicly known to be, which makes him consider his own role in his family, with whom he reconciles after going through difficult moments during the search for understanding his father's story, as well as his own. In *Ever After*, Bill Unwin's self-analysis follows the death of his wife Ruth, which leads him to face an existential crisis, to understand his role in the academic world, and to resonate

with the dilemmas of his ancestor, whose memoirs he is reading. The novel *The Light of Day* follows George Webb as he faces his wife's departure and reflects on his relationships, while he meets Sarah Nash, a client who asks him to follow her husband to ensure he has truly parted ways with a young student with whom he has had an affair. This makes George Webb's life different, as after he reflects on relationships, he emerges as hopeful about starting a relationship with Sarah, once she is released from prison. The novel *Out of This World* follows the crises of a father, Harry Beech, and a daughter, Sophie, who are estranged from one another, and who are also both affected by the death of Robert Beech, father to Harry and grandfather to Sophie. The daughter is undergoing analysis as a patient, which leads her to a revised attitude: after resenting her father throughout her childhood, she wishes to reconcile with him. The novel ends on a hopeful note, as she embarks on a trip to see him and his new wife. This difference in perspective suggests a more profound internal change that characters undergo, and the story told in Swift's novels is an account of this process of personal transformation.

Literature Review

The structure of Swift's novels and the character typology, already noticed by critics, serve as a starting point for a new analysis based on change. Change means transformation. It is the transformation of the characters' psychology as they consider new situations in their lives. Our life context can always be subject to external variations, and we respond to these changes individually as we attempt to adapt. This paper considers public and private histories (Drobot, 2014) as public, or external, modifications in the world and private, or personal, changes of the narrators themselves or those around them. Personal transformation often occurs in response to changes in the characters around them, the external world, or their life context. The way characters react to contexts in their lives serves as a starting point for their self-development process. We begin by defining ourselves in relation to others, as Hegel (Douzinas, 2002) suggests. The characters in Swift's selected novels also develop distinct ways of thinking and behaving in relation to one another.

Buddha is quoted as claiming that "The only constant in life is change" (Barlingay, 1977). This perspective is not exclusive to Asian cultures; it also applies to other cultures. Nevertheless, Asian cultures have their own ways of dealing with change. For example, Zen Buddhism (Barlingay, 1977) emphasizes the belief that we must accept fluctuations, as they are inevitable. Because everything in this world is ephemeral, we must come to terms with the fact that we will eventually lose everything and everyone we love.

While Asian cultures, and Zen Buddhism in particular, claim that the present moment is all we have and that we need to focus on it, Swift's novels, by contrast, show readers that the past is an important aspect in understanding the characters. In this way, we can relate the importance of the past to Freud's discoveries (Neu, 1973) in the field of psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic sessions, the importance of the past is always considered in shaping the patient's present-day issues. Thus, the role of the past in the psychological crises of the characters is unquestionable.

Both wars and personal crises can lead to revisions in the characters' inner world. Wars redesign society at large, affecting the visual aspect of the country and its resources. They also shape the impact of loss on those fighting, as well as the changing mindsets and beliefs. Wars bring about significant remodeling of mindsets, principles, and values. These changes add to the external destructive aspects. Wars provide occasions for characters to restructure their beliefs and their vision of the world. This is particularly evident starting with Modernism, which marked a radical break with the past. The trend continues with Postmodernism and beyond, as seen in Graham Swift's novels. The unreliability of storytelling is a key feature of Postmodernist fiction in Swift's work (Cottier, 1998; Logotheti, 2002). This renders public history itself unreliable and incapable of presenting a clear picture of how the common person interacts with these events. The objective omniscient narrator is rarely present in fiction after Modernism. As a result, Swift's novels are composed of subjective, or personal, versions of the story, with each character presenting their own perspective.

While the transformation of the individual can be observed based on their past and present selves, there is an expected continuity between past and present selves, an issue addressed by the Romantic poets and continued by Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift (Drobot, 2014). These identities, however, need to become united. Otherwise, they remain fragmented aspects of the selves. We notice the difference between a specific character in the past and the same character in the present; yet, these two differences can be united through self-examination, as seen in Graham Swift's novels.

A deeper level of analysis of the characters' change can be provided based on psychological theories that address this precise topic in response to crises. To begin, the paper explores the stages of psychological development of identity as theorized by Erik Erikson. According to Erikson (1959, 1994), these stages of psychological development are marked by a crisis that the individual must resolve. The solution lies in their process of refashioning. For example, if someone has issues in their relationships, resolving them can lead to the development of a stronger sense of self. This appears to be the case with Swift's

characters, who emerge from the experience as more confident and knowledgeable about themselves. Building on this, Worden's (2018) theory of crisis posits that during a crisis, the individual undergoes an adaptation and reevaluation of their personal worldviews. Building further on crisis and change, Prochaska and DiClemente (2013) developed models of stages of change, comprising the following phases: precontemplation, contemplation, action, and maintenance. Lastly, Bridges (2014) creates a transitional model that consists of three phases for personal change: acceptance of issues (ending, losing, letting go), uncertainty (the neutral zone), and personal reinvention, culminating in a new beginning.

Materials and Methods

A story deals with a progression of incidents and shifts from one state of affairs to another. Swift focuses on the inner transformation of his characters. For this matter, the psychology of crisis models presented in the literature review section can help further detail the process of growth that the characters undergo in their stories.

These selected novels follow the way in which characters going through a crisis related to their relationships end up improved after self-examination and integrating the differences in their relationships into their new identity, which is visible, first of all, in their attitude towards the end of the novel. The visible improvement is from a negative state of mind to a positive, or at least hopeful, state of mind.

Historical events are minimized and serve as part of the setting. The focus is on the psychology of the characters and how relationships transform them. The war may trigger death or simply act as a pretext for psychological conflicts. For example, Robert Beech in *Out of This World* was an important figure in the Arms industry during World War I. He was killed in a bomb explosion. His son Harry was a war photographer. These details provide readers with a visual representation of the intense psychological conflicts between the estranged father and daughter in the present. War serves as an analogy for the traumas and dilemmas the characters face, as well as their internal conflicts about their relationships with others. Prentis' father in Shuttlecock was a war spy. This becomes a literal counterpart to the figurative conflict with oneself and the parent–child relationship. Prentis faces a dilemma about whether his father was a deserter or a hero. He tries to find excuses for himself, acknowledging the torture prisoners of war could face. The main issue, however, is his father's role as a model. Prentis feels overwhelmed by his own life as a father and husband, as well as his strained family relationships. These reflect his own problematic relationship with himself, as he struggles to maintain a self-image

he does not feel he deserves. In the end, he accepts both his father and himself as individuals with strengths and weaknesses, and reconciles with his family. In *The Light of Day*, war has a similar role. Croatian refugee Kristina symbolizes the conflict between Sarah and Bob, wife and husband. The war in Croatia is only an external circumstance that brings Kristina into this couple's lives. The novel does not detail Kristina's perspective; instead, readers are only privy to George Webb's imaginings. Webb, the detective and sole narrator, imagines Kristina's inner world. His empathy and the expectations placed on him by readers inform this process as he reconstructs events. The only novel from this selection that does not involve war is *Ever After*. However, Unwin's psychological crisis remains intense, paralleling the interior crisis of his Victorian ancestor, who lost faith in Darwinism. This shattered belief affects the ancestor's relationship with his wife and father-in-law. As his worldview changes, conflicts arise because he no longer shares the same values and principles as those around him. Unwin's conflict with historian Fergusson comes from their different perspectives on the memoirs of Victorian Matthew Pearce, Unwin's great-grandfather. Fergusson sees them as historical documents. Unwin views them as personally significant and insightful about the meaning of life and existential dilemmas, such as the relationship between faith and science. The tension comes from the differences between objective history and personal, emotional engagement. The personal conflict is rooted in the characters' differing beliefs and mindsets, which reflect their individual psychology. These deeply held beliefs reveal what is constant in the characters' psychology. To claim that we encounter the same person, some constant aspects must remain. There is a paradox: if a person changes, can we still say they are the same? Plato's theory of forms, found for example in *The Republic*, Book VI, describes an underlying essence that remains: "The things which we see are always in a process of change, whereas the things which we do not see are unchanging. These things are grasped by the mind and not by the senses" (2016). For Swift's characters, the external world and other people may change. Psychologically, they can remember the past. Their memories remain unchanged, allowing them to bridge the gap between their past and present selves. According to Locke (1847), selfhood is constant due to the continuity of memory and consciousness over time:

> For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person. (Locke, 1847, p. 210)

The way Swift's characters analyze themselves and remember the past supports Locke's theory. For Parfit (1984, p. 215), personal identity means psychological continuity and not one, single, unchanging essence: "Personal identity is not what matters. What matters are certain relations of psychological connectedness and/or continuity, with the right kind of cause."

Storytelling keeps the characters' unity and sense of self as they change in response to psychological crises. These crises arise not only from outside events but also from relationships. They may reflect a natural need for self-exploration and redefinition, which often happens in middle age. Most of Swift's narrators face crises and changes in their lives, which lead to psychological adjustments during midlife. This stage, as Erikson (1959, 1994) notes, involves changes in identity or development. Throughout life, relationships are constant and bring their own problems. Life is a series of challenges that characters must overcome to progress through life stages. For Swift's characters, problems in relationships often come with existential dilemmas. During psychological crises, we see classic questions about life's meaning and identity. These crises prompt us to reevaluate who we are and our place in the world. Transitions from one stage of life to another often involve crises or personal dilemmas.

It could be due to her advancing age that she decides to consider her relationship with her father in further detail. This is what brings her into analysis, as she wishes to analyze her feelings about him in deep detail. Through psychoanalytic therapy, she wishes to try to clarify her feelings about her relationship with her father in *Out of This World*. Sophie's mother having died in a plane crash, her father decides to restart his life in a new relationship. Clearly, this is a conflicted situation for Sophie, yet she needs to accept that time has passed and that her father has the right to be in a relationship with someone else. In addition, Sophie needs to become aware that she is now a grown-up woman and that she cannot expect her parents to always be together when one of them has passed away. George Webb in *The Light of Day* moves towards the process of transformation by deciding to start over his life again in a new relationship, as he waits for Sarah to get out of prison.

The characters in Swift's novels navigate change and psychological crises by sharing their stories with one another. Storytelling is an essential part of our lives. We tell stories in the therapeutic process, we may try self-analysis, we go through moments of introspection during various problematic moments and stages in our lives, and we may also feel, at some point, the need to confess to someone we may not even know about a happening or episode in our lives, or to tell our life story based on selecting specific incidents,

or we may wish to tell someone close what our day has been like, referring to the way in which various incidents have made us respond emotionally. We can find all of these in Swift's stories. The narrators confess to the readers.

Furthermore, some narrators, such as Unwin in *Ever After* and Prentis in *Shuttlecock*, present their own analysis of their dilemmas. They do this by relating to and reflecting on other stories. Unwin finds these stories in the memoirs of his Victorian ancestor, Matthew Pearce, and Prentis in those of his father. Similar dilemmas appear, as if in a mirror, between Unwin and Prentis and the memoirs they read. Unwin also attempts to find himself while reading Hamlet and identifying with the main character. Hamlet is well-known for his moments of dilemmas and, ultimately, psychological crisis, as considered in the psychological theories discussed in this paper. Hamlet stays in the contemplation phase of the Prochaska and DiClemente model for most of the play. The action stage ultimately leads to the tragedy. He does not manage to solve the crisis or illustrate all the phases and the finding of solutions. The psychological theories about crises thus illustrate a complete and ideal process of transformation.

Writing and reading serve as tools for characters to confront and make sense of personal crises. Through writing, characters attempt to bring order to their chaotic and fragmented experiences, a process that mirrors the shifts in literary movements from Modernism to Postmodernism and beyond. Both self-analysis and storytelling become methods to connect events with personal identity. The depiction of a chaotic world reflects the characters' inner turmoil. To resolve their crises, the characters seek to reconnect and restore an order disrupted by change. For example, Unwin's identification with Hamlet exemplifies his effort to find meaning and structure in the face of a dilemma, highlighting his recognition of the need for transformation.

The characters in Swift's novels often feel misunderstood by others. As a result, they experience isolation and retreat into their own world. There, they write about or reflect on their experiences, becoming increasingly introspective. It is only by accident that readers overhear their interior monologues. Prentis feels alone as he wanders in his search for truth. This feeling results from his psychological crisis. He cannot properly communicate with his family and realizes he struggles to connect with his son. He feels he needs answers about his father's experiences during the war. Without them, Prentis' life seems disorganized, chaotic, and without meaning. All of this suggests a moment of psychological crisis.

The psychological crisis is triggered, for Unwin in *Ever After*, by his grief work and experience of mourning following the death of his wife, Ruth. His grief work leads to a radical

transformation in his life, and he needs to redefine himself, which makes him start reflecting on who he is now. The answers can lie in his personal past, as well as in analogy to his ancestors' experiences, and in a fictional character. Grief work (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014) guides someone psychologically through stages of denial until they reach the final stage of accepting the loss. Anger, guilt, and rebellion against the loss can be included. Five stages are generally identified: denial, anger, bargaining or negotiation, depression, and acceptance (Barone & Ivy, 2004). However, not all five stages are present in this order, or some stages can even be skipped or overlap in some cases (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). Unwin seems to be only in a state of depression, ending up reaching acceptance of his loss. All this process leads the person grieving through a process of transformation and of gradual adaptation to the situation of no longer having a loved one beside them. Grief work is, in itself, a psychological crisis. For George Webb, in *The Light of Day*, the loss is related to the previous state of affairs or stability in his life. First, he loses his job, and subsequently, his wife decides to leave him, which makes his life chaotic and devoid of meaning. While this is also a loss, it is not a loss caused by the actual death of someone. Nevertheless, George needs to come to terms with the fact that his wife no longer cares for him and that he has lost his job. The first implied question is what went wrong and what brought about the present state of affairs; yet, readers understand that what happened did not depend solely on the characters. As a result, meaning is initially searched for in the past, since it is lacking at present. However, it will eventually need to be found in the future. For the characters, change is felt as an absence of stability and meaning. Specifically, Unwin and George face changes beyond their control, to which they must adapt, and this, in turn, implies additional changes on their part—both in themselves and in their psychological dealings with their life situations.

Lack of meaning is related to loneliness, as both Sophie and Harry Beech examine their past by themselves in *Out of This World*. Only Sophie is in analysis, yet the therapist can only guide her, and she needs to take an active role in her therapy. Sophie and her father both wish to have a revision in their lives, by no longer being isolated from others, from themselves, and from each other. Harry starts a new relationship, and Sophie wishes to reconcile with her father by visiting him, and readers assume, discussing their relationship, and making amends. Readers understand that her father would also welcome this reconciliation.

In *Shuttlecock*, Prentis begins to suspect that his father, a World War II spy, may not have been the hero portrayed in his memoirs. The public believes his father's story, but Prentis starts to imagine alternative scenes to the one in the book. His father is sick and cannot talk, so Prentis cannot have a dialogue with him. He imagines possible scenes of his father being

interrogated. The story of his father may, thus, be just a story, not a factual account. George Webb also imagines numerous scenes about Kristina and Bob. He reconstructs their story and tries to emotionally understand what he is investigating. Both Prentis and George imagine in order to understand and make sense of others' psychological reality. Readers may notice that the imagined scenes are reasonable hypotheses. Prentis and George imagine these scenes to empathize with the psychological experiences of the characters they envision. By imagining the scenes and psychological realities of the other characters, they try to come to terms with their own emotions about what is happening around them.

For Prentis, however, there is a conflict related to imagining these alternative scenes of his father not being the hero everyone knew him to be. Once his father is no longer a hero, Prentis himself no longer believes that he should struggle to be one for his own children. For Prentis, the entire vision of the world, and particularly his role in the family, shifts from an idealized one to a more realistic one. He is concerned about the truth, yet he decides to destroy the evidence suggesting his father is not the hero everyone knew. He tries to protect his father's public image, while he personally comes to accept this possibility or even fact. Prentis gives up the search, suggesting that he needs to come to terms with the fact that neither his father nor himself is perfect, or a hero:

> And then one day […] I stopped reading Dad's book. I inquired no further. How much of a book is in the words and how much is behind or in between the lines? Perhaps it is best not to probe too deeply into those invisible regions, but to accept on trust what is there on the page as the best showing the author could make. And the same is true perhaps of *this* book (for it has grown into a book) which I have resumed now after a six months' lapse, only to bring to its conclusion. (Swift, 1997, p. 214)

The psychological struggles Prentis goes through when considering the truth about his father are amplified by what his boss Quinn points out to him: "He knew the Chateau, and the regio—and perhaps he had—like you—a strong imagination. If he wanted to invent an escape story he could have done so. I'm just pointing this out, not disagreeing with you" (Swift, 1997, p. 186).

Quinn sees Prentis' father as writing his memoir in an attempt to convince himself, as well as his readers, that what he has written is actually true. For Prentis's father, becoming a hero may be understood, by both himself and the readers, as a way to construct a sense of meaning in his life.

A review of *Shuttlecock* in *Punch* magazine (1981) asks: "Is it important to be *heroic*?" By analogy, Prentis reshapes his perspective on fathers and sons, realizing he does not

have to be a hero or conform to a particular image to matter to his family. The uncertainty surrounding his father's heroism remains, but proving either side seems unimportant. What mattered was how this belief influenced his own self-image. Prentis recognizes he can move beyond this view, especially after Quinn tells him: "Aren't there certain situations when the pressure of events is so intense, so overpowering—that even the most wretched action can be forgiven?" (Swift, 1997, p. 192). Prentis reflects: "[...] if I knew that Dad hadn't been strong and brave, then I wouldn't hit Marian and shout at the kids and sulk around the house. But I didn't want to know that Dad wasn't strong and brave" (1997, p. 193). This indicates that the image he has of his father is closely tied to his own self-image and the model he believes he should emulate.

Another character imagining someone else's life is Unwin, who tries to understand better his ancestor based on his memoirs: "I imagine, I invent" (Swift, 1992, p. 138), "I see him" (Swift, 1992, p. 139), "I conjure him up, I invent him" (Swift, 1992, p. 155). Similarly, George Webb claims, "You have to picture the scene" (Swift, 1992, p. 197).

Another character can be a reflection or a projection of the narrator. For example, in *The Light of Day*, George Webb sees his client, Sarah Nash, as a reflection of himself. Both have been left by their spouses: George's wife leaves him, and Sarah's husband has an affair. Each experiences a growing distance in their partnerships, resulting in the end of their relationships. Drawn emotionally to Sarah, George hopes to be with her, so he views other experiences—like the affair between Sarah's husband, Bob, and Kristina—through her perspective. By exploring his emotions alongside those involved in his case, George feels less isolated in his own similar situation.

According to Fishman (1989), in the novel *Out of this World*, the phrase in the title refers to the way Harry Beech observes his own and others' lives from a large and detached perspective. This viewpoint is based on the visual aspect of his profession as an air photographer. In this way, Harry becomes aware of the rich history of a country, such as England, rooted in its agricultural life from the Bronze Age. His observations also extend to recognizing patterns in his own life, not just those related to agriculture. The visual image becomes a reflection of the figurative image of a broader perspective. Harry considers his own life and the significant person in his life from this perspective, in the following fragment:

> She is still holding a hand aloft as we bank to head south. And I could almost believe it, could almost be guilty of believing it: the rest of the world doesn't matter. The world revolves round that tinier and tinier figure, as it revolves round a cottage in a tiny village in Wiltshire, where she has taken up residence. That I am home, home. (Swift 1992: 39)

He sees Jenny, his fiancée, following him on the runway and waving at him. The entire world fades, and his attention is focused on her, revealing how significant she is to him. Readers may consider the saying that she is his entire world.

In addition, according to Fishman (1989), the image of flying also gives Harry a clear perspective of the past. He remembers the moment when his father offered him the possibility of being in one of the passenger airplanes, inside the cockpit:

> he had pushed me forward into this wondrous outlook on the sky, had made me a present of it, then discreetly withdrawn. I might soar away; he would remain... I can see now that throughout that homeward journey his feet must have been, so to speak, still on the ground, still caught in the mud. And I was being lifted up and away, out of his world, out of the age of mud, out of the brown obscure age, into the air. (Swift, 1992, p. 208)

For Harry, flying is the image of happiness and of beauty. While he had conflicted with his father, he also remembers their beautiful moments together. The images of flying and their connection with a clear picture of life can be seen by readers as equivalent to Harry's ability to create meaning for his life and find a sense of optimism. They can be seen as a means of helping him overcome the psychological crisis and as a means of showcasing his optimistic outlook on the world.

Harry and Sophie both deal, like Unwin, with grief work based on the loss of Robert Beech. Yet his loss is only the pretext for them to examine their lives and feelings about each other, and they wish to reconcile. George deals with the loss of his previous life. He loses his job and his wife leaves him. Prentis deals with the loss of his illusions and previous beliefs about his father. All of these incidents lead to the characters' psychological crises and their need to reorganize their inner world to overcome them. These incidents are intertwined with reflections, shifts in perspective, and changes in beliefs, as well as a reconsideration of values. Harry and Sophie decide to move past their conflicts and reconcile. Prentis also reconciles and takes on a more understanding attitude towards his family. Unwin deals with a conflict within himself, asking who he is, as he needs to redefine himself while getting over the death of his wife, Ruth. George reaches a reconciliation with himself and with life. He grows more optimistic, falls in love with Sarah, and hopes to be with her after she is released from prison. The primary element is a reconciliation with themselves for all these characters, along with a more optimistic, calmer, or detached outlook on life, and a more understanding attitude towards others.

The theories of psychological crises by Erikson (1959, 1994), Worden (2018), Prochaska and DiClemente (Prochaska et al., 2013), as well as those by Bridges (2004), show common elements that can be used to analyze the attitudes depicted in the novels selected for analysis in this paper. The general approach to overcoming psychological crises includes adapting to change and reevaluating worldviews. It also involves remodeling the sense of self, overcoming relationship problems, reflecting on the issue, and taking action to find solutions. Accepting the problem leads to working on self-reinvention and looking towards a new beginning. We can consider these stages of psychological crises as being overcome in a similar way to the stages of grief work, from denial, going through psychological turmoil, including emotions such as anger, guilt, uncertainty, and gradual acceptance, and coming to terms with the situation. The stages of psychological crises are not presented step by step in the novels, as the structure of the novels is designed to show the characters' attempts to make sense of their experiences. This also happens in real life.

Readers can reorganize the events and impressions in the characters' narratives to discern how they confront the psychological crises outlined in the previously mentioned theories. This approach keeps readers actively engaged in the unfolding story. Readers also form emotional connections, as they may identify with the characters' crises. They might use the characters' experiences to address personal dilemmas and view these narratives as models for resolving psychological challenges.

Results

Change is, for Swift's characters, related to a loss of a particular kind: someone they are in a relationship with leaves them, dies, or disappoints them, revealing that they were completely different from what they had believed them to be.

Nowadays, society leads us to believe that every individual is unique due to the mindset promoted by individualism. Psychotherapists support this view. They advise us to consider that each person experiences psychological crises and grief work stages in their own way. Grief work does not necessarily follow the same stage order for everyone. Each of Swift's novels, therefore, presents a unique case based on the experiences of his characters. At the same time, readers can relate to the universal need for characters to reinvent themselves to overcome challenges. Swift's traumatized narrators are understood from this perspective—as undergoing a necessary process of change.

Reactions to change for Swift's characters are related to their reconsideration of values and worldview, as well as to their shifts in mental attitude, which in turn enable them to function more effectively in this world.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the experiences of Swift's characters, readers observe how internal change and introspection can be naturally prompted and resolved by individuals as they progress through their lives. Otherwise, such processes are prompted by the therapeutic setting, allowing the individual, who is already troubled, to initiate a guided process of analysis, introspection, and reinvention, thereby starting anew. We can loosely compare this trajectory to the hero's journey, a model set forth by Campbell (2003), which is commonly applied to fairy tales and myths. Nevertheless, fairy tales and myths are part of our universal, common, or, according to Jung (2014), archetypal experience. We can understand, figuratively speaking, the characters' experiences as they confront psychological crises and overcome them, much like heroes embarking on a journey. The journey is one of self-understanding and self-discovery. The experience they go through is one of initiation, according to Campbell (2003), of growing up, and we can think of the experience of Swift's characters in the same terms. His characters undergo a journey of grief, loss, depression, and life changes, and they emerge transformed and optimistic like victorious heroes.

Swift's characters show how familiar people handle mild depression and loss. We cannot claim these experiences establish a pattern in dealing with loss or the changes that follow. Such changes often require psychological restructuring to adapt and modify our identity. However, these stories can help us relate to someone going through similar experiences. As readers, we can try a similar process by reading another account of coping with change. For example, we might consider Unwin's Victorian ancestors' memories and Prentis' father's experiences.

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Capitalism Delusion in Ex-colonies: A Postcolonial Analysis of *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue

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Abstract

Like other economic models, capitalism is a solid one that has demonstrated its resilience by overpowering political vagaries. From its inception in the 19th century to the present day, it has proven its worth as a development factor in various European societies and to competition. Over time, it has emerged as a foremost political *weapon* serving the cause of Western imperialism beyond its geographical borders. Development aid to Southern societies, as illustrated in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), is a perfect example. Ex-colonized areas such as Kosawa have fragile and poor economies; the West is committed to supporting them by establishing Pexton, a mining company whose purpose is to boost the domestic economy. Enthused by promises, local inhabitants show hospitality towards their benefactors. However, later, to their surprise, their hope gave way to despair, as Pexton's activities caused enormous trouble and diminished the quality of life for the residents. Any nationalist denunciation that demands compensation risks retaliation. As the story unfolds, the environment is polluted, changing the inhabitants' daily lives. Pexton's inaction in the face of this ecological crisis raises suspicions about the reliability and viability of development projects piloted by American backers. The study of those discrepancies is crucial, and it is here that the postcolonial critique proves its undeniable relevance, as it contributes to unmasking Western assistance as a form of disguised imperialism, providing the conceptual framework to decipher the ideological continuities between past colonial practices and present-day neo-colonial realities. By focusing on the experiences and voices of marginalized individuals, this method remains a powerful tool for disclosing how the so-called development factor paradoxically impoverishes formerly colonized people. However, its nuanced application is essential, as its tendency to focus on external forces can sometimes obscure

the complexities of internal community dynamics and risk presenting the subaltern experience as a monolithic narrative. In terms of structure, the current inquiry is composed of two lines of research: "Seduction of capitalist promises" and "Capitalist exploitation and post-exploitative paradigm."

Keywords: capitalism, Southern societies, formerly colonized areas, ecological crisis, discrepancies

Introduction

Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) meticulously depicts the profound and devastating changes that befall the population of Kosawa with the arrival of the American oil company.

This exploration of the illusion of capitalism reveals how the Western promise of economic progress can conceal the harsh realities of corporate exploitation and trigger profound transformations in the lives of vulnerable communities. Before analyzing those social changes, it is worth considering some of the critical reflections that have already been carried out on the new forms of exploitation known as neo-colonialism. This concept, as articulated by Kwame Nkrumah (1965), provides a decisive framework that contributes to comprehending Pexton's operations. According to that Pan-Africanist figure, multinational corporations often exploit African resources for their own profit and leave local communities impoverished. *How Beautiful We Were* vividly illustrates that dynamic; the American oil company Pexton's extraction of resources from Kosawa mirrors Kwame Nkrumah's critique.

Moreover, the book *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (1995) by Bill Ashcroft and various other critics helps to elucidate the mechanisms of postcolonial power. It highlights how Multinational Corporations, such as Pexton, often perpetuate neo-colonial structures and extract resources while disregarding the well-being of local populations. Mbue's novel exemplifies that troublesome social reality, showing how Pexton's promises of development hide a reality of environmental destruction and social disruption. Besides, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) raises vital questions about marginalized voices and resistance, pertinent to the Kosawans' struggle. Moreover, the critical studies by James Ferguson (1999) and Achille Mbembe (2000) shed additional light on the mechanisms of dependency and control. Furthermore, David Vogel's approach (2005) offers a critical lens that helps to analyze corporate behavior and environmental degradation. Similarly, the "slow violence" inflicted upon the Kosawan communities aligns with Rob Nixon's (2011) framework.

As shown above, those theoretical works proffer significant tools that can contribute to interrogating the novel under consideration. Apart from them, various other critical reflections focus on Mbue's literary project. For instance, the article "Environmental Neocolonialism and the Quest for Social Justice in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2022) by Brygida Gasztold examines the ongoing suffering in former colonies, such as Kosawa. According to Gasztold's analysis,

> Mbue's novel critiques the hazardous methods of crude oil exploitation, which put human health and life at risk. It demonstrates how uneven distribution of oil's benefits sanctions corruption and fosters economic injustice, while all attempts at restoring justice are thwarted as much by local as by foreign culprits. (Gasztold, 2022, p. 195)

Clearly, in terms of metaphor, Mbue's creative art is a *weapon* of denunciation. It decries the deliberate social injustices imposed on the Kosawan people, which prevented them from pursuing equitable development. Moreover, in "Extraction and Environmental Injustices: (De)colonial Practices in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*," Goutam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty assert that "the prolonged occupation of the Pexton oil company in Kosawa destroys the local ecological system and relegates the indigenous people of the village to the status of marginalized anomalies" (Karmakar & Chetty, 2023, p. 129). Likewise, examining Pexton's involvement in the ecological crisis that kills the children of Kosawa, Syahruni Junaid, and many other critics maintain,

> Environmental pollution occurs in the community's fields, which are the income of local residents also suffered damage due to infertile soil; water becomes polluted and dirty due to oil spills. This caused the community to lose money because of the damage to their fields. (Junaid *et al*., 2024, p. 281)

Additionally, in her article titled "Hopeful Resistance and Solidarity from Below in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2024), Ángela Suárez-Rodríguez shows how Western imperialist forces hinder development processes in ex-colonized regions such as Kosawa and reveals the way forward to overcoming these hostile mechanisms. Conversely, in her critical work entitled "Wokewashing and Greenwashing: The Silent Architects of Eco-apartheid in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2025), Iftinan Rose Putri Safana looks into the contempt of Pexton's representatives towards the Kosawan people. By the same token, Muhannad Salman Obaid Al-Qaraghouli and Salam Fadhil Abed Al-Taee's article, "Intergenerational Trauma and the Immigrant Experience in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2025), analyzes how the environmental degradation in Mbue's novel creates intergenerational trauma and shapes the immigrant experience. Similarly, the article,

"Racial-Economic Disparities and Environmental Suffering in Postcolonial Africa: A Reading of Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2025) by Ikpemhinoghena Yvonne Ewedemi *et al*. uses a postcolonial ecocritical lens to explore how colonial legacies and neocolonial exploitation exacerbate racial and economic disparities and environmental suffering.

As shown above, existing critical works excel at substantiating the tangible consequences of unchecked capitalism on vulnerable communities and their environments. They also highlight the importance of collective action and cultural preservation in the face of overwhelming odds. However, the issue of capitalism delusion remains evanescent and substantial. Hence, the problem raised by the topic under investigation is that the Western company (Pexton), disguised as an agent of development, functions as a tool of neocolonial exploitation, stripping the Kosawans of their autonomy and traditional way of life. This raises the following questions: How does Mbue's novel depict the illusion of capitalism's promises as a catalyst for profound and detrimental change in the lives of Kosawa's people, and how does that change reflect neocolonial power dynamics?

To delve into that double-barreled interrogation, the use of postcolonial critique will be advantageous. The pertinence of such a methodological tool lies in its capacity to expose the insidious continuities between colonial and neo-colonial power. This method is of crucial relevance for addressing change in communities such as Kosawa; it unmasks capitalist promises as a continuation of colonial domination and offers the necessary tools to comprehend the ideological feature of that change by explaining how exploitation is accepted through psychic alienation and the desire for development. However, its nuanced application is crucial, as a rigid adherence to its theoretical framework can risk reducing all transformations to the colonial legacy, overlooking the internal dynamics or specific community factors that also influence change. It is therefore essential to use it with caution, recognizing that current forms of exploitation are not just echoes of the past, but complex realities that require an analysis attentive to their own specificities.

To that end, the use of Lyn Innes's book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (2007), and Simhachalam Thamarana's article, *Significance of Studying Postcolonial Literature and its Relevance* (2015) will be contributive. Their works underscore the significance of reclaiming and redefining marginalized experiences. Mbue's novel illustrates this by giving voice to the Kosawans, whose perspectives are systematically ignored by Pexton and the local corrupt government.

In terms of structure, the current exegesis is divided into two axes: "seduction of capitalist promises" and "capitalist exploitation and post-exploitative paradigm". The former depicts

how the allure of economic prosperity masks the exploitative characteristics of capitalist ventures in Mbue's novel—it highlights the devastating consequences when communities prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability. The latter sheds light on the devastating consequences of neocolonial resource extraction and explores the potential for community-driven resistance to forge a more equitable and sustainable future.

Seduction of Capitalist Promises

This stage aims to analyze the insidious nature of capitalist promises and demonstrate how they ensnare and ultimately devastate vulnerable communities such as Kosawa. It also examines the deceptive allure of economic prosperity, progress, and development.

To begin with, the seduction of capitalist promises in post-colonial contexts is not a simple matter of economic exchange but a profound psychological and ideological phenomenon, a neo-colonial mirage that Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* lays bare with exceptional acuity. In this novel, the Pexton oil company embodies the promise of Western-style modernity and economic prosperity, functioning as a sophisticated instrument of domination that exploits the genuine aspirations of the Kosawan communities for a better life. Beaming with the immense benefits of the new project, the Kosawan people are ecstatic, as illustrated by the excerpt below,

> They would pour libations over and over to thank their ancestors. They would sing songs of gratitude to the Spirit every morning for having put oil under their. Our grandparents had rejoiced upon hearing this. They believed Pexton's lie, and for a long time, our parents did too, convinced that if only they remained patient the thing called 'prosperity' would arrive like a cherished guest for whom the fattest pig had been slaughtered, and all of Kosawa would live in brick houses like the one Woja Beki would eventually own. (Mbue, 2021, p. 73)

Obviously, the ideological foundation of Pexton's seduction lies in the myth of development, a master-narrative that has long been a cornerstone of both colonial and neocolonial discourse. The people of Kosawa are not merely offered money; they are offered an escape from what the Western world, and increasingly their own leaders, have taught them to consider as their backwardness. The collective voice of the narrative recalls the arrival of the white people from Pexton with a sense of wonder and hope, a sentiment deeply rooted in the historical promise of civilization. Pexton's representatives tell the Kosawan people, "drilling for oil would bring something called 'civilization' to our village.

One day, the government representatives said, Kosawa would have a wonderful thing called 'prosperity" (Mbue, 2021, p. 73). More importantly, the company's representatives speak of jobs, of building a bridge that would connect them to the wider world, of clinics that would heal their sicknesses, and of schools that would educate their children. However, the reality quickly diverges from those seductive narratives. The environmental devastation caused by Pexton's operations serves as a stark counterpoint to the company's promises. Analyzing that irrational exploitation of Kosawa's resources and its subsequent consequences, Uchenna Ohagwam and Queen Albert avow,

> Through all sorts of treachery, divide and rule tactics, and manipulative schemes, Pexton, supported by village elites and the state government, drills oil from Kosawa and pays little or no compensation to the indigenous peoples. Spanning the length of four generations with specific attention to actions between the 1980s and 2000s, the narrative is tragic and riveting. (Ohagwam & Albert, 2024, p. 199)

The above paragraph accounts for the manipulative feature of Pexton's seductive rhetoric. Those promises are not just logistical offers; they are symbolic gestures of an entry into a superior, modern existence. As the Nigerian critic Simon Gikandi argues in his book entitled *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (1996), post-colonial societies often internalize the colonial project of self-improvement, where progress is measured by the degree to which they can mimic the material and social structures of the West. Thus, the Kosawan inhabitants are presented with a false choice: their traditional way of life, with its hardships and vulnerabilities, versus a modern, Westernized future of ease and security. The seduction lies not in a mere preference for wealth, but in a profound ideological conversion, a belief in the inherent superiority of the capitalist model as a means of salvation. This belief, a willing suspension of disbelief in the face of history, is the very essence of the delusion. The narrator's words corroborate Pexton's false promise, as in the excerpt below,

> The representatives told them that drilling for oil would bring something called 'civilization' to our village. One day, the government representatives said, Kosawa would have a wonderful thing called 'prosperity.' Could the men explain 'civilization' in our language? Our grandparents had asked. The government men had said it was impossible for them to explain such terms fully, because it would be hard for our grandparents to understand what they'd never witnessed or considered a possibility. But as soon as 'civilization' and 'prosperity' arrived, they added, our grandparents would be in awe of what a beautiful life they offer; they lose all comprehension of how they and their ancestors could have lived without the wonders heaped upon them by rapidly changing world around them. (Mbue, 2021, pp. 72–73)

This utopian facade is particularly effective because it preys on real, material needs, skillfully transforming suffering into a justification for exploitation. Diseases, the arduous labor of subsistence farming, and a sense of being forgotten by the broader world mark the history of the Kosawan communities. When Pexton arrives, it promises to solve those problems, but time proves otherwise. Indeed, the narrator exposes the false promises of Pexton's representatives:

> Pexton had told our grandfathers that if they came to work for them, for a certain number of hours a day, and did as they were told to do, they would earn a fixed amount of money a month. Our grandfathers, however, had no interest in losing ownership of their lives—every one of them had turned down Pexton's offer and returned to the thrill of killing for food as trees were felled all over the valley to make room for the oil field and pipelines and Gardens. (Mbue, 2021, p. 73)

Noticeably, the irony, however, is that Pexton's solutions are a poison disguised as a cure. The promise of the clinic, for example, is offered to people whose health is about to be systematically destroyed by the very company that promises to heal them. In essence, those promises create a facade of goodwill that obscures the company's exploitative practices and fosters a sense of trust among the people of Kosawa. Woja Beki, Kosawa's Chief, describes that relationship, anchored in hypocrisy, as follows: "Pexon and the government are your friends, the Leader said. Even on your worst day, remember that we're thinking about you in Bézam and working hard for you" (Mbue, 2021, p. 7). The seduction extends beyond material promises to encompass the manipulation of cultural values and social structures. That cultural disruption is a subtle but profound form of manipulation, as it erodes the very foundations of the Kosawan communities and leaves a vacuum for Pexton to impose its own values and practices. Indeed, the psychological dimension of that attractiveness is equally significant. It raises the hopes of Kosawa's inhabitants, as corroborated in the following passage,

> Pexton created a scholarship in honor of the overseer and his wife, the Augustine and Evelyn Fish Memorial Peace and Prosperity Scholarship. The scholarship was for our children only. It would allow them to go to the best schools and someday become learned, like Thula. There was no land left to fight for, so Pexton had no fear that our children might grow up to wage a war against them. They'd already begun digging a new well in what used to be our village square when they announced the scholarship. They'd already uprooted what was left of the mango tree under which we'd played—whatever hadn't turned to ashes. Most of our children got the scholarships. (Mbue, 2021, p. 335)

In accordance with the aforementioned textual clues, the scholarship maintains a deceptive ambiguity and offers false hope by strategically misdirecting the focus of the Kosawan communities from their immediate and existential problems. The very name, "Peace and Prosperity Scholarship," is a profound irony, a promise of a future that Pexton's actions have systematically destroyed in the present. While the scholarship gestures towards a path for the children to become "learned, like Thula," it is offered only after the foundation of their identity and existence has been irrevocably dismantled. The excerpt pointedly juxtaposes that promise with Pexton's destructive deeds: the company has already "uprooted what was left of the mango tree" and left "no land left to fight for." In other words, the scholarship is not a solution to the polluted environment, the displaced heritage, or the destroyed communal life. Instead, it is a calculated project to manage the consequences of those actions. The collective narrative voice describes the Kosawan people's suffering as follows: "We were different tribes thrown together with no common dream. We were forced to build upon sinking sand, and now we're crumbling from within" (Mbue, 2021, p. 335).

By offering the children a future away from the village, a future of individual ascent within the very system that exploited their communities, Pexton effectively neutralizes the next generation's potential for collective resistance. The scholarship is not a bridge to a better life, but a final, ideological act of erasure, designed to make the communities accept a new narrative of success that requires them to forget the very land they lost. Addressing the aesthetic scope of the scholarship granted to the Kosawan youth, Iftinan Rose Putri Safana, one of Mbue's critics, avers, "these scholarships are not aimed at helping the education of the younger generation but only as an effort to build a positive image in society" (Putri Safana, 2025, p. 17).

Clearly, this is a classic neo-colonial mechanism where the imperialist, or in this case, the corporation, creates a state of dependency by offering a solution to a problem that they either created or exacerbated. The gifts of Pexton, scholarships, jobs, and the promise of healthcare are not acts of benevolence but strategic tools to dismantle the Kosawan communities' self-sufficiency and replace them with a reliance on the corporation. The Kosawan people's hope for a better life is turned against them, thus becoming the very key that unlocks the door to their own dispossession. This tragic paradox underscores the fundamental dishonesty of the capitalist promise in this context, asserting that it is an instrument designed not for the development of the communities but for the extraction of their resources, subjugation of their people, and pollution of their environment, as exemplified in the quotation below,

> Whatever life was left in the big river disappeared (…). The smell of Kosawa became the smell of crude. The noise from the oil field multiplied; day and night we heard it in our bedrooms, in our classroom, in the forest. Our air turned heavy. At the end of that first dry season, a pipeline burst and oil flooded the farm of the mother of one of my friends. (Mbue, 2021, p. 32)

More importantly, the power of Pexton's seduction is amplified by the internal complicity of the subaltern, a critical element of neo-colonialism that distinguishes it from its predecessor. Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* documents how the local leadership, particularly the Chief and his council, become unwitting or even willing agents of the capitalist delusion. A close look at the narrator's words helps to discover Woja Beki's contempt towards his people,

> That night, from my mat, I listen as Papa gives Mama more details about his visit, whispering in the dark. Mama is silent—she became tongue-tied the moment Papa returned from Woja Beki's house and told her of his plan to go to Bézam. I picture Papa lying on his back, his hands clasped on his chest, as he tells Mama about Woja Beki's theory that Pexton has been paying off people in the district office to shut their eyes, or turn them to the ground, or to the sky, to anywhere but the children dying in front of them. They deserve the punishment that would inevitably be theirs someday, Woja Beki had said. How could people show such contempt for the laws of the Spirit? Was money so important that they would sell children to strangers seeking oil? Look at me, he said to Papa. Look at how he always made sure to put some of his own money in the hands of bereaved families. Look at how he spoke to even the least in the village as if they were the most significant, because isn't that how it should be? (Mbue, 2021, p. 38)

More explicitly, figures, such as Woja Beki, who should have been the guardians of their communities' interests and traditions, are the first to be compromised. Indeed, Woja Beki's chameleon-like behavior tarnishes his good image and compromises his people's interests to the detriment of his own. He behaves as if he worked for his village, yet at night, he plays right into the hands of Pexton's representatives. By analyzing his attitude, Morayo Joy Akingbelue avers, "alongside state violence, corruption and betrayal from within contribute to complicity. The character of Woja Beki, the village head, is an embodiment of local complicity" (Akingbelue, 2025, p. 159). Obviously, his acceptance of paltry bribes and his dismissal of the villagers' growing concerns are symptomatic of a deeper ideological fracture. In his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Frantz Fanon warned against the dangers of a national bourgeoisie that, upon independence, would simply step into the shoes of the colonizers, perpetuating the same exploitative systems for their own benefit.

In other words, the Kosawan leaders are a tragic embodiment of that phenomenon. Their limited vision and desire for personal gain, however small, make them complicit in the corporation's grand deception. They prioritize the short-term benefits, the cash, the status of negotiating with the powerful white men, over the long-term well-being of their people. Worse still, their complicity creates a fissure within the Kosawan communities, making it difficult to mount a unified front against the external threat. This internal betrayal is a crucial component of the capitalist delusion, as it enables the external power to operate without the need for overt force, using the very structures of the communities to enforce its will. The ensuing paragraph captures the Kosawan people's sense of betrayal towards their leader,

> We knew he was one of them. We'd known for years that though he was our leader, descended from the same ancestors as us, we no longer meant anything to him. Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them. We'd seen with our own eyes, heard with our own ears, how Pexton was fattening his wives and giving his sons jobs in the capital and handing him envelopes of cash. (Mbue, 2021, p. 257)

Apparently, the seduction's grip on the internal psyche is so profound that it leads the local elite to actively silence dissent and to gaslight their own people. When the villagers first report the strange oil slick on their river and the illness of their children, the leaders, already compromised, are quick to dismiss their concerns. They echo the company's narrative, attributing the ailments to other causes or dismissing them as unfortunate side effects of progress. Instead of reproaching Pexton's representatives for their lack of concern for Kosawa's young people and their environment, the Chief, Woja Beki, and his council avoid incriminating them. As an illustration, let us consider the collective narrative voice:

> We did not initially suspect the oil field—it had been there for decades, and despite our hatred of it, we'd never before looked at one of our departed and linked their death to Pexton. (…) Many parents thought it might be a curse, a jealous relative from another village targeting their children, a relative whose wrath was directed at a particular Kosawa family, but was nonetheless going after all the children in the village to create the sense of a random act, render it untraceable. Or perhaps Kosawa had wronged the Spirit? Perhaps our parents needed to atone for one thing or another so their children might be spared? (Mbue, 2021, pp. 33–34)

The denial of reality is a powerful tool of the delusion taking place. The Chief, Woja Beki, and his council, by virtue of their position, act as a buffer between the communities and the reality of the exploitation, reinforcing the fantasy that Pexton is a benevolent partner.

This psychological manipulation is a defining characteristic of neo-colonial control. This is not just about physical control of the land, but about shaping perception, memory, and truth. By denying the reality of the pollution, the local leaders deny the very evidence that would shatter the capitalist delusion, effectively trapping their communities in a cycle of exploitation and false hope. This internal betrayal is, in many ways, more devastating than the external threat, as it undermines the very foundation of trust and communities' solidarity, rendering them vulnerable to the forces that seek their ruin. As the story unfolds, the lack of solidarity continues to rage; as a result, both the Kosawan young people and their elders fail to agree on effective strategies to oppose the resistance against Pexton's representatives. The quotation below is illustrative of that break-up,

> We defy them tonight and we stand a chance of being free again, some said. We don't need freedom, we need to stay alive, others argued. Let us show them that we're people too. The soldiers are going to shoot us dead. The Spirit has sent Konga to tell us that we can and should fight. Fight with? Fight with what we've got. What have we got but spears? We've got machetes and stones and pots of boiling water. How can you be so stupid as to think we have any chance? Konga has shown us we stand every chance. Konga is a madman. Perhaps madness is what we all need. How can you say such a thing? We were once a brave people, the blood of the leopard flows within us—when did we lose sight of that? We'll be dead tomorrow—is that what you? Everyone was standing, shouting; no one was listening. Konga and the Leader shook their fists at each other. The four young men stood between them, unsure of which side they were on. (Mbue, 2021, p. 22)

The most potent manifestation of that delusion, however, is its profound psychological impact on the next generation, a generation caught between the deep-seated traditions of their communities and the alluring promise of a Westernized future. The character named Thula is the most compelling embodiment of that ideological struggle. She is intelligent, ambitious, nationalist, and driven by a desire for knowledge, change, and an accomplished life. Her initial aspiration is not to become a better Kosawan, but to transcend her Kosawan identity entirely. She dreams of going to America, attending a university, and returning with the knowledge to fix her village's problems. In one of her letters to her fellow people, she claims,

> Yes, if we are to be conquered, let it not be because we never fought. Our fathers, brothers, uncles, friends—what did they die for? They died so that we could live peacefully in Kosawa, and if not us, then at least the next generation. No one has the right to make us prisoners on our land. No one has the right to take from us that which

> the Spirit gave our ancestors was taken from them, and now they live at the edge of society, a plight worse than ours. At least we still walk the paths our ancestors walked, but who's to say that one day all our land won't be taken from us like it happened here? The ancestors of these trampled people in America fought hard, and they lost, but what's most important is that they fought. (Mbue, 2021, p. 213)

This is a desire that is both deeply personal and fundamentally political, as it is a direct consequence of a colonial education, which taught her to devalue her own culture and to see salvation in the mastery of the colonizer's knowledge. This ideological framework, as postcolonial critic Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism* (1978), is part of a larger project that casts the West as the center of civilization and the former colonies as its periphery. The capitalist promise in the novel feeds directly into this narrative, suggesting that the West, by following the path, lays out the only way for the people of Kosawa to achieve true worth and dignity,

> I believe we can do it. We may be the only village breathing air poisoned by Pexton, but their pipelines pass through other villages and spill in them too. Soldiers are menacing innocents everywhere. The entire country is suffering under the yoke of His Excellency. Millions want him gone. That's an opportunity right there. We can join forces with people who are as ready for change as we are. Rouse them to get out on the streets and demand a new country. I've studied such movements; they have happened in America and Europe. People have gone out onto streets and changed their countries by marching. (Mbue, 2021, p. 277)

Plainly, the psychological toll of that delusion is the creation of a profound sense of cultural alienation. Thula and the other young people of Kosawa feel a deep-seated disconnection between their lived reality and the idealized future they have been taught to desire. The novel under consideration captures the state of "unhomeliness," a term coined by Homi K. Bhabha to describe the ambiguous, often painful condition of post-colonial identity—a state of being neither fully at home in one's own culture nor fully accepted by the culture one aspires to join or adopt. The capitalist promise offers a false solution to this alienation by suggesting that the adoption of Western modernity will resolve this inner conflict. Thula initially believes that by Western values (language and knowledge), she can find a place in the world and, in turn, save her communities. The delusion is that she can use the master's tools to dismantle their house without first understanding that the tools themselves are part of the system of oppression. One can therefore argue that her journey is a tragic testament to the power of that seduction, as it compels her to embark on a quest for a self that is, at its core, a reflection

of the very forces that seek to destroy her home. In terms of change, the journey to America helps to change Thula's mind and discover that the use of violence cannot save her village from Pexton's manipulation and subjugation.

> I hope the love that dwells today in my heart remains forever, but if it doesn't, may this letter serve as a testament that there once was a day when all I wanted was for peace to reign. Tomorrow I may wake up in pain with a mind crowded with images of what nothing more than to punish Pexton. I may wish I hadn't sent you this letter, but it'll be too late. You may have read my words and decided to join me in freeing Kosawa without causing pain to anyone; without any word, thought, or action that destroys another. You may have vowed never to break or burn again, because you wonder if I was wrong, if we were all wrong to believe that we could seize freedom through destruction. (Mbue, 2021, p. 286)

The seduction of capitalist promises in *How Beautiful We Were* is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon rooted in the historical legacies of colonialism. It functions as an ideological masterstroke that bypasses the need for overt force by preying on the hopes and needs of the communities, relying on internal complicity, and offering a false sense of belonging to a new world order. Mbue's novel masterfully deconstructs that delusion, exposing it as a neo-colonial mirage that promises a new beginning but delivers only a violent end. The utopian vision of progress, internal betrayal of the local elite, and psychological allure of the West all serve to trap the Kosawan communities in a system of exploitation. That intricate process of seduction, however, cannot endure indefinitely. Its inherent violence and fundamental disregard for human life and the environment eventually cause the illusion to shatter.

Regarding the next stage, it aims to examine the capitalist exploitation and post-exploitative paradigm in the novel.

Capitalist Exploitation and Post-exploitative Paradigm

The current step explores the dynamics of capitalist exploitation and the potential for a post-exploitative paradigm. A particular consideration will be given to the devastating impact of neocolonial resource extraction and the possibilities for community-driven resistance.

The term post-exploitative paradigm is not a formal academic term. This means a new way of life, thought, and values that rejects the logic of exploitation and seeks to forge a more equitable, dignified, and sustainable future. This paradigm is not a utopian endpoint but a process of struggle and reclamation. Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* is a profound

and unsparing chronicle of capitalist exploitation, but it is equally, if not more importantly, a powerful articulation of a post-exploitative paradigm. This novel deconstructs the mechanisms through which a multinational corporation, Pexton, extends its neo-colonial power over the fictional African village of Kosawa. However, it transcends a mere lamentation of victimization by detailing the arduous and often tragic process through which subaltern communities reject the logic of exploitation, reclaim their agency, and construct a new framework for existence rooted in collective memory, indigenous values, and unyielding resistance. Although Thula is abroad, she continues to exhort her fellow people to show resilience. The excerpt below shows how committed she is:

> Think about it, Pexton isn't acting alone. They only have power over us because our government gave them our land. The government hanged our men. If we were to get Pexton to leave, wouldn't the government return in another form to continue smothering us. Which means we need that our ultimate enemy is not Pexton, it's our government. That is not to say we shouldn't take a stand against the government too. I know this is going to sound outrageous, you'll probably think it's far beyond our capacity, but what if we started a movement to bring down His Excellency's government? (Mbue, 2021, p. 277)

In other words, the initial phase of this dialectic is the anatomy of capitalist exploitation itself, which Mbue depicts not as a singular event but as a multi-pronged assault on the communities' integrity. At its most visceral, this exploitation is environmental, a form of ecocide that serves as the material foundation of the neo-colonial project. The novel's collective narrative voice recalls a time when their river, their beautiful, clean river, was the lifeblood of their communities. However, Pexton's arrival transforms this sacred artery into a toxic wasteland, polluted by the black rain of oil slicks and the invisible poisons of chemical waste, as described in the ensuing quote:

> For reasons we couldn't understand, the smoke always blew in our direction, never in the direction of Gardens and the hilltop mansion of the American overseer. With new oil spill or day of gas flares so savage our skin shriveled and we needed to shout to each other over the screaming flames, Woja Beki sent someone to Gardens to talk to the supervisors, who, in turn, sent laborers to inspect the damage, patch up what they could of the old, rusty pipelines, and assure us that the spills were of no harm, the air was fine, Pexton was abiding by the law. Not long before I turned eight, two children died in one month, both of them having suffered high fevers but otherwise different symptoms. (Mbue, 2021, p. 33)

The postcolonial critique here is that this environmental destruction is a continuation of the colonial mentality, which viewed indigenous lands not as living ecosystems but as inert resources to be plundered for profit. The degradation of the land is a form of symbolic violence, an attempt to erase the communities' history and their spiritual connection to its territory. In the work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) by Rob Nixon (2011), it is not sudden, dramatic violence, but a gradual and incremental one, the effects of which accumulate over time and disproportionately affect the most marginalized. That gradual destruction is described as depicted in the textual clues below:

> Anyone could tell Juba's illness was no ordinary illness, this disease, which started with him moaning from body aches before progressing to a fever so high his body gyrated like a fish on dry land. Sakani came over in the morning and gave him a potion to drink, but by nightfall his body had grown hotter, no amount of wiping with cold cloth sufficient to cool him down. (Mbue, 2021, p. 35)

Noticeably, the villagers' initial inability to pinpoint the source of their children's sicknesses or the death of their fish is a direct result of this slow violence, which hides its destructive force under the guise of progress, thereby complicating the initial recognition of exploitation. The environmental assault is inextricably linked to the economic exploitation that Mbue depicts as a system of unequal power relations designed to create dependency and consolidate corporate control. The Kosawan inhabitants are not simply robbed; they are lured into a predatory relationship under the pretence of fair compensation:

> They didn't arrive bearing guns. No, the men who arrived were a smiling group. It appeared as if, for once, something good was coming from Bézam. The men told us about some people who sold oil overseas and called them Pexton. (…) They said Pexton was not from Europe, they were from America; they said Pexton had no relationship with our former masters. If we needed to know the truth, they added, American people were far better than Europeans [were]. American people like to mind their business and do good—we would soon get a chance to see that for ourselves. (…) All we had to do was sit back, let Pexton do its job and hand us our share of the money. (Mbue, 2021, p. 227)

In essence, Pexton's offers of money and meager jobs are presented as a lifeline, but they are, in fact, a way to purchase complicity and silence dissent. The payments are a symbolic act of appropriation, substituting the intrinsic value of the land and the health of the community with a transient monetary value that is utterly insignificant in the global market. This dynamic is a textbook example of neo-colonial economics, where multinational corpo-

rations, rather than colonial governments, control the resources and dictate the terms of engagement. As Kwame Nkrumah, a foundational figure in postcolonial thought, argued in *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), this new form of domination operates through economic control, where the former colonizing power—or its corporate proxies—keeps on exploiting the resources of the developing nation while giving the illusion of sovereignty. The Kosawan people's helplessness in the face of Pexton's power, even with the support of their nominally independent government, underscores the reality that their freedom is compromised by an economic system that functions solely for the benefit of the global North. The collective narrative voice exemplifies that economic exploitation:

> One of our fathers asked if Pexton could in the meantime send us clean water, at least for the youngest children. The Leader shook his head; he'd heard this question before. He took a deep breath as he prepared his standard response: Pexton was not in the business of providing water (…) Months later, Pexton men arrived for their first meeting with the village. When our elders asked the Leader at that initial meeting where he thought our vanished men might be, he told them that he knew nothing, Pexton did not involve itself with the whereabouts of the citizens of our country, unless, of course, they were its workers. (Mbue, 2021, pp. 9–10)

Beyond the environmental and economic, the most devastating form of exploitation is the social and bodily violence inflicted upon the Kosawan communities. Mbue uses the bodies of the sick and dying children as the ultimate site of that violence, a harrowing manifestation of what Achille Mbembe terms "necro-politics," where the corporation, with the complicity of the state, wields the power to determine who lives and who dies. Indeed, the illnesses, the birth defects, and the high mortality rates are not unfortunate by-products but a direct consequence of a system that places corporate profit above human life. The exploitation is not just of a resource but of the very biological integrity of the subaltern. The bodies of the children become the tangible evidence of the capitalist delusion's lethal lie. Pexton's representatives show no remorse for economic exploitation in the face of that tragedy:

> Nobody thought much about the fact that two children had died in one month—in a village of dozens of children, it was uncommon for such a thing to happen. Only after my classmate Wambi began coughing while the rest of us laughed, and then began vomiting blood; only after we'd buried Wambi and coughs like his began echoing across the school compound and bouncing hut to hut, some children urinating blood, others burning with fevers no amount of cold baths could bring down, several dying. (Mbue, 2021, p. 33)

This physical suffering is compounded by a deep psychological exploitation, which fragments the communities' trust and creates internal divisions. The fear of speaking out, the despair over the loss of their children, and the erosion of their communal bonds all serve to break the spirit of the people, leaving them isolated and vulnerable to the continued assault. This multi-layered exploitation, environmental, economic, and bodily violence, is the brutal crucible from which a new, post-exploitative paradigm emerges.

The emergence of that paradigm marks a pivotal turn (change) in *How Beautiful We Were*, as the communities shift from being a site of passive exploitation to a space of active reclamation and re-creation. The first and most critical element of that shift (change) is the rejection of capitalist value. The turning point is not a sudden revolution but a slow, painful awakening to the fact that the token payments and false promises are not a fair exchange for their health and their land. At a pivotal moment, the people of Kosawa stop trying to negotiate within the capitalist framework and instead begin to demand something that money cannot buy: the restoration of their natural world and the health of their children. Therefore, they ask Thula for financial help to buy guns and launch attacks on Pexton:

> Six months after her return was when she gave the money for the guns. She did it without ceremony. She simply took out an envelope while we were sitting in one of our huts. In it was the full amount we had requested to buy five powerful guns and sufficient ammunition. She said nothing as we stood up, one after another, stooped next to her, bowed our heads, took her hand in ours, and expressed our gratitude. When she did speak, her tone was stern. She told us that we were not to use the guns without her permission. We were not to use them for anything but the defense of our lives and those of our families and friends. (Mbue, 2021, p. 293)

This is the moment when the post-exploitative paradigm begins to take shape. It is a fundamental shift in epistemology, a rejection of the global market's system of valuation, and a reassertion of their own indigenous values. They begin to value clean water over money, communal health over individual wealth, and the preservation of their heritage over the pursuit of Western modernity. This move is a powerful decolonial act, as it disengages from the very system that has defined their worth and, in doing so, re-establishes their own terms of existence.

Central to that new paradigm is the reclamation of memory and identity through storytelling. The novel's narrative structure, told through the collective "we", is itself an act of resistance. It is a refusal to allow Pexton and the corrupt government to write the history of Kosawa. Instead, the communities tell their own story, asserting their agency in

defining their own past, present, and future. The title, *How Beautiful We Were*, is a poignant anchor for this reclamation. It is not an act of nostalgic escapism, but a political tool for remembering a time before the capitalist delusion took hold, a time of harmony, of respect for the land, and of communal strength:

> Only the mercy of the Spirit kept us from losing our resolve, for it gave us reasons to smile in the laughter of our children, the appearance of rainbows that left us in awe, the euphoria on full-moon nights when we took out our drums and our children skipped around the square while the elders cheered and our wives twirled their hips, causing our groins to stiffen. At times like these, we thought mostly of how blessed we were, what boundless promise life bore. Such moments reminded us that, no matter how long the night, morning always comes. (Mbue, 2021, p. 292)

The memory of "how beautiful we were" becomes the philosophical and moral bedrock of their resistance. In postcolonial theories, this act of reclaiming memory is crucial for decolonization, as it counters the hegemonic narratives of the colonizer that have historically sought to erase the histories and identities of the marginalized beings. The narrative of the novel, therefore, does not just describe the post-exploitative paradigm; it actively embodies it, creating a new literary space where the voice of the subaltern is not just heard but is the very fabric of the story.

Further, that reclamation of memory and value culminates in the articulation of a new collective agency. The post-exploitative paradigm is inherently communal and anti-individualistic, standing in stark contrast to the atomizing logic of capitalism. The Kosawan people's resistance is not led by a single, Western-style hero, but by a collective of voices, each contributing to a unified struggle. This collective agency is manifested in their initial protests, their refusal to accept further bribes, and their eventual resort to more militant actions:

> We promised her that if she provided the funds for the guns we would do all we could to see her vision of a revolution come true. As soon as she gave us the word, we would start meeting with village heads in our district and nearby districts to listen to the stories of their people's woes of mudslides cause by government mass deforestation; lands under seizure by decrees; dying children; raging soldiers; schools collapsed roofs. We would ask the village heads if they wanted to join us to defeat our common enemy. (Mbue, 2021, p. 290)

Clearly, this is a form of power that is not rooted in individual wealth or political office but in the strength of their communal bonds. The new paradigm recognizes that their survival depends on their solidarity, their ability to trust one another, and their shared commitment

to a future free from exploitation. Indeed, the communal resistance is a direct refutation of the capitalist ideal, which pits individuals against one another in a relentless competition for resources. In Kosawa, the paradigm shift is a move from a fragmented, exploited populace to a unified, self-determining community, bound together by a shared struggle and a collective vision of a better future.

The most powerful and tragic articulation of the new paradigm is apparent through the journey of Thula, who acts as the symbolic bridge between the capitalist delusion and the post-exploitative reality. Initially, Thula embodies the capitalist promise, a bright young mind whose dreams of a Western education represent the community's hope for a modern future. However, her return from America marks a profound change. She has a decolonized mind, using the knowledge she gained in the West to fight against the very system that created her. The collective narrative voice reveals Thula's deep desire for social change as follows:

> Her vision for the revolution was for it to begin officially on a day we could call Liberation Day. On that day, men and women from towns and villages in our surrounding districts would gather in Lokunja. She would invite a newspaperman, the man who had taken over Austin's job. The newspaperman would take pictures and chronicle the rebirth of our country. If Liberation Day went well, we would have more rallies in other towns and in as many districts as we could, until we were ready for men and women to march in protest on a single day, in every town, in every village all across the nation, fists clenched up and chanting, until the walls of the regime fell down. (Mbue, 2021, p. 296)

Obviously, Thula's journey to America is a testament to the power of a hybrid agency, a concept central to the postcolonial paradigm. Indeed, her resistance is not a simple rejection of Western knowledge but a critical appropriation of it, blending her legal and political understanding with the indigenous strength and collective will of her people. Her ultimate sacrifice and the ongoing struggle of the young revolutionaries she inspires solidify the novel's vision of a post-exploitative paradigm as a continuous, and often tragic, process. This new way of being is not a peaceful utopia but a state of perpetual struggle, a constant fight to reclaim humanity in the face of a system that would deny it.

As proven above, *How Beautiful We Were* is a masterful postcolonial text that meticulously charts the journey from capitalist exploitation to the articulation of a post-exploitative paradigm. It discloses how the initial seduction of modernity is a multi-faceted neo-colonial delusion that is brutally shattered by the reality of environmental, economic, and bodily violence. The community's subsequent journey towards a new

paradigm, defined by a revaluation of their indigenous culture, the reclamation of their collective voice, and the emergence of a militant agency, is a powerful testament to the resilience of the subaltern. This narrative ultimately offers a profound and necessary lesson: that liberation from the shackles of exploitation requires a fundamental shift in values, an unwavering commitment to collective action, and a radical, unending process of re-imagining a future on one's own terms.

Conclusion

This study embarked on an examination of the capitalism delusion as depicted in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, with the primary objective of unravelling the intricate mechanisms through which capitalist ideology seduces and ultimately exploits vulnerable communities, such as Kosawa.

The analysis of the first axis revealed that the initial embrace of capitalism was not a simple economic choice but a profound ideological seduction, a mirage of modernity that preyed upon the Kosawan communities' legitimate desires for progress. The second axis charted the brutal rupture of that delusion, revealing how the violence inflicted upon the land and the bodies of the people of Kosawa catalyzed a radical awakening. The novel's overarching achievement, as this work has shown, is its masterful portrayal of that dialectical journey from a state of passive hope to a fierce and active resistance, thereby forging a change or a new paradigm of existence that fundamentally rejects the dehumanizing logic of exploitation.

In terms of findings, this inquiry has varied results. Academically, it contributes to the burgeoning field of petro-fiction and postcolonial environmental literature, providing a model for deconstructing the ideological scaffolding of corporate power. Socially and politically, its findings give a powerful voice to marginalized communities facing similar struggles against global corporations, serving as a cautionary tale and a source of inspiration for resilience. Religiously, it illuminates the spiritual dimension of resistance, showing how the Kosawans' connection to both their land and ancestors can become a powerful weapon against a materialist ideology.

As to the relevance of the postcolonial critique in this work, it was not merely contextual but determinative. It provided the essential hermeneutic tools to move beyond a simplistic narrative of corporate greed versus some helpless communities, underscoring the complex internal dynamics of complicity, the psychic alienation of the seduced, and the profound political nature of the collective subaltern voice. This method helps

to interrogate Mbue's novel as a sophisticated commentary on neo-colonialism, where Pexton operates as a proxy for global capital, and the Kosawan people's resistance becomes a struggle not just for their land, but for their very humanity and historical memory. However, this theoretical approach is also subject to several limitations. Although it has meticulously accounted for the central dialectic of seduction and resistance in Mbue's novel, it did not provide a complete analysis of all forms of capitalist exploitation.

Therefore, future research could explore the specific spiritual rituals and indigenous cosmologies of the Kosawan communities as an explicit source of their anti-capitalist worldview, or conduct a comparative analysis with other African literary works on petro-fiction to broaden the scope of this emergent post-exploitative paradigm.

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Empowering Human Capacity for Change: The Animal from Object to Subject

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Abstract

The perception of animals in society remains highly biased: their place differs according to their "usefulness" or their aesthetic appearance. Above all, in Western society, the animal has been regarded as an object for centuries. With the recent development of science, including biology and ethology, social justice movements, the concept of anti-speciesism, and theories based on extensionist ethics, such as animal rights theory and multi-species justice, animals are beginning to emerge from the shadows of the anthropocentric world, especially through the medium of the arts. This article will consider two works of contemporary art that focus on human–animal relations, namely Ever Dundas's novel *Goblin* (2017) and the photojournalism project by the non-governmental organization *We Animals* (founded in 2019). These works depict the animal playing its role as an animal, not as an object or symbol, while at the same time questioning our relationship with non-human animals and highlighting the shift in our perception of the animal. The aim of the article is to analyze how art can bring animals out of invisibility and contribute to changing the place of the animal from object to subject.

Keywords: anti-speciesism, change, human–animal relations, resistance, subject

Introduction

> Animals are the main victims of history, and the treatment of domesticated animals in industrial farms is perhaps the worst crime in history.
>
> —Yuval Noah Harari, Introduction, *Animal Liberation Now* by Peter Singer

Based on Jung's idea that "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious" (Jung, 1967), what analysis of human–animal

relations should we make? Despite the fact that the idea that animals should be respected and treated well is as old as humanity itself, it may be safely suggested that for centuries Western thought has remained influenced by the Judeo-Christian vision of Man as master of the world, created in the image of God, to whom all other creatures are doomed to serve. Animals were seen as beings of a different nature, incapable of reasoning or experiencing pain. In this way, Western man drew a dividing line between "us" and "them." Descartes advanced his mechanistic worldview through the concept of the animal-machine, which stripped animals of consciousness and moral consideration by characterizing them as unthinking, unfeeling automatons. In this way, he distinguished humans from other animals and contributed to the perpetuation of dualism: human–animal and mind–body. His theory influenced the development of science by stimulating questionable practices such as vivisection. These two visions have legitimized the exploitation of animals for human purposes. Despite its proven falsity, the vision of animals as machines persists in industrial farming, despite the spread of the 'happy meat' discourse.[1]

The reification of the animal includes the fact that man has every right over animals: the right to life, to death, to exploit, to torture (in the name of science or entertainment), and to destroy their habitats if man finds it useful. Animals are instrumentalized: a consumer product, a hunting target, an experimental material, even a disposable gadget, but never a sentient being as they are.

Debates over the animal condition have been revived by scientific progress, particularly with the development of biology and ethology. Contrary to various thinkers and religious figures, Charles Darwin and his biologist successors have decided that there is only a difference in degree, not in kind. Biologically, man is also an animal, more specifically, a primate. The current era has also seen the development of the social sciences studying human–animal relations, leading to the emergence of animal rights theories based on extension ethics (Tom Regan, Gary Francione), multi-species justice (Danielle Celermajer, Sophie Chao), Anthropocene discourse, (Eugene Stoermer, Tobias Menely), more-than-human concept (David Abram), anthrozoology (Kenneth Shapiro) and social justice movements that include animal liberation (Peter Singer). Animal studies is now a separate field that studies animals in an interdisciplinary manner. One example of this is Université Toulouse Capitole, which launched a program in animal law in 2025 in collaboration with the L'Ecole nationale vétérinaire de Toulouse [Toulouse National Veterinary School] (Ravier, 2025).

[1] *Happy meat* refers to the belief that ethics, animal welfare, and meat consumption can be reconciled. This assumes that it is possible to raise and kill animals in a 'humane' manner. Thus, ethics is reduced to technical details, with the moral question of exploitation never being raised.

This scientific and social progress has also been reflected in the law, with changes in the legal status of animals. For example, the EU recognises the status of animals as sentient beings, and legislation, especially in Western countries, includes laws to protect animals from suffering.

Gilles Lipovetsky points out that cruelty to animals used to be more ferocious and flagrant. In the 19th century, brutality in slaughterhouses was commonplace; animal fights were one of the workers favourite spectacles, turkeys were made to dance on white-hot plates, pigeons locked in boxes were pelted with stones so that their heads emerged and served as targets. Nowadays, animal abuse is widely condemned, and there are protests on all sides against hunting and bullfighting, against the conditions in which animals are reared, and against certain forms of scientific experimentation[2] (Lipovetsky, 1983, p. 290).

In the face of change, art does not remain indifferent. Artists are influenced by their times; they do not create in isolation from the society around them, and they can share in the prejudices of their time. As demonstrated by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, art has the potential to change the world. Today, on the one hand, we see those who kill animals in the name of 'art' (like Hermann Nitsch or Damien Hirst) and on the other, those who use their art to respond critically to the violence inflicted. As Victor Hugo claimed, art for art's sake may be beautiful, but art for progress's sake is even more beautiful[3] (Hugo, 1864, p. 423). In this paper, two works have been selected as we believe they represent a form of activism and aim to progress. They bring critical thinking to bear on established relationships with animals: Ever Dundas's *Goblin* and We Media's photography project.

Goblin is Ever Dundas' debut novel, published in 2017. The story takes place between the present and the different memories of the past. The heroine, Goblin, is an elderly woman who must confront her past: an outcast who grew up in London during World War II. Traumatized by the events, she found refuge with her family, which consisted of the imaginary world and of the stray animals she rescued from the streets.

[2] "Au XIXe siècle, la brutalité dans les abattoirs était chose courante; les combats d'animaux faisaient partie des spectacles favoris des ouvriers, 'on faisait danser les dindes sur des plaques chauffées à blanc, on visait à coups de cailloux des pigeons enfermés dans des boîtes de telle sorte que leur tête émerge et serve de cible' [le texte cité est de T. Zeldin]. Un monde nous sépare de cette sensibilité, de nos jours les sévices envers les bêtes sont massivement réprouvés, de toutes parts des protestations s'élèvent contre la chasse et les corridas, contre les conditions d'élevage, contre certaines formes d'expérimentation scientifique."

[3] "l'art pour l'art peut être beau, mais l'art pour le progrès est plus beau encore"

We Media is a non-governmental organization set up in 2006 as a similarly titled photography project that tells the stories of animals in order to inspire compassion, conversation, and change (We Media, n.d.). The photos are mainly used by various non-governmental organizations fighting for better treatment of animals, activists, and the media.

These works present animals as subjects in their own right rather than as objects or symbols, while questioning our relationship with non-human animals and highlighting shifts in how we perceive both humans and animals. The aim of the article is to analyze how art can bring animals out of invisibility and contribute to changing their place from object to subject. To address this, we will first analyze how the animal emerges in works that challenge its invisibility and then examine the appropriation and exercise of biopower over animals.

The Emerging Animal: Defying Invisibility

It should be noted that the death toll of non-human animals during warfare is rarely discussed. Beyond the use of animals by the army for military purposes, this sad account includes others: military training or all kinds of research during the development of new types of weaponry (The Military's War on Animals, n.d.) and casualties among wildlife disoriented or trapped in zoos, pets abandoned, eaten or euthanized, domestic animals killed as a result of bombing or lack of care.[4] Their stories are not told unless the animals do what humans find 'useful,' recognizing them as moral agents. The UK charity "War Dogs Remembered," founded in 2015, serves as an example. Stories of war hero dogs are told in order to "pay tribute to and raise awareness of all the dogs that have served in the military" (War Dogs Remembered, n.d.). Nevertheless, even if the recognition of animals that serve in the military is an important step, this approach remains anthropocentric. One could even say that it is anthropomorphic, since the animals did not have the choice to take part in the war or perform what is later considered to be 'exploits.' They were trained, most often using cruel methods, through deprivation of food or pain, for example. International humanitarian law aims solely to protect humans, with animals having the status of objects under their provisions. However, it is worth noting that it aims to 'humanize' what is profoundly inhuman: war.

As author Ever Dundas herself explained, one of the aims in developing her novel *Goblin* was "to challenge the romantic consensus around World War II and, as Ballard said of *Crash*, to 'rub the human face in its own vomit and force it to look in the mirror'" (Ross, 2017).

[4] Kraljević, Petar, ed. "Animal victims of Croatian homeland war 1990–1992." or Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group works may propose a more detailed view on animal victims.

While the human tragedy of the Second World War is well known and investigated, the other tragedy—that of non-human animals—is often forgotten by the general public. One of the main themes of the novel, the 1939 pet massacre, defies this collective oblivion. In September 1939, approximately 400,000 (mainly cats and dogs) were euthanized by their owners under the pretext of sparing them the suffering of war during the food shortages, making them one of the first victims of the war in the United Kingdom (Kean, 2017, p. 47). We read in *Goblin*:

> 'this,' he gestured to the mound of dead bodies. 'It's been happening all over.'
>
> 'Who's doing it?'
>
> 'We are. Freddy from next door took his pup to the vet yesterday and the pup just followed him all excited like it was an adventure. Freddy said it was for her own good. That she'd be afraid of the bombs, that she'd go crazy. Freddy said they'd have enough to worry about without this pup causing them trouble and being another mouth to feed.' (Dundas, 2017, p. 62)

Goblin, as a child, cannot believe such a tragedy is possible: for her, her dog Devil is her family, and it is unthinkable to get rid of him under the pretext of war. For her, it is easier to believe that the Nazis killed animals than to accept the reality: the moral collapse of Londoners, including her own neighbors. The scenes of the use of child labor and the abuse of children sent back to the countryside by their parents to minimize their risk underline the ethical crisis that the nation at war was going through. The novel reveals the dark side of war through the eyes of children and animals, who are far removed from the talk of glory, heroism, and the romantic mythology of war. In the face of this grim reality, Goblin finds comfort in the company of the animals she cares for: the strays she collects from the streets, the pig she names Corporal Pig, in whose company she returns from Cornwall to London, the chicks, and even a crow.

Corporal Pig is undoubtedly one of the book's most charismatic heroes: Dundas portrays the pig accurately without prejudice in describing the friendship between this intelligent animal and the girl. She also remains realistic in her description of other people's views of the pig: despite the fact that its behavior is not too different from that of a dog, Corporal Pig cannot overcome cultural prejudices; its role is to be eaten, not to fulfill the role of a friend, which is reserved rather for dogs. Therefore, despite Goblin's best efforts to protect him from the neighbors, Corporal Pig ends up being stolen and eaten.

This approach, which portrays animals as subjects who become the heroes of the book, differs from the more traditional approach, where animals play the role of object or symbol,

as seen in George Orwell's political satire, *Animal Farm*. Although Orwell criticizes the oppression of human beings, he does not question the exploitation of non-human animals.[5] The representation of animals on the farm is stereotypical: the horse as the image of a worker, the sheep as the image of a docile citizen, and other animals embodying familiar societal roles. The non-human characters serve a dual purpose: they make the story universal while creating the necessary distance between readers and protagonists to deliver the message. Another example might be the genre of Vanitas in painting. In the works of Frans Snyders, the depiction of dead animals does not question the violence inflicted and the killing of animals, but serves to symbolize the vanity and futility of human desires. It might be suggested here that a similar depiction of dead human beings would have questioned whether war itself is so inevitable and necessary to justify suffering, as in Vasily Vereshchagin's painting Apotheosis of War, which shows a mountain of human skulls.

In turn, in the face of the long-standing tradition of photographing animals considered 'cute' or 'beautiful' by the general public, such as wild animals for conservation photography, the We Animals photography project has emerged, following the tradition of animal photojournalism. It has been said that a "picture is worth a thousand words," so this genre exposes animals that are made invisible by agro-industry and its hidden violence, aligning it with war photojournalism. In some countries, this activity is criminalised—the United States, for example, has introduced so-called ag-gag laws, making art a means of resistance not just for the animal cause but also for freedom of expression and the right to free access to information.

These photos differ from the pastoral images we are accustomed to, which typically depict happy animals roaming freely in the countryside with all their needs met. We Media gives the other perspective: the tight cages, the insalubrity, the despair, the dead bodies of those who do not survive until they are killed.

However, they once again become the subject of a forgotten story, despite the fact that we maintain many relationships with these animals that we do not even realize we have; we eat their bodies, wear their fur and skins, and our cosmetics are tested on them (We Animals, n.d). In a project entitled 'Fear, Determination, and Relief: My Night on a Fur Farm,' Jo-Anne McArthur of We Animals presents the living conditions on a fur farm in Poland

[5] Despite the fact that Orwell condemned cruelty to non-humans, his view of animals remained anthropocentric and humanistic: he described vegetarianism as misanthropic and accused animal rights activists of romanticizing animals at the expense of human beings. Thus, it can be said that his notion of cruelty was biased and relativized. As a humanist author, he focused his efforts on humans and their rights in his major works.

and the work of investigators who document the living conditions of the animals trapped there. In his cage with bars, the fox is a prisoner through no fault of his own. Visibly ill and desperate, he has never had any other experience (Figure 1). His fate is even more tragic because the alibi of fur use is more than questionable in the 21st century, when alternatives are accessible and widespread.[6]

Figure 1

Fox in a fur farm, Poland

Source: Jo-Anne McArthur / We Animals

This work by We Animals is part of a broader campaign bringing together several non-governmental organizations with the common goal of achieving a ban on fur production in Poland. Notably, the images from We Animals used by Canadian NGOs contributed to the ban on mink farms in British Columbia (Mink farming phase-out planned in B.C., 2021) and the conviction of a fox and mink fur farmer found guilty of animal cruelty (Bruemmer, 2017).

[6] In the meat industry, the animal becomes an absent referent; in the collective imagination, the final product is disconnected from the fact that it once was an animal—a living being—in order to "keep something from being seen as having been someone" (Adams, 2010, p. 13).

We might suggest that animals in the animal-exploiting industry are what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life," conceptualized in his 1998 work *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Sovereign power, in other words, the master himself, determines the value of their lives and exercises the violence and power of life and death. Jacques Derrida deplores this

> a strange and equivocal economy, a strange and equivocal ecology that consists in expropriating the other, appropriating the other by depriving the other of what is supposed to be proper to him or her, the other's proper place, proper habitat, oikos. (Derrida, 2009, p. 299)

In the following section, we will examine the appropriation of animals and the exercise of biopower over them.

Appropriation and the Exercise of Biopower

Goblin, rejected by her mother, feels closer to the animals who are the 'Others.' The relationship between the heroine and the animals is imbued with compassion and unconditional respect throughout the book. Her compassion extends beyond animals considered 'cute.' As a child, she would not let another boy torture spiders by ripping off their legs; as an adult, she looks after the animals in the circus where she works as a clown "despite piss and shit" (Dundas, 2017, p. 219). As Goblin herself says: "I felt safe" (Dundas, 2017, p. 219). She published a critical observation on the use of animals in the circus, which earned her the hostility of her adoptive parents and her circus colleagues, who saw it as betrayal and a threat to their jobs. She feels that wild animals do not belong in the circus; even if they are treated relatively well, the idea that they spend most of their time locked up in cages and can be euthanized if they behave inappropriately—in other words, if they attack someone and disobey—revolts her. Goblin perceives the animal as it is. She rejects the idea that, even legally, the animal is property. At one point, this earned her six months in prison following her attempt to save a dog from the crowd, as she was accused of "stealing and damaging property" (Dundas, 2017, p. 228). In this scene, the paradox of the situation in which the animal is trapped is clearly expressed: it is not an object, but it has the status of an object.

Both works raise not only the problem of the reification of the animal and its reduction to the status of property, but also the problem of domestication and our relationship with pets: the pet massacre and the issue of stray animals highlighted in the book as well as some of the photos on We Animals, for example, the photos of the mass burials of stray dogs massacred in Turkey following R. Erdogan's decree to r*educe the stray dog*

population (Figure 2), The extermination of stray animals from city streets goes hand in hand with this illusion of human civilisation defined by order and cleanliness, where 'dirty' animals have no place, while in reality our own waste and pollution are killing us.

Figure 2

Exhumation of the body of a dog in a mass grave for investigative purposes

Source: Tunahan Turhan / We Animals

Domestication directly relates to the concept of animal ownership. Some thinkers, such as anthropologist Richard Tapper, draw a parallel between slaves and domesticated animals, whereas Tim Ingold argues that domestication should be seen as "a transition from trust to domination" (2002, p. 75). As Patric Llored notes, pets and domestic animals are no exception to the sovereign logic of appropriating their lives and managing their deaths in order to defend society[7] from alleged risks. Any animal that leaves the private sphere of its sovereign master's home becomes a downgraded animal. Pets that become so-called strays jump from the noble category of pets into the category of vermin, against which repressive measures are authorised (Llored, 2012, p. 305).

[7] "nos animaux domestiques et de compagnie n'échappent pas à cette logique souveraine qui consiste à s'approprier leur vie et à gérer leur mort dans le but de défendre la société"

This attitude is imbued with anthropocentrism: the animal is recognised as just when it fulfils the role assigned to it by human society; if it can no longer be useful, it becomes an outcast. The domestic environment is a place where biopower is exercised, and any living thing that does not submit to the various biopowers (mainly the State, law, and medicine) will be considered a threat by and to our societies[8] (Llored, 2012, p. 306). Drawing on the Derridean idea that there is no distinction between care and violence, Llored demonstrates that care equals power over the animal. In effect, this power is exercised with a view to the most effective and efficient possible control and surveillance of man over beast. The political thesis behind this concept of zoopolitics is that the care provided actually helps to increase man's power over animals and, more specifically, state sovereignty over this non-human living creature ... Killing hunted stray cats thus contributes to the management and elimination of feline populations that are impure in biological, medical and social terms, and helps to consecrate the dominant model of domestication[9] (Llored, 2012, p. 314).

According to Gary Francione's abolitionist approach, the so-called companion animals must cease to exist in the future as a species. While they are here, they must be treated well and sterilized to stop their proliferation. Pets are a form of property that most of us treat rather badly than well: even if protective laws exist in some countries, they only include the minimum that should be guaranteed for animals, and despite this, they can be euthanized if we wish or if a new owner is not found. They are entirely dependent on the will of the master-sovereign and have no intrinsic value but only the extrinsic value that is granted to them.

The Pet Massacre illustrates the fear of losing sovereignty under the pretext of providing care—a pretext that ultimately manifests as violence. Londoners, seeking to prepare for war, deemed it unwise to keep pets alive, thus reducing them to the status of useless or inconvenient property. With shifts in human lifestyles, cats and dogs lost their 'usefulness' in some eyes, whether as pest controllers or property protectors. This underscores that animals are considered 'good' and 'approved' only so long as they serve human purposes and remain within boundaries imposed by people. Even when they comply with

[8] "tout vivant qui ne se soumettrait pas aux divers biopouvoirs (Etat, droit, médecine principalement) sera considéré comme une menace par et pour nos sociétés"

[9] "[…] le soin comme pouvoir sur l'animal. En effet, ce pouvoir s'exerce en vue d'un contrôle et d'une surveillance la plus efficace et efficiente possible de l'homme sur la bête. La thèse politique engagée par ce concept de zoopolitique consiste à penser que les soins délivrés contribuent en réalité à augmenter le pouvoir de l'homme sur l'animal et plus précisément la souveraineté étatique sur ce vivant non humain … Tuer les chats errants chassés contribue ainsi à la gestion et à l'élimination des populations félines impures à la fois biologiquement, médicalement et socialement, et contribue à la consécration du modèle dominant de domestication."

these limits, they remain inferior; their value is tied to their usefulness. There is a pervasive fear that they could become stray animals—potential threats from which people must be protected, especially to safeguard scarce food supplies—which causes them to shift categories: from companions to pests. Through euthanasia, humans maintain sovereignty over animals and retain the ultimate power to decide their survival or death. Notably, this peculiar slaughter—which was inherently speciesist—targeted only certain species: pets. Domestic animals deemed more useful, such as livestock intended for food, were spared. While Dundas does not provide a definitive solution to the problem of animal domestication and appropriation, she prompts us to reflect on our responsibilities toward animals entirely at our mercy, and on our exercise of biopower over them.

We Animal's project, which highlights the efforts of Ukrainian NGO Uanimals volunteers, presents an alternative perspective on war by documenting activists who risk their lives to save animals on the frontlines in Ukraine. This approach not only shifts the focus from traditional narratives of human conflict but also emphasizes compassion, sacrifice, and the often-overlooked experiences of non-human victims. To improve this presentation, the narrative should more clearly articulate how these stories challenge prevailing perceptions of war, underscore the interconnectedness of all beings affected by conflict, and invite reflection on the ethical responsibilities humans have toward animals, even in times of crisis. (Figure 3). The images here not only provide another perspective, that of the volunteers and animals, but also help to raise awareness, draw attention, and attract the funds needed to accomplish the mission. The other project, portraits of stray cats abandoned in Lebanon the day after Israel struck, serves as a reminder that war not only impacts human beings, but that we all suffer, even if other beings have not had the choice of participating in human wars (Figure 4). War thus becomes the other aspect of our domination over other beings. It can be safely suggested that the current pollution crisis is the culmination of this domination.

Figure 3
Volunteers saving puppies in frontline, Ukraine, 2024.
Source: Anzhelika Kozachenko / We Animals

Figure 4

A stray cat on a street hit by Israel in Lebanon

Source: Seb Alex / We Animals

A Shift From an Anthropocentric World

In 1970, Richard D. Ryder, a British psychologist, coined the word 'speciesism' by analogy with words such as sexism, racism, ageism, etc. The term, meaning the discrimination of living beings on the basis of their species[10] (Vilmer, 2001, p. 21), has since been adopted by several philosophers of animal ethics, as has its antonym: anti-speciesism—a movement based on the moral imperative that all living things should be protected from suffering and domination[11] (Candau, 2018, p. 1). Both works have a strong anti-speciesist aspect and invite us to rethink not just the position of the animal but the position of the human being too: the human being is not the pinnacle of creation, an end in itself, but as Romain Gary says humanity is a myth[12] (qtd in Pinque, 2015, p. 183) capable, moreover, of committing

[10] "la discrimination des êtres vivants sur la base de leurs espèces"

[11] "un mouvement fondé sur l'impératif moral selon lequel tout être vivant doit être protégé de la souffrance et de la domination"

[12] "l'humanité […] est un mythe"

the worst crimes. For Claude Lévy-Strauss, this separation between 'us' and 'them' constitutes our "original sin," which brings with it other crimes, because we can easily move this mark of separation and include others in the category of 'them' against whom everything is permitted. A person shapes both their identity and self-image through relationships that involve dominating others.

The animal is that other which, as Milan Kundera puts it, constitutes *a moral test*.[13] The rise of dissident voices advocating for animals is helping to change our perception of animals, allowing us to see them as they are, without the prism of stereotypes of beauty, intelligence, or social role. Through representation and understanding, artists' activism is realized, and their art sparks interest in social activism, allowing it to develop in different ways.

As Éric Dacheux and Tourya Guaaybess point out, at a collective level, the mediatization of any act or object in the confluence of the media is now one of the major conditions for its entry into the public arena. Without visibility, all actions are in vain (Dacheux & Guaaybess, 2020, p. 17).[14] Dundas places those who are marginalized and made invisible, including animals, at the center of her narrative. As Rodge Glass points out, Dundas has presented herself as a writer whose fiction and politics are indivisible from each other (2024) by responding emotionally to injustice. By criticizing human domination over other forms of life, both works raise public awareness of hidden violence and can change our perception, which is formed based on cultural representation rather than real experience. For example, pigs, represented as dirty beings in public opinion, are denied their intelligence, which is comparable to that of dogs, despite all the scientific evidence. It could be argued that politics—manipulating both what is seen and unseen—shapes public opinion and seeks to suppress anything that might be unsettling. Violence in itself must disturb us, because it is a daily reality for many animals. By exhibiting it, We Animals is at the same time advocating change and hope through the work of activists, vets who care for animals rescued from industry, and the lives of animals in sanctuaries, to show that another model of human–animal relations is possible, one with greater compassion and respect (Figure 5). It also reminds us that art can be a form of resistance against injustice and seeks to accelerate the progress that is so necessary today in the face of the rising tide of fascism and the climate crisis.

[13] "un test moral"

[14] "À un niveau collectif, la médiatisation de tout acte ou objet dans la confluence des médias est désormais l'une des conditions majeures à son entrée dans l'espace public. Sans visibilité, ces actions sont vaines."

Figure 5

A hen rescued from agribusiness receives medical help in the Czech Republic. Life in a sanctuary is her second chance.

Source: Lukas Vincour / We Animals

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Changes in Children's Spaces: The History of Playgrounds and Fairytale Connections in Hungary during the Socialist Period[1]

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Abstract

My study outlines the history of the development of the typical settings of socialist architecture—the housing estates, panel blocks, and socialist modernist playgrounds—in parallel with the evolution of the status of the fairytale in socialism. The run-down spaces and abandoned milieus of the socialist period, born as spaces shaped by an ideal system and as visions of the new city and society, seem even sadder today. Through metaphorical architectural spaces, the utopia that once shone like a bright star is contrasted with what is sometimes nostalgia and sometimes a new beginning, a tabula rasa. My writing traces the history of the development and perception of socialist housing estates and the associated playgrounds/communal spaces, and explores how children's needs, fairytales, and fantasies increasingly shape these spaces as the regime changes.

Keywords: urbanism, socialism, architecture, childhood, utopia

Introduction

My study examines how housing estates transformed children's spaces, adopting a multidisciplinary approach that connects the history of socialist-era architecture with film and literary studies, social history, and sociology. The aim is to provide new perspectives to understand the recent past of the region and to critically analyze the identity constructed

[1] A Hungarian version of this text has been published Váraljai, A. (2025). Ég és föld között, bús hazátlanul...": Panelterek "varázsosítása" a nyolcvanas években. In R. Vojnics-Rogics (Ed.), *"Csak úgy egyszerűen: zummbele!": Tanulmányok Békés Pál "Kétbalkezes varázsló" című meseregényéről* (pp. 63–78).

through socialist modernism. I explore the theme of change through architecture and, more specifically, through the evolving face of playgrounds. I live in Szeged, and my research on local history focuses on the city; thus, many of my examples are also related to Szeged.

The destruction and modernization of the city's former playgrounds and the transformation of its public spaces during the socialist period are disheartening because they were once the spaces of the new municipality and the visions of a new society, shaped by an ideal system. These former utopias are in tension with the sometimes nostalgic, sometimes clean slate attitudes of today's collective memory. The history of the development and perception of socialist housing estates and their playgrounds/communal spaces has been well documented. In many cases, the protagonists are "prefab children," the inhabitants of this new or necessary type of building, who, at the time, faced unforeseeable social and mental consequences. Pál Békés portrayed the grip of the housing estate of the 1980s from a child's perspective:

> "One evening, he was staring mournfully at the half-open door of the office. He could see the façade of a huge building. To be precise, all he could see from the office door was this house; the sky was out of the picture. On the fifth floor, sitting in the window, was a little boy of seven." (Békés, 1983, p. 26)

The tension between the child and the concrete building towering above, like a golem, is typical of the 1980s, when the prestige of panel buildings was in decline. As the year of the regime change approached, the inhabitants of the concrete housing estates no longer saw their homes as status symbols. Panel buildings were articulated as a social trap from which there was no "escape" for existential reasons. An exhibition at MODEM in the summer of 2019 highlighted the artistic aspects of this process, as Central European art history since the 1980s has increasingly featured the concrete apartment building as a dystopian/utopian motif—both as a social space and a metaphor for socialism's unsustainability (Süli-Zakar, 2019). In Marcell Esterházy's video loop h.l.m.v 2.0, the edge-to-length of a prefabricated house is realized as a geometric, abstract surface that fills the entire field of the image. Between the city and the natural spaces beyond the urban area, the housing block is a barricade that separates the city from nature, a gray zone defined as a nonplace, a non-lieu, or a between space. In the literature of the period, its "victim" is the child, cut off from the world of fairy tales and nature and forced into a magical, motherless environment. In the 1980s, growing attention was paid to the "theft" of the fairytale, the effects of the spaces surrounding the child on the formation of personality, and the creative maneuvers against demagicalization. In what follows, I will outline this evolution from the 1950s to the regime change in 1989, focusing on playgrounds as a metaphorical setting.

A Brief Introduction to the Architecture of Prefabricated Buildings in Hungary and the History of Prefabricated Spaces

The following overview provides a concise account of the emergence, developmental phases, and defining characteristics of panel-based housing construction in Hungary. One of the primary academic sources for this summary is the doctoral dissertation by architect Ádám Paládi-Kovács (Paládi-Kovács, 2020), which offers an in-depth examination of the historical and socio-structural aspects of socialist-era housing policy. Complementing this is the dissertation by Eszter Karlócainé Bakay (Karlócainé, 2012), which presents a detailed analysis of the spatial design of public open spaces within housing estates. The primary objective of state socialist housing policy in Hungary was to address the severe post-war housing shortage by promoting the construction of large volumes of standardized, rapidly assembled, and cost-effective dwellings. This demand was further intensified by industrialization and the resulting demographic shift toward urban centers. From the early 1960s, both national and international studies increasingly investigated the state of housing stock and the feasibility of prefabricated building technologies. A panel-based construction reached its peak in Hungary between 1961 and 1992, a period in which approximately 510,000 housing units were completed. Hungarian engineers studied Soviet, East German, Czechoslovak, and Danish prefabrication systems and subsequently developed a domestically adapted industrial housing production framework. The planning of these housing estates followed a uniform architectural logic, relying on modular design principles and standardized components to facilitate efficiency in construction. The residential complexes were often accompanied by institutions, commercial spaces, and essential service facilities, intended to support the everyday needs of residents locally, although their actual implementation frequently remained partial.

Public perceptions of housing estates were ambivalent. While some interpreted them as symbols of modernization and improved living standards, others experienced them as alienating and monotonous environments. Despite this, residents frequently sought to personalize their dwellings, using them as expressions of identity and as frameworks for creating a sense of home. Today, panel buildings continue to play a central role in Hungary's urban landscape. They not only embody the housing solutions of the socialist period but also serve as subjects of inquiry in the fields of architectural heritage, social identity construction, and urban theory.

In her research, Karlócainé Bakay (Karlócainé, 2012) highlights that open spaces within Budapest's housing estates between 1945 and 1990 evolved distinctly in terms of spatial logic, function, and visual language. During the Socialist Realist period (1951–1955),

modernist urban planning principles encouraged the creation of internal courtyards and continuous green space systems, aimed at reinforcing spatial connectivity between residential blocks. In the subsequent Late Modernist period (1956–1979), functionalist design took precedence, resulting in spatial configurations defined by simple geometries and repetitive, standardized elements. At the same time, increasing emphasis was placed on mitigating environmental stressors—such as noise, dust, and heat—through the strategic use of vegetation and planting patterns. Based on dispersed shrub groupings, green space design shifted in the 1980s toward denser, forest-like plantings, which provided both spatial articulation and ecological buffering functions. These structures remain active sites of discourse regarding urban renewal, social history, and cultural heritage preservation.

Changes in Playgrounds Between 1945 and 1990

1. Order and Discipline: The 1950s

The Socialist Realist architectural program in Hungary was announced in 1951 by the newly founded Association of Hungarian Architects. This style had been predominant in the Soviet Union for decades. Following Stalin's death, Khrushchev's speech in 1954 eased the pressure on art and architecture, and the socialist style was replaced by modernism. In the terracotta relief of the SOCREAL-style apartment building in Mars Square in Szeged, Antal Tápai presented the typical, idealized family model of the 1950s, for which the regime had designed these apartments. However, the child was not as crucial in the production-oriented state apparatus as the schematic iconographic program suggests. The Hungarian social-realist installations are rigid and symmetrical in composition due to their impressive appearance, and represent the grandeur of the workers' state. Within the enclosed blocks was a minimum of green space; at most, children could play on the building rubble or in the dustbin, which was a mandatory functional element. The playgrounds of the 1950s were not yet within the visual range of the windows; instead, they were located in the parks outside the blocks. The more confined areas of the blocks were used for institutions, laundries, and kitchens to achieve work efficiency. Our image of the playgrounds of the Rákosi era is from archival photos and former plans: the symmetrical 1953 Valéria Square (now Bartók Square) playground plan in Szeged, considerably remodeled, reflects the ideas of social–realist architecture. A characteristic of the supervised areas is the central space, visible from all points, including a swing and a rocket launcher. Instead of the plan's regular, landscaped surroundings, the playground was framed by cinder-strewn terrain, scattered vegetation, and the decaying backdrops of the buildings. Although not a playground, the youth square, designed by Tibor Snopper,

the architect of the Szeged Design Office in 1954, is a real curiosity. With its single-room dormitories and monumental parade ground, the design of the 120-seat, socialist-style textile college building for girls stands out for the total absence of a personal zone and private sphere. The twelve points of the Pioneers' Pledge precisely define the Communist Party's expectations of school-age children at the time, the most important of which was good behavior, as suggested by the controlled and supervised spaces.

Figure 1

Sztálinváros, the park behind the houses on Május 1. Street, facing the rear of the houses on Vasmű (Sztálin) Street, with a seesaw and a swing set without swings, circa 1952

2. Two Floors of Happiness: The 1960s

In the 1960s, before the transition to factory-built technology, housing estates were constructed on a "city within a city" plan that provided all services locally. Kindergartens, schools, and doctors' surgeries were located between the houses, with small shops

and launderettes below. In the 1960s, living in a housing estate was prestigious, both due to the quality of life and the public services available (Prakfalvi, 2022, pp. 134–144). The housing estates were mainly built in transition zones, representing an outward shift of housing estates. The 15-year housing program required new technologies to meet its goal of building one million homes; thus, in the second half of the 1960s. Therefore, the state acquired the housing factories and initiated mass production of prefabricated housing using standard designs. The change in the perception of housing estates is also reflected in socialist housing films. Films from the 1960s (Herskó János: *Két emelet boldogság*, 1960)[2] portrayed the housing theme with an optimistic, comic tone; in contrast, by the seventies, for example, in Péter Bacsó's *Forró vizet a kopaszra!*[3], skepticism about housing estates is already evident, and the tone of the films becomes grotesque and tragicomic (Gelencsér, 2008, pp. 142–160). Public sculptures were a significant aspect of the housing estates of the 1960s, often functioning as gathering spaces and playgrounds for children. Such was the function of Walter Madarassy's reclining (bathing?) statue of a woman in the Odessa settlement in Szeged, built in the 1960s. The wave of playground construction started in the late 1960s; thus, while there were 669 playgrounds in Budapest in 1969, by the mid-1970s, this number had increased fivefold (Várkonyi, 1969, p. 29). Most of the playgrounds of the 1960s had been built by social workers without a particular concept; thus, the 1960s were the era of rocket climbers and chain swings welded based on the Soviet model.

Figure 2

Antal Tápai's relief depicting a family playing with their child above the gate on Hajnóczy Street in Szeged. 1955

Source: own photograph

[2] Two Floors of Happiness (My Translation)

[3] Hot water on the bald head! (My translation)

3. Serious about Games: The 1970s

By the 1970s, the economic situation had improved owing to the new development model; however, the construction priority was to build mass housing as cheaply as possible. It was the period when most of the panel housing was built, with even less attention paid to public spaces than in the previous decade. One reason for this is that before the ever-expanding housing estates were built, using panel technology, everything had been leveled, creating a barren landscape of concrete jungles devoid of trees or plants. The grass was replaced by asphalt, gravel, or gravel aggregate. The spaces between the panels were not as definite as those for the standard flats or building types, so the terracing between the buildings was often entirely ad hoc. Béla Borvendég, the chief architect responsible for developing the Szeged–Tarján district, wrote in 1975:

> The cheerful coexistence of the playground and the car park is somewhat surprising. I don't remember under what compulsion this solution could have been born. It seems that the sturdy steel tube climbing devices protect children from cars. What protects cars from children? Maybe it's Dad looking out the window. (Borvendég, 1975, p. 20)

Playgrounds were pushed out of residential houses, often following traffic routes and car parks that were placed between houses so that the family's only asset, usually the car, could be seen from the apartment window. The transformation of leftover materials from prefabricated buildings into playground equipment was common practice, for example, in Budapest, where the concrete playground on Vackor Street (since demolished) had been made from sewer pipes (Nagy, 2023, p. 117).

Although spaces for future public functions were designated among the housing blocks, these were for the most part never realized. The areas left vacant functioned as semi-private, transitional zones, where the boundaries between public street and the space belonging to the residential buildings remained ambiguous. By the 1970s, public space came to be defined not in physical but in social terms. It was precisely this poetics of space that attracted Central European neo-avant-garde artists, who began to stage their actions more frequently in parks, factory courtyards, schoolyards, and other public sites (Brașoveanu, 2023, p. 1–16). In Hungary, a representative example of such art challenging the very definition of publicness and freedom was Gyula Pauer's *Demonstration Board Forest* (1978), installed on the grounds of the former Nagyatád artists' colony, which had been reduced to dust.

At the same time, the neo-avant-garde turned its attention to childhood and childlike creativity as a metaphorical space of untainted purity, which led to a renewed interest

in art pedagogy. In 1971, Children's Art in Japan, a methodological book by Mária Székácsné Vida (who had spent many years living in Japan) was published, emphasizing the importance of art education and bringing attention to its role in Hungary (Székácsné, 1971).

Between 1975 and 1977, Dóra Maurer and Miklós Erdély conducted creativity exercises at the Ganz–MÁVAG Cultural House in Budapest to rekindle the "natural" creative instincts from childhood. In 1975, the Hungarian National Gallery tasked Árpád Szabados to create the GYIK Workshop (Children and Youth Art Workshop) to enhance children's creativity. In 1976, the first fairytale playground was built in Zalaegerszeg, partly thanks to the work of workshop members Árpád Szabados, Ildikó Várnagy, Márta Pallai, and Géza Samu. The Zalai Hírlap newspaper reported on the newly opened playground as follows:

> Stumpy country lanes, mysterious tunnels, log citadels, totem poles twist and turn on this fresh-framed playground, and the wind whips around with parts of strange, unnamable structures, on the swings you can cling to carved animal heads, and elsewhere a fairytale creature resembling a giant insect spins around on a concrete pedestal. And the creators have made it all cheerful with bright, flirty colors. (P. L. 1976, p. 4)

Figure 3
Page illustrated with photomontage from Ambrus Pirk's 1979 book *Játékról komolyan* [Seriously About Play]

The artistically designed climbing sculptures satisfied the children's need for movement (although the playground made of concrete waste did the same) and put their creativity, imagination, and magical thinking into motion. According to Árpád Szabados, who is also concerned with the psychology of creation, these climbing sculptures are considered "open works" in the emerging concept of postmodernism. The remaining 40% is made up of the children, making the work complete." (P. L. 1976, p. 4) The creators of the fairytale playground, members of the Zala Artists' Colony, researched topics such as collective creation and public utility, which remain relevant today, with the playground serving as an experimental laboratory for their investigations. "The participating sculptors created public sculptures that were an integral part of the urban environment, not only to be looked at but also to be touched and even climbed." (B. L. 1976, p. 4) The 1970s saw the emergence of themed playgrounds, such as the popular traffic parks. An example from Szeged in 1976 was the KRESZ playground, which even included a traffic scene drawing where children could learn the rules of the KRESZ (MNL-CSML, 538–2202/248 I.).

4. The Fairytale Arrives: The 1980s

Fairytale playgrounds spread throughout Hungary in the 1980s as part of a nostalgic movement that had begun in the 1970s, particularly focused on exploring children's creativity. In 1979, to mark the International Year of the Child, Ambrus Pirk published a book titled *Playing Seriously* (1979), which was written to provide housing estates with adequate playgrounds. This large-scale, nearly 300-page-long work was illustrated with photographs of the playground creators in Zalaegerszeg, among other sites. The background for writing the book was research conducted in the 1970s on children's health and initiatives aimed at improving health and promoting physical movement. The most important was the "For a Trained Youth!" movement launched in May 1977 (Vámos, 2021, p. 231).

The landscape and garden architect Ambrus Pirk, born in Gödöllő, was the grandson of the painter Jenő Remsey. He uniquely developed his landscape architecture plans during the decades of socialism, employing a universal approach that affected the smallest details. In the volume intended for playground designers and teachers, the plans and examples, illustrated with countless figures and photos, highlighted the factors influencing suitable playing conditions, using Swedish and Norwegian playgrounds (featuring water, petting zoos, etc.) as examples. In a separate chapter, he addresses the downsides of a civilized lifestyle: overcrowded playgrounds in panel estates, limited green spaces, intimidating high-rise buildings, and the behavioral disorders that develop. Pál Békés' 1983 youth novel explores the same civilizational issues affecting children.

The focus of his book is the rehabilitation of the fairytale genre as a possible means of "saving" children. His descriptions portray the stark, schematic urban panel environments. What happens to children if their intimate relationship with nature fades? Pál Békés's novel *Lakótelepi mítoszok* (1984) is an ironically toned, episodically structured work that constructs a mythical universe from childhood and adolescent experiences shaped within the reality of late socialist housing estates. The narrative presents the housing estate not merely as a physical or social space, but as a site of collective mythology, where childlike imagination, the search for identity, and the absurdities of everyday life are deeply intertwined. Film director Judit Felvidéki released a film adaptation based on the novel in 1985.

What are the consequences of a "sedentary lifestyle, that allows being in the fresh air for only a short time" (Pirk, 1979, p. 26)? Those unable to play find themselves excluded from the fairytale world. Will they be capable of forming social relationships as adults? Ultimately, to what extent can the living conditions of children in a big city, in a panel estate, be humanized? The children's literature of the period aimed to restore fairytales to disenchanted housing estate environments. The 1980s brought a corresponding innovation: the fairytale playground.

Interest in children's games, fairytales, and naive art peaked in Hungary toward the end of the 1970s, marking the beginning of their formal incorporation into cultural policy. Concurrently, the Szórakatenusz Toy Museum and the Naive Art Museum in Kecskemét were established. Undoubtedly, these two institutions focusing on fairytales, games, and instinctive creativity, represented an archetypal common denominator understandable to everyone at that time. "Play is total, like human existence itself," wrote Mihály Schéner (1979). The artist, hailing from a peasant family in Medgyesegyháza, graduated from the College of Fine Arts in the 1940 s and later worked as a high school drawing teacher in Békéscsaba. His unique world of motifs developed in the 1960s, as he filtered through his imagination the forms and figures in peasant life, folk art, crafts, and folk games, combining them with the latest contemporary art techniques and creative methods, primarily from France. In 1982, he was commissioned to create public works for a playground, a commission that was a novelty and a brave undertaking at a time when playgrounds were built using templates. The playground included horses, hussars, Bari, a Puli dog, a pigeon, and a kissing pair of pigeons named Csilabe-csók, along with a peacock whose spread tail feathers became a squirrel wheel turning a swing (Peacock-swing-wheel), a carousel, and various animal figures. Each piece of the outdoor giant chessboard had a name; for example, the king was called Sweet Melon King.

The characters also appeared in a children's play titled Gyalogcsillag, which was staged at the Jókai Theater in Békéscsaba, written by István Csukás. From the late 1970s, some members of the Studio of Young Folk Artists also designed playground equipment, which was showcased in the nursery of the HUNGEXPO exhibition. However, the wooden vehicles of János Román, the wicker rocking chairs of Mária Nagy, Kristóf Nagy, and István Vidák, the ox-sack swing made of natural materials, the dragon tunnel, and other toy initiatives from HUNGEXPO were accessible only to the children of exhibition visitors. Kristóf Nagy's playground sculptures in Csongrád were forerunners of the organic school. The now-fading panel program of the 1980s, characterized by colorful blocks surrounding green areas, also contributed to the disenchanted spaces. During the construction phase of the Szeged–Makkosháza district in 1984, architect Imre Hernyák worked with painter Károly Koffán to develop the color schemes of the buildings. Art, myth, and fairytales seeped back into the walls after having been abandoned for decades.

Figure 4
Mihály Schéner's *Dorottya carriage* in Budapest, at 2 Ágoston Street

Summary and Conclusions

This study investigates the transformation of children's spaces during the socialist period in Hungary, with a particular focus on playgrounds in housing estates and their connections to fairytales. Drawing on the example of Szeged (Hungary), it explores how socialist ideology shaped the urban environment and how conceptions of childhood and play evolved over the decades.

In the 1950s, socialist realist architecture served the needs of the model family envisioned by the state, yet children's perspectives remained marginal. Playgrounds were isolated from residential buildings, offering minimal green space and reflecting a strict logic of surveillance and discipline. During the 1960s, life on housing estates still held prestige, with these neighborhoods forming self-contained microcosms within the city. Although playgrounds continued to emerge primarily through community-led initiatives, there was growing interest in communal spaces designed for children.

The mass production of prefabricated housing in the 1970s, however, resulted in increasingly bleak and alienating environments, where playgrounds competed with parking lots for limited space. Public areas became undefined transitional zones, prompting reinterpretation by artists, particularly members of the Central European neo-avant-garde. Childhood began to function as a metaphor for creative purity, an idea being reinforced by experimental approaches in art education and participatory workshops.

From the mid-1970s, the emergence of fairytale playgrounds, featuring imaginative climbing structures designed by visual artists, marked a shift toward more holistic and child-centered spatial design. Some of these playgrounds operated not only as recreational zones but also as experimental spaces for community-based artistic practice. By the 1980s, fairytales had reentered the visual and spatial vocabulary of prefabricated estates, emphasizing imagination, proximity to nature, and the therapeutic importance of creative play. Institutional developments, such as the founding of the *Szórakaténusz Toy Museum* in Kecskemét, further supported the rehabilitation of play and storytelling. In the final stages of the prefabricated housing program, the aesthetic qualities of these urban environments came under scrutiny, and artists and architects collaborated to reintroduce color and create more humane built environments.

This study seeks to map the symbolic fate of childhood spaces within the framework of socialist modernization. It highlights the extent to which politics and ideology influenced the meanings of play, space, and fairytales, and how playgrounds ultimately became sites of resistance, memory, and renewal. The significance of this work lies

in its reinterpretation of socialist-era urban planning through the lens of childhood, revealing the ideological and social layers embedded in playground design. By integrating insights from architecture, art, and developmental psychology—fields often considered separately—it offers a multidimensional understanding of the cultural and aesthetic processes of the period. The study not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the past but also invites critical reflection on contemporary urban memory and the reimagination of children's spaces today.

Figure 5

Kristóf Nagy's climbing sculpture of the *Miraculous Deer*

Several potential directions for future research emerge from this study, though they could not be addressed within the present scope. These include examining how children's relationships to communal spaces have changed since the fall of socialism and assessing the extent to which today's playgrounds support creativity and community development. Further inquiry might explore how storytelling and play function within contemporary urban design, particularly related to the visual and cultural representation of childhood in public spaces. Interdisciplinary research could also investigate how artists, educators, and planners collaborate to humanize communal environments, whether through art education programs or creative camps. The role of socialist-era playgrounds as sites

of cultural and collective memory could offer new insights into the public's evolving relationship with urban heritage. Lastly, comparative studies of playground development across Central and Eastern Europe could illuminate shared ideological, artistic, and social patterns, while also identifying national specificities in spatial design for children.

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Insights from the Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth in the View of the Romanian Child Protection System

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Abstract

This article highlights the support and care provided to disadvantaged children by the Reformed Church in Romania and by other religious institutions abroad, including the Dutch Church. Simultaneously, it highlights the Romanian child protection system and its transformation after 1989, drawing a perspective on the Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth, a childcare home in Aleșd, Romania. Most studies and research focus predominantly on the Romanian child protection system and legislation. These studies provide an account of the change in attitude, opportunities for improvement, good and bad practices, highlighting the outline for children's care that has developed over the past 30 years. However, child protection homes and the voices of the institutions have received significantly less attention to show what a disadvantaged child truly needs. The article illustrates the challenges of adapting to changing legislation and highlights community resilience through the example of Kajántó Mária Home, which provides comprehensive care programs for vulnerable children. It provides a critical examination of how social and cultural circumstances have shaped the development of the Romanian state's child protection framework. By aligning the case study, this paper underscores the importance of collective action and constitutional measures in shaping societal structures and protecting vulnerable populations.

Keywords: child protection system, challenge, disadvantaged community

Introduction

Established in 1996, the Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth in Aleșd (hereafter Kajántó Mária Home) operates as a charitable institution under the Királyhágómellék District of the Reformed Church in Romania. The institute is mainly financed by the Reformed Church but also receives regular sponsorship from the Netherlands, Germany,

Switzerland, America, and Hungary. Although the Home's life is not barrier-free, the obstacles have been overcome to achieve the main goal. The Kajántó Mária Home celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2022 (which was due in 2021 but was affected by the COVID-19 outbreak), which not only represents the Home's foundation, but also its importance and depth of what has happened during these years.

This study will provide an overview of the Romanian child protection system from the country's regime change to the present, covering nearly 30 years of development and modification, highlighting the psychological and developmental aspects of children, as well as the Home's life throughout the years. It is also noteworthy that I highlight only the changes in the law that have influenced the functioning of the Home. The interviews with the Home's administrators—Júlia Balla and Éva Dénes—provide an insight into their everyday life and functioning. The interviewees were chosen based on their knowledge of the legislative system and experience in the field, which offers us a deeper insight into the functioning of the Home and the challenges it has encountered. The lack of yearbooks from the past 27 years results in *grey fields*; however, the key moments of change can be explored in relation to the modifications of the Romanian child protection system and social legislation.

Through the method of in-depth interviews with the two participants, the subjective or personal approach to the home becomes visible, revealing the dedication of the administrators and caregivers. After a thorough overview of the development of the Romanian child protection system, these interviews sought not only to highlight the administrative challenges throughout the life of the Kajántó Mária Home, but also to emphasize its best practices. The aim of this study is to highlight a family-type home in the light of the past and current Romanian child protection system. In this case, the study aims to present the actual challenges of the family-type homes in the light of the Romanian child protection system (RQ). To achieve this, an overview of the system following the fall of the communist regime is offered, complemented by examples of best practices of the Home for the integration and reintegration of children. The in-depth interviews reveal practical recommendations and solutions that benefit the psychological well-being of the children; these are also summarized in the Conclusions section of this paper.

The Development of the Romanian Child Protection System from the Regime Change (1989) to the Present

Established in 1996, the Kajántó Mária Home is notable for its special background. The Romanian child protection system underwent numerous changes following the regime change in 1989. At the beginning of 1997, the Department for Child Protection (DPC)

was established as a government authority. The purpose of this section is to present the major changes in the system that influenced the Home. This section is divided into three subsections, starting from the fall of the communist regime to the present day. Each section examines a period of change in the child protection system, showing how new approaches to addressing challenges ultimately impacted the lives of children in need. To understand the challenges and the changes introduced in the system, this study presents a literature overview of the topic and a relevant data analysis of the child protection system in Romania. The lack of studies dealing with the analysis of child protection systems in Romania, more precisely in Transylvania, underlines the importance of Deák's (2020) work, which analyzed and synthesized in depth the legislation of the Romanian child protection system.

Beginnings: Between 1989 and 1997

The final decades of the Communist regime in Romania were marked by controversial efforts in the domain of child protection. As long as the focus of attention was on the child, the withdrawal of social support and forced population policies resulted in negative effects (Deák, 2020). As a result, a flawed child protection system remained. Between 1945 and 1989, the state established institutionalized settings in which many children lived in precarious conditions: in 1989, more than 100,000 children resided in such conditions, and more than 16,000 died from curable illnesses or other causes (Deák, 2020). There is consensus amongst experts discussing the strong and negative impacts of institutionalization on a child's healthy development, psychological well-being, and the negative direction of many other developmental stages (Johnson et al., 2006).

While the post-regime-change period introduced structural reforms in child protection, implementing a child-centered orientation faced significant obstacles. The social policy system became confused and lacked a coherent support strategy. The emphasis shifted towards education and health services, while financial support for families with children dropped (Zamfir, 1997). Nevertheless, during this period, Romania ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the early 1990s (Deák, 2020). As far as changes in legal norms were concerned, the responsibility for child protection was scattered, and the activities were not coherent. This meant less attention was given to child protection services and their improvement, resulting in inadequate services, management, and a lack of coherence.

The development of child protection services in Romania was supported by international organizations. Between the regime change and 1996, several NGOs were set up to support children. In 1993, the National Commission for the Protection of Children (CNPC)

was established, and in 1995, the National Action Plan was adopted (Zamfir, 1997). However, these efforts required time to develop and started with the beginning of the decentralization process in 1997 (Stanciu, 2013).

The First Wave of Deinstitutionalization: Between 1997 and 2001

The year 1997 is considered a crucial year in the history of Romanian child protection, as at the beginning of 1997, the National Commission for the Protection of Children (CNPC) was transformed into the Department for the Protection of Children (DPC).[1] Between 1997 and 2000, its primary responsibility was to develop a government strategy for child protection (Deák, 2020). As the system was entirely focused on institution-based care until 1997, another significant change was the transfer of responsibility for child protection to the county council.[2] In the meantime, efforts have been made to deinstitutionalize and reorganize large networks of institutions. These shifts have also produced effects that were unexpected and had a negative effect on both children and institutions.

Between 1997 and 2000/2001, a phase of institutionalization occurred, with limited financial resources allocated to achieve rapid and effective results: extended family placements, foster care, and adoption (Deák, 2020). Family-type services started to grow, but foster care services were less effective because children were placed with families with inadequate monitoring. Foster care served as a short-term solution, which resulted in discrepancies in the structure and quality of services. It failed to address low-quality standards and raised problems of neglect in foster parent training (Deák, 2020). An alternative solution was to transform large institutions into smaller units, or family-type homes. Over time, this proved to be another compromise that failed to clearly distinguish the classic residential institution from the alternative family-type care proposed by this approach (Deák, 2020).

As the system was overwhelmed by the number of children with special needs between 2000 and 2001, the process of closing old institutions began (Stanciu, 2013). Thus, during this period, the ANPDCA[3] coordinated the implementation of policies in the area of services and the reform of the system of institutions that ensure the promotion of children's rights, care, and protection of children with difficulties and disabilities (OUG 192/08.12.1999.).

[1] This was a separate authority within the government, responsible for coordinating and developing child protection strategies.

[2] This led to the formation of Child Protection Committees (CPC) and Specialised Public Services for Child Protection (now known as DGASPC)

[3] The special child protection services (DGASPC) began to take over the central administration of the institutions in 1998, and and in 1999, the DPC was restructured as the National Agency for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (ANPDCA) (OUG 192/08.12.1999.).

The Second Wave of Deinstitutionalization: Between 2001 and 2007

The second phase of deinstitutionalization took place between 2001 and 2007. At this time, the process accelerated along with strong political and financial support from the European Union.[4] During the second phase, financial resources were no longer a problem, and family-type homes became favored alternatives to residential care (Deák, 2020). Foster care continued, but capacity development was not in proportion, which affected the quality of services.

In 2005, the introduction of the prohibition of institutionalization of children under 2 years of age caught the system unprepared and was not preceded by adequate planning. This led to older children living in foster care being transferred to child protection centers to make room for younger children (Deák, 2020; Dénes, 2024).

Another challenge was the number of youngsters leaving the system after turning 18 as they prepared for independent living and social integration. There was no coherent approach for reintegration support services, which eventually led to the development of a standard case management and reintegration guide to help young people leaving the system to integrate into society (Dénes, 2024; Deák, 2020). This was only approved in 2006 and resulted in many adolescents leaving the system, not receiving adequate monitoring and support, leading to unemployment and homelessness. Today, the system continues to face difficulties in adopting the developed guidelines, which cannot be applied uniformly at a national level.

The development continued after 2007, but at a slower rate. While Romania made efforts to reduce the number of children in institutions, the total population of children has also decreased, making it statistically difficult to determine the proportions. Despite substantial efforts to lower the number of children in the child protection system and to strengthen family-type services, there have been no positive results since 2010 (Deák, 2020).

The Third Period of Deinstitutionalization: From 2014 to Today

The ANPDCA announced a third wave of deinstitutionalization in 2014, which started in 2016. This was only possible with European Union funds. The aim was to stop placing children in accommodation centers and to keep children under the age of 3 out of institutions (Deák, 2020). The national body is encouraging their return to the biological families, adoption, or alternative services closer to a family environment.

[4] Also, pre-developed public awareness campaigns attracted considerable financial support (Deák, 2020).

Romania developed two important strategies at the start of the third wave: the protection of children's rights and a national strategy for social inclusion and poverty reduction. The government has decided to close all centers by the end of 2020 (Deák, 2020). If they cannot place children with relatives or foster families, they will be provided with care in family-type homes. In these property-type services, the maximum number of children is 6 or 12, and the state promotes initiatives that aid children in accessing stable housing and career opportunities.

Law No. 268 from 2018 states that a child under the age of 7 cannot be placed in a children's home and can only live with relatives to the 4th degree or foster care (Parlamentul, Legea 286/29.11.2018). This law also seeks to promote adoption, and it was amended in June 2022, Section 2 of Article 64, which stated that children under the age of 7 can only be placed in such institutions if he/she is disabled.[5] This demonstrates the efforts of the state to reduce the number of minors placed in institutions by reducing the number of children living in them. At the same time, they seek to educate them in family-type centers. For children, this is a last resort, as the state takes them through a process of prioritizing kinship and foster care. If they cannot find a suitable place at this level, he/she is placed in a family-type institution. Furthermore, Article 64. Section 3 (a) (b) of Law No. 272/2004 emphasizes that they do not want to separate siblings (Parlamentul, Legea 272/21.06.2004.). The law from 2022 not only sought to age-index, but also significantly reduced the number of children in residential care. According to Section 4 of Article 123, family-type homes can accommodate a maximum of 12 children.[6]

The Romanian Government is promoting the child protection system through its national strategies developed in 2014. From a 2019 ANPDCA report we can see that the number of children in family-type homes has increased significantly, as 52,783 children had to be taken care of by the state, from which 17,096 children were in institutionalized placement centers and 35,687 in family-type homes (see Fig. 1). A few years later, in June 2023, 40,066 children were looked after by the State, out of which 27.39% were in institutionalized centers, either public or private, and 72.61% in family-type homes, level 4 relatives or foster cares (see Fig. 2). The reports show a decrease in the number of children and a significant difference between the data for institutionalized and family-type services (ANPDCA, 2023).

[5] However, the same law highlights that children between the ages of 3 and 7 can only be placed in a home if he/she cannot be rehabilitated in other types of services (OUG 191/28.12.2022.).

[6] In extraordinary situations, the number can be 16, but only for a specified exceptional period (OUG 191/28.12.2022.).

Figure 1
Distribution of children in 2019

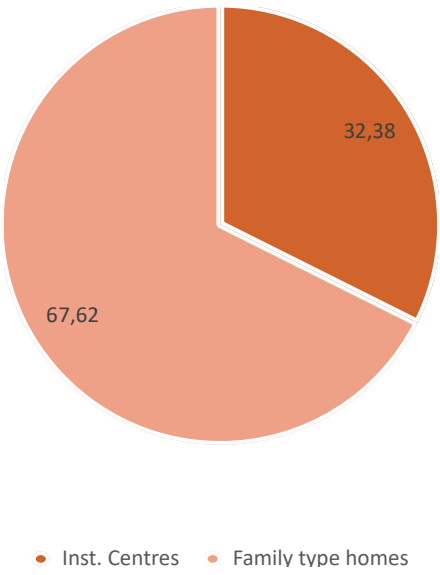
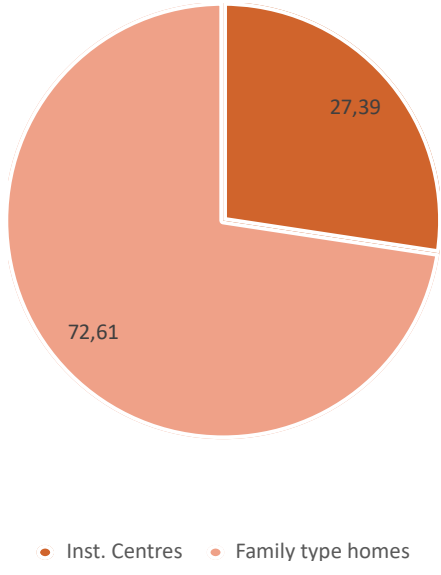


Figure 2
Distribution of children in 2023



As seen in the chapters above, Romania's child protection system underwent three major phases of decentralization, aiming to break free from the Communist-era model. Although these implications improved local ownership, they also led to integration challenges and disparities in quality and resources between institutions. The first wave initiated decentralization and introduced the family-type homes.

Although many family-type homes emerged from institutions, they preserved their original model. This led to homes often becoming default placements rather than tailored choices. The second wave was marked by assistance from the EU; nevertheless, the reintegration framework has yet to be fully optimized. The third wave made progress in eliminating institutional care for children under seven, but there is a lack of monitoring and even quality.

Approaches Based on Child Psychology and Development

While institutional care is widely acknowledged to have a negative impact on children's development, children have been placed in institutional care in Romania and worldwide (Carter, 2005; Johnson et al., 2006). These children are more likely to suffer from poor health, physical underdevelopment, impaired brain development and growth, and emotional

attachment disorders. As a result, children's intellectual, social, and behavioral abilities are impaired compared to those of children growing up in a family home. Related research and surveys have been published in Europe to support child protection efforts.

The purpose of this chapter is to systematically summarize the studies that show the disadvantages of institutions, which are largely due to the partial absence of caregivers in a closer relation, environmental, and external factors. Bagdy (2014) emphasized that growing up is a socially determined process with a foundational effect, and its most important stage takes place within the family. From the many social influences that shape children, family is important because it is the primary and emotionally most significant community that introduces the individual to the patterns of social behavior. Therefore, she rightly points out in her book that when guessing the causes of disturbed, faulty, maladaptive behavior, we often lose sight of the most important thing: a child's behavior is connected to their background and to one or two causes. The causes are revealed to us by understanding the child's individual life, the particularities of their family, their relationship with their parents, siblings, and personal environment (Bagdy, 2014).

The study by Johnson et al. (2006) is a systematic literature review of literature between 1944 and 2003. They are mainly about parental deprivation and abandonment, or children living in institutions or residential homes. Their results are significant, as they give us insight into the disadvantages of children developing in inappropriate conditions. In conclusion, my aim is to summarize the relevant research and studies on the topic, which will help to provide an analysis of the Kajántó Mária Home, showing the efforts and measures taken by the home to become aware of and counteract these effects. After analyzing the studies, it becomes evident that they focus on institutionalized homes, while some studies show that in family-type homes, various effects are reduced from the outset by the environment.

Physical development and motor abilities

Institutions for children under the age of 4 are significantly overcrowded, clinical environments with regulated routines and disproportionate carer–child ratios. Their staff is largely engaged in nursing and physical care (Nelson et al., 2007). Children in these facilities spend a significant part of their day in cots, in sterile environments (Maclean, 2003). There is a strong emphasis on infection control, and children have infrequent contact with the outside world. We have seen that in many institutionalized settings, there are up to 100 children, so excessive supervision and sterile environments are a good choice, as mass illness with few caregivers can result in greater losses. However, at this stage

of development, it is essential to provide care for children that focuses not only on emotional attachment and development, but also on the development of their immune systems. Several studies highlight that excessive control of a child's environmental experience has several detrimental effects (Carter, 2005; Mulheir & Browne, 2007; Smyke et al., 2007). Daily contact with the outside world is challenging, but it also helps children's immune systems mature and adapt.

Kevin Brown's study (2009) shows that body weight, height, and head circumference are lower than normal. These serious conditions can lead to developmental delays, including problems with hearing and vision, which often stem from poor nutrition and/or insufficient stimulation. These problems often go undiagnosed and thus remain untreated for years (Brown, 2009). Furthermore, it is common to miss developmental milestones in motor skills, which can also lead to stereotyped behaviors such as body rocking. It can be concluded that institutionalized care up to the age of 4 is associated with physical and learning disadvantages, which also have a negative impact on motor skills. In such institutionalized environments, developmental stages are delayed, and excessive sterile environments also have long-term negative effects on the development and health of children.

Impacts on Mental Health, Social Behavior, and Interaction

The psychological effects of institutionalized care for children have been examined for more than 50 years. Goldfarb (1944; 1945) and Bowlby (1951) highlight a range of emotional, behavioral, and intellectual impairments among children in such settings. Children living in institutions not only perform poorly on intelligence tests and have difficulty learning, but also experience language, social, and attachment difficulties, in contrast to children living in foster care. A lack of emotional attachment to a mother figure in early childhood is a significant problem, resulting in long-lasting damage to the child's life.

Bowlby's (1969) 'attachment theory' emphasizes this negative impact, which contrasts the importance of the family or a primary carer in the child's development. Bowlby (1951) highlighted that children in similar situations show signs of distress when there is a short-term separation from their primary attachment figure. These were divided into different stages, so that we can observe the application of the PDD model: (a) protest, which results in anger, crying, screaming and clinging; (b) despair, when he is calm on the surface but rejects attempts to help and comfort him; (c) detachment, when he begins to interact with others but rejects the caregivers help. These studies helped to reduce the use of institutional and larger residential care for children.

Johnson et al. (2006) conducted a systematic review. From the 27 studies, 17 focused on social and behavioral problems, and the results show that 94% of children in institutional care had the following problems: antisocial behavior, social competence difficulties, play and peer/sibling interaction problems. Due to poor or incomplete care practices and failed initiatives, young children learn to be antisocial, and it becomes apparent that the child's effort becomes rarer. This observation is particularly significant for children under 3, in which case a 6-month institutional placement already represents a significant part of early life experiences (Nelson et al., 2007).

Institutional care also has a significant impact on the formation of emotional attachment and development. Johnson et al. (2006) reviewed 12 studies on this topic, from which 9 highlight that children growing up in institutions experience emotional attachment difficulties and show extreme behavior types: over-friendliness and/or over-inhibited behavior, which is indicative of 'disorganized attachment disorder.' Smyke et al. (2002) highlighted the "continuum of attachment disorder" after comparing emotional attachment problems in three groups of Romanian children. They observed that few children in (a) foster care with their biological parents showed attachment problems, few children in (b) family-type homes with 4 caregivers present at all times showed such symptoms, and in (c) residential homes with 20 caregivers at different times, the majority showed attachment disorders. Kevin Brown points out in his study (2009) that even seemingly 'good quality' institutional care for emotional attachment can have detrimental effects on children's ability to form relationships throughout their lives.

Bagdy (2014) discusses in detail the illnesses caused by maternal absence, which have two symptoms: depression and hospitalism. Her work highlights the results of René Spitz's study, reflecting on the significant consequences of 'motherlessness.' René (1949) observed developmental characteristics in the nursery environment of 170 children and determined that the temporary 'lack of substance' in the first year produces specific symptoms similar to depressive mood disorders. Among the infants, 10 became withdrawn in the second half of their lives, indifferent to external stimuli, and spent much of their time lying in bed, turning their heads away from their peers. The observation found that between the ages of 6 and 8 months, when they are separated from the mother for 2–3 months, upon her return, the symptoms began to disappear. It was interesting to observe that the longer the mother was away, the slower the recovery was (Spitz, 1949; Bagdy, 2014).

Effects on Language Learning, Communication, and Intellect

Johnson et al. (2006) not only focused on social and behavioral problems but also examined cognitive developments. Of the 13 studies, 12 highlight that children growing up in institutional care show poorer cognitive performance compared to children growing up in a family environment. Nelson et al. (2009) compared children in Romanian residential institutions with children who were placed in foster care from institutions. Their study highlights that the 54-month-olds who remained in institutional care showed no detectable improvement in cognitive performance (average IQ 73), while those who were placed in foster care had higher cognitive ability (average IQ 81), but still did not reach the level of children in biological families (average IQ 109).

In addition to cognitive effects, language learning also proved to be problematic for children in institutional care. Goldfarb (1944, 1945) studied the organization of speech and language in children, working with several control groups of different ages. He found deficits in infancy, early school age, and adolescence compared with children's early years. This has been confirmed by other studies demonstrating the presence of language skill deficits and early reading problems in children raised in such settings (Roy & Rutter, 2006). On the other hand, Croft et al. (2007) found that children compensate well for these language developmental deficits once they are placed in a family. However, evidence suggests that the socioeconomic status and background of the child's new family influence their language development (Geoffroy et al., 2007).

The Kajántó Mária Home for Children and Youth in Aleșd

The Kajántó Mária Home was founded in 1996. The September 30, 1999 issue of *Romániai Magyar Szó* published a letter stating that 24 orphaned, abandoned Hungarian children had been placed at the Home. It is also clear that the Home had already received help from abroad by this time, when, at the request and with the contribution of István Dénes, many theologians from Krasna rushed to help the home with their generous donations, declared Fejér in the above-mentioned newspaper. The letter shows that the Home had already grown to a considerable number of people.

During the jubilee celebrations and thanks to a newspaper article by Ciucur on the Erdon.ro reports that the Kajántó Mária Home was the result of *a joint effort* that has stood the test of time. In the Reformed Church, two names are important when mentioning the foundation: Pál Kajántó and his wife Mária, who had the dream of establishing such a home. By the time the children's home opened its doors, Mária Kajántó had already passed away, so it was named after her (Balla, personal communication).

The study seeks to examine the challenges encountered by family-type homes within Romania's child protection system. To highlight these challenges, I conducted an in-depth interview with the two administrators of the Kajántó Mária Home. These interviews highlighted the bureaucratic obstacles within the legislative framework while revealing the interviewees' dedication to maximizing outcomes for the children under their care. The in-depth interviews focused on the psychological, developmental, and integrational challenges. Their aim was to make the best of the situation in order to support children facing psychological and social integration difficulties. Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla took the lion's share in solving these issues as administrators, creating a true family atmosphere in the home.

Beginnings: Between 1996 and 2001

To explore the early history of the Home prior to Éva Dénes's tenure (the first interviewee), I supplemented this research with newspaper sources as well as the responses provided by the interviewees. This was necessary, given the lack of yearbooks from the early years of the Home.

The Home was established in 1996. It relies primarily on the support of the Reformed Church,[7] and also receives regular support from abroad. Júlia Balla explained that the Kajántó Mária Home has always worked as a foundation. On 24 September 1996, it opened its doors as "Fundația Casa Copilului Kajanto Maria," having received a founder's permit from the Reformed Bishopric. Since its inception as a foundation, the Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church have also contributed significant additional funds for the home's maintenance, development, and construction. On the part of Pál Kajántó, the Reformed Church gave them land on which to build the institution itself (Balla, personal communication).

Dr. Annemarie Sadler, director of the Home, emphasizes that the Home housed Hungarian children, which was also highlighted by Éva Dénes during the interview. Thanks to the legal status and the support of the Church, the home continued to serve Hungarian children, even after the regime change. As one of the unique examples, Éva Dénes pointed out that this was made possible because, until the 1999 Child Protection Act, children were not placed by a committee, but taken and brought by the pastor (Dénes, 2024). The establishment of the ANPDC introduced centralized institutional management, enabling the agency to fulfill the following functions in pursuit of its objectives: strategic, legislative, administrative, representative, and official functions (OUG 192/08.12.1999.). This reorganization also led to the placement of children in the Home.

[7] Also belongs to the Királyhágómellék Diocese of the Reformed Church in Romania.

Between 2001–2017: From Care to Community

Between 2001 and 2007, deinstitutionalization accelerated, the state became more financially backed, and NGOs also played a significant role. The 2004 Child Protection Act stipulated that different standards had to be met, and a mandatory care plan was developed. At that time, it was more difficult to admit children to the institution, and only children under the age of 2 with disabilities could be admitted. In addition to institutionalized residential solutions, family or small residential homes are being sought. In 2013, the law permitted a foundation to operate multiple social services, and a children's home was classified as a social service (Dénes, 2024).

Children who left the system were increasingly receiving specialized services such as financial support, job provision, and aftercare, which were only approved in 2006. As this was a standard case management and reintegration guide, many young people did not benefit from monitoring. In the case of the Kajántó Mária Home, it should be emphasized that their caregivers treated children as their own, paying close attention to their development.

Multi-level activities were carried out both inside and outside the Home to promote integration. Their efforts demonstrated a commitment to positive progress, which contributed to the children's development. In the case of the family environment, it was noticeable that the caregivers rotated due to their work program, but it was also noticeable which foster carer was more attached to which child. Important holidays were organized in a way that created a warm and intimate atmosphere by involving the caregivers' own families in the events, which helped to create a stronger bond of trust (Dénes, 2024). As they made an effort not to rotate staff, a significant emotional attachment could be developed, which is essential at this stage of the child's development.

In the interests of integration and a family-like atmosphere, children were an integral part of life in Aleșd. Besides attending church on Sundays, they continued their studies at the local school. Here, students range from those with lower academic achievement to high-achieving peers who have participated in competitions. In the afternoons, the governesses placed great importance on learning, so they sat down with the students who had lower academic achievement to help them with their studies. During high school, children were given the opportunity to attend major schools in Oradea. Informal activities were also encouraged as long as they served the child's development (Dénes, 2024). As Aleșd is not a municipality, integrating children living in the Home into the town's life was easier: town days, cultural events, and organized performances.

The effort to reintegrate them and prepare them for adult life has produced results. We can see not only preparation, but also serious attention, or monitoring. After reaching the age of 18, children could seek employment. In many cases, residents sought employment with assistance from their caregivers or with recommendations from the Home. There are also cases of children aged 16 and above working in the summer by their own choice. Even after 18, the young person's contact with the home was not terminated. We also find cases of caregivers being invited to the wedding of the young person living in the Home (Dénes, 2024).

As the Kajántó Mária Home does not have yearbooks, data compiled from internal archives, media coverage, and interviews show the number of children, the internal atmosphere of the home, and the success of their children. In the first trimester of 2016, it was reported that the Kajántó Mária Home in Aleșd housed 25–30 children (Fried 2016). At that time, Éva Dénes was running the "orphanage" with István Dénes as social worker and director. Éva Dénes asserted that by 2021, the Home helped 50 children who had already left the home, adding that almost all these adolescents were more successful in life than the family or community from which they came to the Home as children (Dénes, 2024). The anniversary celebration in September 2022 was attended by former residents who, by then, lived independently, and they related their experiences and life in the Home, as well as their status (Dénes, 2024).

Between 2017–2023: *We went to the graduation of one of our children...*

In the third wave of deinstitutionalization, which started in 2016, Romania sought to eliminate institutionalized children's homes. As a result of changes and adaptation in 2020/2021, the institution began operating as a family home for 12 children (Dénes, 2024). During this period, the life of the Home was disintegrated. Thanks to the law, the Home can now operate with a small number of children, and the process of integration has become more complex and difficult. For a child to be admitted into a home, someone in the immediate environment must indicate that the child is having problems. The person who reports the situation to the authorities has the obligation to follow through with the minor, which in many cases discourages people who notice such a problem. Once a decision has been made, the child is placed in a collection center or in foster care, and only then can he/she be placed in a family-type children's home (Dénes, 2024). Thus, in the first years of the Home, it was obvious that the child was caught and brought in, and the director of the institution could admit the child into the home, but now they are being placed. This also affects the Home, specifically, until now it was sustainable to have only Hungarian children; however, due to the above-mentioned legal changes, Romanian children are also being placed here.

The 2018 law, which came into force in 2019, aimed to ensure that children under the age of 7 were placed with relatives or foster parents. For children in foster care, this was a law that had a negative effect, as many foster parents were not adequately prepared for adoption and the difficulties of a child coming from a different background. It can also be seen that in many cases, children were placed in a similar home by foster parents at the age of 13–14, as they were not able to educate the child properly. In the case of the Home, this is a negative factor, as the caregivers must start the process all over again, and it is also more difficult to educate a child after the age of 8. Stability should be the primary goal, and a child's living situation should not be disrupted during their teenage years; therefore, this law should be revised to ensure that children are raised in a permanent, stable environment from the outset whenever possible (Balla, personal communication).

The 2022 law not only sought to reduce the age limit but also significantly reduced the number of children in children's homes; thus, family-type children's homes could accommodate a maximum of 12 children. In the case of the Home, a larger building was constructed to accommodate children over the age of 16, providing them with greater independence. The aforementioned law not only regulates the number of children but also the space available for use on the home's premises, making this building unused (Balla, personal communication).

In the situation of children, we see state support. The current Ministry of Family Affairs has provided them with opportunities, rights, and obligations in their present situation to support them after the age of 18. Therefore, they may remain in the child protection system after reaching the age of 18, up to the age of 26, as long as they continue their education. Even if they have finished their studies but are not yet independent and cannot get back on their feet, they can stay in the system for two years, during which they can work and save money (Barabás, 2023). To enable adolescents to assume various responsibilities, the system also provides financial support to help them stabilize their lives. There is a one-off allowance worth approximately three salaries, and they also receive the value of the child benefit they have accumulated up to the age of 18, which is collected for them in a separate account they can access at the age of 18 (Barabás, 2023). At this point, it is up to the young person to decide on what and how quickly to spend the financial support they receive. From October 2022, we also find educational financial support. This support is nearly 2800 lei per month, according to Barabás, and is paid until the age of 26 if they meet the conditions to continue their studies or work.

The Romanian system appears to encourage adolescents to pursue further education while also supporting those who choose to enter the workforce, providing them with financial security and stability. Júlia Balla (personal communication), current head of the institution, pointed out that despite the educators' efforts and financial support, this amount of money is not effectively used by children who leave school and is spent on things that do not provide them with a secure future.

One of the features of the Home that aims to promote good living and integration of children is its open doors of opportunity. In public institutions, children are not allowed to leave the institution if they are not going to school. Currently, the school in Aleșd boasts a strong handball team comprised of many primary and secondary students who regularly participate in competitions. Practices are held almost daily after school. Students living in children's homes face greater barriers to tournament participation due to child protection regulations, which particularly complicate attendance at out-of-town events scheduled on short notice. In many cases, there is a wait of weeks for permission to leave the city, which is a disadvantage for the children and the handball team (Balla, personal communication).

Another feature of the home is that adolescents can remain after reaching the age of 18 until they are fully established, up to the age of 26. The aim is to provide them with a safe place and community to return home to for further education and other support. Thus, in the case of reintegration, caregivers can aid the young person with financial support and appropriate advice to help them develop their role in society and get their life moving in the right direction (Balla, personal communication). An example occurred in the life of the Home, as in the summer of 2023, the Kajántó Mária Home was invited to a university graduation in Debrecen, where one of their foster children completed his studies. Júlia Balla pointed out that they had an experience similar to the story of the starfish this summer. They went to the university graduation of one of their children in Debrecen (Balla, personal communication). In addition, thanks to the contacts, it is known that another of their children is working as a social worker in Austria, and several others have stable jobs and families (Dénes, personal communication; Balla, personal communication).

Other usual activities include participation in Sunday services, youth, and children's programs. Efforts are made to organize church camps. After years of presence in Aleșd, the Home has achieved excellent community integration through positive relationships with local schools, teachers, and residents. The Home also organizes open days, where at least 50 children from Aleșd come to the activities. Despite these efforts, the children continue to bear significant emotional burdens and often struggle to form typical attachments due to their personal histories. (Balla, personal communication).

Children's daily lives are also divided. Students attending secondary school in Oradea get up at 5 AM to catch the bus to the city at 6 AM. It is also unique for the Home that they support high-quality education and consider the preferences of the children, despite the administrative work involved. Smaller children go to primary school with the governess until 4th grade, after which they are brought home by the teacher who looks after them in the afternoon. Secondary school pupils travel to school independently and are met at home by their teacher. Various informal activities are encouraged to support the children's development, including "curiosity clubs," school sports clubs, and participation in the choir. (Balla, personal communication).

Conclusions and Recommendations

These efforts and the laws that were introduced as the child protection system evolved and developed have led to the abolition of institutionalized children's homes, which in many places could accommodate 50–100 children. These efforts have also had an impact on family-type homes, although they were not the main focus, and often these impacts were accompanied by problems and negativity (Dénes, 2024). However, many changes have not only had positive impacts but have also been accompanied by difficulties. Many experts share a common opinion when considering the effects of institutionalization (Johnson et al., 2006). In this context, family-type homes and services can have a more positive impact on children's development and future well-being. Thus, the Kajántó Mária Home was one of the few positive examples and services during the period of regime change, and one of the services that the Romanian system was striving for.

On the other hand, we face obstacles originating from the child protection system itself, as the constant administrative processes make it difficult or impossible for the Home's management and its tenants to have different opportunities. From the very beginning, the Kajántó Mária Home has been a foundation supported by the Reformed and Dutch Church. Despite having to comply with Romanian child protection laws, which have led to many changes in the Home's operations, they still maintain their primary goal of caring for children. During my conversations with Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla, it has become clear that the changes in legislation have made it difficult for the Home to operate. Accreditation is required to operate and must be renewed every 5 years through an administrative process, allowing the home to continue providing social services. Nevertheless, it has become apparent that the Kajántó Mária Home strives to educate, mentor, and guide children. The children's past has left them with a heavy baggage to deal with, but with the help of the Home, they received a good direction to follow, making it a guiding example.

Psychological and developmental outcomes for children of similar backgrounds are shaped by numerous factors that influence their future and who they will become. The Kajántó Mária Home is aware of its responsibility; therefore, it makes every effort to minimize these problems. In 2005, during the second period of deinstitutionalization, authorities announced that children under 2 years of age should not be institutionalized. In 2018, the age limit was raised to 7, and in 2019, the adoption subsidy was implemented. Balla suggested that the law should be reworked with the aim of providing stability from the beginning, as such impactful changes in the early stages of a child's development can have negative effects. This also makes it harder to educate and integrate children after the age of 8.

An even greater challenge, which is also important for children's lives, is the impact on mental health and social behavior. These social and attachment difficulties are present from the moment of separation. According to Bagdy (2014), the bond between a mother and her unborn baby begins to develop while the baby is still in the womb. In our case, one of the best practices of the Kajántó Mária Home is making efforts both internally and externally for the benefit of their children. Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla highlighted how the Home's internal events—holiday celebrations and excursions—cultivated an intimate, family-like atmosphere. In the Home, there are a few caregivers and teachers, and they rarely alternate, so they can be with the children for years. Éva Dénes (2024) pointed out that they always knew which governess could communicate more effectively with which child because of their bond. They are also becoming more engaged with the outside world, which is a key aspect of integration, allowing the children to play an active role in the life of Aleșd. They are present not only at Sunday services, but also at Bible weeks, classes, and choir. Outside the classroom, children also receive spiritual and emotional support, as teachers not only monitor them individually but also support them in subject competitions, enabling them to participate in workshops and sports teams. However, such activities have run into administrative problems in recent years. According to child protection regulations, a child residing in a home cannot leave the municipality without higher authorization, which is a time-consuming process. An obvious example is when children are given a week's notice of a handball tournament that is outside of Aleșd, so permission, even if requested, does not arrive in time. A significant administrative challenge stems from children being registered under the county director of child protection rather than the institutional head, adding layers of bureaucratic complexity. The frequent changes to laws and regulations make it difficult for the institution to operate, creating the impression that each new requirement adds unnecessary operational barriers (Balla, personal communication).

In the case of Romanian efforts, it was evident that during the second wave of deinstitutionalization, there was only one guide for the reintegration of 18-year-olds, but children were not monitored, which in many cases led to unemployment and homelessness. Subsequently, during the third wave of deinstitutionalization, a new reintegration strategy was developed, which provided significant financial support to adolescents who had left the system. Prior to the first strategy, the heads of the institutions had already been striving to integrate and reintegrate them. The internal reintegration efforts included not only support and preparation before the adolescents left home, but also the assistance and voluntary monitoring of their life by caregivers. They also helped them find employment and allowed them to do student work to support their transition to adulthood. Following the second state reintegration strategy, it was also observed that they had access to a considerable amount of money, but without proper preparation, they were unable to manage it effectively, and much of it was squandered. The opposite, positive example is the individual who uses this amount for further education. This also highlights the recommendations for the development of the reintegration strategy with more child-oriented solutions.

Studies also show that children growing up in institutionalized environments have lower intelligence and cognitive performance. Nelson and colleagues highlighted in their study that those who are placed in a family perform better. This also demonstrates that a child's environment influences their development. Éva Dénes and Júlia Balla (personal communication) also highlighted that in the Home's life, it is observed that former residents become more successful than the environment they have come from. As a result of the care and dedication provided, there are numerous examples of individuals who have gone on to lead fulfilling lives. For instance, one former resident is now a social worker, and in the summer of 2023, the Home celebrated a university graduation in Debrecen. Also, many of their children excel in their schoolwork, personal, and professional lives.

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Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

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Abstract

This study examines player agency and ethical decision-making in Lovecraftian-inspired role-playing games (RPGs) as a means of engaging with H.P. Lovecraft's themes and introducing players to occultism. While Lovecraft's works often center on cosmic horror and existential dread rather than explicit ethical dilemmas, these games expand on his ideas by incorporating moral complexities into their narratives. By granting players agency, these games enable users to make challenging decisions and form personal bonds with characters, enriching their appreciation of the mystical and psychological themes drawn from Lovecraft's mythos. Games like *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* not only provide established fans with interactive ways to explore Lovecraftian concepts but also introduce new audiences to these themes, fostering a richer appreciation of the genre. This study examines how Lovecraftian RPGs build upon and reinterpret his ideas, offering players a dynamic medium to engage with cosmic horror, moral ambiguity, and occult motifs.

Keywords: occult, role-playing, ethical, Lovecraft, video games

Introduction

H.P. Lovecraft's influence extends far beyond horror, exploring the intersection of cosmic terror and forbidden knowledge. Lovecraft's works focus predominantly on witnessing the incomprehensible horrors of the cosmos, presenting a detached, observational perspective rather than an active engagement with ethical dilemmas. However, Lovecraftian-inspired video games extend this framework by incorporating moral decision-making

into their narratives, offering players new ways to grapple with the thematic essence of cosmic horror. These RPGs empower players to influence the narrative through meaningful choices. By actively engaging with these ethical dilemmas, individuals strengthen their connection to the narrative and gain a deeper understanding of the occult elements that permeate Lovecraft's literary works.

To examine how Lovecraftian-inspired video games reinterpret the themes of H.P. Lovecraft's works, this study employs a dual-case approach, analyzing *Bloodborne* (2015) and *Sunless Sea* (2014) through thematic and narrative frameworks. These games were chosen for their distinct portrayals of cosmic horror, moral ambiguity, and occult knowledge, illustrating complementary approaches to adapting Lovecraftian storytelling. Drawing on Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, the analysis explores how player agency transforms passive consumption into active participation, enabling players to engage with moral dilemmas and shape the narrative. Insights from David Punter and Glennis Byron's work on Gothic literature provide context for understanding how *Bloodborne* incorporates Gothic tropes, such as decayed settings, isolation, and psychological torment, while *Sunless Sea* leverages narrative-driven exploration to evoke themes of existential dread and moral complexity. Riordan Frost's discussion of role-playing games as a unique form of interactive fiction highlights how these games blend narrative progression with player autonomy, a point reinforced by Christopher Bartel's argument that moral decision-making in video games allows players to confront ethical concerns within controlled, fictional environments. By applying these perspectives, this study demonstrates how *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* reinterpret Lovecraft's themes, shifting the focus from detached observation to active moral and existential engagement through interactive media.

First, an understanding of what makes a video game fiction and how it incites human reactions. Allan Hazlett clarifies in his article "How to Defend Responsive Moralism" that "novels, plays, many films, as well as many paintings—any work of art that intuitively tells a story" (Hazlett, 2009, p. 244). Similar to that sentiment, Lovecraftian RPGs embody a synthesis of creative manifestation and narrative construction, wherein the interaction between visual elements, storytelling, and player autonomy culminates in the creation of an engrossing narrative. These games immerse players in narratives combining cosmic horror, moral complexity, and supernatural mystery, creating the same engagement found in compelling literature and cinema. This is also further clarified by Riordan Frost, who mentions in his work "The Ethics of Role-Playing Video Games,"

> RPGs tell a story, and they also have all the typical features of a fiction, with authors, participants (their version of audiences), and a medium for portrayal. The medium is different from typical fictions in that it uses the technology of a gaming console and the participation of the player in telling the story. I believe that RPGs are types of fiction, and the only thing that sets them apart in any way is the unique way they are presented. (Frost, 2010, p. 21)

Unlike the passive experience of reading or watching, Lovecraftian RPGs make players active participants in the story. Through gameplay choices, players embody characters grappling with moral complexities in Lovecraft's signature atmosphere of cosmic dread. Hence, the notion that a work of art that effectively conveys a narrative on an intuitive level can be applied to Lovecraftian RPGs as a form of interactive artistic expression. In this context, participants not only passively engage with the narrative but also actively contribute to its development, thereby introducing additional dimensions of personal interpretation, emotional connection, and agency to the overarching storyline. The emotional connection is further solidified by Hans Robert Jauss, who is a prominent reception theorist, in his book *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, where he argues,

> This definition presupposes the dialectical interplay or self-enjoyment through the enjoyment of what is other and makes the recipient an active participant in the constitution of the imaginary, something which is denied him as long as aesthetic distance is understood according to traditional theory as one-directional, as a purely contemplative and disinterested relationship to an object at a certain remove. (1982, p. 92)

Lovecraftian-inspired role-playing games (RPGs) exemplify a departure from the conventional interaction with artistic works. These games demonstrate a model where individuals engage directly with and shape the narrative, surpassing the constraints of mere observation or passive consumption. On the platform, players become co-creators, shaping the narrative's direction through their choices and interactions within the game world. The traditional concept of aesthetic detachment, commonly associated with a disengaged and passive observation of artistic works, experiences a shift when applied to Lovecraftian role-playing games. These video games serve as a medium that facilitates a connection between the viewer and artistic expression, encouraging players to fully engage with the storyline. As a result, the distinction between passive observation and active participation becomes less defined. Jauss further highlights, "the enjoyment of affects as stirred by speech or poetry which can bring about both a change in belief and the liberation of his mind in the listener's or spectator" (1982, p. 92). Lovecraftian RPGs

demonstrate how individuals can find personal fulfillment in engaging with the "other," as participants immerse themselves in imaginary worlds that are strikingly different from their own lived realities. The investigation into the concept of the "other" is transformed into an engaging and interactive encounter, enabling users not only to observe but also to actively participate in the development of the fictional realm.

An important connection between role-playing games and the human experience of video games can be understood through what Jauss (1982) describes as "sympathetic identification," defined as "the aesthetic affect of projecting oneself into the alien self, a process which eliminates the admiring distance and can inspire feelings in the spectator or reader that will lead him to a solidarization with the suffering hero" (p. 172). This idea resonates with the immersive experience offered by Lovecraftian RPGs, which not only engage players in exploring otherworldly narratives but also foster deep emotional connections with their characters. This connection is further illuminated by Michel Houellebecq's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*. Houellebecq (2005) explains that Lovecraft's primary aim was to evoke a sense of "fascination" in his readers, focusing exclusively on the emotions of wonder and fear. Lovecraft deliberately built his universe around these sentiments, embracing this limitation as "a conscious, deliberate one" and suggesting that "authentic creativity cannot exist without a certain degree of self-imposed blindness" (p. 45).

The participants actively engage in immersing themselves into these unfamiliar identities, assuming the roles of protagonists entangled in disconcerting circumstances reminiscent of Lovecraftian storytelling. Furthermore, the process of immersing oneself in the plight of the protagonist follows the emotional involvement cultivated by Lovecraftian RPGs. Players frequently feel a sense of unity with their in-game avatars, as they connect with their challenges and difficulties within the terrifying Lovecraftian-inspired worlds. The establishment of an emotional connection between the player and the suffering protagonist deepens the sense of immersion and empathy, ultimately fostering a stronger bond. Consequently, this intensifies the aesthetic impact of the overall experience.

Moreover, the narrative of the game is responsive to the decisions made by players, resulting in a dynamic interaction between the game's structure and the active involvement of participants. This dynamic interplay is connected to Frost's belief that video games are a form of fiction. Frost argues that "The 'player' is the new vocabulary for the 'reader' when it comes to video games, but they have the same important role" (Frost, 2010, p. 22). This aligns with Jauss' emphasis on empathizing with characters and immersing oneself in their perspectives, which parallels the immersive qualities inherent in role-playing games (RPGs). The transition from the role of a "reader" to that

of a "player" denotes a transformation from a passive mode of consumption to an active mode of engagement. Within RPGs, participants engage in more than mere passive consumption of the story; rather, they actively contribute to its formation through their decision-making and interpersonal engagements. This statement is under Jauss' concept of the reader's interpretive autonomy, wherein each person contributes their distinct viewpoint to the encounter.

The examination of the role of readers and players in the interpretation and comprehension of artistic media provides valuable insights into the manner in which humans engage with tales and storytelling. This investigation holds significance within the field of humanities research, as it offers opportunities to examine the ways in which humans establish connections, understand, and extract significance from diverse kinds of artistic manifestations. James Gribble argues in "The Reality of Fictional Emotions" that these feelings experienced from portrayals of fiction should be taken seriously: "the emotions we experience in response to the representations or portrayals of events and characters in literary works are not less real because they have, as their objects, representations or portrayals of characters and events" (Gribble, 1982, p. 54). In literature, readers often form deep emotional connections with the characters and events depicted within the narrative. The emotions of empathy, joy, grief, and terror are genuine responses evoked by the depiction of these imaginary aspects. Likewise, inside role-playing games (RPGs), individuals establish strong emotional bonds with their virtual avatars. This connection prompts a wide range of emotional responses when players engage with the evolving storyline and make decisions that shape the trajectory of their characters. This illustrates how effective storytelling—in literature or gaming—can generate genuine emotional responses. The characters and events, despite their fictional nature or symbolic representations, function as vehicles for evoking genuine emotional involvement from the viewer or participants. The emotional sensations evoked by these representations are no less valid or real due to their immersive and empathic features. H.O. Mounce offers another argument for the validity of emotional connection in video games in his essay, "Art and Real Life," where he argues "It is evident that there are things in life that move us. This being so, why on earth should it be surprising that we should be moved by representations of these things?" (Mounce, 1980, p. 188). This concept reinforces the importance of engaging the audience and fostering emotional involvement in both literary and interactive forms of media. This illustrates how various storytelling mediums, from literature to RPGs, generate emotional responses that enhance human engagement with cultural narratives.

Bloodborne and *Sunless Sea*

The Forbidden Blood

Certain adaptations of the Lovecraftian mythos have successfully retained a semblance of the essence underlying the concept of cosmic horror. One illustrative instance is the video game *Bloodborne*, released in 2015. The game, although not a strict adherence to the conventional form of Lovecraft's literature, takes inspiration from multiple themes of Lovecraft's works and employs various features characteristic of the genre. Consequently, the game becomes closely intertwined with the cosmic horror genre. Many narratives in Lovecraft's texts employ a central setting that is imbued with a sense of impending doom. "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" employs the decaying fishing village of Innsmouth, located in Massachusetts, which influences one of the final stages in the setting of an extra Downloadable Content (DLC) titled "Old Hunters" for *Bloodborne*. For those who are unfamiliar with Lovecraft's story, it unfolds as follows: during an educational excursion spanning New England, an unfortunate young individual becomes acquainted with a coastal town named Innsmouth, which is held in low esteem by the local populace. Upon his visit to the town, he discovers that the local inhabitants have undergone severe mutations because of interbreeding with divine aquatic beings originating from a submerged kingdom located near the coastal area.

The inhabitants of Innsmouth tried to eliminate the man because of his desire to learn more about the town and gain more knowledge. However, preceding this, the man's initial negative perception of the inhabitants is mostly influenced by their alarming physical features, which are portrayed as a not-so-subtle metaphor for interracial relationships. Such an appearance can be seen in *Bloodborne*'s DLC, with the inhabitants of the decaying Fishing Hamlet that the player comes across (cf. VaatiVidya, 2015, 00:01:09–00:02:30). The player is immediately made aware of a disturbing secret concealed within the depths, prompting them to navigate a series of encounters with formidable adversaries to reach their objective. Upon reaching the fishing hamlet in the DLC, the player encounters its inhabitants as grotesquely mutated aquatic beings (see Figure 1). Through exploration, the player uncovers that these transformations are the result of a curse placed on the village by Kos, a Great One. According to the game's lore, Kos washed ashore in the fishing hamlet, where her body was desecrated by the Hunters. This desecration led to the birth of her offspring, the Orphan of Kos, and a curse that afflicted the villagers, resulting in their grotesque mutations passed down through generations (cf. VaatiVidya, 2015, 00:02:16–00:07:30). The Orphan of Kos, encountered as the final boss of the "Old Hunters" DLC, embodies the suffering and anger tied to Kos's curse. The Orphan is born from Kos's remains, symbolizing divine punishment or lingering anguish tied to the events in the Fishing Hamlet. This mirrors

the transformation of the inhabitants in Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," where the townspeople's physical and societal decay stems from their pact with the Deep Ones. In both cases, the monstrous offspring, whether the Orphan of Kos or the hybrid children of the Deep Ones, serve as a tangible reminder of the catastrophic consequences of humanity's interactions with incomprehensible and alien entities. Both narratives explore themes of generational corruption and the inescapable repercussions of transgressing natural and moral boundaries.

By piecing together these truths, players engage in a moral reckoning that transforms traditional Lovecraftian themes of incomprehensible cosmic horror into a deeply personal and interactive exploration of ethical responsibility. Frost further highlights this,

> As I showed earlier, however, RPGs are different from typical fictions in that they require the player to collaborate with the developers to create a story that the developers have made possible. This means that a great deal of what a player will be emotionally responding to will be his own actions—both in terms of his decisions of how to control his character and his character's actions. (Frost, 2010, p. 28)

The Orphan of Kos, born from the remains of the Great One Kos, embodies the Gothic anxiety surrounding the body as a site of degeneration and evolutionary decline. As David Punter and Glennis Byron observe in *The Gothic*, "if something could evolve it could also devolve or degenerate, whether it were individual, society or nation" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 42). This fear is horrifyingly realized in the Orphan's grotesque physicality, which symbolizes the culmination of the Fishing Hamlet's curse and the irreversible corruption inflicted by the Hunters' desecration. The village's unsettling and abandoned atmosphere, along with the evocative auditory and visual components, engenders a powerful affective response.

The ethical culpability in *Bloodborne* is twofold. On the one hand, players must confront the atrocities committed by the Hunters, the faction they belong to, who desecrated Kos's remains and slaughtered her offspring, unleashing the curse that condemned the villagers. On the other hand, the player's role as the protagonist raises questions about their own complicity in perpetuating this cycle of violence. By engaging in combat with the cursed villagers and the Orphan of Kos, the player reenacts the same aggression that marked the Hunters' transgressions. This dual culpability positions the player in a morally ambiguous space where their actions, however necessary for progression, mirror the very violence they seek to uncover and, perhaps, undo. In *Bloodborne*, this collaboration manifests in the player's gradual discovery of the Fishing Hamlet's tragic history.

Through their choices and actions, players are compelled to piece together the fragmented lore, transforming the villagers from faceless monsters to victims of systemic injustice. This process deepens the player's emotional engagement, making their responses to the story's events deeply personal. Similar to the physical metamorphosis of the dying Helen in *The Great God Pan* (one of Lovecraft's biggest inspirations), which Punter and Byron describe as "[p]erhaps most horrifyingly suggesting the possibility of sliding down the evolutionary ladder" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 42), the Orphan reflects the Gothic fear of devolution, both physical and moral. By actively constructing the narrative alongside the developers, players are drawn into a deeply unsettling exploration of societal collapse, ethical culpability, and their own complicity in the ongoing cycle of violence and decay.

Figure 1

Ludwig the Accursed

Note: "Ludwig." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Ludwig

Moreover, *Bloodborne* incorporates other elements commonly found in Lovecraft's stories. These include an enigmatic affliction that plagues the city of Yharnam, evidence of a forgotten civilization known as the Pthumerians (see Figure 2), and the existence of mysterious beings referred to as the Great Ones, like Amygdala (see Figure 3), who bears a striking resemblance in name and shape to Lovecraft's famous "Great Old Ones."

Figure 2

Pthumerians Descendant

Note: "Pthumerian Descendant." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Pthumerian_Descendant

Figure 3

Amygdala

Note: "Great Ones | Bloodborne Wiki." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.wiki.fextralife.com/Great+Ones

What is even more interesting about the setting of *Bloodborne*, Yharnam, is that its structure draws heavily from Gothic literature. The city of Yharnam embodies classic Gothic tropes, "Yharnam, an environment resembling the one from the *Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole" (Gama & Garcia, 2019, p. 50), functioning as a site of paranoia, persecution, and concealed histories. The decaying, labyrinthine streets and looming spires

of Yharnam evoke the haunted castle archetype. As Punter and Byron observe, Gothic castles often act as "unreliable lenses through which to view history and from the other side of which may emerge terrors only previously apprehended in dream" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 259). Yharnam reflects this distortion by compressing centuries of trauma, persecution, and forbidden knowledge into a single overwhelming environment. Its crumbling architecture and oppressive atmosphere blur the boundaries between the natural and the human-made, creating a space where players must navigate both physical and psychological terrors.

Yharnam also serves as a space of haunted histories, hidden traumas, and distorted perception. As Punter and Byron note, "[t]he castle represents desubjectification: within its walls one may be 'subjected' to a force that is utterly resistant to the individual's attempt to impose his or her own order" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 262). The city is built on layers of corruption and decay, from the rise of the Healing Church and its misuse of the Old Blood to the echoes of ancient Pthumerian rituals that continue to shape its present. The city embodies this uncontrollable power by resisting the player's ability to comprehend or control its labyrinthine structure and the horrors it conceals. This is something that Garcia and Gama draw attention to,

> Arguably *Bloodborne* draws from Lovecraft's mythos through the correspondence between madness and knowledge and, of course, the settings; an example of this connection can be found in some of the items, in the insight status, not to mention the transitions between dreams and nightmares that shape countless environments in the game. (Gama & Garcia, 2019, p. 51)

Gama and Garcia identify 'Insight' as a significant psychological characteristic available to player characters. It is an in-game stat that augments the player's perceptual acuity of the surrounding environment, governed by the amount of inhuman knowledge you have acquired by exploring the game and defeating enemies, especially Great Ones. Gama and Garcia further attest to this,

> the result of making contact with great ones is the access to nightmares. Creating such connections provokes a cathartic feeling on the player, leading them to try to relate seemingly different, or even similar, environmental settings to one another by the use of items, observation, and lore. This sort of gameplay places the player in the position of a scholar, a fundamental character archetype that is part of both Lovecraftian stories and *Bloodborne*. (Gama & Garcia, 2019, p. 53)

Bloodborne intricately weaves the theme of occult rituals and esoteric knowledge into its narrative, exploring the Gothic and Lovecraftian tension between the pursuit of enlightenment and its devastating consequences. Players encounter numerous rituals and symbols tied to the Great Ones, beings whose power transcends human understanding. The Chalice Dungeons provide a striking example of this theme, as these labyrinthine spaces beneath Yharnam are accessed through rituals involving Chalices and materials such as blood and body parts. These dungeons, remnants of the ancient Pthumerian civilization, reflect the society's attempts to commune with the Great Ones, resulting in grotesque horrors that symbolize the cost of tampering with forbidden knowledge. Likewise, the Healing Church—a central institution in Yharnam—embodies the moral ambiguity associated with occult rituals. Founded on the discovery of the Old Blood, the Church conducted experiments to harness the power of the Great Ones, inadvertently creating the Scourge of the Beast, a plague that transformed citizens into monstrous creatures. The Upper Cathedral Ward, filled with altars, ritual chambers, and malformed creations, showcases the Church's transgressions, including their worship of Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos. These practices highlight the ethical and existential dilemmas of exploiting divine power at the expense of humanity's well-being, emphasizing *Bloodborne*'s exploration of the heavy price that accompanies the pursuit of esoteric knowledge.

Dylan Henderson writes in his essay, "The Inability of the Human Mind," that literature, specifically novels, allows the reader to look inward. He mentions, "[i]t also allows them [readers] 'try on different mental states'" (Henderson, 2019, p. 91), and tempts them with "intimate access to the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of other people in our social environment" (Henderson, 2019, p. 91). Throughout the game, players are exposed to numerous instances depicting human aggression, corruption, and moral degradation. The denizens of Yharnam frequently engage in acts of violence, deception, and brutality, motivated by fear, obsession, or a quest for power. The players are confronted with Non-Playable characters (NPCs) who have succumbed to the Scourge, transforming them into hostile and belligerent entities. These transformed NPCs engage in aggressive behavior, launching attacks against both the player character and other NPCs. These individuals, motivated by their primal instincts and consumed by the plague, serve as a vivid depiction of humanity's decline into aggression and insanity. An example of this is Father Gascoigne, who has fallen to the plague and endures the consequences of relentless violence and sinister transformations.

Figure 4

Father Gascoigne Pre-Transformation

Note: "Father Gascoigne." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Father_Gascoigne

Figure 5

Father Gascoigne Post-Transformation

Note: "Father Gascoigne." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Father_Gascoigne

Much like Yharnam serves as a version of the Gothic castle, the city also distorts perception and blurs the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, real and imagined. The city's claustrophobic alleyways and towering spires evoke a sense of oppression and unease, while its secrets, hidden in nightmarish dungeons and cryptic lore, resist merging into a cohesive truth. This aligns with Punter and Byron's observation that Gothic spaces "threaten us with measureless boundaries, and yet at the same time, with the most tomb-like claustrophobia" (2004, p. 262). In Yharnam, this duality is ever-present, as players navigate a city that both overwhelms with its scale and suffocates with its labyrinthine design.

The visual and thematic design of *Bloodborne* extends the Gothic tradition of intertwining beauty and horror, immersing players in profound ethical issues. As Punter and Byron note, Gothic style often incorporates "silver jewelry based on religious and occult themes" (2004, p. 80), reflecting a fascination with the interplay between sanctity and corruption. This aesthetic is integral to the game's portrayal of the Healing Church, whose elaborate cathedrals and religious imagery mask their transgressive experiments with the Old Blood and communion with the Great Ones. The Church's duality mirrors the Gothic tension between faith and heresy, presenting the player with an unsettling moral landscape to navigate.

For the player, these aesthetic and narrative choices heighten the ethical stakes of engaging with the occult. Rituals and symbols tied to the Great Ones, such as the Chalice Dungeons and the Insight mechanic, encourage the player to pursue forbidden knowledge, but at the cost of madness, corruption, and complicity in perpetuating the game's cycle of violence. The Gothic aesthetic reinforces this tension by presenting beauty and grandeur alongside decay and monstrosity, forcing players to confront the dual nature of their quest for enlightenment. The robes and symbols of the Healing Church, for example, evoke sanctity while simultaneously representing their moral downfall through occult experimentation. By participating in these rituals and uncovering the Church's secrets, the player becomes an active participant in the game's exploration of the ethical consequences of seeking power and knowledge.

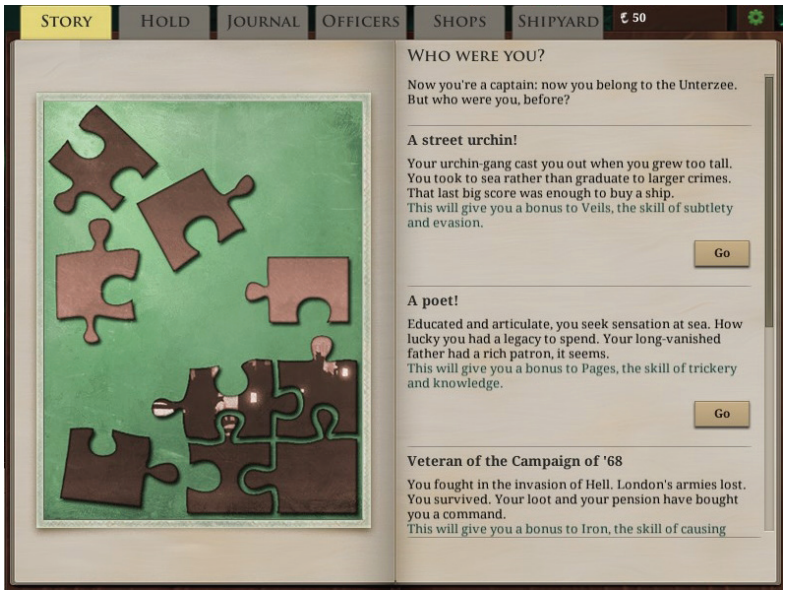
This dynamic is further reflected in the player's interactions with NPCs, many of whom embody the Gothic aesthetic of corrupted innocence. Father Gascoigne, for example, dons clergy robes symbolizing his faith, but his transformation into a beast reveals the devastating cost of the Scourge of the Beast, a plague tied directly to the Church's occult practices. Engaging with such characters compels the player to question their own role in perpetuating or resisting the cycle of corruption. The aesthetic beauty of *Bloodborne*'s world becomes a lens through which players experience its moral and existential dilemmas, blurring the lines between faith, heresy, and the ethical consequences of uncovering esoteric truths.

The Sunken Mind

While *Sunless Sea* is more of a role-playing game than *Bloodborne*, its design philosophy merits consideration because it explores Gothic and Lovecraftian horror through narrative complexity, moral ambiguity, and slower-paced gameplay, contrasting with *Bloodborne*'s action-oriented gameplay. The game's narrative places the player in the role of a ship captain tasked with navigating a sea full of terrors and eldritch beings, while fighting back against the elements that could drive the crew mad. It is a more narrative-driven game that emphasizes the choices the player makes and their short-term and long-term consequences. However, it does incorporate role-playing game (RPGs) elements where players assume the role of a captain and have the ability to personalize their character's background, qualities, and decisions. These choices have the potential to impact the captain's capabilities and interactions within the game. The aforementioned element of character development is consistent with the standards seen in role-playing games (RPGs), wherein players have the ability to influence the protagonist's attributes and narrative trajectory. Furthermore, the involvement in missions and storylines is consistent with the narrative-focused gameplay of role-playing games (RPGs).

Figure 6

RPG Elements in Sunless Sea



Note: "Sunless Sea, 80 Days and the Rise of Modular Storytelling." *Game Developer*. www.gamedeveloper.com/design/-i-sunless-sea-i-i-80-days-i-and-the-rise-of-modular-storytelling

The player is presented with numerous options in the *Sunless Sea*. The player has the option to betray their crew, engage in cannibalism, and negotiate with torturers and demons in order to amass wealth by exploiting others; however, the game does not judge the player for villainous behavior. The descriptive text will unambiguously highlight the gravity of their wrongdoing, but beyond that, the matter rests solely inside your own conscience. This is effective because for the player to maintain a morally upright character in *Sunless Sea*, they must actively exert great effort and resist the allure of engaging in malevolent actions that would make progressing the game easier. Navigating the Zee (the name of the sea) is a challenging task, and as the player spends more time in this environment, their moral compass tends to gradually deteriorate.

One of the instances where the game challenges the player's moral stance is the Wistful Deviless questline. The questline exemplifies the Gothic tradition of the Faustian pact, combining moral ambiguity and the occult in a way that immerses players in the game's story. According to Punter and Byron (2004), Gothic literature frequently highlights "a more old-fashioned, eighteenth-century emphasis on, for example, the Faustian pact with the devil and its dire consequences" (p. 99). With her questline, players must choose between three unique pathways, each with its own moral and narrative complexities. Assisting the Deviless by delivering her letters or accompanying her to the Brass Embassy in London generates tangible rewards such as a Captivating Treasure and Secrets, but it also connects the player with the forces of Hell, presenting questions about allegiance and complicity. Alternatively, betraying her by reporting her as a traitor to the Brass Embassy results in benefits such as Outlandish Artefacts and Fragments, but raises the player's Terror, reflecting the psychological cost of self-serving activities. Players can also choose to disregard her mission altogether, avoiding moral quandaries but missing out on the storyline and benefits associated with her journey. Christopher Bartel's assertion that "our affective and aesthetic responses to works of narrative fiction often depend (in part) on our ability to recognize the moral significance of the events and scenarios that make up the fictional work" (2015, p. 292) emphasizes the importance of these choices. The Deviless' pleasant attitude and infernal essence create a dissonance that reflects the tension of the Faustian contract, compelling players to deal with trust, betrayal, and moral compromise.

The way the player perceives and comprehends the ethical weight of events greatly influences how we interpret and engage with stories. Examining the moral complexity in *Sunless Sea* and literature enhances our comprehension, enabling players to delve into the thematic depths and appreciate the complexities of the provided narratives.

The absence of a singular central narrative does not diminish the game's value; rather, it enhances the experience by offering multiple methods of play. The dynamic nature of the player's Unterzee map (main setting), which alters with each playtime and new Captain, ensures that the world never presents the same experience twice. The positioning of ports in relation to one another can significantly impact the way the player engages with the stories, hence influencing their gameplay. If the player chooses to pursue a more villainous path, then the game will present them with choices that can accommodate such a direction. However, it is important to note that making evil choices often leads to more immediate gameplay rewards, while righteous decisions are more challenging to pursue but ultimately result in greater long-term benefits for the player's ship, such as increased supplies, a stronger crew, and easier navigation of the Unterzee.

Bartel emphasizes that evil acts within video games do not necessarily reflect evil behavior from the player, but that they are acting in the role they are assigned to in the game, "[i]t is in this sense that a player can play a game as a villain, just as an actor can play the part of a villain without thereby coming to hold the same moral viewpoint as the villain" (2015, p. 293). Enabling players to assume different roles, especially those that present moral dilemmas, increases the immersive narrative experience in *Sunless Sea*. The system allows individuals to shape the storyline, explore a range of possibilities, and experience the consequences of their choices without facing any ethical repercussions outside the game.

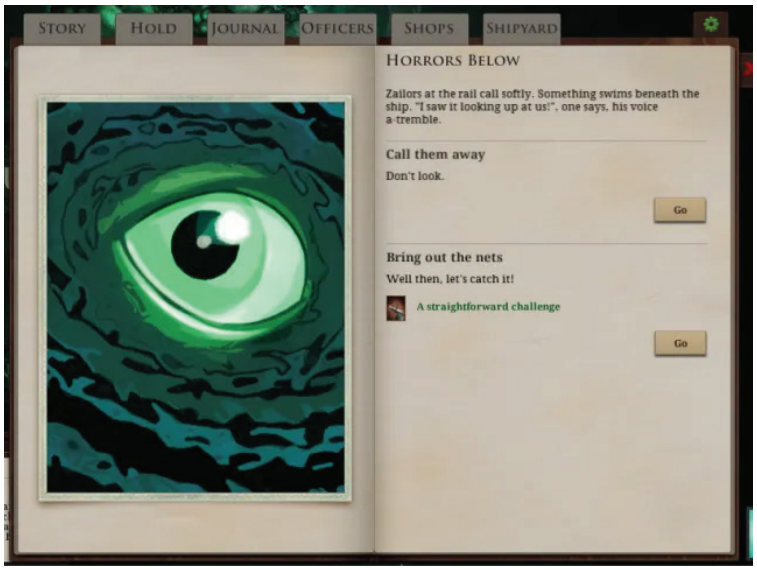
Moreover, Bartel evokes Henry Frankfurt's *Compatibilism*, which centers on the notion that an action can be considered free if it conforms to an individual's wants or higher-order volitions, irrespective of whether it is causally driven by external factors. Bartel uses Frankfurt's compatibilism to underscore the significance of a player's capacity to behave in accordance with their own volition, free from any form of external compulsion or limitation in tackling the issue of morality in video games. Bartel highlights that for the player to feel or be conflicted by a moral decision, the extent of this moral issue must be first measured by how much the player can relate to the character committing the act, "an agent can be held morally responsible for her actions only to the extent that she identifies her sense of self with the perpetration of those actions" (2015, p. 292). Observing the behavior of players in *Sunless Sea* is intriguing because making morally upright decisions is frequently not the most advantageous option from a mechanical standpoint. Bartel further adds that

> in these situations, the player feels a conflict between her freedom to act and her freedom to will. While the player has little freedom to act, the player still has the free will to either identify herself with the actions that are committed within the game or not. (Bartel, 2015, p. 291)

The concept of "freedom to act" in *Sunless Sea* relates to the limited range of options or actions that the player can do because of the game's design, narrative framework, or gameplay. For example, the player may have a limited range of choices when navigating the treacherous waters of the Unterzee or when interacting with various individuals and factions. Conversely, "freedom to will" refers to the player's inherent ability to determine their emotional and intellectual involvement independently and ethically with the acts or options provided. Despite the game's restrictions on accessible actions, the player retains the ability to interpret, explain, or emotionally engage with those acts. This distinction highlights an intriguing aspect of gaming: while a player's choices may be constrained by the game's rules or design, their personal interpretation and connection to in-game actions remain unrestricted. Players may encounter ethical issues, moral dilemmas, or role-playing features that allow them to interact with the game environment beyond the predetermined actions. For example, a player may lack the autonomy to prevent a specific encounter or consequence, but they still possess the volition to determine whether their in-game character accepts or rejects the activities undertaken in that encounter. This can result in a heightened level of engagement as players navigate the conflict between the constraints imposed by the game and their personal interpretation or connection with their in-game character's decisions.

Figure 7

A Choice That Can Equally Have Good And Negative Outcomes

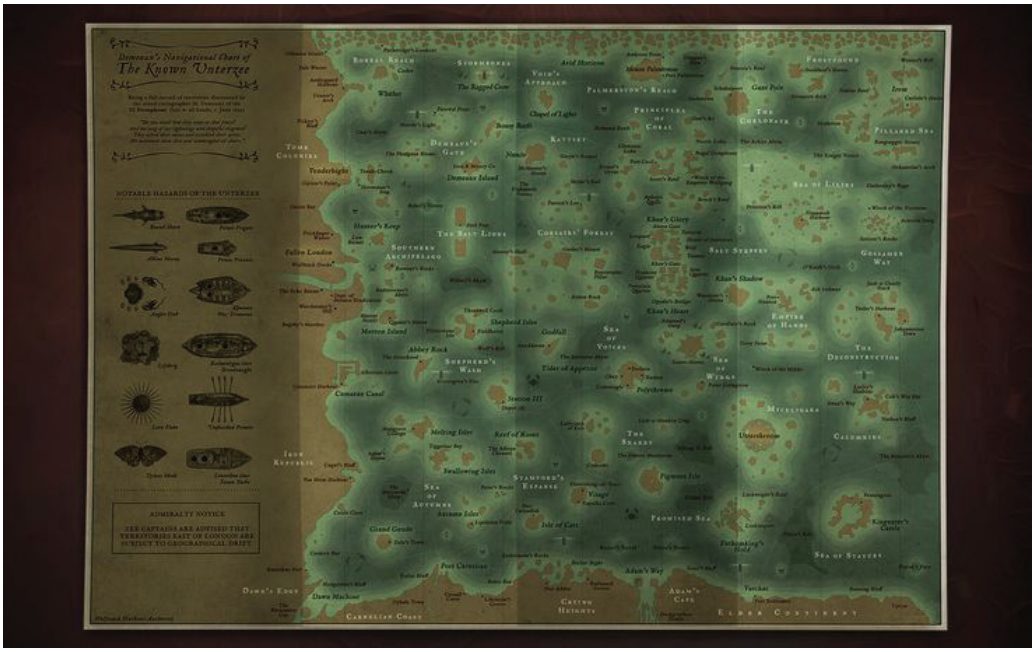


Note: "Sunless Sea Part #1—The Making of a Captain." by Black Wombat. https://lparchive.org/Sunless-Sea/Update%2001/

The game's writing offers a very beautiful combination of Edgar Allan Poe's eerie writing style, Lovecraftian horrors, and the fantastical elements of Greek mythology. Moreover, players will discover a distorted portrayal of Victorian London. The player will experience a range of strong reactions, including fear, sadness, discomfort, and amusement.

Figure 8

Map of the Unterzee



Note: "The Known Unterzee | Fallen London, Sunless Sea, London Map." *Pinterest*. www.pinterest.com/pin/the-known-unterzee--45950858689599001

Combining Lovecraftian terror with mankind's natural desire for the unknown, the investigation of the Unterzee in *Sunless Sea* captures the core of occult ideas. Mirroring the occult's fixation on hidden truths, forbidden knowledge, and arcane rituals, players encounter enigmatic monsters, supernatural phenomena, and cosmic entities. Players lured into a setting reflecting the appeal of occultism, the search for forbidden knowledge, and the promise of discovering hidden realms, are drawn into these unexplored areas. The narrative of the game revolves around this dynamic, whereby curiosity serves both as a source of danger and a motivating factor. The game's depiction of Eldritch entities as bearers of dangerous, transformative knowledge aligns with occultism's connection

to harmful enlightenment. Like occultists, players are driven to go into the unknown and push beyond established limits, suffering real consequences, including more anxiety or crew loss. *Sunless Sea* reflects the conflict in the occult, where the search for enlightenment often comes at enormous personal or existential cost, by showing the Unterzee as a place of both discovery and danger.

Figure 9

Nook Which is Described in the Game as "The Throat of Some Unknown Leviathan"

Note: "Nook." *Sunless Sea Wiki*. https://sunlesssea.fandom.com/wiki/Nook

Bartel's claim that "the virtual actions that a player identifies with her sense of self can relevantly enter into a consideration of that player's actual moral psychology" (2015, p. 292) speaks especially to *Sunless Sea*'s examination of occultism and moral ambiguity. While fictional, the game immerses players in scenarios with serious ethical implications, examining the psychological consequences of navigating an occult-saturated world.

One such recurring instance is the possibility of cannibalism on the Unterzee during desperate times. Players can decide to eat human flesh for survival when confronted with limited supplies and a crew growing more afraid. Despite being only virtual, this game has players justify a transgression based on the obsession with the forbidden and the primordial that defines the occult. Consuming human flesh questions the player's view of their in-game morality and survival instincts; hence, it is packed with moral and existential consequences. Similarly, the encounter with the Wistful Deviless draws players into the infernal politics of Hell, emphasizing the Gothic and occult motifs of seduction and moral compromise. This scenario presents a Faustian dilemma, highlighting the Gothic fascination with forging pacts and alliances with demonic forces. Selling human souls at places like the Brass Embassy is a clear illustration of commodifying spiritual essence, an activity intimately related to the obsession of the occult with the metaphysical. Players must consider the moral consequences of trafficking in something as holy as a soul against the attraction of financial benefits. This situation not only accentuates the Gothic and Lovecraftian themes of forbidden knowledge and transgression but also reflects Bartel's point of view by letting players consider the consequences of their decisions in an imagined yet emotionally relevant environment. The immersive design of the game invites players to contemplate the limits of morality in line with Bartel's belief that virtual acts can profoundly affect players' moral psychology, therefore, blurring the distinctions between fictitious decisions and ethical issues.

Conclusion

Through the study presented in this paper, *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* embody unique yet complementary methods of engaging players with occult-themed storylines and Lovecraftian hallmarks. *Bloodborne* engages players with rapid action and Gothic visuals, whereas *Sunless Sea* employs a more deliberate, narrative-centric methodology that highlights player decisions and their repercussions. Both games adeptly intertwine occultism, ethical dilemmas, and cosmic terror, crafting experiences that compel players to confront the seduction and peril of forbidden knowledge. The occult functions as a narrative structure that immerses players in ethically problematic situations, ranging from the Faustian bargain of the Wistful Deviless in *Sunless Sea* to the ritualistic pursuit of the Great Ones in *Bloodborne*. Lovecraftian influences amplify these experiences, merging existential dread, cosmic terror, and the inexplicable into narratives that compel players to interrogate the limits of morality and agency. Through the exploration of these issues, the games offer distinct perspectives on humanity's intrigue with the unknown and the ethical intricacies of interaction with it.

This analysis presents promising avenues for future investigation. One potential method is to investigate how interactive experiences affect players' enduring psychological reactions to moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas. Can games such as *Sunless Sea* and *Bloodborne* serve as contemporary "moral laboratories," allowing players to explore transgressive actions in a consequence-free environment, possibly influencing their real-world ethical perspectives? By proposing such questions, this study not only underscores the richness of games like *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* as subjects of analysis but also highlights the potential of video games to serve as powerful media for exploring the depths of human psychology, morality, and our enduring fascination with the unknown.

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Art Review. "Innovation" or "Kidnapping": Elaine Sturtevant in Seville

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Seville, Spain, on an oppressively steamy summer afternoon. Heat shimmers off the stone paving of the former Monasterio de la Cartuja, situated on the outskirts of the ancient city. During the typical siesta hour, quiet loosens the sense of time, as if the fourteenth century were near and the monks still moved through cloisters at a patient cadence. The site now serves as the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, CAAC, which is hosting Spain's first retrospective of American artist Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014), titled *Sturtevant: The Echo of Innovation* (February 27 to September 21, 2025). The artist is best known for decades of rigorous "repetitions" of contemporaries from the early 1960s, engaging the work of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Claes Oldenburg, and Félix González-Torres, among others. By the late 1990s, Sturtevant declared that copying no longer concerned her. The work pivoted to digital constructions assembled from scavenged cultural shards.

Soon after the opening, a sharp rejoinder arrived from Spanish art critic Ángela Molina (Molina, 2025), who published an article in the national newspaper *El País* titled "Elaine Sturtevant and the Multiple Abduction of Authorship" (translated). "The work cannot be located in the discourse of copy … I'm talking about the power and autonomy of originality, and the force and pervasiveness of art" (Sturtevant cited in Kittelmann, 2005, p. 20). Declaring in the 1960s that her work constituted an original operation rather than a copy placed Sturtevant in a decade of neglect by critics, institutions, and the market. During the Appropriation movement of the 1980s, however, what had been labeled imitation became

a prized currency in the very market she often rebuffed. Molina contends that the show, under the strong force of institutional framing, risks kidnapping the work beneath the banners of authorship or innovation, a move that runs counter to the artist's intention to unsettle entrenched mental structures and power arrangements.

For Molina, an exhibition that assembles Sturtevant's work from museums and private collections can read as "un store de los auténticos" (a real store) rather than a renewed challenge to the original artistic intention. Jimena Blázquez Abascal, the director of CAAC and chief curator of the exhibition, explained during the interview that "She (Sturtevant) wanted to engage audiences critically, not polemically" (personal communication, June 2025). If the exhibition is understood as a deliberate attempt to confront the audience with the tension between Sturtevant's work and the architectural typology, its appearance as innovative becomes more comprehensible. As visitors move through corridors, chapels, and courtyards, saturated with sacred motifs, the works unfold in varied configurations, inviting a reading of her sixty-year inquiry as a progression from the power of Copy to the gravity of death, to the exhaustion of Information.

Entering through the Puerta de Tierra, before the Capilla de Afuera on the right, a portico with a pair of wooden doors comes into view. Flanking the doorway are two framed ceramic tiles: on the left, St. John the Baptist; on the right, St. John the Evangelist. On the side wall, over peeled and scarred paint, a red and black offset print, close to A4 in size, is pasted at the same height. It displays a mugshot-style pairing, front and profile, with the legend "$2,000 REWARD" beneath it (Figure 1). Against the chapel's spiritual guardians, the print reads as an interruption. Titled *Duchamp Wanted*, it is the first artwork visitors encounter. Created in 1992, the piece alludes to Marcel Duchamp's 1923 readymade poster *Wanted: $2,000 Reward*. Two curatorial decisions frame the encounter: placing an artwork outdoors without protection and setting this criminal-style poster in parallel with two Christian figures. Under this arrangement, three habits of visual consumption are deliberately unsettled: first, as Sturtevant intends, seeing gives way to thinking through her repetition of Duchamp's antiretinal strategy; second, the aura of the museum and the artwork is punctured; third, equating the criminal portrait with major religious figures in Christianity dislodges fixed hierarchies between religious iconography and contemporary art, activating both the status of the artwork and its new cultural context.

Figure 1
Sturtevant,
'Duchamp Wanted'

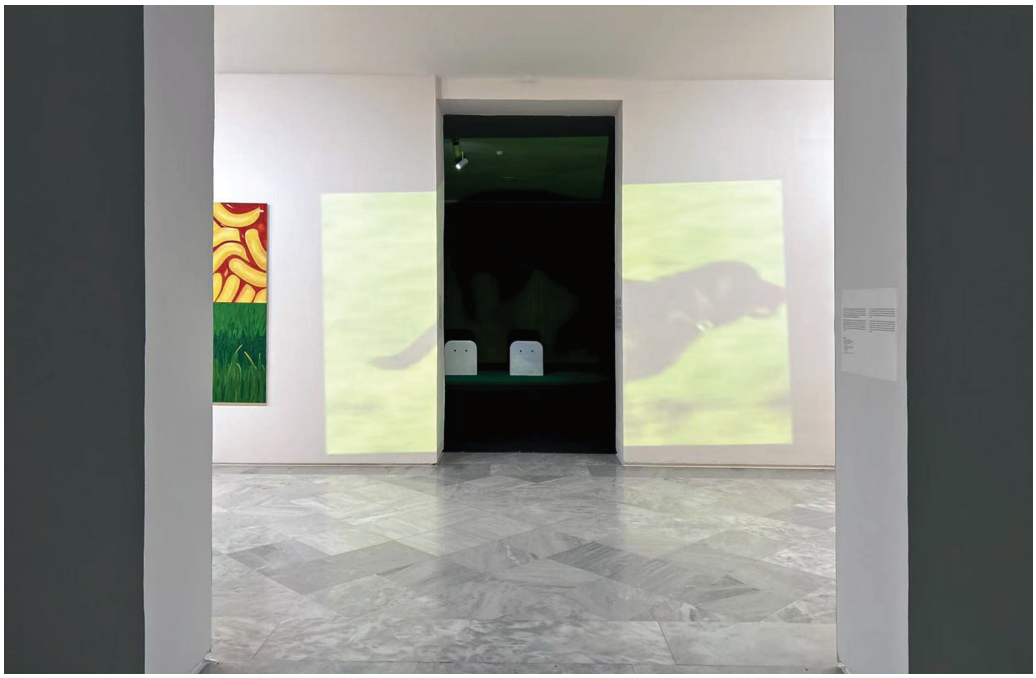
Note: Photo by Ruohong Wu, 10 July 2025 at the exhibition *The Echo of Innovation*, CAAC, Seville. © Ruohong Wu, 2025

The unusual setup extends into a stretched rectangular white cube. At first glance, the space resembles a crowded shop: around eight closely arranged Marilyn Monroe diptychs ranging in size from roughly 30 by 40 centimeters to two by three meters, accompanied by two American flags, two large striped paintings on black backgrounds, and several comic-style canvases. Off this corridor-like room, a side chamber gathers everyday objects, including a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, and a street sign. Across the long axis sit two more rooms: one lined with flower prints, ranging from small to large; the other displays a pair of white ceramic tombstones on artificial grass and a mannequin in a white bridal gown. For visitors unfamiliar with Sturtevant, the dense and irregular sequence of the monastic cloister, with narrow rooms and eccentric openings, can feel disorderly, as if works by Warhol, Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Robert Gober, and Roy Lichtenstein had been carelessly swept together. The effect leans toward Molina's argument of an institutional souvenir store.

Then a projection appears: a black dog running in a loop while the projector slowly rotates, the image washing over *Lichtenstein Girl with Hair Ribbon* (1966–67), *Gober Partially Buried Sinks* (1997), and the four white walls (Figure 2). This shift in medium and the anonymous canine protagonist signal Sturtevant's 1990s turn to digital repetition that collapses interior and exterior representation. The work, titled *Re-Run* (2007), suggests that social power has moved from physical institutions to cybernetic systems that expose everything, generating endless circuits of representation and cognitive overload. Everything seems exposed yet remains concealed, provisional, and trapped in circularity. Image upon image, information upon information, the sequence corrals static objects that stand for cultural and political victims into inescapable loops. History's weight folds into a present that repeats as if the future were already here, and figures from the past, once stable, now confront a new regime of value through the chaotic layout of work and the overlaid images.

Figure 2

Sturtevant, 'Re-Run'



Note: Photo by Ruohong Wu, 10 July 2025 at the exhibition *The Echo of Innovation*, CAAC, Seville. © Ruohong Wu, 2025

To zoom out from the exhibition to its architectural context, the site records layered regimes of power and belief, from a twelfth-century Moorish pottery kiln under Islamic al-Andalus, through the Christian Reconquest and the fourteenth-century monastery, to a nineteenth-century tile factory, to the 1992 World's Fair, and now an art center. The exhibition clarifies a double tempo in which mutable and persistent cultural rhythms intersect. The main exhibition areas, where Sturtevant's repetitive paintings and video works are displayed, are set apart from the *Duchamp Wanted* poster. Visitors walk a long path under the bright, unshielded sun, crossing the expansive patio of Ave María before entering the solemn Gothic church, built in the 15th century and expanded in the 16th century. From there, they move into the inner courtyard, where austere stone sculptures of monks create a quiet, reflective atmosphere. The route continues to the Sala Capitular, the chapter hall once used for critical monastic meetings and later serving as the burial site of the Ribera family, including the wall tombs of Pedro Enríquez and Catalina de Ribera, who were guards of the monastery. After confronting the presence of mortality in the age of knights, visitors reach the entrance to Sturtevant's luminous exhibition, a transition that brings

them back to contemporary concerns. Simultaneously, Gober's *Partially Buried Sinks* and the yellow wallpaper, entirely composed of the word "KILL," (Figure 3) ingeniously pulls the journey into an endless loop of anxiety.

Figure 3

Sturtevant, 'Warhol Flower' Painting Over the 'Kill Wall'

Note: Photo by Ruohong Wu, 10 July 2025 at the exhibition *The Echo of Innovation*, CAAC, Seville.

"Sturtevant's concern is not with selected individual artworks…" observed Gerd de Vries, the key figure who introduced Sturtevant to the German art scene (Kittelmann, Maculan, & Blistène, 2005, p. 34). This exhibition aligns with de Vries's perspective, emphasizing Sturtevant's approach as a sustained inquiry rather than a simple shift from repetitive paintings and sculptures to digital reworkings. As Byung-Chul Han has argued, the violence of sovereignty in pre-modern society has evolved into a form of positivity, a hidden violence cloaked in the guise of freedom, shifting from the physical to the psychological realm, and from collective revenge to individual burnout within a neoliberal order (Han, 2018, pp. 88–89). Here, Sturtevant underscores how violence operates across society as a progression and loop rather than as isolated acts. Crucially, her work loosens the grip of authorship and functions less as a fixed artistic identity, serving instead

as a mirror to past and present. The contribution of Sturtevant's lifelong exploration of repetition reminds us that power structures have never truly dissipated. Immersing decades of her work within this seven-hundred-year architectural organism evokes Karl Marx's observation: "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce" (1852). In this light, the artistic polemics may cool.

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