



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

**REPROGRAMMING THE SIGNIFIERS: AN ANALYSIS OF POST-
TRUTH AS A NARRATIVE ATMOSPHERE DERIVING FROM A
SHIFT IN THE SOCIOCULTURAL NARRATIVES**

by

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ABSTRACT

Reprogramming the Signifiers engages in the spirited debate on the origins, effects, and outcomes of the post-truth phenomenon. Adopting a narratological approach and taking the standpoint that post-truth represents a socio-cultural narrative shift, this thesis argues the case for a post-truth narrative atmosphere capable of enacting a profound impact on individual and community psychology and cognition. To that end this work undertakes an analysis of narrative movement through the synthesised space — a descriptor for the enmeshment of the online and offline worlds which the larger proportion of humanity now inhabits – I demonstrate that it is possible to see how the post-truth tectonic is established and maintained by delineating how narrative is warped and bent through these spaces, how it becomes immediately unmoored from its foundational context, creating the atmosphere of confusion, misunderstanding, and obfuscation which embodies the post-truth condition. This work then outlines a series of inbuilt narrative defence mechanisms whose existence has, in some cases, through real-world outcomes caused by obscured narrative movement, broken the grip of post-truth narrative on an audience within the synthesised space. Through these mechanisms, this thesis determines, there is a means to push back against the ongoing effects of post-truth tectonic shift without requiring legislative responses that would inhibit the ability of online spaces to provide a voice for marginalised groups, which has become a vital and powerful fulcrum for global advancement of human rights and freedoms.

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INTRODUCTION

In his short novel, *The Fall*, Camus has his protagonist speak of falsehood as “a beautiful twilight that enhances every object.”¹ This sentence, this sentiment, is a perfect description of a feeling that can be associated with the digital age, defined as it is by mass media shared across multiple platforms online and through countless iterations until news, events, and personalities are rendered down to their most salacious, most delicious, and possibly least accurate accounting. Whatever it takes to capture precious seconds from a public attention span stretched thin between a thousand and one distractions, a saturated blur of information and obligation, the pressures of life always squeezed between and around the demands of that constant drone of words and images, of news blurring into gossip, all becoming white noise. We are living in fictional times, digital times, in which the narratives we encounter are too often altered, curated, and sometimes even purely fabricated for likes, shares, and virality, and there is no way to entirely avoid these narratives, they find us even when we are offline, through our interactions with other individuals and groups, in the still prevalent sea of printed mass media and visual media that saturate our surroundings, they are ubiquitous, the background to daily life. They are the atmosphere of the twenty-first century, and its defining feature, and this endless backdrop of noise, irreverent and nonsensical as it can frequently be, holds extraordinary power, capable of shaping the direction in which whole communities, groups, and political parties decide to move. So why do we, as societies, as communities, as individuals, not take this deluge more seriously, allowing it to crash over us like a wave, instead of regarding it as the threat to clarity that it has become?

¹ Camus. A. (1917) *The Fall*, Hamish Hamilton: London, p.89

That question defines the direction of this thesis, its core ideas, ideals, and argument, leading as it does, inexorably almost, to the notion of post-truth, a term whose implied suggestion is that of a position in which the very idea of truth has become nothing more than an afterthought, swiftly discarded. Tracing the term post-truth back to its beginnings, we find no more than a throw-away turn of phrase from a 1992 article in *The Nation* by the artist Steve Tesich. Speaking of the Reagan presidency, he wrote, “In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.” (1992, p. 13) As evidence for this assertion, he referred to a gradual public acceptance of comforting lies used to obfuscate uneasy facts, an unwillingness to engage with uncomfortable reality. What he perceived as a willingness to be protected from the truth. “We came to equate the truth with bad news,” he wrote, “and we didn’t want bad news anymore, no matter how true or vital to our health as a nation. We looked to our government to protect us from the truth.” (1992, p. 12). Tesich goes on to state that the American people of the late 20th century are “rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams.” (*ibid.* p. 13) This emotive language is typical of the article and yet one cannot help but flash forward to 2016 and the moment on November 9th, when Donald Trump was announced president-elect of the United States of America on the back of a campaign built upon falsehoods, and one begins to understand Tesich’s urgency and tone when expressing his fears over where this perceived public acceptance of lies might lead.² Thanks to the absurd nature of Trump’s presidential campaign, and his unprecedented and unanticipated win, in 2016, Tesich’s term, and somewhat of the urgency in his assertions enjoyed a

² A few examples of scholarship examining the multiple instances Trump resorted to falsehood: Kellner, D. (2018). ‘Donald Trump and the Politics of Lying.’ In: Peters, M.A., Rider, S., Hyvönen, M., Besley, T. (eds) *Post-Truth, Fake News*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8013-5_7, Kenski, K., Filer, C. R. and Conway-Silva, B. A. (2018) ‘Lying, Liars, and Lies: Incivility in 2016 Presidential Candidate and Campaign Tweets During the Invisible Primary’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(3), pp. 286–299. doi: [10.1177/0002764217724840](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217724840), McGRANAHAN, C. (2017), ‘An anthropology of lying: Trump and the political sociality of moral outrage’, *American Ethnologist*, 44, pp 243-248. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12475>

steep rise to prominence in the public, media, and academic discourse, when it had previously floated round as no more than the ghost of an idea not many people took very seriously. As a result, the Oxford Dictionary chose post-truth as its 2016 word of the year, giving as its justification post-truth's journey from a term mentioned in passing, or as an addendum, to one of such ubiquity that it could be employed by all the big media outlets "without the need for clarification or definition in their headlines" (2016). This leap of public and media interest sparked a wave of non-fiction books, all looking to deconstruct and understand the suddenly fascinating phenomenon so that the outcomes arising from post-truth, such as fake news, alternative facts, and the predominance of feeling over fact in politics, commentary, and the public discourse, might be tackled and perhaps reversed. These books, though they are all excellent, soundly researched forays into post-truth detailing the mechanics of the issue, largely focus on the political aspect of post-truth, which is perhaps the most public and understood outcome of the narrative conditions of post-truth. Consequently, these works all share the same tendency, which is to attack post-truth from the angle of political spin and manipulation spiraling out of control, that of fake news, alternative facts, misinformation, disinformation, and the art of bullshit. There is nothing wrong with that approach, except that it cancels out a vital perspective which offers a more nuanced and complete accounting of the effects of post-truth upon the narrative landscape of the twenty-first century. This thesis, therefore, marks an attempt to illuminate and explicate this missed perspective, as well as offering insight into the vital nature of its inclusion. At this juncture I would like to offer a very brief literature overview and utilize it as a framework of sorts to describe the shape of the research gap that I have identified, and that this thesis intends to bridge.

I have not included these in order of publication, nor in any specific subject order, as they all seem to come at the same subject matter from differing angles, and all to come to similar conclusions about said subject matter. Again, I want to make clear that these are excellent, well-researched resources, all of which proved helpful in understanding the political aspects of post-truth, which is a deeply important viewpoint to explore. It is simply interesting to note that, although a wider narrative impact is acknowledged to have occurred in most of these works, it is never subjected to deeper exploration. Lee McIntyre's (2018) incisive breakdown of post-truth describes it as a tool of ideological supremacy employed to manipulate the public to believe fabricated versions of events even in the face of contradictory evidence, used as a lever for political expediency. Evan Davis (2017) explores the nonsensical aspects of post-truth and the tendency for prevarication, as characterized by an overwhelming rise in the sheer amount of bullshit spoken by politicians and seen in the narratives disseminated by the media at large. Steve Fuller (2018) focuses on post-truth as a power game between elites (both political and corporate) and identifies the central feature of post-truth as one of a notable distinction between appearances and reality whose intention is a manipulation of outcomes (winners and losers). James Ball (2017), much like Davis, Ball also takes a deeper dive into bullshit and looks at how information moves and who it benefits on the political and corporate stage as a foundation of the post-truth paradigm, giving credence yet again to that notion of spin and deception as having a long history that finds itself magnified and distilled in the post-truth era. Finally, Matthew D'Ancona (2017) writes eloquently on the art of the lie and the championing of feeling over facts which forms a primary pillar of the political post-truth narrative landscape. There is a small amount of work outside of this main body on post-truth in other fields and disciplines, some of which focuses on narrative aspects of post-truth, such

as Foroughi, Gabriel, and Fotaki's paper exploring post-truth as a possible narrative disorder within corporate management culture. Though their focus remains heavily geared toward management culture, they speak a great deal of the effects of this narrative disorder and of the narrative nature of post-truth, stating that "post-truth is also characterized by some dominant narrative patterns and tropes, including its own myths, stories, images, slogans and buzz-words, which surface and often dominate public discourses." (2019, p. 142) It is this specific narrative patterning that helps to offer the answer to that question I posed, that of public capitulation to the tsunami of information in the digital age. I assert that this symbiosis between the public and the informational tsunami is not merely a surface issue but a deeply written narrative issue, one that is situated within the narrative agreements (the sociocultural narratives) that society builds, defines, and understands itself by. Moreover, I argue that the foundation of post-truth can in fact be seen as arising from a change in these narrative agreements, encompassing all manner of ideas and ideals, including those surrounding notions of what is and is not dishonest (or truthful), and that the narrative ecology of these changes gives rise to an 'atmosphere' which then exacerbates the conditions and outcomes within society, affecting our communication, our self-creation, and the social dynamics within groups. Moving logically forward from these assertions it then becomes clear why the narrative threat is not taken more seriously, why the deluge is allowed to crash in wave upon wave without acknowledgement of the threat to clarity. That failure of acknowledgement can be directly attributed to the changes in these inbuilt and ubiquitous narratives and their ever-present and inexorable effect upon the ways in which society is seeing, experiencing, and responding in general. This fundamental aspect of the post-truth phenomenon is one that has not been highlighted or explored in any detail or to any length beyond off-hand and often fleeting mentions

of the wider narrative impact of post-truth, despite the clear and present effects on society I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, effects that I will delineate and explore throughout this thesis.

My contribution, therefore, seeks to address a fundamental oversight in the narrative understanding of post-truth, exploring the broader societal ramifications by first acknowledging that post-truth is not an isolated phenomenon but one that exists as a consequence or outcome of sweeping changes in values, political expediency, philosophy, and technology in the 20th and 21st century that has changed the ways in which the world is experienced, explored, and understood. My thesis first acknowledges that this change is situated at the sociocultural narrative level, arising from the societal agreements that guide our cultural positioning, self-making, community creation, expression, communication, action, and interaction. However, apart from to make a case for its existence, it is not the post-truth sociocultural narrative that this thesis is most interested in, its focal point lies in what I have referred to as the 'atmosphere' of post-truth. When I speak of atmosphere within the bounds of this thesis, I refer to the narrative conditions that arise from this new societal agreement of what is and isn't acceptable in the sharing, dissemination, experience and expression of communication, language, and discourse in the digital age, which stands as a central factor in the narrative atmosphere and its effects. The effects of the post-truth atmosphere are specific, composed of obfuscation, division, disorder, and distortion, and the outcome of these effects is calculable, measured in societal, group, and individual action, and indeed inaction. Though it is certainly correct that all the works I have mentioned which cover post-truth as a topic look into the effects the internet has on the subversion of truth and the dissemination of misinformation, they do not seek to explore the ramifications of such a narrative

atmosphere on the development and expression of the individual and the collective. This omission is extraordinary, and worrying, considering the very real outcomes of the post-truth narrative atmosphere as seen within voting patterns that show an alarming lean to the Right and away from progressive ideas despite significant evidence arising from online movements and real-world protest that the public at large moves from within a more progressive mindset.^{3 4} Considering this, I would think it vital, indeed urgent, to understand why the online landscape manages so effortlessly to obscure patterns and behaviour occurring offline to the extent that real world events can feel almost surreal when they occur, because the pattern of information online did not indicate a move in that direction. Though all the works I have mentioned do touch upon the nature and involvement of ideology in the tactics and rhetoric of post-truth, they do not isolate these ideological frameworks and seek to understand the relationship between ideologies and their narrative outcomes on a broader public stage, which is where the omission can be seen to arise. My thesis seeks to explicate not only the narrative elements of the post-truth sociocultural narrative agreement by way of the atmosphere that it produces in the online and offline spaces, but also seeks to elucidate that relationship by means of understanding the systems of ideology most associated with post-truth rhetoric, in politics and on the public stage. Moreover, this thesis endeavours to understand the

³ One only has to look at the worrying upward trend in election success for parties whose rhetoric, roots and philosophy lie in extremism, such as the Brothers of Italy, Len Pen's National Rally, and Orpo's NPC in Finland. These wins would have been unthinkable only a few years ago, and as this interview with Cas Mudde, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Georgia demonstrates, the pattern is not as abrupt as it may appear but is the culmination of a trend beginning in the 80s, the period responsible for the coining of the term post-truth. There is a notable connection between the post-truth era and the rise of the far right within general politics and within the political sphere itself: Martin, M. (2022), "What the recent wins for far-right parties in Europe could mean for the region", *NPC*, Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/01/1126419403/what-the-recent-wins-for-far-right-parties-in-europe-could-mean-for-the-region> (Accessed January 2023)

⁴ Examples of this move toward the progressive lie in the direction of world protest and in the stark growth in such protest as a response to the continuing lean to the Right that can be seen in political rhetoric: The women's march on the day of Trump's inauguration, otherwise known as the 'Pink pussy hat' march, the black lives matter protests, the #metoo movement online, the 'we are the 99%' protests, and the more recent online movement and real world protest efforts of the Enough is Enough campaign. This trend is clearly delineated in the following study, collating information on hundreds of protests (both singular events and whole movements) in over one hundred different countries and places: Ortiz, I., Burke, S., Berrada, M., & Saenz Cortés, H. (2022). *World protests: A study of key protest issues in the 21st Century*. Routledge: London. Although this study also notes and highlights a rise of protest formed in opposition to notions of progression (such as the attack on Capitol Hill) which helps to support assertions I will make later in this thesis around those ideologies whose central mythologies support post-truth narratives, the data clearly outlines that the rise in protest mainly revolves around issues such as civil rights, equalities, and governmental responsibility (with regards to housing, infrastructure, amenities, basic rights etc). These issues are decidedly progressive.

ways in which the general narrative landscape is obscured by post-truth atmospheric narrative conditions. These relationships are important to understand as they form a central role in the editing of reality, and the attendant manipulations of narrative in the online and offline spaces which is such a prominent feature in the post-truth narrative atmosphere.⁵ My main concern, however, is to understand and define the ways in which the post-truth atmosphere, both in the online and offline spaces, can be said to affect human behaviour, development, action, and interaction, particularly with regards to self-storying, which in the online explosion of the digital age has become central to the ways in which people self-express their deepest notions of identity and selfhood, and which is deeply impacted by the effects of the post-truth atmosphere. When it comes to combating post-truth, or recognizing it in all its forms, knowledge is key, understanding is necessary, and comprehension of the urgency of the situation is essential, therefore this narrative focus seeks to close the significant gap in knowledge preventing a properly refined and targeted approach to tackling the systemic issues of post-truth.

Taking into account the narrative foundation of this thesis and its comparative isolation in terms of theoretical direction, I have chosen to turn towards the field of narratology for some methodological direction. I say direction because this is less a methodology than a guiding principle, as I have had to patch different ideas and theories from many differing fields of thought together to build a structure around which to hang my thesis. As such, this thesis will comprise of two distinct sections. The first section, encompassing chapters one and two, offers an introduction into the narratological theory and scholarship which acts as a loose and adaptive framework for my own ideas, and an overview of post-truth from existing scholarship leading

⁵ Editing of reality: the deluge of informational alterations whose intention is to make the public believe a position that does not exist, see a situation that is not occurring, or obscure a situation by narrative distraction or sleight of hand.

into an explanation of my own insight into the phenomenon. This is to demonstrate how I have built my own theoretical structure from the extant literature to allow a full expression of the central idea of this thesis. This opening section also demonstrates why this approach is better than adaption to an existing methodology in this instance, clarifying how the limitations of existing scholarship would curtail any attempt to explore and understand the post-truth atmosphere in any significant fashion. There are simply too many variables, and the dearth of existing scholarship on this specific subject demanded that I build this argument in my own way, whilst attempting to maintain academic rigour and accountability. The framework of ideas I showcase in chapters one and two are a springboard and foundation for the case studies and examples I draw upon throughout the body of the thesis, which takes place in section two. Running from chapter three onwards, the second section of the thesis utilizes aspects of the theory and case study within chapters one and two and other theory pertinent to the subjects discussed within each subsequent chapter to undertake a deep dive into all aspects of the post-truth narrative atmosphere, both online and offline, building a comprehensive picture of the clear and present danger this atmosphere and its attendant narratives represent and the urgency of the need to have a greater understanding thereof. Attempting to describe something ubiquitous and yet only visible by its effects, such as the post-truth atmosphere, is somewhat of a challenge, and the latter half of this thesis has an experimental feel in places, freewheeling through ideas and theories, all underpinned by the loose theoretical framework of scholarship built within chapters one and two. This inside out approach is both metaphor and meta, comprising an effort to explain a phenomenon by the way it feels to exist within it. By fore fronting the experimental and slightly chaotic latter half of the thesis with a solid theoretical and scholarly foundation I seek to ground this thesis, embedding the unknown within the familiar,

which in itself is another metaphor for the absurdity of the digital age. Given the predominance of narrative in the central argument of this thesis, the theoretical field I have chosen for this foundation could only be narratology, a field which was, at the beginning of this thesis, completely unfamiliar to me. In fact, I discovered narratology almost by accident in my desperate search for a singular methodological basis that fit the somewhat complicated needs of this thesis and its central argument. Prior to discovering narratology, I was attempting to weave that central argument through a handful of theoretical frameworks that, whilst appropriate and fitting, only served to overcomplicate an already complex project. In light of that considerable, painful struggle, finding narratology was nothing less than a relief, even as it became clear to me that narratologists would be horrified, not only by this thesis but by its use of narratological theory. Nonetheless, narratology presents a set of vital theoretical tools for narrative theory whose effectiveness I have found to be indispensable, even when rather loosely interpreted. Having acknowledged how narratologists might view this thesis, it is interesting to note that narratology itself began as somewhat of an outrage in the field of literary theory after emerging as an idea with the publication of the 1966 edition of the French literary journal *Communications* entitled "The structural analysis of narrative". A handful of years later, one of the authors involved in that edition, Tzvetan Todorov, labelled this analytical style "narratology" in his work of literary theory studying the grammar of Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, the "*Grammaire du Décaméron*". Narratology was offered by Todorov as a form of science, eschewing the surface analysis of literature for a more comprehensive investigation of its underlying structures or principles, to determine their commonalities, a unifying theory of literature as it were, and it is therein that the controversy lies, in the notion that anything at all can have a unifying theory, but particularly something so diverse and complex as the written

word. The first architects of this new analytical style followed in the footsteps of the Saussurean linguists who studied the system of language (*langue*) as opposed to the messages articulated by that system (*parole*), seeking to analyze *how* narrative creates meaning rather than *what* specific narratives might mean. Manfred Jahn speaks of this structuralist approach as being one that sought to “present a ‘structural description’” and says that in the process of this investigation “the narratologist dissects the narrative phenomena into their component parts and then attempts to determine functions and relationships.” (2021, p. 18)⁶ It is this capacity of structuralism, in fact, to which I am primarily drawn, a means to outline the functions and relationships around and within the narrative phenomena that is described using the term post-truth. I want to seek out and elucidate the connections between the stories of post-truth, as disseminated both IRL and online, and its dominant narratives. How those narrative relationships are formed and then enacted, the effects they have, and their shared reasoning or meaning.^{7 8} Beyond that, structuralism is more a hindrance than a help, constrained as it is by the strict theoretical guidelines whose existence delineate the rigidity of the field, its inability to accept evolution and change. The same can be said for post-structuralism, which offers far more in terms of theoretical framework for my purposes but still holds itself within its own set of immovable guidelines. I can only apologise to any scholars therein who may end up reading this thesis.

Arriving in the 1980s on the heels of structuralism, narratological poststructuralism was led by scholars such as Chatman, Brooks, Lanser and Doležel and aimed to

⁶ Jahn’s online “Theory of Narrative” resource has several iterations, updated to take into account changes in the field. As such it is a vital document for those wanting to further understand narratology: Jahn, M. (2021) ‘Narratology 2.3: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative’, *English Department, University of Cologne*. Available at: www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.pdf. (Accessed March 2019)

⁷ IRL: In real life

⁸ Or their shared “unreason” and “lack of meaning” – a fascinating aspect of post-truth is its inherent nonsensicality.

widen the spectrum of fiction beyond the literary and introduce theories from other fields to aid in the analysis of structures and forms.⁹ The arrival of poststructuralism in narratology mirrored a movement in the humanities, visible in the stretch beyond the structural roots of narratology and towards adopting a more flexible, interdisciplinary approach within which narrative played a central role as an object of fascination and inquiry. This so-called narrative turn, which occurred across the field of humanities, placed storytelling, or telling stories about the self, at the center of theories exploring self-creation, self-development, understanding the self, and the self in its social and cultural context, and thus offers an ability to identify and explore the ways in which the post-truth sociocultural narrative and the atmosphere it engenders affects our self-creation, our social and cultural context, and our understanding of the world. Post-classicist narratologists such as Manfred Jahn, David Herman, Monika Fludernik, and Mieke Bal have vastly expanded the capacity of narratology to explore and understand the ways in which we understand and interpret narrative forms individually and societally.¹⁰ Their work in the field of the post-classical sub-domain cognitive narratology focuses on a mind-narrative nexus that “encompasses not only how stories can be used to build worlds but also how such acts of narrative worldmaking are themselves mind-enabling and mind-extending.” (2011 [rev. 2013], p. 1). The scope of cognitive narratology is not only broadly interdisciplinary but includes the study of narrative processing across such mediums as hypertext fiction, face-to-face storytelling, comics, graphic novels, and audio-visual media. The research undertaken therein seeks to explicate not only the ways in which fiction relates to experientiality – the phenomenological roots of reader comprehension – but also the ways in which the processing of narrative

⁹ This is seen as somewhat of a reaction to the more rigid scientific approach of structuralism.

¹⁰ Post-classicist as a term is used to separate those who engage in the use of classic structuralist theory from those who engage with the broader methodological path of the post structuralist narrative turn.

affects, and is affected by, our mental states. How it therefore may inform or inhibit our self-creation or indeed our collected narrative agreements. Herman outlines the emphasis of cognitive narratology research as being bound to two general lines of enquiry, those being “narrative as a target of interpretation” and “stories as a resource for sense-making” (2011, p. 2). Ogilvy, Nonaka, and Konno delineate the thrust of these lines of inquiry perfectly when they speak of story being “more than a descriptive text”, stating that as story “becomes related to the reader’s own experiences, the reader acts as an operator and creator of meanings.” (2104, p. 11). Fundamentally, cognitive narratology affirms the ways in which we make significant use of narratives to explain and explore the meaning of our own existence, the world around us, and the stories we encounter. Cognitive narratology’s field of thought offers the most broad and suitable lens through which to interrogate this narrative phenomenon, allowing for an investigation of the ways in which the narratives we utilise to interpret the world and make sense of it have shifted and continue to shift under and within the post-truth sociocultural narrative. They also offer a means of exploring particular narrative outcomes, one of which is the effect upon the creation of individual and collective selves, the destabilization of self, and the situatedness of the self in the post-truth narrative atmosphere, most specifically the online / offline spaces. Fundamentally, narratology embodies a category of categories, all of which pursue the same overarching goal, the study of narrative, narrative structures and their effects. Moreover, these categories engage in interdisciplinary outreach, mirroring a narrative turn enacted by fields within the social sciences, psychology and machine intelligence etc to seek answers to questions not answerable within the parameters of literary theory alone. However, it is notable that questions posed by narratology invariably return to the subject matter of making sense of stories. In other words, the intention is always to understand more

about the ways in which we interact with and glean meaning from narratives communicated through various forms of media and how differing forms of narrative across media share meaning and structure. That is not to say narratology ignores or neglects sociocultural narrative as a subject, in fact it does not, as Titzmann (2003) declares when discussing the systemic place of narratology in the field of literary and textual theory, “narration does not just take place in literary, mythological, and religious texts; it is also an indispensable part of everyday communication, be it oral or written, literary or non-literary, linguistic or non-linguistic.” (p. 178-9)¹¹ During this thesis, I want to open out the discussion to these narratives that are indispensable to everyday communication by exploring the post-truth sociocultural narrative and its attendant atmosphere *as* narrative. It is important to undertake this task in order to understand the relationships between the post-truth sociocultural narrative and current lived experience of the world, the self, and the community for those most affected by it (largely the West but the post-truth narrative is not limited to the West, it has outreach through the digital spaces to the world at large, and the effects of this in politics and in discourse are becoming more and more evident).¹² With respect to that aim and taking into account the literary focus of narratological methodology, I intend to use narratology less as a set of methodological frameworks and more as a broad viewing lens through which to explore various narrative and experiential aspects of post-truth. I make this choice as I am very keen to avoid any connotations with literature, which I feel would distract from the focus on societal narrative patterning within this thesis. Therefore, whilst I have employed some narratological theory to frame case studies and ideas as I deem it suitable, I have not been strict in the application thereof, which perhaps detracts from the theoretical

¹¹ For an insight into narratology’s broad viewpoint see Krieswirth’s contribution in: Krieswirth, M. (2005) "Narrative Turn in the Humanities," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. (Edited by Herman, D, Manfred, J, & Ryan, M.L.), Routledge, p. 377-382

¹² For example, the growing radicalisation found within international discourse around abortion, migrants, and climate change, and the astonishing march back towards and into power by Far-Right parties in Europe.

strength of the thesis but I hope does nothing to damage its central messages and ideas.

To open the discussion into the post-truth narrative atmosphere that this thesis seeks to undertake, I considered it necessary to make the case for post-truth as a sociocultural narrative, which is the beginning focus of chapter one. Establishing the plausibility of post-truth as arising from changes in the social contract serves to strengthen and contextualize all that follows. The first step in this process is a breakdown of the current literature. To begin with, I think there is a need to take a closer look at the varying arguments therein in order to clarify these a little and establish the positions taken therein and show how the field, whilst diverse, is broadly in agreement on post-truth and its outcomes. The main aim of showcasing the central cohesion aligning all these arguments is to demonstrate how the literature indicates a deeper narrative current underlying post-truth. This section seeks, in short, to outline the broader picture of what Jonathan Mair suggests may be a “new struggle – or a new phase in an ongoing struggle – over theories of truth, belief and knowledge, in the context of a radically altered information environment.” (Paragraph 4) My argument centres around delineating how the radically altered information environment which the literature does such a wonderful job of detailing has a sociocultural narrative foundation. This broader and more intentional dive into the extant post-truth literature is then followed by a section diving a little deeper into sociocultural narratives, utilising theoretical works by Bruner, Lyotard, Dennett and McAdams as a foundation from which to explore and understand the functions of sociocultural narratives in the formation of the social agreements they represent and inform.¹³ My aim here is to illuminate, and also

¹³ Though I will apply some of this theory as it is offered, I am also using theory I apply as a framework, either to illuminate parts of this theory whose direction aids in cementing an example I wish to make, or as a means of supporting different ideas

to delineate, the role of sociocultural narratives and the broad effect they enact with regards to human action, interaction, and behaviour. The most central issue of this section, however, is an effort to resolve problems of language and its meaning by offering a reframing of the terminology used in narrative theory for sociocultural narratives. As I have stated in this introduction, I am keen to avoid literary parallels in my theory, and so avoiding using language and terminology most commonly found in association with literary theory is important to me. To this end, I have chosen to devise unique terminology for sociocultural narratives for the purpose of this thesis, choosing to name them tectonics and giving my reasoning and thought process for this alteration. This is not the only language I have chosen to alter for my thesis, there is also language inherent to the post-truth sociocultural narrative that I believe holds a weight of meaning that would inhibit the discussion I intend to undertake. I speak here of the words truth and reality, both of which require frequent reference when discussing any aspect of post-truth as they form central contestations within the narrative landscape. In this next section I offer my new language for those terms, choosing fact and actual for truth and actuality for reality, in order to speak concretely of things that can be proven or experienced directly. The final aim of this chapter is to elucidate the post-truth narrative atmosphere and some of the ways in which it presents in the online and offline spaces, some of the ways in which it is experienced and encountered. This to offer a clearer understanding of my meaning when I utilise the term, as I will frequently do within the body of this work.

The focus of chapter two is a deeper dive into the role of sociocultural narratives, this time in the formation of the self and collectives, all of which serves to elucidate

and theoretical notions. In the case of using this theory as a support mechanism I am using a pre-existing scaffold to build a new construction as a means to better illuminate new directions of thought upon and within a subject. Where necessary, I will highlight these deviations and usages.

the ways in which a sociocultural narrative derived from post-truth might be able to effect self-creation and collective behaviour. One of the champions of this exploration into the storytelling self is Jerome Bruner, whose work in the field of cognitive psychology established the importance and primacy of self-created narratives in human development and understanding. Using Ricoeur's narrative self to ground the notion of narrative as a primary driver in the development of the self and of the collective (society/ culture), I then combine the thrust of these ideas to investigate the ways in which the creation of self is informed and influenced by sociocultural narratives. I speak of acculturation, the process of inhabiting the narratives of a culture, which is the broad scale of these narrative interactions and show how such narratives inform even the smallest of our actions. The day-to-day stuff of living, the rules of interaction, action, behaviour, and personhood, are all given voice by the societal agreements that form the sociocultural narratives. Making clear the narrative foundation inherent in humanity's societal agreements enables me to highlight the ease with which we respond to narrative, and therefore to the narrative manipulation that forms a central feature of the post-truth narrative atmosphere. As this chapter represents an intent to study the individual and the collective, the next section deals solely with collective behaviour, the mechanics underlying this behaviour and its societal functions and rewards. Informed by Gallagher and Tollefson's work as well as Bruner, these sections examine group behaviour and psychology in detail, showing how the collective experience lends itself not only to the writing of the sociocultural narratives that we inhabit but to the broader systemic changes that form progress or the inhibition of such. The emphasis here is on the power of the collective experience, how this can override individual experience, thought, and intent, and how this lends itself to the divisive elements of the post-truth narrative atmosphere. By forming to groups, we categorise ourselves

into alike and other, and this natural tendency to divide amongst ourselves can be seen to be exploited and magnified by the discourse in the post-truth narrative atmosphere. The main aim of this chapter is to allow me to explicate how “profoundly relational” (Bruner, 2002, p. 86) our selfhood is. Imagine self like the clay on the metal skeleton of a model. The clay can take any form, build any kind of person, but the skeleton (the tectonics of the era, our socio-cultural narratives) remains the same. Even though we may come to recognize parts of that skeleton are toxic, or do not serve us, or perhaps are disparate from whom we wish to be, we can only reshape the clay over them, not eliminate them entirely. They are the ghost whispers of precondition, what we elegantly describe as ‘human nature’, those parts of us leaning more toward instinct than premeditation. These basal codes, or basal tectonics, are the underlying structures of humanity and selfhood, and are the ones most at risk of exploitation by post-truth narrative forms. It is difficult to see alterations to subconscious structures after they have become an integral and firmly adhered to function of selfhood. We are storied beings, narrative beings, and in large part we build ourselves from the narratives available to us, which poses significant questions about how we might deviate now from these unreliable post-truth narratives undermining our sense of reality and truth. Is it possible to rewrite these narratives whilst immersed in an edited reality, wherein ‘truth’ as the ‘real’ slowly becomes ever more disputed territory? As we achieve greater malleability over this distinction, aided by advances in the field of digital technology and augmented reality, so the difficulty in identifying and countering the type of sticky narratives that propagate in a post-truth era will increase. To my mind the first step is to interrogate and define the ways in which our reality has already been, not only edited, but compromised. The ways in which our online spaces, and the effects they enact within us, are changing society as a whole – and how those changes are

feeding into the ability of post-truth narratives to stick, spread and initiate a damaging effect upon the ways in which we build and perform society and self. Which is where I take us in part two of this thesis, where I begin to open out my central argument and explore the ways in which the post-truth narrative atmosphere (and narrative in general) acts and reacts within society in the online, offline, and hybrid spaces. Given the power these narratives we absorb possess to change everything about us and how we think – how we present ourselves to the world, how we engage with it – I investigate the long-term effects of immersing in spaces wherein such narratives proliferate ever more freely, becoming ever harder to decode.

One of the largest spaces we inhabit is an entirely new space for inhabitation, it is the digital environment, and this new space forms the background for chapter three, and an investigation into the way narrative enters, reacts, and interacts online. Existing scholarship on and around digital culture, which has the benefit of exploring the subject with the benefit of both hindsight and experience, covers a broad range of subject matter, opening an inquiry into various outcomes, symptoms, or effects enacted upon society by social media and technology. For instance, there is a wealth of scholarship around the notions of self-surveillance, moral panic and the truth bias connected with this, and problems surrounding the prevalence of right-wing populism in the online spaces.¹⁴ Other scholars have aimed their focus at the effects of these spaces upon our psychology, exploring the effects on aspects of mental health such as body image and our overall wellbeing, including the viral industries springing up around these areas online.¹⁵ There has also been a swathe of

¹⁴ This small overview of the field offers an excellent insight into the breadth of scholarship: Kaziliūnaitė 2019, Duffy, Chan 2018, Luo, Hancock, Markowitz 2020, Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, Bimber 2020, Barnidge 2018.

¹⁵ Some wonderful research into the effects cyberspace/sns enact on psychology can be found written by: Bekalu, McCloud, Viswanath 2019, Appel, Marker, Gnams 2019, Fardouly, Holland 2018, Stavrova, Denissen 2020.

vital scholarship aimed at understanding the ways in which our news is mediated via social media and how those spaces lend themselves to the spread of misinformation.¹⁶ However, the subject of narrative in the totality of this scholarship, whenever referenced, remains anchored to either a storytelling perspective or psychological viewpoint, rather than broadening out to encompass the larger effects on our tectonic narratives and the subsequent ramifications for our social, interpersonal, and political being, not to mention our selfhood. In chapter three my intention is to rectify this lapse and explore not only the possible ways in which online spaces affect our sociocultural narratives but the ways in which all narratives disseminate, fragment and warp beyond recognition as they pass through the prism of online spaces, particularly the SNS. This warping and fragmentation is of prime importance when trying to understand the ways in which our narratives have been altered—and often undermined—by these spaces and the effect this is having upon us as a society. This process begins with an exploration of space, the combined spaces of the online / offline environment have inspired several attempts to classify what this new space is and how it can be referred to. I explore a number of these theories, such as de Souza e Silva's hybrid space, based in a combined experience of online and offline environments and Kosari and Amoori's third space, which seeks to build a theoretical gap between online and offline spaces that suggests a new space in which they combine. I then offer my addition to the field of thought with the term synthesised space, which I argue is the clearest explication of the experience of being immersed in 21st century with its smart devices and the ways in which discourse travels seamlessly across the digital spaces and into the physical. I argue then that this online experience is heterotopic in nature, in that it represents, contests, and inverts reality, and the narratives deriving thereof. Having established

¹⁶ These papers show a broad cross-section of the field: Swart, Peters, Broersma 2018, Kruzan, Won 2019, Li, Liu, Pirkkalainen, Salo 2020, Arceneaux, Dinu 2018.

this I move then to explore the heterotopic narrative ecology of the synthesised space, describing the unmooring of narrative that occurs therein and how this lends to immediate diffusion, warping, and distortion. Turning to Foucault, I seek to understand the implications for communication and how such narrative unmooring inhibits the ability to interpret what a narrative might mean, impacting sense-making and the understanding of the world. This in turn impacts the ways in which we interact with information online, our digital psychogeography and, by way of Debord and his notion of the *dérive*, I take the time to unpack three specific outcomes of this interaction, the enforced *dérive*, which is the mindless scrolling online that leads to a narrative and territorial de-situation as exposure to a limitless unfamiliar muddies the perception of the self and the space. The second psychogeographical effect I tackle is the urge to remain within the familiar, this *dérive* makes reference to humans as creatures of habit and seeks to explicate the prevalence of filter bubbles and echo chambers in the online space, which I see as the natural outcome of an overexposure to the unfamiliar in the glut and profusion online. The third effect earns a section of its own, and deals with the psychogeographical diegesis, the journey through the multitude of digital selves. The effects of this diegesis are manifold, and utilising the theory of Turkle and Elwell, amongst others, I elucidate on a number of these outcomes, including the impact of surveillance on the presentation of the self, online and off, and how curation online impacts self-image, even to the point of pathology. The final point of this chapter resides in Caillois and legendary psychasthenia, wherein a subject becomes lost in its environment and therefore dislocated, and responds in the only way possible, by assimilating with the environment. I relate this to the pressure to curate oneself online, the urge to mimic to fit in, and then turn to back to the notion of the *dérive* through manifold selves to elucidate via Bachelard how the encounter

with the vastness of the online spaces, and all those who inhabit it, can lead to a drowning in the space, to a diminishment of being that then informs the outcomes of interaction in the synthesised space. This, I argue is one of the drivers of the propagation and expansion of the post-truth narrative atmosphere. This chapter is not intended as a criticism of the online spaces, these spaces are shown to have multiple positive effects, some of which are incredibly powerful, it aims is to elucidate how narrative reacts within the space to demonstrate the integral role of the space in the production of the post-truth atmosphere and in a variety of psychological and physical impacts, as evidenced by changes in human behaviour that can be directly attributed to the ways in which narrative moves within the space.

Chapter four moves on from the online spaces and looks into the narrative underpinnings of the post-truth atmosphere to show how its core features of confusion, division, obfuscation and distortion can be said to relate to an alliance of the post-truth sociocultural narrative with outgoing mythic-systems which are engaged in a battle for dominance with newer mythic-systems arising from a variety of profound societal and philosophical changes over the course of the late 20th and early 21st century. In the context of this thesis and this argument, mythic-systems are belief-systems founded upon archaic or myth-driven modes of thinking based on historical perceptions of weakness/strength, colour/race, culture/education. These systems perpetuate binary perceptions of the world and frame them as either preferable or lamentable.^{17 18} Their modes of thinking are often rooted in a deep-

¹⁷ By 'historical perceptions' I mean perceptions based in studies or philosophy etc written by and for the progenitors of such mythic-systems, to align further with their preferred comprehension of the world. For instance, one can look to the fallacious studies into African natives that seek to show the primitive nature of African cultures, or the concerted efforts throughout history to subdue or erase the many contributions of women to science, philosophy, art etc in an attempt to force the viewpoint that women are incapable of the same contributions as men.

¹⁸ For instance, by delineating and enforcing the moral difference between political, religious, or social positions.

seated conviction which is obdurate in its resistance to change despite the progenitors of these systems, through rhetoric and systemic implementation, seeking to effect large-scale behaviour-altering tectonics in service of their beliefs. Whilst dissecting the myth-based structures underpinning workplace and organisational cultures, Boje, Fedor and Rowland (1982) make several important points about how such mythic-systems function amongst groups of people, describing the process of myth-making as adaptive, a mechanism whose function is to construct frameworks of meaning and logic that a workforce in a particular environment can follow. Such frameworks are meant to create a singular vision within the company or group of what reality *should* look like, allowing for the members of that company or group to move in concert when facing uncertainty. In the organisational context this enables members to take part in communal legitimisation of certain activities and behaviours within said organisation that might otherwise cause friction or upset. In other words, one might call these myths a collective defence mechanism against the unexpected, which recalls the notion of filter bubbles and echo chambers and the way they offer a safety in a mutually affirmed actuality, which demonstrates why the sharing of a common mythic-system might be deemed beneficial. Faced with interference from unwanted information a group can, using its agreed mythic-system, agree that actuality remains as they wish to see it, as they have constructed it, or have agreed that it is constructed. As beneficial as this outcome might be to the groups involved, there is an undeniable downside, described by Boje, Fedor and Rowland (1982) as a narrowing of the horizon by which life is allowed to make sense. Within the bounds of a mythic-system, much like a group of settlers forming a circle of their wagons, a group can close ranks and agree that nothing outside of their mythic-system is rational, or based in truth, allowing for the summary dismissal as counterfactual of anything that does not align. So what is it that does

not align with the mythic-systems I am describing, those in danger of extinction? What one finds when one examines the narratives of such mythic-systems are rigid notions, very often couched in binary terms, of what is and is not morally, religiously, philosophically, politically, and socially acceptable. These notions are primarily informed by archetypal stories, whose importance lies in the symbolic value of their content. An archetypal story is an incredibly powerful idea, rich with symbolism and meaning, and as such they are found everywhere. Simply put, one cannot write a story without archetypes, but the archetypal stories most comparable with those of these older mythic-systems can be found within religion, specifically Christianity – whose mythic foundations can be said to form a sort of bedrock for some of the prevailing ideals therein. In their discussion upon the subject of symbolism in Christianity, Deacon and Cashman (2009) speak about the human lived experience as consisting of a duality, a relationship between the virtual world of symbols and their meanings, and the material world, with its concrete actions and events. The effects of this, they argue, are twofold. First this relationship fosters an impulse to form a symbolic self-narrative and an attendant narrative explanation of the world. Second it encourages people to look for that which underlies the surface appearance of the world and seek out patterns in the structures and systems they find. Deacon and Cashman refer to these modes of focusing as an “attentional bias toward discerning a pattern-behind-the-pattern” (2009, p. 26). These symbolic systems with all their meanings offer to the individual “his or her *place* in an imagined (yet believed) symbolic system with meanings more communal and/or lasting” (*ibid*, p.24) Religion is a powerful example of this pattern-behind-the-pattern bias, offering a means of explanation, and therefore comfort, for the world and that which lies beyond. The mythic-systems whose narratives form the underpinnings of what might be considered a more conservative viewpoint provide the same comfort,

drawing from literal interpretation of the scriptures around notions of morality, faith, and identity expression. However, and this is far more troubling in many ways, their foundation is also built from the type of archetypal stories whose fundamentals derive from ideas of white supremacy, which shares parallels with the ideas behind fascism, authoritarianism and autocracy etc — the self-made man, the sovereign individual, might is right, white power, the inferiority of the ‘primitive’ (or as is signified by the language employed, any version of Other not fore-fronted by these mythic-systems), and extreme notions of divide and conquer. These ideas in their totality are diametrically opposed to the more progressive ideas that have gradually been built into society over the course of the mid to late 20th century and early 21st century. Such ideas of progress and diversity, and the breaking of all manner of binary boundaries represent that which does not align with the values of these mythic-systems, and what they stand in opposition against. Their logic and reason outlining for their adherents why this cannot be the world they live in, and why it does not and will not align with their fundamental actuality. This inability to align drives the battle against newer, more progressive mythic-systems, such as those agreed in the post-war period, in the philosophical revolution of the sixties and in the wake of globalisation’s wider perspective on the world, which has broadened the ability of many people to understand different ideas and ways of being. The aim of this chapter is to show how older mythic-systems have made a narrative alliance with post-truth, the experience of which in the synthesised space is the manipulation of narrative and a re-writing of reality that seeks to obscure the lie of the land so that the battle can be won by stealth. I conclude this chapter by asking if there are any inbuilt mechanisms in our sociocultural narrative make-up that offer a solution to this obscuration of the world, which leads to the final chapter, and an exploration into narrative break.

Taking the notion of narrative breach and applying it to the outcomes of the post-truth narrative atmosphere, chapter five explores inbuilt narrative protections as a primary means of defence against the consequences of post-truth narrative manipulation and edited reality. Beginning with a breakdown of breach itself, what it is, how it is meant by Bruner and how it can be utilised to understand reactions to post-truth narratives themselves, this chapter investigates our narrative defence mechanisms, whose function is purely protective. Using the examples of Gibson's F.Q. and his defensive membrane, this chapter seeks to offer a comprehensive insight into the purpose and function of these mechanisms, which is both to offer forewarning that the world is not all it seems, and to allow for immediate awareness in the event of catastrophic breach (such as Brexit or Trump, or more recently for progressives in Italy, following the ascension to power of the Brothers of Italy, whose roots derive from Mussolini's National Fascist Party).¹⁹ ²⁰ Such immediate awareness may be uncomfortable, but we rarely act from a position of comfort, and breaches in narrative are, more than anything else, an opportunity for action. To illustrate such a breach and why this is important, this chapter presents a case study of a breach pertinent to Gibson's experience, Donald Trump's candidacy and his subsequent winning of the 2016 Presidential election. This case study is followed by an in-depth analysis of his voter base and their possible reasons for choosing him, all of which relate to mythic-systems and the post-truth narrative atmosphere. The purpose of this chapter is to show that, as disruptive as the post-truth narrative atmosphere can be, no matter how obscured or distorted understanding of the world may become, there are inbuilt narrative protections, mechanisms whose sole

¹⁹ F.Q.: Fuckedness quotient, the metric by which Gibson measures the weirdness of the world as it spirals out of control.

²⁰ Defensive membrane: The barrier between the realities of his work as he researched it for the purposes of fiction and his everyday life, Gibson's defensive membrane collapsed after Trump won the presidential election.

purpose is to maintain a deeper awareness of the integrity of the real world and give rise to warning when that integrity is under threat or actively broken. These mechanisms are not, however, the answer to the issue of narrative manipulation in the post-truth narrative atmosphere of the editing of reality, they are merely a tool in our arsenal against it. Without these, I contest, and even with them, our immersion in the post-truth narrative atmosphere, arising from the post-truth sociocultural narrative agreement, leaves us little room for manoeuvre. We are left relying on the conditions leading up to narrative break for insight into the changes occurring on the ground, this is because information and narrative becomes too contested and dispersed in our current shared spaces and communications.

By way of a conclusion, this thesis finds that the primary defence against post-truth, is to acknowledge it as a narrative issue and treat it accordingly, seeking for absolute clarity in the foundation of our language and, more importantly, our meaning, because meaning matters and for meaning to matter the shape of our narrative must be chosen with precision. In the battle against post-truth, context and clarification are key. Furthermore, if we seek to solve the problem of post-truth, we cannot do so if we are approaching the problem solely as a binary issue of truth versus facts and reality versus unreality. This approach, as this thesis demonstrates, serves only the continuation of the problem, by allowing it to be obscured by the narrative warping and obfuscation which characterises the post-truth tectonic and its narrative atmosphere. Clarity in communication can serve to limit the ways in which narrative can be re-appropriated into other positions by means of distortion and manipulation, but such clarification is difficult. In a mediated synthesized space where narrative comes immediately unmoored and belongs to whoever appropriates it, any clarification can be subject to manipulation. In sum, there is no

ideal solution to the problem of a post-truth narrative atmosphere, deriving as it does from a change in the societal agreements which means that the narrative underpinnings of the phenomenon run deep and wide throughout the whole of the narrative foundation and therefore may only be subject to absolute change if Western society agrees collectively to change them. Considering the battle taking place in the synthesized space for dominance between mythic-systems, I suggest that this could go either way. Either we by losing agree to remain within a paradigm that belongs to the 20th century, or we agree collectively by decisive action to move forward into a narrative framework more suited to the progressive ideals and globalized understanding that typifies the 21st century and the digital age it inhabits.

PART ONE

1.

THE PROBLEM OF POST-TRUTH

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to establish the case for post-truth as a socio-cultural narrative. The first step in this process is an exploration into how post-truth is viewed by the current scholarship, how it is described, and why. It is important to present, explore, and understand this existing viewpoint to show how speaking of the notion of post-truth as a broader narrative issue is necessary and worthwhile. At this point I then turn my attention to unpacking the case for post-truth as a narrative issue, determining the language that I intend to employ and looking at some of the factors that make an investigation of this nature pertinent. Attendant to that undertaking I then move to speak of a couple of the central terms used when speaking about post-truth to explain why I intend to use differing terminology. Finally, this chapter moves to give a description of what I will continue throughout this thesis to call the 'post-truth narrative atmosphere'. This last section offers an expressive overview of the atmosphere's make-up, effects, and outcomes, in order to drive home the idea of post-truth as a societal narrative issue whose capacity for reach and effects are far-ranging.

1.1 Understanding Post-Truth.

In the introduction I referred to Tesich and his coining of the term post-truth, his reasoning for this description and its foundation, that of a public willingness to be shielded from harsher reality and facts, driven by a pervasive feeling of anxiety surrounding such. He speaks with great passion about this suggested abandonment of truth, but truth itself is too emotive and slippery a subject to make any kind of declaration about its abandonment or otherwise. To do so would be unwise. However, what can be taken from the observations that drive his assertion is the deep sense of alteration implied beneath this apparent change of heart, that of a societal shifting (at least within the West) around the notion of what forms dishonesty can take, and how far such dishonesty is given permission to extend. This transformation of the narratives around honesty versus dishonesty in America is the subject of Ralph Keyes's 2004 book *The Post-Truth era: Dishonesty and Deception in Everyday Life*. In this book, Keyes outlines his theory regarding changing attitudes towards dishonesty, beginning with a chapter that offers several studies showing a growing ease with lies and dishonesty, such as studies covering lying in conversations with strangers by psychologist Robert Feldman and a huge study by sociologists Noelle Rodriguez and Alan Rygrave that recorded how many times hundreds of people told lies across the course of a week.²¹ The results of these studies, amongst others, revealed that even people who regard themselves as truthful tend to tell an extraordinary amount of casual little lies. Offset this against evidence found in polls that honesty is still a highly prized commodity and there is, as Keyes noted, an unusual dichotomy at play, more so when one looks at the number of participators in the studies who went in claiming that they were honest people, that they rarely, if ever, told lies. Keyes goes on to talk at length about the

²¹ A clarification is needed here to note that Keyes, much like most scholars writing around the subject of post-truth (including myself), can only really speak in terms of Western (specifically white western) trends with regards to attitudes toward dishonesty etc. There is no attempt to blanket this as a global phenomenon, although post-truth is globally recognised and has global consequences.

ways in which it has been, historically, acceptable to lie, drawing a line all the way from Plato's "noble lies" (2004, p. 28), through the Old and New Testaments "combining condemnations of dishonesty with admiring accounts of successful deception" (*ibid*, p. 29), to the "socially acceptable" (*ibid*, p. 39) lies even members of close-knit communities might expect to hear within their group. He makes it clear that there are forms of dishonesty that have been regarded categorically unacceptable, such as fraud and theft, but that dishonesty has always and will always exist, and that we as individuals and as a society are both fully aware of this and have built a multitude of rules and morals around all possible forms thereof. As he puts it: "All societies must reconcile the fact that lying is socially toxic which the fact that nearly all their members engage in this practice." (*ibid*, p. 27) Keyes point is clearly not that truth has somehow been superseded, instead he makes a case to suggest that the rules surrounding honesty and dishonesty have changed. He speaks of a correlative pattern in the language used around dishonesty that seems to be the foundation of the adjustment in meaning. "Lies," he says, "have always been told with hesitation, a dash of anxiety, a bit of guilt, a little shame, at least some sheepishness. Now, clever people that we are, we have come up with rationales for tampering with the truth so we can dissemble guilt-free." (2004, p. 12) Borrowing directly (and with a tiny disclaimer in his footnotes) from Tesich, he then calls *this* state of dissembling post-truth, which he suggests "exists in an ethical twilight zone" that gives us leave to "dissemble without considering ourselves dishonest". (*ibid*, p. 13) He speaks of the "alternative approaches to morality" we have begun to take within which "dissembling is considered okay, not necessarily wrong, therefore not really dishonest in the negative sense of the word." (*ibid*, p. 13) Keyes then goes on to examine the notion of the lie and how it can be seen in two ways, as a description, and as a weapon, and how modern society, disliking the violence of the word and

the feeling engendered by being called a liar, has found softer language to take the sting of accusation out of the equation. He writes, “We no longer tell lies. Instead we ‘misspeak’. We ‘exaggerate’. We ‘exercise poor judgement’. ‘Mistakes were made,’ we say. The term ‘deceive’ gives way to the more playful ‘spin’.” (2004, p. 13) Keyes states that in this same spirit of softness we also hold back from accusing others of lying, making excuses for dishonesty in others as freely as we do so for ourselves. He suggests that these changing attitudes to honesty and truth within (mostly Western) society makes a good case for why there might be greater willingness to allow certain types of manipulation of the facts.²² This changing attitude to honesty adds weight to the notion of deep narrative shifts occurring within the socio-cultural tectonics which have the capacity to affect, and alter, aspects of behaviour, interaction, and reaction across societies.

This early take on post-truth, with its focus on a broader issue with the societal value of honesty as opposed to dishonesty somewhat sets the stage for all later works, most of which were written in the wake of Brexit and Trump, after the Oxford dictionary dubbed post-truth its word of the year.²³ In the immediate aftermath of these two extraordinary events, a swathe of literature sought to examine and understand what the term might mean, and how the effects of post-truth could be fought and countered. Matthew D’Ancona (2017) focused on “the decline of truth as society’s reserve currency, and the pernicious spread of relativism disguised as legitimate skepticism” (location 78). Evan Davis (2017) sought to suggest that post-truth arose from a state of peak bullshit, James Ball (2017) also focused on the

²² Mostly Western is my distinction, just for the sake of clarity. Keyes does not state it explicitly every time, but it is clear in the book that he is speaking mainly about the West, and primarily about North America.

²³ In 2016 the Oxford dictionary chose post-truth as their word of the year, describing it thus: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”: Editors. (2016) ‘Word of the Year 2016’, *Oxford Languages*. Available at: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>. (Accessed March 2020)

unprecedented rise of bullshit, as indicated by the rise of Trump and the outcomes of Brexit. Lee McIntyre (2018) tackled post-truth from the position that it was a challenge to truth designed as a mechanism for establishing political dominance. Steve Fuller (2018) spoke of it in terms of a Machiavellian power game of sorts, a political battle waged by asserting dominance over the control of information. Much like Keyes, these works acknowledge the extent to which a change in attitude toward notions of truth and untruth supports a post-truth environment whilst making certain to be explicit in their interrogation of the limitations of the binary aspects inherent within the term itself. For instance, Evan Davis begins his 2017 interrogation of post-truth much like Keyes, with a compelling overview of our freewheeling attitude to truth and facts throughout history, including a breakdown of the many softer versions of lying we have come to normalise, such as spin, selective facts, the near-lie, stretching the truth and self-delusion. He goes on, however, to point out that there are factors we cannot ignore which problematise factuality and truth-telling outside of the political sphere.²⁴ Amongst the evidence he presents for these non-political influences, Davis cites the “modern marketing techniques of the twentieth century, which saw messages so perfectly crafted as to no longer be grounded in reality” (location 111), or the “ingenious but hollow brand slogans to which we have become habituated” (location 158). He points out that we understand this is nonsense, but we tolerate it, we even buy the products knowing that the slogans and jingles are an outright exaggeration at best. An interesting psychology is at work here, the building of stories and inviting a buying audience to feel part of them, even if it is obvious that they are stories. Barthes speaks of this language of advertisement in his *Mythologies*, breaking down the ways in which advertisement exploits the inherent significance of imagery to sell us stories or ideas

²⁴ In agreement with the existing literature, I must state here that the rhetoric from the political sphere is arguably one of the key contributors to waning adherence to factuality in the populous.

that feel familiar even if they are not, thereby contorting, or erasing, that original meaning. In this way, he argues, we confuse the very foundations of meaning itself by eliding meaning from the meaningful until we are no longer sure what anything means, or indeed if anything has any meaning at all (1972, p. 131-187). In his breakdown of post-truth, McIntyre (2018) also speaks about the subversion of truth and of the concept of wilful ignorance. He pinpoints the blatant bending of facts as a major issue and notes that the primary issue therein is the intention to manipulate others into “believing something *that we know to be untrue*” (location 200). He suggests that this willingness to believe despite an awareness of the lie, or dishonesty, indicates a graduation from simply seeking for an interpretation of the facts to openly falsifying the facts as they stand. By way of conclusion, he asks: “Is that what post-truth is about?” (location 200). For him, and for post-truth scholarship in general, this ends up as only a small part of the overall picture of what post-truth seems to be about. The larger picture of post-truth points to a convergence of sorts, a critical mass of political, societal, philosophical, and technological changes culminating in the atmosphere from which the phenomenon of post-truth derives. I have already mentioned D’Ancona’s conviction that post-truth can be traced back to the rise of relativism. Davis (2017) agrees with that in part, but he brings together those debates in academia on the impossibility of objective truth with changes in the media landscape, science denial on issues such as vaccination, evolution and climate change and the cognitive irrationalities inbuilt into human nature to outline an argument for a much larger group of formative events. Benesch also sees it as a larger event, for him the convergence at the heart of post-truth arises from the “major breakdown of the institutions and mechanisms of democratic society, triggered by an encompassing technological transformation that affects both our public and our private lives” (2020, p. 2). Benesch argues that the contestation of

truth occurred in the wake of this collapse, and that we are not, therefore, dealing with some post-truth era, but with an inevitable consequence or outcome. These analyses align with the notion of a post-truth socio-cultural narrative which can have been said to arise as an outcome of a multitude of changes in the societal agreements caused by rapid technological transformation coupled with political, social, and economic upheavals. In this viewpoint, and in my own, the collapse of truth and the contestation of reality are no more than symptoms of post-truth, as are the results of the EU referendum and the rise of Trump. This thesis seeks to shine a light on the disease itself, the underlying narrative structures and their effects on communication, behaviour, action, and interaction in the online and offline spaces.

I do not wish to end this section on post-truth without looking at an alternative viewpoint. One viewpoint offering a fascinating alternative reasoning for the phenomenon arises from Carrera. Writing on the subject in 2018, she describes post-truth as a deliberate rhetorical device, pointing to a staging of truth against fake news after which, she claims, the false finds itself “excluded from the global discourse” and “isolated [...] in a ghetto of discourses that are false and generate falsehood” (2018, p. 1470). This exclusion she claims, then allows for the remainder of the discourse to retain a gleam of truth and reliability, an innocence of sorts. Speaking of this staging of the true against the false, Carrera says that it “suggests a space of discursive transparency that aims to be beyond rhetoric and mediation in order to reflect reality *as it is*.” (*ibid.* p. 1470) She is speaking here of the self-same phenomenon as McIntyre, citing representations of reality as manipulated to reflect what is expedient in whichever historical or political context is preferable, which to her thinking then avoids any “objective factuality located beyond the historical realm.” (2018, p. 1470) I would suggest that post-truth political narratives are all

about being able to have a kind of plausible deniability on the basis of reality itself, in that they seek to place uncertainty at the heart of the equation. Take for example Trump's inauguration crowd and the multitude of lies he and his administration fabricated about its size, all against the backdrop of actual footage and photographs of the event.²⁵ The intersection of images and rhetoric around alternative facts sought to destabilise the very idea of factual evidence, as if it was somehow wrong to believe the evidence of one's eyes. Though these claims were widely ridiculed, that confidence in the telling characterised the administration's ongoing attitude toward any evidence standing in contradiction to claims Trump might feel moved to make. One could also turn to the recent Tory partygate incidents, where the Prime Minister broke the lockdown rules that his parliament had established to attend several parties, and then insisted, and continued to insist, even as evidence mounted, that he had not done so.²⁶ This plausible deniability is not, however, only found regarding purely political issues, it is also clearly visible in the rhetoric around climate change, with multiple prominent political figures stating outright that anthropogenic climate change is neither real, nor urgent, for instance the new business and energy secretary (at the time of writing) Jacob Rees-Mogg.^{27 28} This uncertainty, this plausible deniability on the basis of reality is a feature of post-truth and not a bug, and its

²⁵ For a little context see: Cockburn, H. (2017) 'Donald Trump again claims to have largest presidential inauguration audience in history', *The Independent*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-claims-presidential-inauguration-audience-history-us-president-white-house-barack-obama-a7547141.html> (Accessed September 2022), Hunt, E. (2017) 'Trump's inauguration crowd: Sean Spicer's claims versus the evidence', *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/22/trump-inauguration-crowd-sean-spicers-claims-versus-the-evidence> (Accessed September 2022)

²⁶ These stories provide some background and information about the partygate issue: Flinders, M. (2022) Denial, 'Detachment and the Boris Johnson Partygate Saga', *The Wire*. Available at: <https://thewire.in/world/denial-detachment-and-the-boris-johnson-partygate-saga> (Accessed September 2022), Sholli, S. (2022), 'Shelagh Fogarty's devastating takedown of Boris Johnson partygate denial', *LBC*. Available at: <https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/shelagh-fogarty/shelagh-fogarty-takedown-boris-johnson-partygate-denial/> (Accessed September 2022), Peachey, S. (2022) 'Partygate: Boris Johnson's repeated denials and excuses', *IndependentTV*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/partygate-boris-johnson-denials-excuses-b2056636.html> (Accessed September 2022)

²⁷ That is, climate change accelerated by human activity.

²⁸ See: Harvey, F. (2022) 'Record of climate denialism indicates how Rees-Mogg will handle energy brief', *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2022/sep/06/record-of-climate-denialism-indicates-how-rees-mogg-will-handle-energy-brief> (Accessed September 2022), Macaskill, A. & Sandal, P. (2022) 'Britain appoints Rees-Mogg, who dismissed climate change risks, to energy role', *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-appoints-rees-mogg-who-dismissed-climate-change-risks-energy-role-2022-09-06/> (Accessed September 2022), Crera, P., Horton, H., & Mason, R. (2022) 'Jacob Rees-Mogg, who decried 'climate alarmism', to take on UK energy brief', *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/sep/06/jacob-rees-mogg-climate-alarmism-uk-energy-brief> (Accessed September 2022)

effect is not more apparent than in the online spaces, particularly the social networking sites (SNS). This is something that Carrera touches upon, although her interest lies in how the internet and social networks are described for the purposes of post-truth. To Carrera (2018) the descriptions utilised for the internet and SNS seem focused on defining them as spaces ideal for deception or misrepresentation, and that this description is then used to posit the existence of “mediated spaces that are [...] unbiased and free from manipulation.” (2018, p. 1470). Carrera is of the view that this is a deliberate strategy, as is post-truth itself, which she believes is a rhetorical weapon. I do not disagree with this stance, but I argue that this adoption of post-truth as a rhetorical weapon stands as proof of the narrative nature of the issue. This outcome is supported by Chomsky and Herman, who in 1995 wrote that all communication, all media, all society, whether it likes it or not, speaks and acts in service of the pre-existing ideological rhetoric of the active paradigm.²⁹ I argue that post-truth counts as such a paradigm, with that atmosphere of confusion, obfuscation, division, and distortion reflecting within and from the narratives arising out of this strange new era. As Carrera states, post-truth in the media and in politics “simultaneously serves as a lure and a smoke screen. It compels us to focus our attention on certain secondary phenomena and serves to hide from sight what is truly relevant in discursive, media, political, economic and cultural terms.” (Carrera, 2018, p. 1471) This is a hallmark of post-truth, visible in its strategies, its rhetoric, and in its atmospheric effects, most notably those of obfuscation and distortion.

I conclude this exploration of post-truth by speaking of one final aspect of the phenomenon whose central role has been noted throughout the extant literature: the

²⁹ E. S. Herman, and N. Chomsky, (2008). *Manufacturing Consent The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. London: The Bodley Head.

notion of bullshit.³⁰ The role of bullshitting in the mismanagement of facts and truth, and the logic behind such cavalier behaviour in politics, was explored in by Harry Frankfurt in his 2005 book *On Bullshit*. Here, he not only delved into the possible etymology behind the word but the psychology behind bullshitting itself. Of the bullshitter he says:

“When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.” (2005, p. 8)

And therein, perhaps, lies the crux of bullshit’s prevalence in post-truth, as a more blatant variant of that blurring of the lines between what can be classed as untruth and what can be excused as a tangential angle on the truth. In an article on post-truth as it pertains to leadership in the workplace, Foroughi, Gabriel and Fotaki suggest that bullshit artists and bullshit culture “normalizes empty verbiage as a legitimate language.” (2019, p. 138) They also reference Harry Frankfurt’s argument that “bullshit is not necessarily created by mindless slobes but can be the production of sophisticated craftsmen or bullshit artists. [...] at times aided by advanced and demanding techniques of market research, public opinion polling, or psychological testing [...] delivered in a way that gives the opposite impression.” (*ibid*, p. 138) This

³⁰ As I have already mentioned, both Davis (2017) and Ball (2017) tackle post-truth from the perspective of a rise in bullshit.

line of argument can be paralleled with that line of argument used by Davis about the language of marketing and advertisement, making a case for bullshit in the post-truth era as a marketing technique for unpopular ideas, contested information, and outright nonsenses. In an interview with Krishnan Guru-Murthy on his channel 4 podcast *Ways to Change the World*, Ken Clarke spoke of the hiring of [mostly] American experts who introduced the idea of “message discipline” – the art of sticking to the script, only ever speaking about the issue at hand.³¹ Keeping it simple. Or as Ken Clarke elaborates, “...what you need is a simple message, a slogan, and you have to repeat it all the time, because it won’t sink in unless you repeat it...” (Guru-Murthy, 2018). This repetitive presentation of the single, simple message derives from advertisement, from the slogans and jingles used to imprint products in our memories. Clarke goes on to talk about a ministerial culture of only offering interviews on subjects “where the opinion polls show that you’re popular” (*ibid*, 2018). This, yet again, is a form of message control, of audience manipulation. Such tactics can easily be abused. They not only seek to control the story, but also who sees it, how it’s seen, and how it is responded to. These tactics, and others like them, within politics and the media, have the unpleasant side effect of setting up a sort of narrative arena within which versions of events must fight for dominance. The intention being that any version not aligning with the version on offer be cast into doubt, even if there are corroborating facts and evidence, which brings us again to the concept of plausible deniability on the basis of reality. At this point I turn to Vittorio Bufacchi’s 2021 paper in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, and his clarification with regards to the difference between the narratives of the bullshit artist and the narratives of post-truth. He affirms Frankfurt’s claims about the bullshitter’s attitude

³¹ Guru-Murthy, K., 2018. ‘Ken Clarke MP on Brexit chaos, being a Tory rebel and answering critics’. [podcast] *Ways to Change the World*. Available at: <https://www.podchaser.com/podcasts/ways-to-change-the-world-with-641216/episodes/ken-clarke-mp-on-brexit-chaos-29786593> (Accessed November 2020)

to truth and lies, and that this attitude is indeed frequently present in post-truth narratives. However, he notes that in post-truth, the aims of bullshit are often quite different. He states that post-truth narratives “are in the business of subverting truth” (2021, 349), that those who utilise such narratives “aim [...] to delegitimise truth, since this is the best way to disarm the threat that truth poses to them.” (2021, 349) This distinction frames the editing of the facts to support a narrative that privileges one version of events or information over another, usually for personal or political benefit, as a calculated act, not merely the side effect of narratives offered by those for whom truth has little meaning. One can return here to McIntyre (2018) who, in speaking of the Brexit campaign and the use of misinformation against the populace in countries such as Turkey, Brazil and Hungary notes that there are those who see post-truth “as part of a growing trend where some feel emboldened to try to bend reality to fit their opinion, rather than the other way around.”(location 166) The marked reinvention of information, of facts and actuality, seen so clearly within the Brexit campaign and the Trump presidential campaign and presidency is, I argue, another clear indication of post-truth as a deeper, more systemic narrative issue, the prevailing socio-cultural narrative agreement for the digital era.³² How then, should I speak of this narrative? That problem, and the solution that I have found, are the subject I now turn to.

1.2 Narrative Nodes In A Network

“We want to know what narrative is—what might count as a narrative.” (Krieswirth, 2000, p. 296).

³² See for several major examples: the global response to the Covid pandemic (which shows the global pervasion of post-truth atmospheric pressure); the US withdrawal from Afghanistan; the Russian invasion of Ukraine; the ongoing economic fallout of Brexit.

Mieke Bal speaks of narrative as being “the stuff of anthropological knowledge” (1990, p. 731). In this understanding, narrative is not merely a means of interpretation for us as readers and listeners but as a society immersed *within* narratives and seeking to decipher what they mean for us and those around us. For Bal, and for myself, this is what one finds “at the heart of narratology”, not text, or plot, or story, but “the concept of subject, person, individual, as a node in a network of social and textual relations.” (*ibid*, p. 732) When we begin interpreting these social and textual relationships, we unlock an understanding not only of ourselves, but of our place in the world, in society, and in culture. This focus on the individual as a node in a network can be found at the heart of cognitive narratology, with its focus on a mind-narrative nexus. According to Herman (2011), one of the leaders in the theoretical field of this sub-genre, cognitive narratology “encompasses not only how stories can be used to build worlds but also how such acts of narrative worldmaking are themselves mind-enabling and mind-extending.” (p. 1). The scope of the field is not only broadly interdisciplinary but includes the study of narrative processing across such mediums as hypertext fiction, face-to-face storytelling, comics, graphic novels, and audio-visual media, throwing open the idea of what can be considered narrative. The research undertaken seeks to explicate not only the ways in which fiction relates to experientiality – the phenomenological roots of reader comprehension – but also the ways in which the processing of narrative affects, and is affected by, our mental states. How it therefore may inform or inhibit our self-creation or indeed our collected narrative agreements. Herman outlines the emphasis of cognitive narratology research as being bound to two general lines of enquiry, those being “narrative as a target of interpretation” and “stories as a resource for sense-making” (2011, p. 2). Ogilvy, Nonaka, and Konno delineate the thrust of these lines of inquiry perfectly when they speak of story being “more than a

descriptive text”, stating that as story “becomes related to the reader’s own experiences, the reader acts as an operator and creator of meanings.” (2104, p. 11). Fundamentally, cognitive narratology affirms the ways in which we make significant use of narratives to explain and explore the meaning of our own existence, the world around us, and the stories we encounter. This form of narrative study, then, sets out to explore the ways in which we interpret and are interpreted by our stories, our narratives, how we use them for sense-making. Of course, this is not a study of fictional or non-fictional narrative, it is a study of the narratives from which they derive, the underlying stories of nonmaterial culture and society, the socio-cultural narrative structures. These are the very structures that fictional narratives speak to most profoundly when they are used to interpret ways of being and feeling in the world, or ways of being and feeling as a human being. Our stories seek to understand who we are, and how we are, how the world is and how it affects us as people, as individual nodes in a network. This notion of the node in the network describes the area of my interest in terms of post-truth and narratology, but the network I define is not social and textual, but socio-cultural and digital. I argue that our current socio-cultural narrative, the paradigm of the digital era, is one of post-truth (though that term indicates a bias that I do not entirely agree with as it makes too concrete a singular aspect of the narrative) and that this results in an atmosphere of confusion, obfuscation, division, and distortion which problematises the narrative interpretation occurring within this node/ network relationship. I further seek to contest that this issue of interpretation is magnified and exacerbated by the effects of the digital space, and that this is one of the central factors within what is described as the contestation of truth and reality that characterises post-truth. To begin, however, I think it necessary to speak a little more on socio-cultural narrative as narrative, as a socially agreed upon story about humanity in its various

presentations and expressions. Within narrative theory there are a few pre-existing terms that are used to describe different factors of these socio-cultural narratives. Lyotard's "grands récits" – otherwise identified as master or grand narratives – embodies big ideas, the "culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviours." (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 323)³³ Such culturally shared stories possess five principles, all of which relate to one another: "utility, ubiquity, invisibility [...] compulsory nature, and [...] rigidity." (*ibid*, p. 326) indicating a pattern of fixed, widespread, and indiscernible cultural or social ideas whose uptake is all but subconscious. Such narratives have also been categorised, by Hammack, as a "dominant discourse" (2008, p. 224) that we, as individuals, confront in the process of decoding our own cultures. Experientially and narratively, then, these master or grand narratives described and guide the very fundamentals of humanity's thinking and being, they are the big ideas, the philosophies, the ideologies. By contrast, canonical narratives are variously described as the means by which we understand what is socially correct or acceptable. They are the scripts of normality against which deviance is checked, essentially the blueprints for social behaviour and action. Bruner defines them "plot summaries" by which "cultures provide presuppositions and perspectives about selfhood" (2002, p. 66). Canonical narratives guide the day to day of our action and connection, they show us how and what to be, how to present ourselves socially, how to interact with others, how to build a life, a community, a self. So, when Dennett asks, "Where is the self?" and then proceeds to describe it as having "no physical properties at all" but possessing a "spatio-temporal location" (1992, p. 108-9) we can extrapolate that the temporal location he is speaking of exists within the current socio-cultural narratives underpinning human experiences and behaviours. The self, therefore, much as the socio-cultural narratives from which it

³³ Lyotard refers to these ideas as the ideologies of modernity, such as Marxism or the enlightenment.

derives, in part, its creation, is a narrative. These socio-cultural narratives can be otherwise described as a “Narrative of narratives” (Freeman, 2001, p. 290-1), a guidebook of, to, and by humanity. This description of a narrative of narratives allows us to imagine these socio-cultural narratives as a series of synopses for ways of living, being and thinking, encompassing both the grand narratives and the canonical, including all the smaller narratives that comprise that latter category, which might otherwise be defined as scripts for living. Some of these smaller narratives are as simple as the ways in which one can enter a room to join someone for dinner, buy a bus ticket, or respond to a request. These too have their own terminology, variously described as frames (involving the creation and use of scripts and plans) (Schenk and Abelson, 1977), mental models (Johnson-Laird, 1999), frameworks (Freeman, 1999) and inner maps (Sterelny, 1999), all of which are “knowledge structures, that contain fixed structural information” (Brewer, 1999, 729) of everyday activities and encounters we attain through experience or by way of instruction from parents, peers, or teachers.³⁴ Essentially then, when we speak of these underlying narratives, no matter what language or terms we are utilising, or which aspects we refer to, we are describing the narrative systems by which some of the fundamental aspects of human life and behaviours are determined. Bruner was speaking of culture when he asked the question; “Do we invent tools to further our cultural bent and then become their servants, even developing ourselves to fit them?” (2002, p. 67). I would argue that our social systems fall into this category of tools we become servants to. It is as McAdams describes when he says, “Humans evolved to create culture, and variations in cultural practices, in turn, have contoured human evolution.” (2019, p. 11)³⁵ In effect, socio-cultural narratives exert a powerful influence on human

³⁴ Interesting to note that some of these minor narratives differ across cultures and societies and others possess remarkable similarities. It seems that, as a people, we can all agree on certain aspects of behaviour no matter how broad and seemingly unassailable our differences might be in other spheres or actions.

³⁵ My use of McAdams throughout this section is illustrative of the parts of his theory which I feel support the intention of my own work. I am not utilising his theory as a theoretical methodology, as we do not align theoretically on the whole.

experientiality and narrativity, they are central to the formulation of the collective and the self, both within and in relation to the attendant social and cultural atmospheres that they inhabit, which is why it is so important to understand the nature of the extant socio-cultural narrative paradigm informing these behaviours, actions, thoughts, and ideas. I am not attempting to assert that post-truth exists as an extant socio-cultural paradigm for the world at large, only with regards to the West, but I do argue that one can see in the rise of misinformation, division, obfuscation, and distortion across the world (all of which are aspects of the post-truth atmosphere) a significant pattern of post-truth narrative spread.

As I aim to speak of post-truth as a socio-cultural narrative, and investigate its atmospheric effects, I assert that use of pre-established terminology such as grand, master, or canonical would neither be useful or appropriate. These terms, excellent though they are, are well established and embedded in the study of literature, performance, or mediated communication, and do not reflect the sense of post-truth as a prevailing narrative with a distinctive atmosphere that enacts a broad societal effect wherever it is found. If I intend to interrogate this notion of post-truth as socio-cultural narrative, I believe that necessitates a step away from such literary roots to clarify the role of socio-cultural narratives as drivers of societal invention and reinvention. I will therefore be utilizing the term “tectonics” when speaking of not only the post-truth socio-cultural narrative but socio-cultural narratives in general. Tectonics feels apropos not only for its architectural and structural connotations, but for the neatness of its geological application, rendering the subtext of the term particularly fitting when one contemplates the seismic effects socio-cultural narratives enact upon society. Tectonics are the narratives that endure, those that become part of the base code of humanity, the skeletal framework over which self,

society and culture are built. They are subject to change and to fluctuation, even to extraordinary, explosive upheavals, but remain largely stable over time. Indeed, we use the term “paradigm shift” to describe the ways in which our tectonics align to a new positioning, either abruptly by upheaval, or slowly over the course of time, which then leads to the shifting or adaption of the narratives derived thereof, altering our entire societal response. The language of sociality and experientiality changes as we move through various historical cultural frames; societies align themselves within the tectonically agreed paradigms of the age.³⁶ So, what precisely is a post-truth tectonic? What narratives might derive thereof? I have spoken of the post-truth tectonic as producing its own specific atmosphere, one of confusion, obfuscation, division, and distortion, these atmospheric conditions allow us to form a clear picture of the post-truth narratives and their content, what they can therefore affect in the societal agreement and the interpretation of the world. Such narratives are purposefully at odds with the world of the real, they are inflammatory, speculative, distracting, and disabling, in that they offer no real answers to any of the questions they ask, encouraging inertia, indecision, and bewilderment, they also encourage lines of division to form by pandering to stereotype and caricature. Instead of seeking nuance, they offer only generalisations, boiling issues down to binaries, to the most common denominator, to memes and slogans that make for great soundbites but not for complex conversation around significant issues. They arise from uncertainty, insecurity, lack of trust, exhaustion with information, compassion fatigue, and a sense of drowning in the global malaise of too much all the time, never once letting up. They describe the experience of living in the digital age and define it, even as they struggle to keep up with the rapidly changing reality

³⁶ Of course, these societal alignments show subtle or striking divergences depending upon different cultural practices, beliefs, ideas or ideals etc. but tectonics influence every culture and group in one way or another, and some have a wider-ranging sphere of influence than others. It is my belief that post-truth falls within this category.

that experience comprises. In other words, they are the internalised narratives of decades of mass media generated memes and nonsense, scandal and one liner headlines, of advertisement, political chicanery, philosophical derision around facts and objective knowledge, they are the sum of all we have decided to be over the course of the 20th and 21st century, and these post-truth tectonics that we have agreed during these frantic, confusing, swiftly changing decades of disaster, disorder and chaos now shape who we are, how we think, and how we interact with one another. It is therefore deeply frustrating that any commentary around post-truth, thanks to the inbuilt connotations of the term itself, comes with the attendant assumption that its content must be focused on a loss of truth. I acknowledge these problems of truth and reality accompanying the post-truth tectonic and accept that I too will have frequent need to refer to that aspect, as it is central to how post-truth functions. However, I have some issue with these terms, or rather their definitions, so I would like to take some time now to speak about how I intend to approach the discussion of truth and reality for the purposes of my argument, what words I choose to use to describe these concepts, and what I mean by them.

1.3 Questions of Reality and Truth

The erosion of truth and the reliability of reality have been identified as central problems caused by post-truth tectonics. Fuller (2018) speaks of the truth problem a “truth game” (location 135), used in a larger game of power, D’Ancona (2018) refers to post-truth’s issue with honesty as arising from a “crash in the value of truth, comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock” (location 136), and I have identified a plausible deniability on the basis of reality as a feature of post-truth, not a bug. However, any focus on this binary notion of truth versus lies and reality

versus its contestation is deleterious, serving only to limit the capacity to understand post-truth as a wider, more systemic issue. Moreover, use of the binary leans into the intentions and outcomes of post-truth rhetoric, not to mention the fact that the binary itself is limiting, based on an assumption of value rather than an actual value—both sides of the truth/lie binary represent a subjective viewpoint dependent upon a position.³⁷ One person's truth may not be another's, and therefore their notion of a lie then differs, or deviates. Such positions based on 'truth' or 'lie' are representations of what one 'believes'. When we speak of truth, we are often speaking in absolutes, but all we can assert is a subjective viewpoint. In other words, although we often employ it to mean as much, truth cannot often be exchanged wholesale for the term fact, it is merely an interpretation thereof. Even the origins of the word truth affirm that it is a more a case of what we believe, deriving as it does from the *triewð* (West Saxon), whose meaning leans into notions of 'faith' or 'fidelity', though these meanings assuredly allow for a truth based in fact there is more of 'belief' than 'fidelity' in the meaning as it stands.³⁸ ³⁹ To avoid this doubled meaning, or this inference, and to avoid leaning into binary notions, I wish to employ the use of more concrete language when speaking upon issues of truth or reality as they relate to post-truth. For the terms truth and reality, then, I will more often employ the use of the word actual or actuality, the use of which takes the focus of the discussion away from ideas of truth/falsehood and real/not real in order to

³⁷ When I speak of post-truth rhetoric, I refer to ideologically driven attempts to sow division and dissatisfaction between and against minorities that seeks to obfuscate systemic issues (e.g., denying climate change, denying the existence of racism (not seeing colour, attacking the notion of racially-motivated discrimination etc.), trans-phobia, attacks on female bodily autonomy and so on) in order to problematise and discredit those who seek an equitable society. This rhetoric, primarily political and religious in nature, fundamentally serves an older, less progressive mindset, and seeks to ratify a vision of the world in keeping with its own beliefs, regardless of the consequences.

³⁸ Old English *triewð* (West Saxon), *treowð* (Mercian) "faith, faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty; veracity, quality of being true; pledge, covenant," from Germanic abstract noun **treuwitho*, from Proto-Germanic *treuwaz* "having or characterized by good faith," from PIE **drew-o-*, a suffixed form of the root **deru-* "be firm, solid, steadfast." With Germanic abstract noun suffix **-itho* (see *-th* (2)). Sense of "something that is true" is first recorded mid-14c. Meaning "accuracy, correctness" is from 1560s: *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Available at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/truth> (Accessed June 2022)

³⁹ An issue I will discuss further on in this chapter whose existence points toward a post-truth tectonic but cannot be said to have caused it.

create a clear distinction between what is believed and what happens, actual events as opposed to the narratives used to describe them.

The issues most often described as subverting fact or actuality are in fact cases of narrative positioning—making claims of fact by means of manipulating a narrative or its meaning, manufacturing a state in which it is possible to muddy perception to an extraordinary degree, an effect not limited to proponents of post-truth tectonics but widely used in all manner of fundamentalist rhetoric. As I will describe in this thesis, our modes of belief, no matter what we believe, are entirely capable of obscuring our comprehension of what is happening ‘on the ground’, there is a measurable loss of solid ground for actuality as perceived by an audience tuned in to post-truth narratives. What is most significant about this loss, however, is not that actuality is lost altogether but that the *value meaning* of such has diminished, and continues to diminish, towards a vanishing point. For the purposes of this conclusion, actuality exists as a value meaning for ‘what is *provable*’. Belief is not a factor in this value meaning equation, as that which is provable exists whether it engenders belief or not.⁴⁰ In this sense, then, it can be said that certain types of actuality [facts (knowledge)/events/objects] had value, they could be proven, and that proof was seen as a guarantee of trustworthiness. In post-truth, however, the meaning value of the actuality equation changes from what can be proven to what is believed, and belief in that equation holds more power than proof. Proof therefore holds no weight to alter belief, and this is one of the central characteristics of the post-truth narrative atmosphere arising from the post-truth tectonic. But what else characterises this atmosphere? I have stated four specific outcomes, obfuscation, division, confusion, and distortion, so I would like now to offer a broad expansion

⁴⁰ For those interested in facts, it is the facts that hold value meaning, they provide the worth behind any given concept. For those who prefer to rely on their belief, it is that which provides the worth, the value meaning, behind any given concept.

on the ways this atmosphere presents and the underlying narrative landscape this presentation indicates.

1.4 The Post-Truth Narrative Atmosphere

“A culture’s narrative resources (folktales, old stories, evolving literature, gossip) conventionalize the inequities it generates and thereby contain its imbalances and incompatibilities.” (Bruner, 2002, p. 93). All this to say that the new narrative resources (comparable to mythologies) perpetuated in this post-truth narrative atmosphere, often utilized in politics or mass media for ideological reasons, have not only generated new narratives of difference, but reignited and intensified old narratives of hatred and bigotry, particularly as a result of transformative events such as the Brexit referendum and the Trump candidacy and presidency, both of which made central in their narrative a pervasive and virulent demonization of the other.⁴¹ ⁴² We need only look to the ways in which the Brexit campaign used the fear of refugees and migrants to whip up nationalistic fervour and divide a nation along xenophobic lines and of the language and behaviours perpetuated by Trump in a campaign whose effects have been the unrelenting fomentation of bigotry and hatred, with horrific new laws passing against women’s rights, LGBT+ rights and voting laws which contravene the rights and humanity of BIPOC communities.⁴³ In the wake of this change of narrative, hate crimes perpetuated upon these communities and upon the disabled, and the demonization of the poor, particularly

⁴¹ Here I refer again to the rhetoric of Brexit and the Trump campaign, used frequently since by conservative MPs (Priti Patel for example) and by Republicans and conservative talking heads in the US (DeSantis, Abbott etc).

⁴² To be sure this manner of hate is old, and had gone nowhere, but the permissiveness of the narratives within these campaigns (and others) made the open expression of such ideological beliefs acceptable again.

⁴³ For attacks on women’s rights see: Spitzer, E & Ellman, N. (2021) ‘State Abortion Legislation in 2021’, *American Progress*. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/state-abortion-legislation-2021/> (Accessed March 2022) For attempts to block BIPOC voting rights see: Findijs, A. (2021) ‘Republicans introduce 253 bills to restrict voting rights in states across the US’, *WSWS*. Available at: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/03/25/vote-m25.html> (Accessed March 2022) For recent anti-trans laws see: Riedel, S. (2022) ‘Here’s All the Anti-Trans Legislation That Moved Forward This Week’, *Them*. <https://www.them.us/story/dont-say-gay-bill-anti-lgbtq-legislation-florida-idaho/amp> (Accessed April 2022)

of those on welfare or benefits, became regular news.^{44 45} This is the environment of post-truth, a sea of confusion over the viability and meaning value of actuality, and over the question of actuality itself. I have stated that the post-truth narrative atmosphere is one of confusion, obfuscation, distortion, and division, but what does this mean when translated to a lived experience? Certainly, we can say that the contention of facts and actuality discussed in the extant post-truth literature plays a significant role in the confusion and distortion experienced in the post-truth atmosphere. This was seen during the entirety of the Covid19 pandemic, the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theory flooding SNS, the digital spaces, and indeed even the mass media made finding accurate information about the virus, about what was happening in one's own country or any other country, extremely difficult. This seemed to worsen after the vaccines were introduced, the sheer amount of misinformation becoming somewhat of a flood and the battle between accurate information based on science and evidence and specious information derived from anti-vax groups sparked a matching battle throughout SNS. This is what I mean when I speak of division as being part of the atmosphere of post-truth. It is not debate that these opposing stances seem to trigger but an all-out war of words on SNS, held between those who believe and those who do not, a war that is then reflected into the actual. It has repercussions in that it creates casualties of sorts, casualties of information who were unable to find reason in the barrage and made the choice to therefore disengage from debate altogether, to the extent of disengaging from the issue at large. In the case of Covid19 this manner of disengagement could, and did, cause actual casualties, people so discouraged from

⁴⁴ For rise in hate crime linked to Trump see: Williamson, V & Gelfand, I. (2019) 'Trump and racism: what do the data say?', *Brookings*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2019/08/14/trump-and-racism-what-do-the-data-say/> (Accessed March 2020), Hanci, F. (2019) 'Hate crimes increase in the US since Trump's election', *Politics Today*. Available at: <https://politicstoday.org/hate-crimes-increase-in-the-us-since-trumps-election/> (Accessed March 2020)

⁴⁵ For researched evidence of this rise in hate crime after Brexit see: Taylor, R. (2018) 'Hate crime did spike after the referendum – even allowing for other factors', *LSE*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/03/19/hate-crime-did-spike-after-the-referendum-even-allowing-for-other-factors/>

seeking vaccination by the noise around the issue and the inability to find information they trusted that they waited too long and became sick, which in some cases led to a loss of life.⁴⁶ In this pattern of confusion, we see a notable flow between the invention of the actual and the actual itself, an exchange serves to obscure and confound the issue of actuality. Bruner states, “in the end a (narrative fiction) has the power to change our habits of conceiving what is real, what canonical, it can even undermine the law’s dictates about what constitutes a canonical reality.” (2002, p. 94) To my mind, this is the crux of the post-truth narrative issue, an upending of the notion of actuality impacted by the world as seen from within the digital virtuality, which serves as an immersive extension to the reality film created by the encompassment of visual media, mass media, and the narrative manipulations inherent within advertisements.⁴⁷ We live in strange times, filled with upheaval, with constant change and ever-expanding knowledge of the world at large, all its trials and tribulations, a glut of too much. Too much to know, too much to see, too much to take in. Add into this soup of overexposure the politicization of facts occurring within modern politics and – associated with this trend – the increasing manipulation of public opinion for political and economic gain, and I think it can be said that there is a solid foundation for this atmosphere of confusion, obfuscation, division, and distortion. The digitization of vast areas of the world has meant that we have, for the first time ever, not only immediate access to all manner of information, news, gossip, and other media but to the world at large. In our initial forays into that ocean of information we cannot help but drown in different

⁴⁶ See for context: Konger, K. (2021) ‘How misinformation, medical mistrust fuel vaccine hesitancy’, *Stanford Medicine*. Available at: <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2021/09/infodemic-covid-19.html> (Accessed September 2022), Bump, P. (2021) ‘Over and over, the same refrain from people sick with covid: I wish I’d gotten the vaccine’, *Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/02/over-over-same-refrain-people-sick-with-covid-i-wish-id-gotten-vaccine/> (Accessed September 2022), Craig, P. & McVey, R. (2021) ‘Man Told Nurses “I wish I’d got vaccine” before tragically dying from covid’, *Daily Record*. Available at: <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/man-told-nurses-i-wish-24579467> (Accessed September 2022)

⁴⁷ Selling the “perfect life” and creating narratives of false need and false expectation. For a broader analysis of such manipulation and its effects see Kellner and Harm’s excellent overview: Harms, J. & Kellner, D. (2004) ‘Toward A Critical Theory of Advertising’, *UCLA*. Available at: <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell6.htm> (Accessed March 2020)

viewpoints, different cultures, in *difference* full stop. As Foroughi, Gabriel and Fotaki suggest, this exposure has made us “more likely to hold contradictory views about the world and adopt relativistic opinions, in part due to increased contact with people from different cultures who hold vastly different views from our own.” (2019, p. 137) This also holds true for information. When you have a deluge of information at your fingertips and little way to verify factual from specious, it is hard to know what to believe. Trust in the reliability of information erodes. Add to this the troubling trend for unlawful behaviour in the political forum that seems to engender no real consequences, one only has to witness the responses to Partygate from within the Tory party, or witness the ways in which Trump and his allies have sought to reinvent the narratives around the classified documents seized from Mar A Lago.⁴⁸ Even in the face of a critical mass of evidence, denial tends to increase rather than abate, and this increase of denial is offered as a counterweight of evidence rather than a refutation. In this post-truth era, we are finding that the checks and balances created to inhibit and reprimand unlawful or immoral conduct only work when those who have the power to use them decide to do so. Without that cooperation from the powerful, all our checks and balances become impotent. Therefore, it is not merely the loss of truth’s value meaning that we speak of, or the editing of the real, it is the loss of accountability, a disappearance of the endpoint of the equation that adds evidentiary and litigatory artefacts together and produces a weighted and proper outcome. The balance is lost when those who control the evidence and the law control actuality. Here again is another point at which actuality begins to become uncertain – when events continue to ripple through a transformative lens, a frame of plausible deniability that allows mischaracterizations

⁴⁸ See for example: Conservative expenses scandal, second job scandal, the parties held at Downing street during lockdown, Trump’s continued connections to his business, likewise his children, his behaviour during the insurrection against Capitol Hill on January 6th 2020 (now the subject of a criminal investigation, with the hopes of perhaps forming some consequence, although Rand Paul recently demanded that the law allowing for Trump to be indicted on criminal charges be removed (LINK)), and the actions of some members of the GOP, all still holding their seats.

and blatant breaches of the law to continue unabated and unpunished. Notably, this aspect of the post-truth tectonic and its narrative atmosphere is not new either, such a distortion and manipulation of the law also takes place in authoritarian and dictatorial regimes whose leaders and governments rely on ignorance and the control of information; in the digital age that control includes internet bans and strictly enforced regulations on content. It seems that, in the post-truth tectonic era, these discrete operational habits, utilised by often secretive regimes within the private borders of their countries, have spread into media, advertisement and the political and economic discourse, and become part of the general landscape. Post-truth narratives can therefore become, as Carrera pointed out, a systemic tool for the control of information and power.

It is at this point that I make my argument for post-truth as the meaning equivalent of our hyperreal atmosphere, its semiotic parallel.⁴⁹ In the hyperreality the lines between reality and its representations begin to blur to the extent that one can be mistaken for, or even become, the other. In post-truth, the lines between actuality and belief, between objects and their significance, blurs until the one can be mistaken for the other, or else dismissed altogether. In this sense, the terms fake news and alternative facts are like the nonsense poems in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, they exist to perplex, discombobulate and, most importantly, distract. They are a sleight of hand, a psychological trick to fool the mind's eye. Belief is powerful, but in the post-truth atmosphere, it is also malleable. Ultimately then, to tackle post-truth will not be as simple as fighting for actuality. The best way forward, to my mind, is to illuminate the mechanisms, seek to understand how narratives are changed in this

⁴⁹ Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal concerns an inability to distinguish between the actual and the simulation of the actual as experienced within mass media and the online world. For a broader description see: Baudrillard, J., 1988. *The hyper-realism of simulation*. *Jean Baudrillard: selected writings*, 143, p.147. I suggest that post-truth comprises the meaning (comprehension of meaning) equivalent of this failure to process actuality from simulation.

tectonic, and in turn how they change society and societal reactions. For myself I also seek to understand how these narratives changes, this ongoing tectonic shift, may affect us going forward as our digital submersion becomes further problematised by the deepening of the inversion of reality / unreality. With more tools at their disposal to direct the discourse, those for whom post-truth is a powerful tool of control have the means to change the narratives to suit them. And considering the speed of digital development, there is an urgency to this exploration of post-truth and the hyperreal that cannot be side-lined by any acknowledgement of alternate stratagems or intentions of post-truth itself. It is as Carrera says, "The Internet offers the perfect staging for the post-truth simulacra, although, as mentioned, the supposed cacophony of the network and the plurality of sources have much more of mirage than of reality." (2018, p. 1476) I argue that this mirage, this digital representation of a representation, converges with actuality until the seams between the two begin to blur, creating uncertainty over where one ends and the other begins. Before we can think about the ramifications of this mirage effect in an increasingly blurry reality, we need to further understand how narrative shapes and defines us, exploring the ways in which we use narrative in our self-creation and the possible outcomes of such application in a post-truth atmosphere of unreliability and virality, and this is what I will set out to achieve in chapter two.

Summary

This chapter endeavours to establish the issue of post-truth outside of the mediated understanding of the term. The argument herein seeks to remove it from its context of the purely political, and away from the binary issue involving problems with honesty or actuality and re-establish post-truth as a systemic issue arising out of a

change in the societal narrative agreements. Beginning with an in-depth exploration of the extant literature this chapter then makes its case for post-truth as tectonic, delineating the various factors involved in that conclusion. It then goes on to establish the language with which I will continue to approach those central issues of post-truth arising from the contestation of facts and actuality, acknowledging that no investigation into post-truth can continue without frequent mention of those integral issues. To culminate this characterisation of post-truth as narrative, I then take a broad overview of what I describe as the post-truth narrative atmosphere which is, in brief, the social and individual experience and expression of living in a post-truth tectonic era.

2.

QUESTIONS OF NARRATIVE AND SELF

“There are people. There are stories. The people think they shape the stories, but the reverse is often closer to the truth.”

— Alan Moore, Swamp Thing, Vol. 2: Love and Death

Introduction

In chapter one I presented the case for post-truth as a tectonic, placing the roots of its foundation in a basal narrative shift whose effect is still ongoing, showing that the issues arising around truth and reality (which I have called actuality) within the post-truth era arise because of this. They are symptoms of a problem, not its totality, which post-truth scholarship can be shown to support, despite a focus on the symptoms. With post-truth established as a tectonic, this chapter undertakes an exploration into the storied being, the self-narrative, and the ways in which individuals self-create and develop personhood and form into groups, the aim of which is to highlight the significant impact the post-truth tectonic is capable of enacting on human development, action, and interaction at both individual and communal levels. This exploration does not represent an exhaustive survey of scholarship around selfhood, self-creation, and group psychology, and is not intended to be, the intention is merely to establish that tectonics play a formative role in the process of these important societal constructions. The aim here is to highlight how being surrounded by narratives that confound sense, provoke division, and seed doubt in the reliability of information and the surrounding world

problematise the building of self and group narratives which then has a comparable effect on every area of human action, reaction, and interaction.

2.1 We Are Storied Beings

“...it is through narrative that we come to understand the meaning that a life possesses, both for an individual and in his or her relation to some particular social and cultural ecology.” (Hammack, 2008, 232)

The theory of an identity creation founded upon narrative was proposed by Ricoeur (1988) in *Time and Narrative Vol 3*. His intention for this theory was to resolve problems of identity that arose during philosophical discussions around self and selfhood. Regarding this problem in the discussion of identity, Ricoeur noted a lack of distinction between two usages of the concept of identity: *idem* – identity experienced as sameness, and *ipson* – identity experienced as self. Though used interchangeably, Ricoeur asserted that the terms were different, that *ipseity* was not “sameness”. At question here were conflicting concepts of permanence over time, in that the notion of *idem* was better used when answering the question *what* with regards to identity [what I am] and *ipseity* better utilized to answer the question of *who* [who I am]. In addition to these distinctions, Ricoeur argued for a third concept, the narrative self, the story one tells about oneself – this is what I am, a being in time, this is who I am, a person in time. The narrative self, he argued, offers the opportunity to mediate between the oppositional states of who and what to become a “a self which figures itself as this or that” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 73), a self that is also a story. A storied being is able to answer the question of what they are and who they are not only in the embodied sense but also in the figural sense. They have the answer to the question that “cannot be abolished, “Who am I?”” (1991, p. 80) For Ricoeur, this is how narrative offers a solution to the difficulties of explaining the

immutable and often difficult to pinpoint issue of personhood and how, or even whether, it is capable of conceding to classification. In the case of narrative, story offers itself as the means to classify, by allowing for the development of personhood via a vast array of identifiers to which the notion of “self” can be attached and find expression.

According to Bruner (2002), the process of self-making is a sort of narrative art, and is formed from two directions; from the inside, from a wellspring of memories, ideas, beliefs, and feelings, and from the outside, guided by social and cultural expectations, upon how others best see us. He suggests the latter as being the most fundamental of these directions, stating his belief that selfhood is primarily formed from the outside in, and is delineated and formed upon the myriad narratives around selfhood encountered in tectonics, he describes these narratives as being akin to plot summaries (I refer here back to chapter one and the discussion around tectonics, which reflects and expands on this notion). It is this developmental direction of self-hood formation that I find most interesting, supporting as it does the notion of tectonic influence on self-formation. For Bruner, we begin building unique selves through a process of acculturation, which is essentially the acquirement of all manner of tectonics pertinent to the country, family, and cultural groups into which we are born.⁵⁰ This acculturation happens not only to children as they grow and develop, but throughout a lifetime, and the collection of narratives we utilize as part of this process of building an identity, a life, and a community are derived in part from the tectonics underpinning our cultures and our societies. These basal tectonics define how people within societies speak of self (identity), community, belief, difference and sameness. In this sense humanity can be described

⁵⁰ Deeply interesting article on the different aspects of acculturation: Cole, N.L., (2019), 'Understanding Acculturation and Why It Happens', *ThoughtCo*, Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/acculturation-definition-3026039> (Accessed September 2022)

as a collection of viral patterns of behavior and thinking, of feeling and action, of reaction and response. Narrative forms the foundation of these patterns, but communal construction forms the pattern of the foundation – mutual, societal agreements of interaction, action, response, and behaviour. These agreements can form over periods of time as cultures/societies develop, or via outside intervention or manipulation (Government/monarchy/religion etc). Such new narratives, no matter how they find their way into the basal tectonic, either become enmeshed and begin to form part of the tectonic as a whole or are rejected by the whole and therefore become brief footnotes in the narrative history of a tectonic. One need only look to the Covid19 pandemic (still ongoing at the writing of this chapter) to see this pattern of narrative acceptance or rejection in action, for example in how different societal groups reacted to the request to wear masks and how many of those cultures who adapted to mask wearing have now abandoned the idea, caused in the main by the constant flip-flopping of mask policies, but also due to a general fatigue with the idea.^{51 52} It is interesting to note, too, how a wealth of conspiracy theories spread around vaccinations, and the pandemic itself.^{53 54} I suggest that this arose primarily from narrative manipulation, which I will discuss at length later in this thesis, but the ease with which this manipulation takes hold relates directly to the human vulnerability to narrative, particularly that which aligns with certain aspects of a given group's basal tectonics, such as their mythic-systems.

⁵¹ Study about cultural difference in mask adoption during Covid19: Kimmelmeier, M, Waleed, J, (2021), 'Mask Wearing as Cultural Behavior: An Investigation Across 45 U.S. States During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Available at: doi: [10.3389/fpsyg.2021.648692](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.648692),

⁵² Ibbetson, C, (2022), 'Mask wearing drops despite sharp increase in Britons thinking the pandemic is getting worse', *YouGov*, Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/articles-reports/2022/03/31/mask-wearing-drops-despite-most-britons-thinking-p> (Accessed September 2022) Picheta, R, (2021), 'Why the world is still arguing over face masks, 20 months into the pandemic', *CNNHealth*, Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/02/health/face-mask-debate-covid-19-pandemic-cmd-intl/index.html> (Accessed September 2022)

⁵³ Study into rumours and conspiracy theories about the Covid vaccine: Islam, M, *et al.* (2021), 'COVID-19 vaccine rumors and conspiracy theories: The need for cognitive inoculation against misinformation to improve vaccine adherence', *PLOS ONE*, May 12th, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0251605> (Accessed September 2022)

⁵⁴ Various articles on the conspiracy theories surrounding Covid19: Gorski, D, (2020), 'COVID-19 conspiracy theories: Vaccines and 5G (along with Bill Gates) are responsible!', *Science Based Medicine*, Available at: <https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/covid-19-conspiracy-theories-vaccines-5g-bill-gates/> (Accessed September 2022) Lynas, M, (2020), 'COVID: Top 10 current conspiracy theories', *Alliance For Science*, Available at: <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories/> (Accessed September 2022)

Returning to the development of the self, I make note of Dennett's (1992) description of the 'self' as an abstract object, essentially dismissing it as a theorist's fiction, derived from a problem of interpretation. I assert that whilst identity is a personal fiction of sorts, it is not fictional, it is a vital process of the construction that underlies the ability to describe oneself *as* a self. In this sense the construction of selfhood bearing such a profound resemblance to the construction of fiction presents as no coincidence. After all, we do not simply share memories, we tell stories in which we are the protagonist, we build self in these moments, and affirm that selfhood within and with others – *this is who I am and what I do*. Interwound into these narratives is an element of the fantastical, not only this is who I am and what I do, but this is who I think I am and what I would like to do, this is who I would like to be. This is not a deceit as such, unless the self we recount is entirely a fantasy, and designed to fool, but we embellish, we project, we seek ways to tell the story as we want it to be seen, as *we* want to be seen, by ourselves as well as by others. This instinct plays an important role in the formation of inter-personal bonds as, in this self-telling, we strive also to project what we think others wish to see in us, a part of self-presentation that is not singular but multiple.⁵⁵ Moreover, we present a different self in different situations with different groups – friends, work colleagues, acquaintances, strangers all see a highly edited and adapted version of the projected self, all hear a different story, see a different self, molded to the perceived narrative boundaries of those relationships. I argue that this narrative fascination, this narrative attraction, this narrative foundation of self and community renders us

⁵⁵ See: Cole, H, Baker, D, (2019), 'Tall tales make fast friends: Exaggerating when retelling previous experiences fosters relational closeness', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36 (8), pp 2287–2306 Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518787344> (Accessed September 2022)

vulnerable to manipulation via narrative, even when it is antithetical to our internalized projection of self, that it is the lure of fitting in, of community, that is capable of making us doubt our narrative position if it is not aligned within the narrative of the group/collective, and post-truth tectonics seem uniquely designed to exploit this narrative vulnerability. In other words, the outside in of self-creation forms the basis of a narrative weakness in the formation of selfhood.

2.2 Collective Behaviour and Collectivism

“Self is also other.” (Bruner, 2002, p. 66)

As we have seen, humans are wired to fit in, to utilize the opinions and expectations of others, and of society in general, to mediate their identity to fit within a specific group narrative. There is in this process an endless balance of uniqueness against fitting in. Uniqueness functions as a personal necessity but being able to state categorically ‘I am different’ is also a *cultural* artefact.⁵⁶ There are cultures wherein a sense of being unique would be akin to standing out and therefore undesirable but in cultures for whom uniqueness is preferable, such individuality has no bearing on the creation and presentation of the social self, even in sub-genres of self-expression, except between differing groups.⁵⁷ For example, one can look to various types of fandom (Doctor Who, Star Wars, Star Trek etc) and music subgenres (Metal, Goth, K-Pop etc) for the ways in which entry to these groups is often subject to

⁵⁶ There are an overwhelming amount of works in academia on the subject of culture, many as part of the ever-expanding and changing field of cultural theory, to which I do not intend to add or, on the whole, to refer, as on the whole those works offer only a deviation from the direction of my own. My aim here is simply to observe the ways in which collectivism and individualism within cultures and societies can be said to operate narratively to further an understanding of the effects and influence of narrative on such interactions, and of such interactions on basal tectonics

⁵⁷ A few studies looking into this phenomenon: K, Hee-Jung, Markus, H.R, (1999) “Deviance or Uniqueness, Harmony or Conformity? A Cultural Analysis”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Volume 77, No 4, p. 785-800, Fatehi, K., Priestley, J. L., & Taasoobshirazi, G. (2020). The expanded view of individualism and collectivism: One, two, or four dimensions? *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 20(1), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147059582091307Z>, Grief, A. (1994) Cultural Beliefs and the Organization of Society: A Historical and Theoretical Reflection on Collectivist and Individualist Societies, *Journal of Political Economy*, 102 (5), p. 912-950

gatekeeping, and judgement.^{58 59} This not only suggests a sort of narrative rigidity within groups, it suggests that we perceive “sameness” as belonging more than we do “similarity” and choose to monitor who “belongs” by refining and cementing the rules of sameness. Moreover, the Goth sub-culture is treated as a deviant expression of selfhood within the normalized socio-cultural tectonics – it is therefore isolated by difference and isolates within by the selfsame vectors.⁶⁰ This friction renders the process of self-narration in identity creation a complex negotiation between the needs and views of “self” and “other”. As Bruner points out, “self-making through self-narrating is restless and endless, probably more so now than ever before. It is a dialectical process, a balancing act” (2002, p. 84) and this is where narrative vulnerabilities occur, particularly when the opinions of others, the approval of the group, outweighs the drive to individuate.⁶¹ The pressure to meet expectations, to align within the preferred narrative of the group, can see us all but unconsciously changing the self on multiple levels, including those inside-out categories. Individuals may find themselves inadvertently altering their feelings, ideas, belief, subjectivity, and even memory to align more closely with those around them. Writing of this process in “*First They Invented Stories, Then They Changed Us*”, McAdams delineates the communal aspects therein: “Other people in the author’s life, along with groups and institutions, may also exert an authorial force. Therefore, the autobiographical author is, in reality, a co-author. It is the self-defining collaboration of a lifetime.” (2019, p. 14) We write our self-narratives through and

⁵⁸ Excellent overview of what Gatekeeping is: Admin, (2021), ‘What is Gatekeeping and why is it problematic?’, *Ceed*, Available at: <https://ceed.co/what-is-gatekeeping-and-why-is-it-problematic/> (Accessed September 2022)

⁵⁹ Gardner, K, (2018), ‘Viral Tweet About Fandom Gatekeeping Proves We Still Have a Male Geek Problem’, *TheMarySue*, Available at: <https://www.themarysue.com/fandom-gatekeeping-male-geeks/> (Accessed September 2022), Courtney, P, et al. (2020) ‘Get out of my fandom, newbie’: A cross-fandom study of elitism and gatekeeping in fans’, *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 8 (2), pp. 123-146(24), Available at: https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs_00013_1 (Accessed September 2022)

⁶⁰ See for a brief scholarly analysis drawn both from example and personal experiences: Fellow, M, (Year Unknown), ‘Reflections of a Goth immersed in sociological deviance’, *BCU School of Social Sciences Blogs*, Available at: <https://www.bcu.ac.uk/social-sciences/news/blogs/reflections-of-a-goth-immersed-in-sociological-deviance> (Accessed March 2022)

⁶¹ I do not speak specifically of individualist cultures here, I would argue that the drive to individuate is present even in collectivist cultures, as is the narrative vulnerability exploitable by the power of the group. I would suggest that in collectivist cultures, who value communal action over individuation, such vulnerabilities are even more acute, as group adherence is already written into the tectonics of these cultures.

with the expectations of society, culture, and the groups we move within, and by doing so form extra-dimensional selves that include others *as* self – we form collectives.

Gallagher and Tollefsen speak of narratives formed over time by individuals within the group and continuing outside of their participation in the group across “generations of group members” (*ibid* p. 217). I assert that basal tectonics fall within this category of narrative, as Gallagher and Tollefsen suggest when they state, “the processes connected with narrative formation [...] can also be treated as constituting aspects of the collective *we* that are not reducible to the minds of the individual members.” (*ibid* p. 217) This is the defining feature of tectonics, and the narratives that derive from them, a shared narrative that exists within groups to form group mentalities such as the definitions of a shared “culture” and the “social norms” within a society which persist across time and generations and can even move beyond their specific social group. This moving can take effect in many ways; by violent means such as colonisation; by means of enculturation or influence, and by dissemination amongst age-groups fascinated with one another’s culture.⁶² ⁶³ In discussing the notion of shared narratives, Gallagher and Tollefsen further assert that the shape of an individual’s view of the world can be “facilitated by a *we*-narrative” (*ibid* p. 217), that is to say directly influenced by their group participations, and that this influence can be as much unconscious as it can be intentional. There is power in the notion of unity, of the self as part of a collective,

⁶² For example, the influence American culture wields on the world at large. See for some brief overviews of this phenomenon: Goldfarb, M, (2014), ‘Soft power: how American culture rules the world’, *Raconteur*, Available at: <https://www.raconteur.net/american-culture-rules-the-world/> (Accessed March 2022), Oussayfi, T, (2018), ‘The global reach of US culture’, *Medium*, Available at: <https://medium.com/@taieboussayfi/the-global-reach-of-us-popular-culture-d31be4aaeb4b> (Accessed March 2022), Maissuwong, W, (2012), ‘The Promotion of American Culture through Hollywood Movies to the World’, *International Journal of Engineering Research and Technology*, 1 (4), Available at: <https://www.ijert.org/research/the-promotion-of-american-culture-through-hollywood-movies-to-the-world-IJERTV1IS4194.pdf> (Accessed March 2022)

⁶³ For instance, the spread of Korean cultural mores and ideas amongst young Western teens via K-pop: Kim, K, (2019), ‘The growing international influence of K-pop’, *The Spectator*, Available at: <https://spec.hamilton.edu/the-growing-international-influence-of-k-pop-edd0ef8035ff> (Accessed September 2022)

experiencing usefulness, connection, a sense of being valued. There is also power in unified action, no matter where it is directed. This power is both shaped and directed by the socio-cultural tectonic atmospheres surrounding such groups, the narratives which drive them. But this collective power also extends to the creation of narratives, as we previously noted. As narratives achieve a certain critical mass within a collective, they achieve a sort of ubiquity, or dominance, and are either added to the pre-existing socio-cultural tectonic array, or they become a tectonic, capable of re-shaping the socio-cultural narrative in their image. The effects of this can be unifying, as in the case of the gradual changing of opinion with regards to gay marriage and adoption in the West, or destabilising, as with the resurgence of far-right ideological discourse in the political domain and its increasing spread in the public domain.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ This capacity is both the power, and the problem, of “we”.

2.3 The Problem of “We”

When speaking of group behaviour, Gallagher and Tollefsen assert that it can only be “a grammatical categorization, not an experiential categorization” (2019, p. 217) in that we only have the means to describe a singular, individual experience.⁶⁶ But I assert that whilst a group cannot speak of the collective experience outside of an individual accounting of such, there is a phenomenological aspect of the group mentality that is experienced collectively, wherein the shared aims or beliefs or ideals of a group or groups become aligned and move in concert, expressing a

⁶⁴ See for reference and further context: Von Rohr, M. (2013), ‘Gay Marriage on a Roll in the West’, *SPIEGEL International*, Available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/the-gay-marriage-movement-is-gaining-acceptance-in-west-a-908839.html> (Accessed March 2022), Lee, H-Y, Mutz, D. (2019), ‘Changing Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage: A Three-Wave Panel Study’, *Political Behaviour*, 41, pp 701–722, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9463-7> (Accessed March 2022), and for attitudes to adoption see: Morris, A. (2016) *Adopting: Real Life Stories*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London

⁶⁵ For a minor overview of the spread of particular far-right ideological ideas and how they have re-entered the mainstream: Downes, J. (2020), ‘How the far right took over the mainstream’, *OpenDemocracy*, Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/how-far-right-took-over-mainstream/> (Accessed March 2022)

⁶⁶ Clarification: Gallagher and Tollefsen are making here the assertion that a group cannot speak as a singular entity to describe the experience of being in the group. Their argument rests upon the conclusion that in seeking to understand the collective experience one can only collect and compare individual accounts.

singular experience. There is a sense in which this is like the company 'We', where a person subconsciously aligns with company values becoming a subsidiary unit of a larger whole and speaks of that whole in terms of unified purpose and activity. This reflects a dynamic that can occur within family, friendship groups or other groups bonded by an ideal, a belief, an ideology, or an interest. These collectives can be a powerful force for change or good. I offer as examples in this instance the #metoo movement and the #blacklivesmatter movement, both of which at different points leaked into a wider public awareness and gained the critical mass of support required to effect tectonic, and therefore social change. As Hammack asserts, "it is in transformations of social processes that discourses and identities can shift to accommodate new ways of being. Transformations in individual identities can thus assume a role in the larger processes of cultural change" (2008, p. 235). In this case, the collective forms an individual identity capable of transforming those social processes which affect the discourse and the identity of others, both individually and collectively. I can refer here to historical civil rights movements, such as Suffrage, which played a powerful and vital role in the fight for women's equality, or the Stonewall uprising that united LBGT+ groups to a common cause, fighting for equal rights and against discrimination and then spread outward into the heteronormative world in the form of more progressive ideals and beliefs. The power these movements have, to unite people and invoke a common aim amongst strangers is extraordinary but this process can also be turned to the purpose of destabilisation. To speak of this process, I return to the notion of group tectonics and the lure for an individual to override self-narratives to align within a group narrative to preserve an important sense of connection and community.⁶⁷ In these cases, the individual

⁶⁷ One cannot speak about this without referring to Groupthink, coined by William H. Whyte of Fortune Magazine in 1952 to explain a fundament of the group dynamic in which individuals within a group will not speak out against the ideas/ideals of a group to maintain group identity. This idea was then expanded upon by Irving Janis, whose 1972 book Groupthink explored how such collective action often undermined individual thought, action, and behaviour: Whyte, W.H., (1952), 'Groupthink',

identifies themselves primarily by affiliation within the group, but in extreme cases the individual can in fact be subsumed within the collective group-mind, the shared singular. Take QAnon as a powerful, and recent, example of how a group narrative is capable of swallowing individuality.⁶⁸ Originating in 2017 from a single post on the message board 4Chan, from a user only known as Q, who claimed to possess ‘Q Clearance’, giving him access to top secret information, the political and political conspiracy theory movement QAnon has grown in followers and in mythology ever since. A 2021 study on PRRI showed that 15% to 20% of Americans can now be said to believe in key QAnon tenets, and QAnon is also rapidly growing its membership internationally.⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ At its core, the movement represents a collective way of being, of believing, of existing, speaking in one voice, with a singular intention, as their motto declares with pride “Where we go one, we go all”, usually appearing abbreviated in hashtag form (#WWG1WGA). A driving factor in QAnon, and other groups like it (with a unifying mission and ‘enemy’) aligns with what Hammack refers to as “perceived existential threat”, wherein groups of people, either marginalised or non-marginalised “experience identity insecurity”. (2008, p. 228) In the case of this insecurity, it matters not whether the threat is perceived or actual, the psychological and emotional reaction to the threat is felt deeply either way. However, it is

Fortune, pp 114-117, Janis, I, (1972). *Victims of groupthink; a psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin

⁶⁸ For a basic overview: QAnon (2020), Available at: <https://www.adl.org/qanon>

For a more complex, academic inquiry: Garry, A *et al.* (2022) ‘QAnon Conspiracy Theory: Examining its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalization’, *Journal for Deradicalisation*, 26, pp 152-216

For the rise of QAnon in the UK: Smallman, G, (2020), ‘How QAnon Took Hold in the UK’, *Wired*, Available at:

<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/qanon-uk> (Accessed March 2022)

For QAnon effect on social relationships: Nagesh, A, (2021), ‘The moment QAnon took the person I love most’, *BBC*, Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57369349?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA%27 (Accessed March 2022),

Laura, (2020), ‘I lost my best friend to QAnon’, *Huffington Post*, Available at:

https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/i-lost-my-best-friend-to-qanon_uk_5f8707abc5b6e9e76fb95a96 (accessed March 2022),

Watt, C.S, (2020), ‘The QAnon orphans: people who have lost loved ones to conspiracy theories’, *The Guardian*, Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-loved-ones> (Accessed March 2022),

Lytvynenko, J, (2020), ‘Family and friends of QAnon believers are going through a “Surreal Goddamn Nightmare”’, *Buzzfeed News*, Available at:

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janeltyvnenko/qanon-families-friends> (Accessed March 2022)

For an insider perspective on the collective: Jadeja, J, (2021), ‘I left QAnon in 2019. But I’m still not free’, Interview with Jedeja, J, Interviewed by Carrier, A for *Politico Magazine*, 12th November, Available at:

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/12/11/q-anon-movement-former-believer-523972> (Accessed March 2022)

⁶⁹ See: PRRI staff, (2021), ‘Understanding QAnon’s Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption’, *PRRI*, Available at: <https://www.prii.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/> (Accessed September 2022)

⁷⁰ See: Haimowitz, I, (2020), ‘No One is Immune: The Spread of Q-anon Through Social Media and the Pandemic’, *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, Available at: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/technology-policy-blog/no-one-immune-spread-q-anon-through-social-media-and-pandemic> (Accessed September 2022)

interesting to note that existential threat in this category is utilised as a weapon of ideology to motivate non-marginalised groups to seek a collective behaviour harmful to others whose experience *is* one of marginalisation. A powerful example of this is the recent harnessing of anti-trans messaging for political point-scoring, with candidates on both sides leveraging the transphobic position of trans women constituting a threat to biological women in the content of their rhetoric.⁷¹ Another far broader example of this existential threat rhetoric is the white supremacist conspiracy theory of ‘White Genocide’, or the ‘Great Replacement Theory’, wherein anti-racism and the advancement of civil rights for BIPOC people are seen as evidence of a war against whiteness, or an attempt to erase it.⁷² The rhetoric around White Genocide relies upon the notion of existential threat, in this case the threat of annihilation or an erosion of rights triggered by BIPOC, who when asking for simple equity are presumed to be demanding that white people relinquish all their rights. How can this behaviour be explained beyond obvious connotations of bigotry? Certainly, I think one can surmise that bigotry plays a central role, but it surely cannot be the entirety of the answer when this behaviour is not limited to those expressing bigotry. Any group or individual can feel threatened by a change or perceived change that poses a threat to their status quo, such as a change of policy in their company that alters how they will act and interact, a change of management, or a change of direction in the career or life of a friend or loved one that makes them feel left behind. To look at the broader picture behind existential threat behaviours, I return to Hammack (2008), speaking of Schachter’s theory of identity in which he

⁷¹ Read these articles for a broader overview of the use of this rhetoric and its effects: Hansford, A. (2022), ‘How shameless attacks on trans people defined a car-crash Tory leadership race’, *PinkNews*, Available at: <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2022/08/25/tory-leadership-race-trans/> (Accessed September 2022), Pritilata, M., Archer, N., Alwakeel, R. (2022), ‘Tory leadership candidates are weaponising trans rights – again’, *openDemocracy*, Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/conservative-party-leadership-rishi-sunak-penny-mordaunt-trans-rights/> (Accessed September 2022)

⁷² To read a little more about this theory see: No Author, (Year Unknown), ‘White Populism’, *European Centre for Populism Studies: Dictionary of Populism*, Available at: <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/white-genocide/> (Accessed September 2022), Bridge Initiative Team, (2020), ‘Factsheet: Great replacement/White Genocide Conspiracy Theory’, Available at: <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-great-replacement-white-genocide-conspiracy-theory/> (Accessed September 2022)

posits the notion of an identity structured with flexibility, which presents as an adaption to the social and historical context of its surrounds. This flexibility is key, I think. Bereft of flexibility, an individual and/or group cannot adapt, and must therefore resort to adapting the world around themselves, reconfiguring outward actuality to match their inner rigidity. Hammack cites a group of experiments utilising a method from social psychology to explore the minimal conditions for discrimination to flare between groups. The results of these experiments exposed a worrying trend, concluding that “identification with a group, *no matter how trivial or minimal the basis for categorisation*, was sufficient to activate intergroup conflict, suggesting that social identity is a key (if not *the key*) mechanism in the psychology of intergroup relations.” (2008, p. 228)^{73 74} This suggests that the formation of a group whose connection is a category can easily spark conflict with any other group or groups outside of this category, because they are not the same, and therefore pose an existential threat on the basis on shared identity. This conflict of sameness is a central feature of rhetoric arising within the post-truth tectonic, forming part of the atmosphere of post-truth that I spoke of in chapter one, an atmosphere formed of division, confusion, and chaos.

At this point I’d like to come back to the notion of “we” as a grammatical category rather than an experiential one. Having spoken of the power of group belief and action, how we align to and identify within a group and how such collective belief can subsume individual identity, I propose that the collective we speaks to a powerful experiential sensation and argue that this bonded sensation within a we collective can be described as a central pillar of tectonic spread, used to evoke a powerful feeling of belonging. Human beings may only have access to an individual

⁷³ My emphasis: “*no matter how trivial or minimal the basis for categorisation...*”

⁷⁴ Hammack’s emphasis: (if not *the key*)

internalisation of experience but there is stability, safety, and acceptance in *sharing* experience, in sharing belief, language, and intention, even if this sharing becomes deleterious to notions of selfhood. It is interesting to note that a distinguishing feature of post-truth narratives in the digital age is their ability to arise, persist, and proliferate from unconventional sources; an off-hand tweet, a Facebook post, a YouTube video, and swiftly spread, particularly from those public figures with whom people form parasocial relationships and therefore feel a loyalty toward that equals that of a close friend or family member.⁷⁵ ⁷⁶ These viral narratives, no matter how removed, or altered, from their source material, have remarkable power to take root and to therefore become the seed of the types of collective behaviour I have described – particularly harmful behaviours.⁷⁷ Individuals in these group collectives can then find themselves on the wrong side of legality, having been encouraged to act by the shared beliefs and intentions of the group. This process aligns with Gallagher and Tollefsen’s suggestion that narratives possess the power to “oppress or dominate (in explicit or subtle ways) the intentions of the individuals that belong to the group.” (2019, p. 218) Couple this process with the ways in which I have described people as drawn to groups, to likeness, to lines of division between ‘self’ and ‘other’ and we can begin how patterns of narrative adherence may, in times of narrative uncertainty, form to fractures. Exploit vulnerabilities through which it is possible to lose sight of not only personal autonomy but of personhood itself, especially under the guise of service to group narratives whose content demands

⁷⁵ Study on information diffusion across SNS: Huacheng, L, *et al.* (2021), ‘Capturing Dynamics of Information Diffusion in SNS: A Survey of Methodology and Techniques’, *ArXiv*, 2110.14245v1, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2110.14245> (Accessed September 2022), Maheshwari, S, (2016), ‘How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study’, *The New York Times*, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html> (Accessed September 2022), Meserole, C, (2018), ‘How Misinformation Spreads on Social Media—And What To Do About It’, *Lawfare*, Available at: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-misinformation-spreads-on-social-media-and-what-to-do-about-it> (Accessed September 2022)

⁷⁶ Some information on parasocial relationships: Ballantine, P, Martin, B, (2005) "Forming Parasocial Relationships in Online Communities", *NA - Advances in Consumer Research*, 32, eds. Geeta Menon and Akshay R. Rao, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, pp 197-201

⁷⁷ The types of narrative that become most viral are often the most salacious. The gossip. The dirt. The tea. Based in actuality or not, rumour is the fertiliser of digital virality.

division from groups marked as “other” to cement group identity of sameness. Gallagher and Tollefsen (2019) pinpoint the problem inherent in this interaction when they speak of narratives as being capable of blinding people to other options, even as they manipulate them to move toward certain patterns of action or behaviour. In the post-truth atmosphere, this capacity of narrative can become weaponised as it travels through the spaces of the digital age, deepening the divides and marking an ever-widening separation between the actual and its interpretation. It is this process of narrative unmooring, and its effects on the self and community, that I explore in the next chapter as I define the spaces of the digital age in which post-truth tectonics take root, perpetuating the atmosphere which post-truth is most identified with, that of obfuscation, confusion, misinformation, and uncertainty.

Summary

This chapter has outlined how tectonic narratives influence the creation of the individual and the collective. The aim here was to make clear how narrative, whilst it is not the whole of the equation, nonetheless forms a vital, structural role in human development and relationships. Narrative enables humanity to the story of who it is, how it functions, what it believes, what it decries, what is socially acceptable and unacceptable, how to form communal and individual selves, and how to exist within a societal structure as an individual and group member. All this makes clear the central role of narrative and therefore how vital it is to be aware of the prevailing narrative atmosphere at a given point in history. It is particularly vital to establish and maintain such an awareness when the given narrative of a time is enacting a noticeable impact on the perception of actuality, the understanding of the world, and the reliability of information.

PART TWO

3.

NOT WAVING, BUT DROWNING

Introduction

In chapter two I made clear the relationship between basal tectonic narratives and the development of the self and society, and the self in society, in order to highlight how post-truth as a tectonic could prove damaging to individual and group action, interaction, and behaviour. I have also, throughout this thesis thus far, made frequent reference to the notion of a post-truth atmosphere, and whilst I do not suggest that this atmosphere has its roots in our current digital era, I will argue in this chapter that the digital era has caused an exponential increase in these post-truth atmospheric conditions. SNS are most particularly notable in their magnification of this atmosphere but the online spaces in their totality can be said to enact a detrimental effect on narrative as it enters the space created from our combined digital and actual-world habitation, a space which I will describe in this chapter as a 'synthesised space'. This chapter offers an analysis of the ways in which narrative moves and reacts within this space and those who reside in the space, becoming unmoored, entangled, edited, re-edited and therefore increasingly problematic with regards to interpretation, reinterpretation, and communication. To fully explore the impact of this compound space I consider the question of cyberspace as *place*, and the affect this enacts on the human sense of presence and spatiality, what emotions or reactions might be engendered, and how basic

comprehension of the world and the ability to ground into actual-world experience of the self might be compromised, if at all.

3.1 Cloud Connected

An expansion of access to the internet in the 80s and early 90s, caused by a drop in the price and availability of personal computers, invited a wealth of commentary and scholarship as media and academia sought to understand the changes this pioneering technology might trigger. The tone of some of these early opinions verged upon the hyperbolic, seeming to leap directly to a techno-future ripped not from the pages of Gibson's seminal *Neuromancer* but some fantastical version thereof, where the techno-dystopia of corporate rule was somehow superseded by the beauty of a limitless cyberspatial horizon. Take for an example of this hyperbole an essay written for *Cyberspace: First Steps*, Michael Benedikt's collection of essays on the possibilities the internet might offer. The essay in question "Mind is a Leaking Rainbow", was written by Nicole Stenger, a pioneering artist in Virtual Reality and research fellow at MIT. In her vision of the future of cyberspace, humans would "become creatures of coloured light in motion" (1991, p. 52). She declared that in cyberspace we would transcend, become angels, and exist for eternity, an extension of the idea of the wholesale uploading of the human consciousness. The whole tenor of Stenger's essay is one of bold, delirious optimism, speaking of a "release of the imagination" (*ibid.* 57) and from the strictures of time and space, leading to her final assertion that "our future can only take on a luminous dimension!" (*ibid.* 58).

Looking backwards from the 21st century as it stands, Stenger's viewpoint seems overly optimistic, but she was far from being alone in it. Howcroft and Fitzgerald note that early scholarship and commentary saw "The information superhighway

[...] often presented as the universal cure-all for the social ills that have plagued humanity." (1998, p. 4) The disquisition of these scholars sought to claim that "work and organizations will be transformed, education upturned, democracies revitalised, and community life resurrected." (*ibid*, p. 4). This rhetoric, though not quite as vigorously imaginative as Stenger's, was based on a belief that cyberspace would "make it easier for people to communicate both politically and otherwise" (Fisher, 2001, 6). The feeling being that this extended level of communication might disrupt the efforts of corporate interests whose interference in politics threatened to subvert the process of democracy. As Howcroft and Fitzgerald describe it, commentators sharing this vision of the future of virtual spaces saw a potential for "extended democracy, personal liberation, enhanced powers of organization and coordination, and renewal of community." (1998, p. 1). The optimism of these forecasts, written on the whole after the publication of *Neuromancer*, seem strange in light of Gibson's bleak vision.⁷⁸ But even Gibson, plugged in to the zeitgeist as he has always been, frequently declares himself stunned by the vast chasm between what he imagined the internet might be and what it has become. This is a fundamental problem of looking forwards to change rather than backwards with hindsight. As Fisher elucidates, "predicting how the technology will develop and how it will change society is a difficult task." (2001, p. 5) With no real knowledge of what may come to pass, one can only imagine.

Those who did not share the enthusiasm or hopes of Stenger and others like her formed their imaginings from a combination of uncertainty, distrust, or outright dismay at the changing of the times and the dangers such changes may pose. As noted by Howcroft and Fitzgerald, scholarship on the opposite end of the opinion

⁷⁸ Gibson, W, (1984), *Neuromancer*, Ace Books: New York

scale tended to describe the internet as “alienating”, as “shallow, impersonal, and often hostile” (1998, p. 6). These responses are locked in the fear of the new, but they are not entirely without precedent. People can be, at their worst, astonishing cruel, and the remove from reality such technology offers, the anonymity, present an atmosphere within which the worst self of humanity can find expression. Having experienced the chat rooms of the mid-90s, I can confirm that the internet even in those days could be both hostile and alienating, especially for those new to navigating the space. This hostility was not inevitable, but the freedom anonymity offered to users served to lend itself to rather unpleasant behaviour such as cloning, flaming, and dogpiling. However, some scholars sharing such counter-discourses had even greater concerns about the internet’s impact on other aspects of humanity than the behavioural. They feared the internet had the potential to evolve into “a vehicle to exacerbate human suffering.” (*ibid*, p. 6). This seems an extraordinary concern but arose from a genuine fear that society might become fragmented by this technology, provoking widespread isolation and the “loss of strong bonds between members of a society” (*ibid*, p. 7). Add to this the worry of a political outcome that might lead to a “domination by the few.” (*ibid*, p. 18) and one begins to understand the scenario these concerned scholars feared possible. A world of the alienated, in which “technology exacerbates human misery as individuals become increasingly controlled by what they fail to understand.” (*ibid*, p. 5) On the heels of such predictions it is important to reiterate the difficulties of foreknowledge at the beginning of what amounts to a paradigmatic shift. As Howcroft and Fitzgerald emphasize in their essay; “it is in the realities of organizational and social settings that technologies are diffused and implemented; these realities defy predictions based on the capabilities of technologies.” (*ibid*, p. 21). In other words, it is hard to know what an effect may be within a given society or environment until such an

effect has taken place, reaffirming the limits of imagination and the unreliability of pre-judgement.

With hindsight, and experience, we can now state that aspects of both visions, the utopian and the dystopian, find expression in the long-term outcomes of widespread internet access. The platform the internet provides for small creators has led to an explosion of creativity, collaboration, and experimentation whose limits have yet to be reached or tested. Moreover, and more importantly, the digital landscape has offered itself up as a powerful vehicle for marginalised communities, who are magnified online, able to be heard in new and exciting ways. As Goldenburg and Gross point out in “Digital Emotion Contagion”, social media networks have had a transformative effect on social movements, stating that is it “impossible to imagine movements such as the Arab Spring or the Black Lives Matter without digital media.” (2020, p. 320) Digital and online activism is all about building larger communities of support to highlight multiple causes and effect lasting change, in the hopes of forcing those in government to generate and enact policy for fear of losing public support.⁷⁹ Petition sites such as Avaaz and change.org offer a huge platform for multiple causes, some so small that without these sites and their advocacy they might struggle to be heard, but the results are often lacking. Whilst getting people to sign a petition is easy, creating the right amount of outrage around so many issues is much harder. There is a lot to see online, and it is very easy for compassion fatigue to inhibit public enthusiasm in a cause. Gen Z activism on the other hand is generated amongst like-minded young people united in their belief in specific causes

⁷⁹ Further information: Rees, A, (2013), ‘Digital and Online Activism’, *Reset: DIGITAL FOR GOOD*, <https://en.reset.org/digital-and-online-activism/> (Accessed September 2022), Vigo, J, (2019), ‘Internet Advocacy: How It Has Shifted Human Rights Struggles’, *Forbes*, Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/julianvigo/2019/08/25/internet-advocacy-how-it-has-shifted-human-rights-struggles/?sh=4da19a652e8f> (Accessed September 2022), Ovide, S, (2020), ‘How Social Media Has Changed Civil Rights Protests’, *The New York Times*, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/technology/social-media-protests.html> (Accessed September 2022)

and represents an ever-growing presence in both online and real-world activism.⁸⁰ Driven by various inspiring role models from amongst their peers, such as Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, and David Hogg, the hactivists of Gen Z are passionate in their desire to create change, and skilled at generating virality on SNS, utilising techniques such as spamming timelines and websites with fancam videos and using hashtags to generate conversations about issues of importance to them in the wider world (such as company abuse of employees).^{81 82 83} There is, of course, an opposite side to the coin in that digital media also offer an unprecedented platform for those who seek to dismantle the rights and freedoms of those they do not see, or want to see, as equal to them. These dissenting voices have also managed, via their online platforms, to foster worldwide community and support, I offer as an example of this magnification, the manosphere, a growing men's rights network whose philosophy is based in extreme misogyny and the eradication of women's rights.⁸⁴ From this, one can ascertain that a categorical effect of the internet is a magnification of narratives, no matter their provenance. All this, however, takes place within the spectrum of everyday life and living. Of all the changes that have been wrought, the most

⁸⁰ For information on Gen Z activism see: Carnegie, M, (2022), 'Gen Z: How Young People Are Changing Activism', *BBC Worklife*, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220803-gen-z-how-young-people-are-changing-activism> (Accessed September 2022), Cohen, L, (2020), 'From TikTok to Black Lives Matter, how Gen Z is revolutionizing activism', *CBS News*, Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/from-tiktok-to-black-lives-matter-how-gen-z-is-revolutionizing-activism/> (Accessed September 2022)

⁸¹ Malala Yusefzai is an international public figure and therefore a great deal is known about her story, but I include this BBC profile as a matter of interest. Her story is extraordinary: Editors, (2017), 'Profile: Malala Yusefzai', *BBC News*, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23241937> (Accessed September 2022)

Greta Thunberg, much like Malala, is an international figure, but again I include some information about her campaign story as a matter of interest: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, (2020), 'Greta Thunberg: Swedish Activist', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Greta-Thunberg> (Accessed September 2022)

Article on David Hogg for further information: Young, G, (2018), 'What happened next? How teenage shooting survivor David Hogg became a political leader', *The Guardian*, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/12/gun-control-activist-david-hogg-parkland-people-dying> (Accessed September 2022)

⁸² What is 'going viral': Author Unknown, (Date Unknown), 'What does 'going viral' mean and how does it work?', *JustAskThales*, Available at: <https://justaskthales.com/en/going-viral-mean-work/> (Accessed March 2022), The importance of virality on social media: Author Unknown, (2017), 'McDonalds and Going Viral On Social Media', *Social Media First*, Available at: <http://www.socialmediafirst.info/blog/2017/09/mcdonalds-and-going-viral-social-media/> (Accessed March 2022), Malhotra, S, (2017), 'The Science of Going Viral On Social Media & Changing People's Perceptions', *LinkedIn*, Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/science-going-viral-social-media-changing-peoples-sahil-malhotra> (Accessed March 2022)

⁸³ Some further information about these disruption techniques: Martinez, B, (2020), 'Fancams and Hashtags: Gen Z's Strategy of Disruption', *New Moon*, Available at: <https://new-moon.com/fancams-and-hashtags-gen-z-strategy-of-disruption/> (Accessed September 2022)

⁸⁴ For context and further information: Felton, J, (2020), 'Study On Misogynist Men's Groups On The Internet Confirms The Obvious', *IFLScience*, Available at: https://www.iflscience.com/technology/study-on-misogynist-mens-groups-on-the-internet-confirms-the-obvious/?fbclid=IwAR3imv-E9MeSj2k7Ra930WwtXsleE2iM3AcBXSmixr_In6dXZOXEj3_KEU (Accessed June 2022), Aiston, J, (2021), 'What is the manosphere and why is it a concern?', *InternetMatters.org*, Available at: <https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/news-blogs/what-is-the-manosphere-and-why-is-it-a-concern/> (Accessed June 2022)

remarkable is the ways in which digital culture has utterly subsumed itself into our daily lives, our culture, our societies. The internet is essentially just another utility now and, as such, has become ubiquitous, and although there are those who have little to no access to the internet at present, the pendulum is rapidly shifting. According to TheNextWeb's Digital Trends report (2021), out of a global population of 7.8 billion, 4.66 billion are unique internet users, showing an increase of 316 million from January 2020. Moreover, 5.22 billion people in the world now have mobile phones, an increase of 93 million between January 2020 and January 2021. Most remarkably, the report finds an incredible 4.20 billion people worldwide accessing and using social media platforms, an increase of 490 million users in the past year.⁸⁵ All this to describe what has become for a vast number of people around the world the absolute normality of being online interacting with one's friends, family, colleagues and peers, the purely habitual nature of seeking information, conversation, entertainment, advice, and opinion, and of offering such. This casual use, and its ubiquity, effects an enormous transformation upon even countries with lower levels of internet access and engagement, impacting interactions, information seeking, knowledge and beliefs and, most importantly, the narrative tectonics of a given culture or society. This digital landscape, this online version of the world, offers up a whole new space within which humanity resides and communicates, but how do we categorise this space, can it be categorised as a space at all?

3.2 A Topology of Cyberspace

⁸⁵ No authors, (2021), *thenextweb.com*, Available at: <https://thenextweb.com/news/insights-global-state-of-digital-social-media-2021> (Accessed March 2021)

“Schematically speaking, each society offers up its own peculiar space, as it were, as an ‘object’ for analysis and overall theoretical explication.” (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991, p. 31)

Though the spatial element of cyberspace is essentially conceptual, there exists an unusual consensus within the surrounding scholarship about whether it can be considered space or not. Boellstorff states that “the category of the real is not a point of distinction between the digital and the physical” (2016, p. 397). His position maintains that digital spaces remain existent places whether or not an individual is logged into them. “They exist,” he asserts, “even if no one is currently ‘inworld’.” (*ibid.* 395) Magermans (2004, p. 03) agrees, suggesting that we all inhabit the physical and digital places simultaneously. The inchoate environment otherwise known as cyberspace is therefore not *separate*, or as Magermans states it, “not an isolated and inaccessible world” (*ibid.*, p. 03). That is to say, anyone who possesses the correct equipment, or has access to the correct equipment.^{86 87} For Magermans, there is a distinct intermutual relationship at play between the real and the virtual, the one quantifiably affecting the other, and she is not alone in this conclusion. Back in the earlier days of the internet Kitchin described cyberspace as “an extension of the real world”, so much so that the actions one took, or took part in, online would have the capacity to spark “real-world implications.” (1998, p. 402). In Kitchin’s estimation “life on-line is not divorced from nonvirtual life but is highly situated within it” (1998, p. 402). Even in these earlier days he recognised a reciprocal relationship

⁸⁶ I refer back to the Digital Trends survey, to the extraordinary uptake in smart phone ownership and the vast broadening of access those figures account for: No authors, (2021), *thenextweb.com*, Available at: <https://thenextweb.com/news/insights-global-state-of-digital-social-media-2021> (Accessed March 2021)

⁸⁷ There are cybercafes in most cities and in developing countries, cell phones usage for internet access is constantly rising, not to mention the sharing of smart devices between families where a modem/PC is too expensive, all of which suggests that the complete picture of access is possibly far broader than the numbers given in the Digital Trends survey. See these sources for context on cyber-access: Editors, (2017), ‘Internet cafes’, *Smarter Travel*, Available at: <https://www.smartertravel.com/internet-cafes/> (Accessed September 2022), Silva, L, *et al.*, (2019), ‘Mobile Connectivity in Emerging Economies’, *Pew Research Center*, Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/03/07/mobile-connectivity-in-emerging-economies/#:~:text=Surveys%20conducted%20in%2011%20emerging%20and%20developing%20countries,capable%20of%20accessing%20the%20internet%20and%20running%20apps.> (Accessed September 2022)

between the real and virtual domains, and declared them “highly embodied, with real-world discrimination and abuse reproducing themselves in a new space” (1998, p. 402). For Batty, who began with a view of cyberspace as “layered on top of, within, and between the fabric of traditional geographical space” (1993, p. 616) his conclusion lands in much the same place as Magermans’ and Kitchin’s. He finds cyberspace to be a place that, despite having no conventional sense of the spatial inhabits a mutually affective relationship with our “activity in physical space.” (2000, p. 137) In recent years he has moved to postulate the notion of there being no divide at all between the virtual and physical worlds; “for one cannot exist without the other although there is an assumption that the physical world existed prior to the virtual.” (*ibid*, p. 134) A picture emerges here, then, of a space that can be quantified, even if it cannot be seen, a space present enough to influence other, more quantifiable spaces. How might we describe such a space, and such a relationship?

Considering the impact of mobile devices, de Souza e Silva argues that we have to speak of a new kind of space, one that takes into account both the virtual and the real: “Because mobile devices create a more dynamic relationship with the Internet, embedding it in outdoor, everyday activities, we can no longer address the disconnection between physical and digital spaces. I name this new type of space hybrid space.” (2006, p. 262) De Souza e Silva’s hybrid space brings into sharp relief the way in which mobile technology broadens the parameters of the digital spaces we inhabit, upending the notion of a separate space accessed from a set point, to a digital universe that exists wherever we are and wherever we go, that we may enter or leave at will. From this standpoint it could be argued that, if not for mobile technology, cyberspaces without borders would only exist in entirely virtual worlds such as Second Life. Instead, as de Souza e Silva points out, the “‘always-on’

connection" afforded to us by mobile technology "transforms our experience of space by enfolding remote contexts inside the present context." (ibid, p. 262) De Souza e Silva is quick to point out that these hybrid spaces, whilst they are opened up through technology, were not created by technology, they are extensions of that which already existed: "built by the connection of mobility and communication and materialized by social networks developed simultaneously in physical and digital spaces." (ibid, p. 265-6) In this era of the smartphone, however, we "carry the digital space" (ibid, p. 268) with us, redefining the ways in which we can connect through that medium. The notion of the hybrid space, therefore, expands our experience of the digital and acknowledges our immersion *within* the digital spaces but only as a composite – two disparate things combining to create an experience that is entirely other in nature, the experience of being connected to the internet wherever we go. This concept is explored further by Drakopoulou, who suggests that mobile technology creates "a new urban environment that is techno-synthetically composed" allowing for our urban spaces to be "enriched with electronic information" (2013, para. 1). In trying to describe the experience of living this enriched space, Drakopoulou turns to Lefebvre, and to representational space, which "can be lived as a mental and bodily experience" (ibid, para. 5). The lived experience of representational spaces as described by Lefebvre and utilized by Drakopoulou involves "an all-consuming process of feeling, seeing and apprehending reality" (ibid, para. 5) all of which is interpreted through culture, through the communal agreement of societal expression. This suggests that the experience of being online in this enriched environment, even if it is an integral part of lived experience, is a separate matter from walking or existing in this environment minus that enrichment. In other words, it does not acknowledge that, in this case, the culture we are interpreting our experience through is *digital* culture. The culture *is* the experience, *is*

the environment, and therefore is not fully given voice by this notion of composite space. This lack necessitates a search elsewhere for the full expression of this space and its lived experience.

Looking to “build a bridge on the theoretical gap between real and virtual spaces” (2018, p. 163) Kosari and Amoori imagine a Thirdspace, which they describe as a blended space, bearing characteristics of both the virtual and the real. This theory centres on the idea of a space that is formed within our minds as we are using our digital technology to access virtual space. They compare this mental Thirdspace to a control panel that allows a user to mediate interactions between and within the real and virtual spaces. They agree that virtual space is not merely representational space, arguing for it as a space that we perceive and undertake lived experience within, causing a measurable effect in our thinking, emotions, and behaviours, some of which can be fully attributed to experiences within the virtual space. Their assertion goes as far as to declare that despite the virtual being non-physical, those who access the virtual undergo a physical experience by proxy. The caveat to this interpretation is their idea of the physical experience being purely located within our interaction with our devices and with sensors and so forth. This theory, whilst it acknowledges interaction, limits the understanding of said interaction to a mental activity, a process of thought. Whilst this is undoubtedly an integral and important aspect of our experience with this space, it does not quite describe the level of feedback and interaction, the sheer magnitude of immersion that we experience. Nor does it quite give voice to the ways in which these virtual spaces have transformed our societies, have in fact written themselves into a digital culturality through which we interpret not only online experience but those we encounter IRL. Kosari and Amoori ask at one point “where is the user?” (2018, p. 163) and I would argue that

they are rather closer to the answer when they speak of mixed spaces than when they insist that such a mixed space occurs only within the mind. If that were true, digital culture would be an individual experience, and unique, rather than shared by 4.66 billion unique individual internet users and all those who interact with them in the real-world, who are drawn into a shared experience that has become so integral it can now be called ubiquitous. Consequently, I argue that the experience of digital space is not the result of simply moving from one place to another, or of combining places mentally to process the experience of existing between spaces, it is the result of moving through a space that exists all around, a space merged across the real and the virtual, a space that enacts effects upon us “even when electricity dies and the virtual space seems to be absent.” (Kosari & Amoori, 2018, p. 178). I propose to name this new space the ‘synthesized space’. The synthesized space acknowledges the incorporation of online and real-life spaces into a distinct and recognisable space in and of itself, a space that is also a cultural experience that humanity is submersed within and shares, one that feeds back upon itself, that has its own language, moods, and dimensions, whose influence spreads into all parts of society and culture wherever it is found, and it is found almost everywhere. This synthesized space constitutes not only a spatial expansion, but a sensorial expansion, an unavoidable broadening of the parameters by which humanity understands and connects with the world around. Perhaps it might better be described as a metaphysical expansion, one that is as capable of being detrimental as it can be revolutionary, given that it is an abstraction that often produces distortion as it bends, blends, and reflects the real and the virtual through one another. Regarded in this fashion, our synthesized space comes to resemble a heterotopia. A heterotopia is a space wherein actuality is “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, 1986, p. 23), and here, in this heterotopic space of synthesis, our notions of concrete actuality and

concrete information are slowly but surely destabilising as they become contested and inverted via constant, warping representation. And because information moves through this space in the same way as our perception of the actual, returning warped and fractured, reflected into multifarious fragments which bear little resemblance to the original information, humanity walks not only through a new space but through a new means of encountering and absorbing narrative. In the synthesized space, the human narrative ecology is also rendered heterotopic in nature, distorting and inverting understanding, perception, and communication.

3.3 Narrative ecologies

In the heterotopic narrative ecology, all types of narrative e.g., information, news, ideologies etc become unmoored as they enter the space, undergoing immediate diffusion, warping, and distorting as they travel from location to location. The primary outcome of this unmooring is a laxity of interpretation, as unmoored information belongs to whoever finds it, so too does its interpretation, meaning all narratives released and lost to the synthesized space become subject to the subjective. Of course, narratives are invariably subject to the subjective over periods of time and between differing groups of people but never with the speed this subjectivity occurs within the synthesised space. In this environment there are a number of effects that undermine not only narratives but the ability to communicate with and within them, to make sense of them, and to make sense of the surrounding world. Moreover, in this synthesised space, because narrative is free to travel wherever and however it likes, being interpreted and reinterpreted, it tends to spread faster. A bacterial spread. The infection of a badly interpreted or inaccurate take can multiply exponentially, sometimes even before the source of any

information that has been incorrectly shared or interpreted is even aware that their facts have been overrun by fictions. Stories nest within stories in this profusion, this confusion of sharing, and thus the connective tissue of all these stories, the thread leading back to the source, to some possible foundation of fact or evidence, can become so unravelled that locating the source—or even the task of figuring out whether there *was* a source, or if in fact this information is credible at all—can become a forensic mission. This renders source materials hard to pinpoint and allows false or misleading narratives to become primary narratives and primary sources, particularly when we consider a user base who are, on the whole, unmotivated to fact-check narratives they encounter at the point of entry, especially from trusted sources in their social circles and media environs.⁸⁸ In this ecosystem, opinion not only undermines fact, it can easily *become* fact, or have an equivalent meaning value. Returning then to the metaphysical experience of this space, we can think of how this abstraction lends itself to narrative even beyond the loss of mooring and the transmutation of opinion into fact.

Narrative itself is an abstraction, a way of looking at the world through uneven vectors. Gilles Fauconnier, whose expertise resided in the field of cognitive science, described language as a “superficial manifestation of hidden, highly abstract, cognitive constructions” (1997, p. 34).⁸⁹ Narratives are a deeply complex manifestation of those constructions and therefore subject to that integral abstraction. They are our attempts to make concrete, to explicate, the somewhat

⁸⁸ The global pandemic has somewhat changed these habits, due to the unprecedented rise in general levels of online misinformation and disinformation surrounding Covid19. There has been a concerted effort by existing fact-checking bodies to undergo ongoing audits on the veracity of information offered online. See this study for an overview of the changes: Siwakoti, S, *et al.* (2021), ‘How COVID drove the evolution of fact-checking’, *MisinformationReview*, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-69> (Accessed April 2022)

⁸⁹ Fauconnier’s books on the cognitive creativity of language use and mental spaces and conceptual projection: Fauconnier, G, (1997), ‘*Mapping in Thoughts and Language*’, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, Fauconnier, G, (1994), ‘*Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*’, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

obscure conceptual ideas, values, and structures by which we design our humanity, our society, and ourselves. In the case of language, “the operation of structure projection between domains [is] essential to such constructions” (Fauconnier, 1997, p. 34) – that is the interactions between where language derives from, the meaning that it is trying to convey, and the spaces in which that meaning is created. For Fauconnier it was obvious that to understand the construction of language and its meanings we must also understand the domains over which the projection of language occurs. Taking this concept to the synthesised space and what happens to our narratives in that space, we can see that the unmooring of narrative, the bacterial spread and diffusion thereof, and its subsequent divorce from sources, from context or framing, can damage the internal procedures by which we determine both the meaning and the function of a narrative. When speaking of users and their various encounters with narrative in the synthesised space, I used the term ‘point of entry’, in fiction this is the place a story starts, and in fictional narratives the point of entry is decided by the author. I suggest that it is the self-same process for narratives in the synthesised space as they are shared between social authors, meaning point of entry is subject to rapid and unpredictable shifting, not only in terms of the various social actors and their perspectives but also as each shared narrative is interpreted through the various filters of belief, ideology, philosophy and understanding. An event with multiple spectators can be used as an example of this shifting perspective dependent upon point of entry. Not only will the point of entry into the statement of each spectator be distinctive, so will their mode of interpretation. Even if two of the spectators stood side by side in the same location, their stories would not match exactly as their point of entry would be divergent, based on their individual subjectivity. So, what happens when point of entry becomes subject to the subjective? We can extrapolate that, in this occurrence, as a narrative enters the

synthesised space and diffuses amongst a plethora of spectators, losing not only its cohesion but its connection to the originating event, the meaning and function of that narrative is lost. Once meaning and function is compromised, the way is opened to all manner of divergent meanings and functions being declared by untrustworthy sources.⁹⁰ Couple this with an inability to prove the veracity of the narrative or its many “witnesses”, and users themselves become unmoored in a sea of diffuse narrative they can neither interpret nor trust. In short, this diffusion and unmooring of narrative in the synthesised space is compromising our narrative anchors.

According to Landa (2017, p. 586) “the narrative anchoring of stories within larger stories, and within an evolutionary and narrative conception of reality, is one of the most basic cognitive manoeuvres allowing us to construct and organize a world”. I have previously demonstrated how our understanding of the world, ourselves, and one another has its basis in narrative, in master documents of narrative that I have called tectonics, that inform all of our actions, interactions, beliefs and practices. This is how we make sense of the world. As Landa makes certain to note, “reality is a narrative, literally so, from the moment we have a brain—a narrative generator—to understand and structure it.” (*ibid*, p. 579) These tectonics are our narrative anchors, they allow us to navigate through our cultures, societies and lives, all our interpersonal interaction and self-creation. They are vital to this process. One can then, with this understanding, state that existing within a space wherein narrative is immediately unmoored at the point of entry is to begin to lose our grip on the anchoring that secures all of our tectonics. Landa describes the formation of our individual narratives, our individual tectonics, as being “made up of many narrative layers and structures: processes, anecdotes, previous histories, archetypes,

⁹⁰ Event here can be taken to mean information or news as well as an actual happening.

interpretive frames and scripts, virtual plots and sideshadows." (*ibid*, p. 578) He speaks here of frames, which are the knowledge structures we use to interpret and anticipate familiar events, and of the scripts and plans, the stores of stereotypical events we may not have yet experienced but are aware of, and the means of responding to them. These narrative layers also include the mental models we utilize to "to anticipate events, to reason, and to underlie explanation" (Palmer, 2004, p. 46 [Johnson, Laird, 1999]). We apply all of these varied, crucial models of narrative comprehension in our everyday life, communications and actions, thus they all become subject to the subjective in the synthesised space. This subjection then leads to their unmooring, their diffusion, their loss of meaning and function and begins the process of destabilising our narrative anchors, leaving us adrift and searching for meaning, for structure, for ways to process the world around us that make sense. My suggestion here is that when reality, through diffusion, subjection and loss of meaning and function, becomes unreliable, our multitude of narrative structures can no longer tell us with certainty what to anticipate, how to react, how to reason, and how to explain it. Nor can they help us differentiate between what is "real" and therefore "reliable", and what is not. The world looks like our world but no longer acts like it, and the narratives we use to navigate it no longer act like narratives should; diverging, diffusing, becoming opaque and unusable, and thus we are left navigating without coordinates, de-situated into a strange new territory exacerbated by psychogeographical incongruities.

3.4 Reflections and mimicry: the overlapping world and cyber-psychogeography

Debord (1958) speaks of cities as possessing "psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or

exit from certain zones.” (paragraph 2) In *dérive* “certain processes of chance and predictability” (Doruff, 2006, p. 23) carry us through unknown spaces.⁹¹ With this *dérive*, this intentional drifting, we allow ourselves to be “drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.” (Debord 1958) In other words, the aim is to get lost on purpose, but with purpose, to know that you are going somewhere that you have never been and thereby alter your relationship to space. This is more profound than a loss of mere topological orientation—it is a significant disturbance of our psychological orientation, opening spaces beyond our comprehension. Whilst there are obvious exceptions and limitations, one can state that human beings are creatures of habit, drawn to familiar spaces, places, and routines, so what happens when the human mental map expands to cover a synthesised space without borders?⁹² I suggest that there are several psycho-geographical experiences than can be said to occur therein. The first of these experiences I describe as an enforced *dérive*, intensifying exposure to the unmoored, reconstituted narratives entering the synthesised space.⁹³ *Dérive* is the way in which we travel through information online, describing perfectly the 21st century tendency to scroll mindlessly through content, getting lost on purpose, without purpose, drifting from one fleeting impression to another, brief flashes of dopamine leading us on a never-ending spiral down the rabbit hole of content.⁹⁴ Moreover, there is a constant pressure from SNS to add to the rabbit holes, building new distractions for

⁹¹ For Debord quote, see: Debord, G, (1956), ‘Theory of the *Dérive*, *Situationist Online*, Translated by Ken Knabb, Available at: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html> (Accessed June 2019)

⁹² People who run ultra-marathons, climb mountains, chase adventure, break stereotypes, smash through glass ceilings, who shake up the status quo, but the general mode of humanity is routine. See for evidence: Heintzelman, S, King L, (2019), ‘Routines and Meaning in Life’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 45(5), pp 688–699, Smith, L, (2020), ‘The psychology behind why we love routines and schedules’, *Yahoo Finance*, Available at: <https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/the-psychology-behind-why-we-love-routines-and-schedules-050053932.html> (Accessed September 2022)

⁹³ The literal meaning of *dérive* is “drift” or “drifting”, this was a Situationist play to outwit the habitual psychogeography via “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” - Debord, G, (1956), ‘Theory of the *Dérive*, *Situationist Online*, Translated by Ken Knabb, Available at: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html> (Accessed June 2019)

⁹⁴ Though social media addiction is not yet a classified mental disorder there is evidence to suggest that it exists. For a report into SNS addiction, see: Andreassen, C.S., (2015), ‘Online Social Network Site Addiction: A Comprehensive Review’, *Current Addiction Reports*, 2, pp. 175–184 Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-015-0056-9> (Accessed September 2022)

others from our lives, interests, and obsessions.⁹⁵ This noise we encounter in the synthesised space is as distracting and disorientating as it is addictive. Amongst these rabbit holes, ever searching through other lives, all of which (as I will discuss later in this chapter) are as curated as those parts of our lives that we share online, our sense of self can begin to unravel in peculiar ways, diminishing, inverting, or warping out of true. So, as we move through the synthesised space, either in our familiar pathways or in our exploratory *dérive*, driven by algorithms, by virality, and by that ever-addicting hit of dopamine, what takes place is an essential dislocation from the self. A de-situation that lends itself to, and exacerbates, our narrative and territorial de-situation. Doruff describes place as becoming “a topological rhythm between Euclidean and non-Euclidean space, between our actual perception of the 3D world and a virtual proprioceptive experience of movement through it.” (2006, p. 1) Whilst he is, in fact, discussing this in connection with new media projects which meld performance practice with technology in urban spaces I mark a parallel between this notion of digital/physical synthesis and our psycho-geographical movements through the synthesised space. Through this parallel it can be seen how exposure to all this content, to the unfamiliar, to these unmoored narratives, leads to our de-situation from the world by muddying the relationship and therefore the perception of the self and the space, of the self *in* the space. Speaking of the virtual city, Foth states, “if real world space no longer matters or matters differently, then reality will indeed recurse into the virtual.” (2009, p. 285) I argue that the process of recursion begins with a narrative unmooring through the synthesised space and ends with our own unmooring, a de-situation in the

⁹⁵ For further context, see: Subair, E, (2020) ‘How To Reduce The Pressure Of Feeling A Relentless Need To Succeed On Social Media’, *Vogue*, Available at: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/reduce-social-media-pressure> (Accessed September 2022), Youds, H, (2021), ‘The Pressure To Share Everything On Social Media’, *The Independent*, Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/the-pressure-to-share-everything-on-social-media/> (Accessed September 2022)

synthesised space, where humanity as social authors and actors reflects an endless mise en abyme of narrative and personal referentiality.

The second psycho-geographical experience concerns the familiar tread of online wandering and how it mimics psycho-geographical movement in the physical world as people form to social groups in which they can be certain their familiar narrative topography (the map of narrative terrain that forms their self-hood, their beliefs, and philosophies etc) will be the primary subject of discussion. In this way, online psychogeography can facilitate a limited exposure to news, views, and information, leading to insularity, and to a pattern of pathologized behaviours enacting a reflection of group narratives into the actual (for instance by way of enacted prejudice and the disenfranchisement of the Other). But a retreat to insularity cannot guarantee protection from exposure to the unfamiliar or upsetting. In the synthesised space, where narratives diffuse without anchor or control and constantly reproduce, they are impossible to avoid entirely. There are a multitude of routes through which even the most avoidant user might be exposed, for instance by way of fellow users in a community, through friends, family, colleagues, via stories in the mass media, or feeds, walls, recommends, or even through pop-up notifications from news apps. These unwanted encounters drive users ever further in their quest for narrative purity, leading to the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, which can offer the illusion of a world without such narratives.⁹⁶ Echo chambers and filter bubbles might seem to be directly attributable to the ways in which SNS allow for a herding into distinct and separate groups, but I argue that they are also a

⁹⁶ I am not referring here to any specific narrative for any specific group. The fact is, no matter our ideology, politics, or belief systems there exist narratives we consider unwelcome, threatening, or unwanted, narratives that can drive us to seek out the comfort of the familiar. This reaction is universal and not particular, and therefore exists across all narrative boundaries for all groups.

defence mechanism sparked by this threat of exposure.⁹⁷ So what might happen to the members of a filter bubble or echo chamber should an unwanted narrative somehow find a way in? I suggest that, in this case, the cycle begins all over again, leading to deeper insularity, greater pathology, and perhaps also to a quest for narratives that confirm their way of thinking, no matter how based in the absurd. For an example here, I refer back to the Covid19 pandemic and how vaccine hesitancy coupled with increasing sharing of conspiracy theories and manipulated narratives online made encouraging certain groups in certain areas to get the vaccine increasingly difficult.⁹⁸ In some cases, in some communities, local pastors and religious leaders ended up having to try and counteract the misinformation and the very real fear it engendered, to encourage vaccine take up.⁹⁹ The point I make here is that once a group has decided that something is antithetical to their narratives, it is extremely difficult to convince them otherwise, and the antivax movement that drove much of this misinformation around Covid19 are a classic example of this constant retreat to insularity and further pathologizing of behaviours and actions. In this case, that cycle was able to enact impact upon a far wider group thanks to the shared experience of Covid19. The wider impact mentioned above shows that the collision of these two psycho-geographical experiences, the mindless scrolling, and the effects of encounters with unwanted information, precipitates a vulnerability to the sort of viral tectonics post-truth has become infamous for which, in turn, can lead to mirrored pathologizing of communal and individual behaviours outside of those

⁹⁷ For context and further information please refer to: Arguedas, A, *et al.* (2022), 'Echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarisation: a literature review', *Reuters Institute: University of Oxford*, Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/Echo_Chambers_Filter_Bubbles_and_Polarisation_A_Literature_Review.pdf (Accessed September 2022), see also: Pariser, E, (2012), *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, New York: Penguin Books.

⁹⁸ For context see these two studies on vaccine hesitancy in the UK: Allington, D, *et al.* (2021), 'Coronavirus conspiracies and views of vaccination', *University of Bristol and King's College London*, available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/coronavirus-conspiracies-and-views-of-vaccination.pdf> (Accessed September 2022) And Worldwide: Roozenbeek, J, *et al.* (2020) 'Susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 around the world', *Royal Society Open Science*, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.201199> (Accessed September 2022)

⁹⁹ See: Delgado, C, (2021), 'How Faith Leaders Are Increasing COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence', *verywellhealth*, available at: <https://www.verywellhealth.com/faith-leaders-covid-19-vaccine-confidence-5119460> (Accessed September 2022), Glinka, E, (2021), 'Covid-19: Pastor urges black communities to take up vaccine', *BBC*, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-55747784> (Accessed September 2022)

insular groups. Regarding the pathologizing of behaviour, I look now to the final psycho-geographical experience I wish to explore, the *dérive* through the manifold self, distributed and represented through user profiles on multifarious SNS platforms, delineated and informed by the encounter with ever-present surveillance. This *dérive* leads to a curated self-diegesis whose mirror upon the self pathologizes, distorts, and can ultimately cause direct damage to the perception of the self both online and in the real world. Essentially, an exposure to the panorama of digital selves threatens a loss of touch with the embodied self in the ways needed to cohere as an embodied person. Such decohesion, taking back into the online spaces as users engage and interact with other online selves, serves only to further the sense of disconnection and derealisation with the physical self. This effect of psychogeography is multi-faceted and will therefore be discussed in a section of its own, beginning with the very real problems and outcomes of surveillance in the synthesised space.

3.5 Surveillance, Online Diegesis, and the Fractal Self – A Consequence of the Psycho-geographical travel amongst digital selves.

I begin here with a point made by media communications journalist, Tom Valcanis (2011) on new media technologies, that they do not merely enhance a culture, or add to it, they transform it. One transformation that media technology has enacted on culture is that of a permanent state of surveillance. One of many scholars to tackle this subject, Deibert delineates the routine nature of surveillance in the 21st century as “an inherent characteristic of modernity” (2019, p. 26), intimating that technological society exacts an intrusive level of surveillance upon a populace as a matter of course. Christensen and Jansson go further even that this when they

suggest that inherent surveillance is “no longer a feature of the nation-state but engaged in by an amalgamation of commercial/ state/ nonstate/ military entities and used for a variety of governmental or nongovernmental purposes” (2015, p. 1479) and further elucidate the breadth of this commercialization by declaring “most forms of surveillance nowadays [...] are driven by a variety of social practices (such as online socializing) that are quickly, widely, and willingly adopted” (*ibid.* p. 1479). These statements outline a surveillance embedded into our communication and interaction across SNS platforms, meaning that taking part in online socialization predetermines submission to a culture of surveillance. Christensen and Jansson argue that the result of this “is an ever-more complex entanglement of daily social and personal practice, and technology use, which makes it difficult to differentiate between the various levels of mediatized surveillance” (*ibid.*, p. 1479). They call this mediatized surveillance “interveillance” and speak of the three modes of interveillance operation, all of which are integrated into daily actions and interactions online. The first of these involves interactions with others and judgement of their behaviours, essentially monitoring what others do, and making swift judgement calls on those observations. This is a mirroring of the real-world behaviour I touched upon in chapter two, wherein we model ourselves based on what others think of us, and this judgement is integral to that process, we judge others based upon the agreed tectonics and are aware of reciprocal judgement. The second is the awareness of being watched whilst also watching, “sensing and anticipating the gazes of strangers as well as fellow group members” (Christensen and Jansson, 2015, p.1480) whilst online, which leads to an acute sense of self-mediation. This the sense of constant observation in the digital age can be paralleled with Bentham’s panopticon, in which prisoners are kept in a system designed to allow for unrelenting surveillance with the intent of causing the prisoner, or subject,

to self-regulate.¹⁰⁰ Lastly, Christensen and Jansson describe a process of “watching one’s own data double, that is, the hypermediated Self” (*ibid*, p.1480), not only the separate digital versions of the self, all their iterations and interactions, but encountering the almost preternatural advertising, marketing, and promotions that can make it seem as though technology is watching even when one isn’t online. This targeting, though it seems based in direct and constant surveillance is in fact driven by algorithms designed to notice everything about a person, including interactions with friends, family, and strangers online.¹⁰¹ Writing about the power of surveillance in the form of algorithms, Kaziliūnaitė says; “The gaze of the algorithm has nothing to do with conscious, not like the gaze of god or humans. It only records, profiles, observes even not understanding what it’s observing” but this unawareness, or “underestimation of the power of the gaze of the algorithm”, she notes, is dangerous, “providing bigger possibilities to be visible.” (2019, p. 61) To accentuate how innocuous datafication and surveillance can seem, I refer to back to Deibert, who states, “An application that you use to tease your brain might seem like a mere game, but in reality, it doubles as a means to observe you and acquire data about you” (2019, p. 28). This is the reality of putting one’s life online, of continuing to take part even though there is a level of awareness that data is being collected and that some sort of surveillance is in place, but users are aware of this and are surprisingly sanguine about it. Christensen and Jansson’s (2015) study on complicit surveillance formed this extraordinary conclusion, finding that their participants, even those who initially had some concerns about SNS had, at the time of the study, fully integrated it into their lives with some going as far as to call it an extension of their everyday

¹⁰⁰ For further information on the Panopticon: Bentham, J, (1995), *The Panopticon Writings*, Verso: London

¹⁰¹ After being targeted by one of these seemingly omniscient adverts after a visit to his mother, Robert G. Reeve, a content strategist at Capital One, shared a thread on Twitter about how these ads actually work, all of which is recorded in this news article: Santora, S, (2021), “Your Social Media Apps are Not Listening to You’: Tech Worker Explains Data Privacy in Viral Twitter Thread’, *Newsweek*, Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/your-social-media-apps-are-not-listening-you-tech-worker-explains-data-privacy-viral-twitter-1595136> (Accessed June 2022)

life. This comfort with the level of surveillance and data mining confirms the overwhelming ubiquity of online technology. If one is connected, it becomes natural to share one's life on the internet, natural to socialize on the internet, to work online, to shop online, to study online, all of which has only increased following the onset of the coronavirus, the worldwide pandemic whose tectonic shift is ongoing in people's lives, behaviours, interactions, and attitudes. Having established the normality of sharing one's life online, and the ease with which people seem to have accepted the natural existence of greater levels of surveillance from without, I return to the second mode of interveillance, "sensing and anticipating the gazes of strangers as well as fellow group members" (Christensen and Jansson, 2015, p.1480), and to its role in the self-curation that takes place on SNS. The ways in which such self-curation leads into the third mode of interveillance, that encounter with the hypermediated self, which I argue leads to a fracturing that furthers the effects enacted by the synthesised space,

The format of SNS encourages storification, either by image or in edible, bite-size chunks, or short tales, as Elwell succinctly puts it: "From tweets to texts, we are transforming our private subjectivity into public content in a way and on a scale never-before witnessed." (2014, p. 237)¹⁰² SNS and other online platforms explicitly encourage the narration of daily life – it is in the medium and its execution, the allure of presenting what Elwell refers to as "...the story world of you." (*ibid*, p. 243) And every platform is designed to lure us into this process of sharing, of framing and curating our day, exploiting humanity's deep need for interconnectivity, and offering the promise of dopamine rewards in the form of likes and follows and

¹⁰² Short tales can involve blogs, Instagram reels/stories, YouTube shorts, Facebook reels, Twitter threads etc – the number of vectors for sharing one's life as a mini curated story is ever growing within existent SNS and other online spaces.

comments as a persuasive vector.¹⁰³ Online diegesis therefore, is the creation and curation of the virtual selves. What is interesting about this diegesis is the ways in which it blurs into real world diegesis, and the effect of this blurring. The recounting of daily life on social media renders experience into narrative, putting distance between the experience of life and self – between the subject and the object – and allowing for a loss of touch with the embodied self. This distance, over time has the capacity to abstract the experience of the self from real life. The synthesised space has thus opened the door to an uncertainty, the same uncertainty one occasionally feels when one realises that one is inside of a body looking out, and experiences that not as an integrated sensation, but as a de-realised, depersonalised one – the self as stuck within the body, the body as external and other, as an automaton carrying the consciousness, entirely separate from it. Elwell speaks of the difficulties of engaging with this new trans-spatial self, he writes: “interpreting self-identity in the liminal space between the virtual and the real, reveals a transmediated self, constituted as a browsable story-world that is integrated, dispersed, interactive, and episodic.” (2014, p. 234)

Elwell’s transmediated self is a useful descriptor, however, he describes this self as emerging from a feedback loop existing between the digital and actual, suggesting that as such it relies on a liminal space between the two for its explication. Whilst this notion of the liminal space is compelling, I would suggest that life within the synthesised space is far more than transmediated or liminal, it is hypertextual, hyper-personal, hypermediated, and hyperreal, experienced not only across

¹⁰³ The dopamine reward of SNS interactions is a topic that provokes considerable discussion in the media, the medical field, and across various scholarly disciplines: Parkin, S, (2018), ‘Has dopamine got us hooked on tech?’, *The Guardian*, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/04/has-dopamine-got-us-hooked-on-tech-facebook-apps-addiction> (Accessed September 2022), Haynes, T, (2018), ‘Dopamine, Smartphones & You: A Battle for your time’, *Science in the News*, Available at: <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/> (Accessed September 2022), Robert, J, (2022), ‘Likes, Shares And Dopamine: The Science Of Social Media’, *Schillings*, Available at: <https://www.schillingspartners.com/think/likes-shares-dopamine-science-of-social-media/> (Accessed September 2022)

platforms but across the digital and the physical, the one bleeding seamlessly into the other, with shared narratives unfolding through the space, embellished and embellishing through many vectors of image, word, and sound. Considering this, I make the claim that selfhood in the synthesised space is fully diegetic, and much like any other narrative in that space, the narratives people share about themselves merge and mingle, uproot and warp, becoming ever more abstract, depersonalised, and out-of-context. In this sense the synthesised space problematizes self-narration, allowing it to become ever more fluid even as it fractures. This mirrors to an extent the way humanity is given to present different selves to different people in different spaces but the transference of this process to the synthesised space is exacerbated by the relentless influence of a hypermediated, hyper-curated experience that can leave people feeling inadequate about their lives and experiences, and uncertain about their beliefs and ideas. Pariser (2011) argues that the effect this enacts on real world selfhood amounts to a self-fulfilling prophesy on the nature of identity, in which we become the distorted image of the self we share across platforms. Regarding these online re/presentations of the self, replicating and reflecting across the synthesised space and back again, I can only concur with his conclusion. This fractal nature of the self in the synthesised space opens the possibility of uncanny encounters with the self. Pariser describes this outcome perfectly: "The uncanny valley is the place where something is lifelike but not convincingly alive ... We're now in an uncanny valley of personalisation. The doppelgänger selves reflected in our media are a lot like, but not exactly, ourselves." (2011, p. 115) This uncanny likeness presents us with another dilemma: how to understand and categorise the unreal world, the unreal self, the other *in* the self. How to mediate the interaction between digital and physical iterations of the self and be both at the same time without losing sight of who we are across platforms as opposed to in the physical world. This confusion

also finds expression when we seek to differentiate between the online and physical selves of others, whether the hypermediated selves they present online are accurate reflections of their physical self. This freedom and the awareness thereof create perceptual issues not only in terms of what is seen, but in terms of what can and cannot be trusted. What is and is not self. What is and is not actual.

3.6 The Reflections

Sherry Turkle (2004) suggested that we live in a culture of simulation, I'd like to amend that somewhat and state that we live in a culture of reflections. After all, a simulation is a perfect or imperfect facsimile of a real object, essentially a reflection. Taking this to the synthesised space I am led to wonder how we are to know whether what we see is real or not, I wonder *if* we know. Thinking about imagery online, and of the power of photoshop and filters such as Facetune, I argue that, for the most part, there is a struggle for any certainty in the synthesised space.¹⁰⁴ This is not an unfamiliar occurrence in this mass media saturated era, the photoshopping of models etc long having set a precedence for digitally enhanced perfection. But Instagram is arguably more immediate and relatable, offering easy access to dozens of filters with the ability to convincingly alter anyone's appearance. One need no special knowledge to digitally embody an ideal in this environment, and that presents even more of a danger with regards to exacerbating problematic body-image across genders and age-ranges. Add to this the remarkable fact that there are models on Instagram whose perfection and lives are entirely simulated and we begin to see the depth, and the scope, of the problem. Miquela Sousa is an example

¹⁰⁴ For context on what Facetune is and what it does: Jennings, R, (2019), 'Facetune and the internet's endless pursuit of physical perfection', *Vox*, available at: <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/7/16/20689832/instagram-photo-editing-app-facetune> (Accessed September 2022)

of such a model. Miquela is CGI, an imagined ideal created by a brand: Brud, in L.A.¹⁰⁵ She is marketed as a girl who knows her own mind—except she doesn't even have a mind, only a group of guys in an office trying to imagine what an it-girl of Instagram might do, or think, and putting that out there for real young women to see. To measure themselves against. And Miquela is not the only CGI model on Instagram, there are others, and they are not limited to their existence on that SNS platform, they model for couture designers, they're hacked by other CGI models, presented as Trump trolls, in publicity stunts, they enter the world of the real in gossip, image and identification, with fans and supporters who, despite knowing these 'people' are not even real, support them nonetheless.^{106 107} They have an effect. Which is perhaps why the 'Instagram vs reality' meme popped up on the platform, the exposure to idealized, thoroughly curated images led to a critical mass of irritation with the notion of perfection and caused a significant backlash, led by creators and influencers in the hopes of changing the tectonics surrounding perfection.¹⁰⁸ Despite this movement the curation of images has not abated, and the two representations exist side by side in the synthesised space, vying for attention, with the fight against curation becoming no more than a narrative with the potential

¹⁰⁵ Background information and context on Miquela Sousa: Belgrove, T, (2021), 'The CGI Phenomenon That Is Miquela Sousa', *My Come Up*, available at: <https://mycomeup.com/the-cgi-phenomenon-that-is-miquela-sousa/> (Accessed January 2020), Shieber, J, (2018), 'The Makers of the Virtual Influencer Lil Miquela Snag Real Money From Silicon Valley', *TechCrunch*, available at: https://techcrunch.com/2018/04/23/the-makers-of-the-virtual-influencer-lil-miquela-snag-real-money-from-silicon-valley/?guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_cs=YmiVnrTzD8JHGTg529fizw&guccounter=2 (Accessed January 2020), Cresci, E, (2018), 'From Instagram to Balmain: The rise of CGI models', *BBC News*, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-45474286> (Accessed January 2019)

¹⁰⁶ Breakdown of the CGI Instagram model phenomenon and their real-world effect: Sarkisyan, M, (Year Unknown), 'CGI Influencers and Models: Their existence is fake, but their influence - real', *Shorthand Stories*, Available at: <https://city.shorthandstories.com/cgi-influencers-models/index.html> (Accessed September 2022)

¹⁰⁷ Some context: Hilton, P, (Year Unknown), 'Popular CGI Instagram Model Apparently Just Got Hacked By A Less Popular, Pro-Trump Insta Model -- And It's The Weirdest Thing EVER!', *PerezHilton*, Available at: <https://perezhilton.com/lil-miquela-bermuda-donald-trump-cgi-instagram/> (Accessed January 2020), Koebler, J, (2018) 'A Computer-Generated, Pro-Trump Instagram Model Said She Hacked Lil Miquela, Another CGI Instagram Model', *Vice*, Available at: <https://www.theset.com/threads/cgi-pro-trump-instagram-model-beefing-with-another-cgi-model.37136/> (Accessed January 2022)

¹⁰⁸ This trend, which has achieved a more stable virality than a good number of other such trends, seeks to undo the damage to mental health and body image caused by doctored images by showing real and doctored images side by side. For further information see: Kaunt, J, Wv, K, (2019), 'Instagram vs. Reality' Exposes The Truth About Those Unrealistically 'Perfect' Pics', *BoredPanda*, Available at: https://www.boredpanda.com/instagram-vs-reality-truth-behind-pictures/?utm_source=uk.search.yahoo&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=organic (Accessed January 2022), Sam, (2021) 'Instagram Versus Reality: The Effect of the Body Positive Social Media Trend', *Dose*, Available at: <https://whateveryourdose.com/instagram-versus-reality-the-effect-of-the-body-positive-social-media-trend/> (Accessed January 2022)

to disappear into online mythology, a story people tell about what influencers once did to try and normalise normality.

There is another, equally fascinating and disturbing constant in this universe of curated pictures within the synthesised space, the experiential lie, an alteration of the actual designed to offer an idealised version of an experience or event.¹⁰⁹ To give an example of one of the ways this curation takes place I offer social media star Amelia Liana, who altered pictures of foreign holidays to remove unwanted crowds and objects, so she appeared to have places entirely to herself.¹¹⁰ Her behaviour, and the driver behind it, is not unusual at all, the doctored image, filtered until it seems more like CGI than real life, is Instagram culture and represents a shift in the way people self-present. According to Turkle, today's society exists in a "culture of presentation, a corporate culture in which appearance is often more important than reality." (2004, p. 259) This is attributable to the fact that SNS provide an incentive to present an idealised version of lives and experiences, to curate all of a life into content, for clicks and views. With the rising popularity of short form media, sparked by TikTok, Instagram reels and YouTube shorts, this perfectionism and curation extends ever further, offering seemingly real projections in cinematically edited bursts designed to harness the diminishing attention span of the 21st century user.¹¹¹ Ultimately one can say that SNS pit users against one another, exploiting those vulnerabilities in identity construction, the ways in which people mirror themselves in others, or mirror others in themselves and judge themselves by that

¹⁰⁹ I use actual instead of "real" as my categorisation of the real because I feel it is a more concrete term. I go on to explain this in greater detail later in this thesis.

¹¹⁰ Wong, V. (2017), 'This Instagram Star Faked Her Travel Photos, But Why Are People So Mad?', *Refinery29*, Available at: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2017/07/164776/amelia-liana-photoshop-pictures-response> (Accessed January 2022)

¹¹¹ How the human attention span is diminishing: Editors, (2021) 'Changing Attention Span and What it Means for Content', *Ranieri x Co*, Available at: <https://www.ranieriandco.com/post/changing-attention-span-and-what-it-means-for-content-in-2021> (Accessed September 2022), McArthur, S. (2021) 'Driven to distraction: How can we tackle our waning attention spans?', *Service Desk Institute*, Available at: <https://www.servicedeskintstitute.com/driven-to-distraction-how-can-we-tackle-our-waning-attention-spans/> (Accessed September 2022), Bradbury, N. (2016) 'Attention span during lectures: 8 seconds, 10 minutes, or more?', *Advances in Physiology Education*, 40 (4), pp 509-513, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00109.2016> (Accessed September 2022)

reflection.¹¹² Sociologist David Altheide argues that: "Much of our theory asserts that we exist as social beings in the midst of process. We do not "have" or own an "identity," but rather, identity emerges and is acknowledged in situations; we live in the identity process." (2000, p. 4) Let us consider what that might mean for the identity process when it takes place in a synthesised space of reflections. I suggest that, in the synthesised space, whose carefully curated images offer so many unreal distortions and idealisations of reality, the identity process is pathologized, and the outcome of this is that the digital presentation of the self can emerge as a desire to emulate the ideal, to *become* the reflection.

Evidence that the desire to become the reflection is already beginning to happen is worryingly easy to find. Renee Engeln (2018), a professor of psychology at Northwestern University has conducted several studies into the effects of SNS, such as snapchat and Instagram, on the self-esteem and body image of girls and women. Primarily interested in how images in mass media advertisement and magazines were damaging the self-image of the women exposed to them, she swiftly turned her attention to SNS, and the lasting damage done by the images we post and see online daily. Her findings noted that the daily comparison between the real self and the online selves, or fake selves (intentional or unintentional), presented online can end up as one more way in which someone might feel as if they are falling short every day. She found that some users, over time, might forget what their real face looks like, reacting to their reflection in a mirror with surprise. Is it any surprise then, that 'Instagram face', a make-up look matching the filters available to use on a selfie, is on the rise? IRL, this face, with its flawless presentation looks surreal,

¹¹² Facebook indeed began its life as a means to quantify the "hotness" of female students at Harvard: Bellis, M. (2020) 'The History of Facebook and How It Was Invented', *ThoughtCo*, Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/who-invented-facebook-1991791> (Accessed January 2022)

unquestionably unsettling, uncanny in fact. But as a reflection of what presented as perfection in curated images online, it is exacting, a simulation of the simulation, a perfect facsimile.¹¹³ I'm focusing here on one element, the curated selfie, but the popularity of the selfie has perhaps made it the most frequently encountered mirror, and the one whose uncanny reflection most profoundly entangles into identity construction and so it is, perhaps, the bar by which to judge the most likely effect of all those other reflections upon the various aspects of identity construction.

A research letter from Ward et al (2019) quoted a poll conducted by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive surgeons that reported a staggering forty-two percent of all patients seeking cosmetic procedures were doing so for improved selfies and pictures on SNS. This is an extraordinary number, and is a trend not limited to the United States. A recent story on BirminghamLive (2019) highlighted the prevalence of this behaviour in the UK, with young people spending thousands on procedures to look more like their filtered selfies or produce a more 'filtered' look for Instagram etc (ref). To Vashi (2018), the instigating factor is clearly filters such as facetune, offering a level of perfection that is accessible to anyone, meaning that beauty standards are no longer propagated only by people such as celebrities but by anyone online, even family and friends. She suggests that the saturation of such filtered images is capable of impacting self-esteem to the extent of causing body dysmorphic disorder, a disorder wherein a person is incapable of seeing their face or body as it is, seeing only a distorted image thereof. Though such a disorder represents the extreme endpoint of exposure to curated images in the synthesised space, I argue that this exposure represents an integral factor of an ongoing de-situation wherein users in the synthesised space become viewed and

¹¹³ Article on Instagram face: Tolentino, J, (2019), 'The Age of Instagram Face', *The New Yorker*, Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face> (Accessed September 2022)

viewer, audience, and subject, monitored wherever they go, whatever they do, often voluntarily, by use of their own devices. In the digital age, humanity can be said to navigate a new heterotopic psychogeography within which the experience is one of a loss of situatedness whose ultimate consequence is a complete dislocation of the self in space.

3.7 The Loss of Situatedness

“Beware: whoever pretends to be a ghost will eventually turn into one.” (Caillois, 1984, p. 17)

To illustrate how a loss of situatedness in the synthesised space might lead to a dislocation of the self, I turn to Caillois’s legendary psychasthenia, which is described as a “disturbance in the perception of space” (1984, p. 28). Caillois pinpoints this disturbance as occurring within the moment “the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others.” (*ibid.* p.28) At this moment, in this conjuncture of space “it [the creature] is dispossessed of its privilege and literally *no longer knows where to place itself.*” (*ibid.* p. 28) This displacement, characterised by a “disturbance between the personality and space” (*ibid.* p. 28) is what I have described as happening within the heterotopic terrains of the synthesised space wherein the boundaries of the self, psychogeography, diesgesis, and therefore self-perception is blurred, broken or bewildered. Dislocation is the natural outcome of existing in the synthesised space, occurring not only due to dislocation across space but dislocation across selves amongst a multitude, and here I refer to other users in the space, also distributed across space and selves. For Caillois, there is only one response to this dislocation,

this loss of self within the homogenous mass, “an assimilation to the surroundings” (*ibid.* 28) which has, as its simultaneous accompaniment, “a decline in the feeling of personality and life.” (*ibid.* 30). I relate this to the pressure to curate, to align oneself in the homogenous mass by mimicry, which leads to a decline, characterised in this parallel as a diminishment of the self, and suggest that such diminishment can be pinpointed as one of the factors behind post-truth tectonic rhetoric and certain group and individual behaviour. This form of psycho-geography, the *dérive* amongst the digital selves, presents a similar conundrum of the *dérive* through unwanted narratives that lead to insularity and a pathologizing of behaviour. Without an unabridged view, the world exists as object, possessing an inbuilt distance, allowing imagination to fill in the rest. In the synthesised space, the world is too immediate to be rendered an object, it is in the instantaneousness of the connection, the fundamental nature of the encounter. The encounter is visceral, and yet it is without context that might render it comprehensible, that might give it position in the horizon, or the experiential view, of the traveller. This is entirely antithetical to the notion of travel constituting a broadening of the horizon, wherein the world becomes larger and more contextual. In this state, the Other loses its otherness, and becomes same, or similar: human. However, in the synthesised space, the expansion is limitless, happens automatically, and is comprised not only of the simulation of the world, but of the world distorted, thrown out of any situating context. As such, the experience can be one not of broadening, but of challenge, and imagination fills in the rest, rendering the traveller alienated from a world they do not understand, and more importantly, no longer wish to understand. The equation as presented, the virtual conundrum of the simulated Other, is too complicated to solve. In his *Poetics of Space*, speaking about adaptation, Gaston Bachelard states that “we do not change place, we change our nature.” (1994, p. 206) In this instance I assert that his meaning

is not so much that *we* change our nature but that *place* changes it for us, often without our consent or cooperation. He also speaks of the effects upon the human psyche of immensity, of grandeur, using the phrase “an increase of being.” (*ibid.* p. 194) to describe an ecstatic state opening spaces of equal majesty within when we are confronted with such. I have used its inverse, ‘diminishment of being’, to describe an altogether different sensation, provoked by the immensity of the world reflected through the synthesised space, a panoply of human experience too vast to process. I propose this experience of the world through the synthesised space can lend itself to a sensation of shrinking within a vastness, that loss of situatedness. A possible reaction to this loss is not one of internally reflected immensity but of diminishment. For some, certainty collapses in reaction to the vastness of the world, opening the way for a sense of inadequacy, of erasure, of being swallowed, a diminishment of being that then lends itself to a determination to diminish the rest of the world to recover the feeling of security that existed prior to the exposure, characterized by a turning inward to familiar groups (insularity) and a deepening of mistrust against outsiders that drives exclusionary behaviour that may become increasingly aggressive (pathologized). This experience of the vastness of the synthesised spaces and their heterotopic nature are neatly summed up in a quote Bachelard shares from Supervielle: “Too much space smothers us much more than if there were not enough.” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 221)¹¹⁴ In the 21st century, space has not vanished but evolved, spread out, created places without boundaries that nonetheless enclose humanity within a cat’s cradle of interconnected networks in which it is losing situatedness and interconnectivity, challenging notions of self and space, and self in space, all of which represent central factors in the way the post-truth atmosphere propagates and expands.

¹¹⁴ Supervielle, J, (1925), *Gravitations*, Gallimard: France, p.19

Summary

Throughout this chapter I have deconstructed the ways in which narrative disseminates within the synthesised space, a term I have chosen to better describe the absolute enmeshment of our online/offline living. Having established the idea of this synthesised space as being a *place*, I have then outlined various ways narrative movement and destabilisation within that place enacts effects on our narrative ecologies, our psychogeography and our online diegesis – fundamentally impacting our selfhood, our communication, our understanding of information and our ability to attribute meaning. I have also explored some interesting side effects of the space itself and the profusion of the world to which it offers us access, and looked at how these effects lend themselves to the furtherment of the environment in which post-truth flourishes. I have demonstrated that, although the synthesised space and the digital technologies that enable it are not solely responsible for the post-truth environment, they are integral to the ways in which this environment has perpetuated and spread in the 21st century. Without the synthesised spaces, that enmeshment of online and offline lives, we would still have post-truth, this is evidentially supported by the origins of the word itself and by the tectonic shifting which moved narrative in this direction but as this chapter clearly outlines, post-truth would not be as deeply entrenched or as all-encompassing as it has been able to become with the aid of the synthesised space. There is in this synthesised space a melding of self and space, of self *in* space, and a too-acute awareness of something mythic in scope – the changing of an entire socio-cultural narrative and all its attendant complications and confusions. And it is to the mythic which I now turn my attention, seeking to understand how pre-existing mythic-systems have added

their weight to the post-truth tectonic, and the ways in which this alliance of ideas has impacted perceptions of the actual (real). How it has worked to edit the actuality (reality) to suit a common goal.

4.

THE RE-WRITING OF ACTUALITY**Introduction**

Delving into the mythological basis of post-truth narrative, this chapter unpacks how a march towards extinction for older mythic-systems forms the basis of a loss of certainty in the actual and the self for those who follow them, provoking a protective instinct whose manifestation is the drive to control outgoing narratives in the synthesised space. This also serves as an attempt to invalidate newer mythic-systems by Othering their philosophies and aims. One of the ways in which this validation is achieved is a tactic that I will describe herein as 'counter-cultural narrative shift', which is designed to reframe progressive ideals and positions as dangerous, not only by comparison, but as a direct threat to an established way of life and being. Exploring this drive to invalidate new mythic-systems then leads into a discussion around the editing of reality through the medium of narrative manipulation in the synthesised space. I acknowledge that our narratively built view of reality is persistently edited, however, I argue that this process becomes inhibitive when used to force a singular viewpoint, and contest that narrative manipulation is a primary driver, a fulcrum as it were, of the post-truth tectonic era and its accompanying atmosphere of division, confusion, and obfuscation.¹¹⁵

4.1 Myths, Mythic-Systems and The Loss Of Meaning

¹¹⁵ Latour's essay on critique covers this very issue, making some important points around the impact of postmodernity's distrust of theory: Latour, B, (2004), "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 30 (2), pp.25-248

In his article exploring notions of Myth and Identity in *Daedalus*, Bruner makes a most interesting observation. "We live," he writes, "in a time of mythical confusion that may provide the occasion for a new growth of myth, myth more suitable for our times." (1959, p. 356-7) It is his use of the words "more suitable" here that stand out most explicitly to me. Though I question that this was his intended meaning, I think one can state that, at the time in which Bruner wrote these words, the pre-existing mythic-systems relied upon for the structural basis of tectonic narratives in the West were becoming incompatible with a rapidly transforming post-war world. Looking through the prism of this time of societal catechism (before the even more extraordinary mythical upheaval of the sixties, which transformed how young people saw themselves, their freedoms, their rights, and the world around them) we can see how this time of tectonic shifting has shaped so much of the changes wrought since and might even suggest that this was, in fact, a time of mythical *profusion*. Many new ideas, new systems of belief being put to the test, to see if society could still function in the wake of such broad structural narrative changes. Casting this backwards gaze from the 21st century, the outcomes of this profusion are immediately visible, we see the social sediment of change in terms of societal progression enacted by the adoption of certain of those new mythic-systems, such as fundamental changes in the narratives around womanhood, blackness, sexuality, class etc, and the tensions between old and new creating new frameworks of interaction between opposing forces, sparking new conflicts on new battlefronts. And we can track by these self-same sediments the progress of the battles undertaken, most of which, sadly, are still ongoing, despite remarkable achievements. The enormous resistance encountered therein, the frontline of these battles, is maintained by those whose grip remains firmly attached to older mythic-

systems, the mythic-systems which were, at the time of Bruner writing, beginning to experience the broad societal questioning of their totem beliefs and inherent symbolism. The proponents of these embattled mythic-systems engage in a narrative alliance of sorts with the tectonics of post-truth to restrict the progress of new mythic-system tectonics by any means necessary, supported by citizen and corporate groups who agitate for the rolling back of certain new rights and freedoms; a moral movement, led on the whole by the religious right, that seeks to instil what these movements regard as 'proper values' back into society, as if any other belief position has no such values; a culture war between old ideas and new, which the new framed as the aggressors in the battle. There is also a deeper ripple of reaction moving inwards through the progenitors of older mythic-systems, caused by a continuing and growing societal resistance to the philosophies and ideals of those outgoing systems, this inward instinct seeks an explanation for such obstinance. Upon making note of an excess of rationality in modernist thought, Kvale declares, "When the presupposed rationality is seldom found in the given reality, then another deeper, more essential reality is constructed to account for the disorder we observe in the world around us." (1990, p. 39) He relates this drive to a search for overarching meaning where none may exist, suggesting that the extreme of this represents a pathology demarcated by paranoia, which might lead to the formation of conspiracy theories or to a determination to uncover a buried deeper rationale. This search for deeper rationality leading to a pathological extreme exhibiting the suspicion of paranoia can be seen within post-truth tectonics and the mythic-systems aligned with it. The reaction appears as a spectre challenging newer mythic-systems by questioning not only their suitability but their intention, implying an immoral or unethical agenda, such as is seen within the opposition to abortion, LGBTQ+ rights etc. The reaction can also be seen as attached to a collapse of trust in the foundation

of certain categories of information and learning, where things such as established scientific theory can be called into question if it seen to support different ways of being and any education offering information of that kind can therefore be seen as indoctrination. We see this precise effect in the fight against Critical Race Theory, which explores the black experience of systemic, racially motivated injustice (racism) in America.¹¹⁶ Having accused educational institutions of trying to indoctrinate white children into believing they are inherently racist by teaching aspects of Critical Race Theory; various Republican senators are now legislating state bans on the teaching of any aspect of this theory in their schools and colleges.¹¹⁷ Societal mores once supported the central beliefs and ideas of older mythic-systems, such as the roles associated with gender essentialism, for example marriage occurring only between a man and a woman, and a woman's place being in the home etc, but the conventions underpinning those ideas have changed, shaken up by natural, ongoing changes to the way life is lived in the 21st century.¹¹⁸ For the adherents to older mythic-systems, such changes, however naturally they occur, are not 'progress' but instead signify an 'agenda', an attack against their foundation.

What happens next is fundamental to the foundations of what we now call post-truth. Leading on from this collapse of certainty in categories of information, all manner of 'expert knowledge' deriving from 'untrustworthy' or 'worldly' sources can be called into question, which is how belief acquires a legitimacy it might

¹¹⁶ Borter, G, (2021), 'Explainer: What 'critical race theory' means and why it's igniting debate', *Reuters*, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/what-critical-race-theory-means-why-its-igniting-debate-2021-09-21/> (Accessed September 2022). Also read: Ladson-Billings, G. (2013) 'Critical Race Theory: What it is Not!' in Lynn, M, & Dixon A.D. (Eds.) *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, Available at:

https://www.biknotes.com/files/ugd/b8b6dc_c130ecf51e404a0c94a163eb73db6c20.pdf#page=55 (Accessed September 2022)

¹¹⁷ Information on state bans: Dutton, J. (2021), 'Critical Race Theory Is Banned in These States', *Newsweek*, Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/critical-race-theory-banned-these-states-1599712> (Accessed September 2022), Rawshawn, R. & Gibbons, A. (2021), 'Why are states banning critical race theory?', *Brookings*, Available at:

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/> (Accessed September 2022)

¹¹⁸ A useful and informative overview of gender essentialism which frames the appeal of the theory to older mythic-systems and its lack of appeal to newer, more progressive mythic-systems: Vinney, C. (2021), 'What Is Gender Essentialism Theory?', Available at: <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-gender-essentialism-theory-5203465> (Accessed September 2022)

otherwise lack. If we refer to Critical Race Theory, we can see how this occurs, with the outrage against CRT used to cast reasonable doubt on the teaching of any real American history dealing with racism and racial injustice.¹¹⁹ Once such a reasonable doubt is legitimised, it can be used as a lever to evict an unwanted informational source or discredit it entirely. In the world of 21st century post-truth commentary, narrative from these ideological directions puts considerable effort into pressing a viewpoint that stands against scientific consensus to drown out that consensus.¹²⁰ To that end, anti-intellectualism can act as a construct, a societal control vector. And one must not forget the convenience of this stance for a certain type of political expediency. To consider this viewpoint, one can again turn to Kvale, who says: “Decisions about what knowledge is to be developed are made by those in power, through channelization of economic resources.” (1990, p. 42) The powerful (not only those in the highest seats of government, such as Mitch McConnell, I also include most explicitly in this group the billionaire ‘kingmakers’, such as Rupert Murdoch) enact a direct influence on the shape of information, not only through channelization of economic resources but also through channelization of *narrative* resources.¹²¹ What we are currently experiencing in the post-truth tectonic era can be traced back to that entrenchment of older mythic-systems whose adherents have been fighting for their way of being and thinking to remain ascendent. And beneath it all, one finds another deep ripple of effect underlying the agitation of these older mythic-systems, feeding

¹¹⁹ This article in Time magazine offers excellent insight into how the controversy around CRT affects not only the teaching of other aspects of black history but teaching itself: Waxman, O. (2021) ‘Critical Race Theory Is Simple the Latest Bogeyman Inside the Fight Over What Kids Learn About America’s History’, *Time*. Available at: <https://time.com/6075193/critical-race-theory-debate/> (Accessed September 2022)

¹²⁰ This topic has been a matter of serious conversation now for some time. For various viewpoints and more detailed information please read: Fong, J. (2009) “Right wing smears scientific consensus on global warming as a “cult””, *Media Matters For America*. Available at: <https://www.mediamatters.org/ann-coulter/right-wing-smears-scientific-consensus-global-warming-cult> (Accessed May 2022), Editorial (Authors unknown) (2010) “Science scorned: The anti-science strain pervading the right wing in the United States is the last thing the country needs in a time of economic challenge.” *Nature*, Vol 467, Issue 7312, Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/467133a.pdf> (Accessed May 2022), Torcello, L. (2020) “Science Denial, Pseudoskepticism, and Philosophical Deficits Undermining Public Understanding of Science: A Response to Sharon E. Mason.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (9): 1-9. Available at: https://social-epistemology.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/torcello_reply_mason_serrc_9-1-2020.pdf (Accessed May 2022), Westman, A. S., Willink, J. and McHoskey, J. W. (2000) ‘On Perceived Conflicts between Religion and Science: The Role of Fundamentalism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism’, *Psychological Reports*, 86(2), pp. 379–385. doi: [10.2466/pr0.2000.86.2.379](https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.2000.86.2.379)

¹²¹ See for context this BBC documentary series on Murdoch: BBC 2020 *The Rise of the Murdoch Dynasty* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000kxw1/episodes/player> (Accessed September 2021)

into the ways these narratives interact with the world at large and align with post-truth: the loss of self. However erroneously a self is constructed, the loss of self is categorically devastating. In his most famous book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, writing about Korsakoff's syndrome, Oliver Sacks declared, "To be ourselves, we must *have* ourselves." (2011, p 117). I have already discussed how self is created, how we are storied beings constructed from basal tectonics, and part of those basal tectonics are our mythic-systems, which form the blueprints of certain societal values and mores. The construction of self informs a delicate puzzle, and the loss, erosion, or warping of any of the facets that comprise selfhood can therefore have catastrophic results. Logically, then, if a facet of one's selfhood relies upon the beliefs and ideas of a particular mythic-system and that system encounters a situation wherein its fundamentals are called into question, the fundamentals of selfhood must follow. There is an interesting parallel in this loss and its repercussions with the subjects depicted in Sacks' book, who suffer from Korsakoff's syndrome. In Korsakoff's syndrome one loses one's sense of identity, of self, via a total loss of memory and situatedness, and a subsequent total loss of the certainty of reality. Their loss of situatedness resonates with a particular strength in this instance, bringing us back to the idea of legendary psychasthenia and diminishment of the self, following that loss of situatedness in the synthesised space. But what speaks most profoundly in this parallel with regards to the collapse of selfhood as mythic-systems slide into obsolescence, is the loss of the certainty in actuality. An example of the effects of this loss can be identified as occurring within the manosphere, which is the overarching term for a raft of men's rights movements, closely associated with far-right groups and ideology and motivated by rampant misogyny, toxic masculinity, and a view on feminism that places women's rights at the centre of a

disenfranchisement, or emasculation, of the rights of men.¹²² The ideologies of these groups align heavily with the gender essentialism described by those outgoing mythic-systems, and there is no breathing room in the idea of masculinity as described by these mythic-systems for notions of a changing world, or a changing role for women.¹²³ Such masculinity can only imagine itself as being forcibly obliterated by this change. It allows itself no space to move, to grow, to adapt, and thus its only recourse is to deepen the binary, to exaggerate the notions of masculinity enshrined within the mythic-system and fight back against the very idea of a womanhood expressed outside of gender essentialism. Think of this behaviour as an exercise in preservation, a determination to create an actuality that cannot be sundered by these unwanted alterations. When discussing his patient, Mr Thompson, a sufferer of Korsakoff's, Sacks described how Thompson was "driven to a sort of narrational frenzy [...] his mythomania." (2011 [1985], p. 117) by the loss of the continuity of his inner narrative. Sacks saw this mythomania as a means for Thompson to throw "bridges of meaning over abysses of meaninglessness" (*ibid*, p 118). This tactic of throwing bridges can be used as a metaphor for the ways in which the progenitors of these older mythic-systems seek to patch instances of interference from progressive (or different) narratives to their own (which, to them, constitute abysses) by means of assimilation or morphing. Changing the language of the breaching narrative to suit or to conform to their own viewpoint, as with those

¹²² The premise of white masculinity as under threat can perhaps be seen as arising from the ideology of the far right, undeniably frustrated and exacerbated by increasing feminist discourse. For further context and a broader viewpoint see: Christou, M. (2019) 'The Fragile, Toxic Masculinity Of White Supremacy', *CARR*. Available at: <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/09/23/the-fragile-toxic-masculinity-of-white-supremacy/> (Accessed May 2022), Pinar, W. F. (2001) 'The Crisis of White Masculinity', *Counterpoints*, vol. 163, pp. 321–416. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42977756> (Accessed May 2022), Scaptura, M. (2019) 'Masculinity Threat, Misogyny, and the Celebration of Violence in White Men', *vtechworks*. Available at: https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/93239/Scaptura_M_T_2019.pdf (Accessed May 2022), Beaver, K. (2022), 'One in three men believe feminism does more harm than good', *IPSOS*, Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/one-three-men-believe-feminism-does-more-harm-good> (Accessed May 2022),

¹²³ For some of the views on women enacted into society by these mythic-systems one has only to look to advertisement to see depictions of men beating their wives. One can also look to the fact that criminalisation of rape in the UK and in the US did not occur (at least in all the states of the US) until the early 1990s. This is an extraordinary and cruel legacy which the manosphere's most radical elements would see a return to. There are reports that threats to rape women occur on Incel (involuntary celibates) forums at a rate of one per half hour.

men who believe utterly that women hold, and always have held, all the power, and abuse it accordingly. There is no room in their narratives for the wrong done to women, it is all about the perceived wrong done to men. Like Mr Thompson, the adherents to these systems of belief can “never stop running, from the breach [...] in meaning” (2011 [1985], p. 118) or else they face the collapse of their version of actuality. How can they allow themselves to ally with a world utterly transformed beyond their capacity to comprehend it? If they allow the illusion to lift, they are met with the greater and, to them, more deleterious chaos of the loss of their very identity, the framework by which all else in their lives is defined. To this end, an interplay of post-truth tectonics and mythic-systems, united in reframing the narratives of the 21st century for their own purposes can be seen as inevitable, particularly considering the ways in which the post-truth atmosphere privileges emotions and belief over fact and actuality. This privileging of emotion and belief lays the foundation of the intentionally edited reality of post-truth, seeding narratives whose purpose is to engender a kind of plausible deniability on the basis of actuality by virtue of endless narrative manipulation, turning the tables of disorientation against the enemy. In the battle to preserve a selfhood based in myth, reality appears to be no more than an obstacle, a story that can be re-written, or edited to suit. In *Nationalism and Sexuality*, Mosse (1985) talks about an earlier battle along precisely these lines wherein religion throughout the 19th century had been in decline and, by the beginning of the 20th century, particularly amongst younger generations, a more creative expression in terms of gender and sexuality was beginning to be explored, all of which was considered a threat to religious, or established, values. The political ideology of nationalism became the answer to this threat by encouraging men and women to enact gendered behaviour, roles, and sexuality as markers of respectability, allowing for any behaviours or expressions

outside of those gendered presentations to be labelled as deviant. So, either you were respectable, or you were deviant. The redefinition, the rewriting of the story, is simple and yet devastatingly effective, because it connects into an innate human need, that I have referred to time and again in this thesis, the need to fit in, the need to belong. A similar tactic, utilised in the 21st century by the progenitors of those outgoing mythic-systems, is what I will call here 'counter-cultural narrative shift'. Religion was an outgoing paradigm amongst those whom nationalism sought to control with those notions of respectability, in the 21st century however, all manner of convention, in thought, morality, and action, are the outgoing paradigm, so there can be no cohesive means to bring under control that which refuses to conform to older ideas. In response to this problem counter-cultural narrative shift instead utilises all the tools of narrative manipulation and the synthesised space to put into question the central motivation of a progressive identity, idea, or philosophy by means of mythological manipulation and reframing. The tactics are different, and so is the intention. Because society has progressed so far in terms of what is considered deviance and what is not, deviance alone is no longer enough to dictate an apparent lack of normality. Therefore, the aim of counter-cultural narrative shift is to establish that sense of plausible deniability on the basis of actuality by introducing the suggestion that a certain presentation, philosophy, or idea, poses a direct and purposeful threat to those who do not identify within them, the threat of eradication, replacement, or reduction of rights. This is why I have chosen counter-cultural narrative shift as the term for this tactic, because it highlights the ways in which it appropriates and distorts the notion of established threats to minority groups by seeking to suggest that a minority group can, and do, pose not only similar, but even greater threats to the majority.

4.2 Counter cultural narrative shift

Speaking of the function and capacity of counter-narratives in the paper *Introduction: Counter-Narratives and the Power to Oppose*, Andrews refers to Delgado, who spoke about the ways in which counter-narratives offer a “counter-reality” ([1995, p64] 2002, p. 2). The purpose of a counter-narrative (in a cultural battleground) is not merely to oppose or refute the existing narrative, it is to offer the means to imagine an alternate world, with the intention of enacting change by sparking protest that leads to affirmative action. This appeal to the imagination has extraordinary traction, leading to a greater appeal and a wider interest in listening to and sharing the counter-narrative. The more counter-narratives are shared, the larger their voice and their movement through society (which accelerates in the digital age), the greater the chance occurs for disparate members of these groups to form a collective voice to share common experiences and advocate for the group. A group identity emerges from this coherence, and thus the counter-narrative the group represents gains momentum, moving towards the possibility of pushing back against, and perhaps changing, the prevailing tectonic whose mythic-systems stand in opposition to their existence or their freedoms. Any change achieved by such counter-narratives is made by convincing the public to alter the social agreement based on a new understanding, formed through exposure to new information, a new viewpoint that had not previously been considered. Where a counter narrative takes hold (such as black rights, gay rights, or women’s rights), those who allow it to re-shape their tectonics become more open to the world in general. However, in the case of counter-cultural narrative shift the intention is not to open minds but to encourage them to become ever more closed off. Counter-narratives, and the counter-cultural movements they spark, are potent, and therefore their converse, the counter-cultural

narrative shift can be just as potent. Their effectiveness as a weapon of narrative manipulation should not be underestimated. In his paper about postmodern psychology, referring to the act of storytelling as establishing the position of both storyteller and audience, Kvale states: "A narrative is not merely a transmission of information, in the very act of telling a story the position of the storyteller and of the listener is constituted, and their place in the social order, the story creating and maintaining a social bond." (1990, p. 38) Inherent to this process of storyteller and audience in counter-cultural narrative shift is not only the creation and maintenance of the social order and bond, but also a means of directing the audience, of controlling the conversation by monopolising the position of the protagonist. Counter-cultural narrative shift undertakes to achieve the flipping of the position of protagonist and antagonist on specific cultural battlegrounds to project an aura of victimhood upon the aggressor. The aggressor in these stories often positions as wanting to protect others from the intentions of the group or groups their counter-cultural narrative shift is targeting. An example of this type of shift can be seen in the furore exploding around trans rights in the UK and the US, focused with most vehemence against trans women.¹²⁴ The trans community is a minority group, and yet they have come under rabid attack in recent years under the guise of protecting cis women and girls from the possibility of violence perpetrated by trans women operating under false pretences in shared female spaces (such as toilets and changing rooms).¹²⁵ This position assumes that any trans woman may be a cis man using transgender identity to gain access to safe spaces for women and girls to

¹²⁴ See: Editors. (2020) 'Trans Right Under Attack Worldwide', *TGEU*, Available at: <https://tgeu.org/trans-rights-under-attack-worldwide/> (Accessed September 2022), Wareham, J. (2020) 'Trans Rights In Global Recession—One Year After Transgender Removed From WHO List Of Diseases', *Forbes*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2020/05/25/trans-rights-in-global-recessionone-year-after-transgender-removed-from-who-list-of-diseases/?sh=18831bf35d80> (Accessed September 2022)

¹²⁵ For information surrounding this debate, see: Thorn, R. (2016) 'Why toilets are a battleground for transgender rights', *BBC*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-36395646> (Accessed September 2022), Grinberg, E. & Stewart, D. (2017) '3 myths that shape the transgender bathroom debate', *CNN Health*. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/07/health/transgender-bathroom-law-facts-myths/index.html> (Accessed September 2022), McGee, W. (2019) 'The trans-toilet wars come to Britain', *SP!KED*. Available at: <https://www.spiked-online.com/2019/10/18/the-trans-toilet-wars-come-to-britain/> (Accessed September 2022)

predate upon them. Moreover, there is an accusation of indoctrination in the campaign for trans right, such as the furore continuing to erupt around allowing trans children to self-identify, for instance in the UK, where legislation was passed in 2005 to enable self-identification to protect the mental health of trans people.¹²⁶ Anti-trans rhetoric suggests that this type of legislation, coupled with growing resources geared toward ensuring trans kids can access services and therefore help, is used to manipulate vulnerable children into believing that they are trans when they are not. At its most inflammatory, this rhetoric has attempted to imply that children as young as five have been allowed to change their gender using T-blockers and/or HRT.¹²⁷ There is no basis for these claims whatsoever, which were thoroughly repudiated in a fact check published by Reuters new agency (see footnote 11). Up to the age of 16, a child who passes the significant diagnostic process required to begin the long process of pursuing transition, including therapy and unmedicated time spent living in their new gender identity, will usually only be offered puberty blockers (I say usually because there is the option of private practices that offer hormone therapy earlier and offer puberty blockers earlier than NHS gender clinics – these choices are for the parents to make, who will know their own children and know what they can and cannot cope with). After sixteen, if a transgender child has been on blockers for at least a year, they will be offered the option of hormone therapy. For trans children, access to this treatment is a lifeline, considering the high statistic of suicide for those children who do not receive such support.¹²⁸ As for the attempts to suggest trans women might be cis men seeking to attack cis women and girls in their safe spaces, statistics and reports do not support this concern. What

¹²⁶ See: Editors. (Date Unknown) 'Transgender Laws', *GenderTrust.Org*. Available at: <http://www.gendertrust.org.uk/transgender-laws/> (Accessed September 2022)

¹²⁷ Reuters published a fact check on this misinformation, as it was being widely shared: Reuters fact check. (2021) 'Fact Check- Posts falsely claim five-year-olds can take sex-changing hormones', <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-children-hormones-idUSL1N2LE1UZ> (Accessed September 2022)

¹²⁸ For a study on these statistics see: Austin, A. *et al.* (2020) 'Suicidality Among Transgender Youth: Elucidating the Role of Interpersonal Risk Factors', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(5-6), NP2696–NP2718. Available at: DOI: [10.1177/0886260520915554](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520915554) (Accessed September 2022),

statistics do show, however, is that trans women are up to four times more likely to be the victims of violence in the way of rape, sexual assault, and aggravated assault than their cis counterparts, this alongside the pain, trauma, and injustice faced by trans women (by trans people in general) as they go about their transition journey casts an unflattering light on the motives of those who seek to make such claims about their intentions.¹²⁹ There is also the shadow of the gender critic looming over the trans debate, radical feminists who believe that biological status is determined by the sex organs.¹³⁰ Attaching gender to sexual organs renders it immutable, unchangeable by any means, including surgery, and therefore positions trans people as suffering a kind of delusion. This position, no matter how it attempts to present itself, is basically gender essentialism by another name. The rhetoric arising from these transphobic viewpoints positions trans people, and those who support them, as aggressors in an ideological battle that undermines the rights of cis women by forcing them to give up their safe spaces, and by diluting language that privileges cis female experiences (such as pregnant person instead of pregnant woman). The aim seems to be to suggest that trans identity attacks cis womanhood by trying to declare that there is any other way to be a woman than to be cis-gendered/born with female sexual organs. This position does not strike me as a feminist viewpoint, but one driven by the ideology of older mythic-systems whose gender essentialism drove notions of strict binary roles, such as those promoted by Nationalism. By actively seeking to represent trans women as a threat to cis women the transphobic position has overseen a worrying rise in the violence perpetrated against an already

¹²⁹ There is a wealth of evidence supporting this statistic, and suggesting far worse: Dowd, R. (2021), 'Transgender people over four times more likely than cisgender people to be victims of violent crime', *Williams Institute: UCLA*. Available at: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/ncvs-trans-press-release/> (Accessed September 2022), Editors. (2014)

'Responding to Transgender Victims of Sexual Assault', *Office for Victims of Crime*. Available at: https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/pubs/forge/sexual_numbers.html (Accessed September 2022)

¹³⁰ This piece articulates the issue well, without taking a position: Samuelson, K. (2021) 'What Are Gender critical Beliefs?', *The Week*. Available at: <https://www.theweek.co.uk/news/society/953619/what-are-gender-critical-beliefs> (Accessed September 2022). This piece gives a few more contextual reasons as to the problematic nature of the gender critical position: Siddiqui, S. (2021) 'Feminism, biological fundamentalism and the attack on trans rights', *Institute of Race Relations*. Available at: <https://irr.org.uk/article/feminism-biological-fundamentalism-attack-on-trans-rights/> (Accessed September 2022)

statistically more vulnerable minority.¹³¹ This is counter-cultural narrative shift operating as intended, manipulating narratives to distort the public viewpoint, to paint a minority as capable of enacting an ideological war upon the majority by reframing their fight for existence, humanity, and dignity as an attack against the existence, humanity, and dignity of the majority group.

A primary weapon in this tactic of counter-cultural narrative shift is the acquisition, derailment and reversal of public debate, the manipulation of the public's narratives around an issue. The motivation here is clear: if you can control the shape of the argument, you can control the shape of the outcome. If we look to movements such as GamerGate, an early breeding ground for the manosphere, we see how effective this barrage of noise can become.¹³² Noise strategies such as this pay dividends on social media platforms, allowing for reactive responses on the large scale. Not only a bombardment of rhetoric aimed at the perceived opposition, to intimidate and delegitimise, but a wave of counter-narrative to reframe the focus of the narrative at large. Gamergate sprung up around a blog post written by an angry, jilted boyfriend about his game-developer ex-girlfriend and became a campaign of misogynistic harassment, largely conducted online through dogpiling, doxxing, and the use of rape and death threats, refocusing the deeply misogynistic roots of the movement to present their cause as a defence against a lack of ethics in journalism. The movement at large sought to be seen as activists in a war against bad actors, when in fact they

¹³¹ See: Carlisle, M. (2021) 'Anti-Trans Violence and Rhetoric Reached Record Highs Across America in 2021', *TIME*. Available at: <https://time.com/6131444/2021-anti-trans-violence/> (Accessed September 2022), Roxburgh, C. (2021) 'Anti-trans rhetoric is fuelling hate crimes and making UK an increasingly dangerous place', *Left Foot Forward*. Available at: <https://leftfootforward.org/2021/12/anti-trans-rhetoric-is-fuelling-hate-crimes-and-making-uk-an-increasingly-dangerous-place-says-activist/> (Accessed September 2022)

¹³² These articles offer a small peek into the landscape of the gamergate mentality and approach: Emery, D. (2022) Snopestionary: What Was 'Gamergate?', *Snopes*, 2022, Available at: <https://www.snopes.com/articles/402899/what-was-gamergate/> (Accessed March 2020), Allen, J. (2014) GamerGate and the New Misogyny, *Medium*, 2014, Available at: https://medium.com/@a_man_in_black/gamergate-and-the-new-misogyny-284bea6a8bb3 (Accessed March 2020), Dewey, C. (2014) The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need, *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/> (Accessed March 2020), Gray, K. *et al.* (2017) Blurring the Boundaries: Using Gamergate to examine "real" and symbolic violence against women in contemporary gaming culture, *Sociology Compass*, 11 (3), Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12458> (Accessed March 2020)

themselves were the bad actors. This was not an isolated incident, nor was it new, but as Romano points out in an essay in Vox in January 2021, the movement was “arguably a watershed moment and learning experience for many future Trump supporters” which led inexorably into “the trend toward systematized online harassment and increased ideological polarization that emerged in the latter half of the 2010s.”¹³³ I would argue that it also established the new paradigm of ideologically driven groups seeking to use the reach and narrative drive of social media to corral, coerce and control their public image. Discussing the problem of youth ideology and ideology in general in *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, Erikson (1968), refers to it as “a universal psychological need for a system of ideas that provides a convincing world image.” (p. 30-31) This description of the term is an excellent frame through which to view and understand the motivations behind the editing of ideology’s image by its own progenitors. Within the mythic-systems standing in opposition to post-truth mythic-systems, the ideas and ideals of movements such as modern conservatism and white supremacy are anathema, and in the digital age, online activism and pushback represents a growing and vocal resistance, placing such groups under an unpleasant, too-revealing light. Being seen in such a fashion, having the flaws behind their ideology exposed and critiqued, sits poorly with these groups. The obvious solution, then, is to take charge of the narrative and offer an alternate story for their ideologies. In their fascinating study of group psychology that I referred to extensively in chapter two, Gallagher and Thompson state that “a group’s narrative may be nothing more than ‘public relations’, a smoke screen, or propaganda—deceptive and not reflective of the real identity of the group.” (2019, p. 218). They were of course speaking in general, and make an excellent point, but the

¹³³ Romano, A. (2021) What we still haven’t learned from GamerGate, Vox. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/20/20808875/gamergate-lessons-cultural-impact-changes-harassment-laws> (Accessed March 2020)

studied use of these PR techniques, and the tactical ways in which tweet bombing, narrative control, and reverse-psychology are deployed to shout down and weaken opposing narratives is important to highlight. We have already established how important and integral storytelling is to the creation of cultural narrative. Whilst this process usually takes place within communities and groups, and between individuals, the power of the process is very much exploited in this fashion by the agents of counter-cultural narrative shift to symbolically defang the core of their ideologies for public consumption. Immersion in the synthesised space, within its confusion of ever-expanding narrative ecologies can make it difficult to maintain awareness of such tactics, particularly when these narrative manipulations use the combative nature of online debate to their advantage. As their narratives spark a debate that rages across SNS, through and into the echo chambers and filter bubbles, the shifted counter-cultural narrative goes quietly about its business, reaching and infecting the intended audiences, whose anger and disillusionment make them a fertile ground for the growth of violent and regressive ideas disguised as justice.

The danger here, however, does not restrict itself to those most vulnerable targets. I have made it clear that anyone is vulnerable to the rewriting or re-wiring of their narrative identity. Hammack states it plainly when he says, "Ideological identification allows individuals to organize and synthesize the shared representations of a group, a culture, or a nation, in such a way as to construct a sense of person-culture symbiosis." (2008, p. 231) This pre-disposition to the ideological in our narratives makes people equally vulnerable to the appropriation and overwriting of their given ideology. The knee-jerk reaction to such an assertion is to deny any possibility of such a vulnerability, but to press home the advantage narrative has over us in the digital age I turn to the notion of ubiquity. The

ubiquitous is that which we most immerse within, and our primary subconscious driver. Post-truth tectonics, such as these counter-cultural narrative shifts and other such narrative manipulations, work by mimicking the patterns and flows of ubiquitous tectonics. What might appear to be a perfectly reasonable argument, or a seemingly innocuous question might well be a counter-cultural narrative shift or other narrative manipulation in disguise. Just as the QAnon game started with questions and information designed to spark curiosity and doubt, so too do these narratives, and that is the point, to make it difficult to differentiate them from well-intended and meaningful thought and debate. Because of this mimicry, I argue that such narrative manipulation can be incredibly hard to avoid and equally hard to defend oneself against, particularly in the chaos of the synthesised space and the speed of the dissemination therein, the ways in which narrative immediately unmoors and belongs to any storyteller or position. One can turn here to the idea of the synthesised space as being akin to a mirror of the actual, reflecting itself into infinity. Filtered through too many curated viewpoints, photoshopped and rewritten as clickbait, shaped by too many hands and minds all vying to make the information fit their pre-existing ideological and narrative preconceptions. Fundamentally, it is not a reliable vector for seeing ourselves or the world we live in, and yet it seems the only option is to continue looking, continue partaking, or else be cut off. In the digital age, a severing of this nature cuts off vital lines of communication, not only within social circles but with the world at large. The coronavirus pandemic has made startlingly clear how important these virtual webs of communication and connection can be. They are a lifeline. How then can the connection be maintained without losing more to the manipulation of narrative therein? Hammack makes the urgency of this question clear when he states that “person and culture are co-constitutive.” (2008, p. 238) I have already covered how culture is based on mutually

agreed ideas of what constitutes self, behaviour, actions, and interactions, and how this process can be affected and problematised by post-truth tectonic shift. By ignoring the narrative foundation of the post-truth tectonic, and the ways in which such narratives proliferate, we risk deepening the grip thereof and the possibility of handing our autonomy over wholesale to the progenitors of older mythic-systems for whom the post-truth tectonic serves as both an ally and as an opportunity to rewrite actuality in the image of their mythic-systems.

4.3 Actuality Re-Written

One of the functions of our mythic-systems is to provide a means of interpretation between things embedded in actuality (anything we must engage with as we navigate the world) and their given meanings, the concepts they embody. These meanings and concepts do not have to reflect reality (actuality), in fact the intention of a mythic-system is often to construct a preferred reality by means of attaching approved signification (concepts/ideas) to the signs (images and objects) used for interpretation and understanding of the world. This is how mythic-systems are able to rewrite the world in their own image, their own ideology. I have shown how, through counter-cultural narrative shift it is possible to essentially rewrite the mythology of a minority to paint them as the antagonist in an ideological battle. This shifting of narrative is purely symbolic, encapsulated in language and interpretation, and yet is capable of enacting an effect upon not only the perception of reality, but reality as lived and experienced, as shown with the increased levels of violence towards trans people and the banning of Critical Race Theory in states across America. This ability to affect reality occurs because of the relationship we have with the symbolic, the role it plays in our cognition of the world. In *The Architectural*

Other, Hendrix speaks of the real as being “an absence in the symbolic [that] cannot be represented by the symbolic” (2020, p. 5). Yet despite this representational gap, he acknowledges that the symbolic nonetheless enacts an effect on the actual, one he describes as akin to the effect of the unconscious mind upon the conscious. This is the role of the symbolic, to act as the backstage cognition of the real, as the subconscious mechanism driving our navigational understanding thereof. As people, we often do not really know where the information we utilise in our daily lives comes from, it seems automatic, because we learn so much of it in our childhood. That process is conscious, but it feels unconscious, automatic. This conscious but seemingly automatic process continues as we as humans learn and grow, and experience, changing not only who we are, but our views and opinions on the world and other people. Such natural progression is part and parcel of our development but these changes over time represent a significant challenge to the symbolic meaning offered by older mythic-systems, one that threatens that preferred worldview whose lived reality was so well described through nationalism. The outcome of such a threat is reactive: an editing of reality through reframing that becomes ever more insistent. One can refer to counter-cultural narrative shift to see the effects of this reframing on groups, but it is not just groups that are subjected to this narrative manipulation, it is also words, ideas, and philosophies, such as the notion of wokeness, which is now the centre of a culture war on the frontlines of the battle between mythic-systems.¹³⁴ This is how a shift in the symbolic meaning, offered through narrative manipulation, enacts effects upon the actual, by changing

¹³⁴ Some fascinating articles on the shape and the history of the culture war, which is by no means new, but this has been my point, it is the way in which the battle can now be fought, through the synthesised space, that is the issue: Fenwick, J. (2021) 'Woke: Compliment or criticism, it is now fuelling the culture wars', *BBC News*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-58281576> (Accessed September 2022), Torres, E.P. (2022) "'White Psychodrama" and the culture wars: A self-reinforcing cycle, going nowhere', *Salon*. Available at: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/opinion/white-psychodrama-and-the-culture-wars-a-self-reinforcing-cycle-going-nowhere/ar-AA12cEkG> (Accessed September 2022)

the way in which it is perceived, understood, and interpreted, and therefore the way in which it is *experienced*.

Consider then the ramifications, the significance, of this reframing of the symbolic when its basis is unreality: a meme, a construction (such as fake news), a deepfake. As we have seen throughout this thesis, all meaning is constructed, but these constructions ordinarily have inherent meaning value and therefore hold a vital role in underpinning and explaining aspects of the actuality.¹³⁵ However, when the actuality begins to reflect the often chaotic and unreliable aspects of a symbolic actuality reframed by narrative manipulation in the synthesised space, meaning loses value as it is replaced, reframed, reduced to an advertising gimmick, an ideological tool, or a meme, all of which serves to lessen our connection to actuality, to our objective, or symbolic, understanding thereof.¹³⁶ And as I have described in chapter three, without these connections people can become rootless, removed from their own context, and left adrift in a space whose meaning is a matter of the moment; attached only to the fleeting, the insignificant, the replaceable, the ineffable. The growing dependence upon smart devices, and the attachment they offer to the synthesised space and its many distractions and delights, has shaped the 21st Century. The intertainment therein has far too great a percentage of humanity's collective attention, and as such it offer an ideal gateway into the human subconscious for the purposes of narrative manipulation.¹³⁷ There are several key issues arising from this manipulation, and some interesting vectors of transference exploited by such tactics. In *Psychonarratology – foundations for the empirical study of literary response*, Bertolossi and Dixon refer to the similarity of inference processes

¹³⁵ They are descriptors with a purpose, a means of anchoring understanding to the surrounding world or within communication with others, or else they are reframed descriptors whose purpose is to reaffirm a specific view of the actual.

¹³⁶ For an insight into the power of the meme and information about what memes are see: Blackmore, S. (2000) 'The Power of a Meme', *Scientific American*, 283(4), pp 52-61

¹³⁷ Intertainment: a mash-up of internet and entertainment – I did not coin this phrase, it is used all over the online spaces.

(2003, p. 141), wherein they argue that “in processing both fictional characters and real people, we draw on the same knowledge base of experience with people and situations.” Bertolossi and Dixon declare that the perfect reader, who can “decode textual signs in a programmatic manner” (*ibid*, p. 141) does not exist, and that human beings tend towards using real world experience to unlock the mystery of character behaviour in novels. That’s quite the generalisation, but the central thrust of this argument provides fascinating context for the human relationship with story, and with actuality. It suggests that people do not differentiate between actuality and fiction for the purposes of cognition, choosing on the whole not to attempt to untangle deeper meaning but instead find that which is relatable to the self within story and character. The possibilities for exploitation of this habit are manifold. For example, the news, whether it be mass media or on SNS, captures the attention in the same way as fiction, with elements of mystery, thriller, drama, romance, comedy and tragedy, with heroes and villains etc (one can look here to the way in the story of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry has been framed in the media, it has all the markers of a great story, with sometimes Meghan and sometimes Harry as the villain in an ongoing saga built from no more than speculation). The intention is to draw the public, and therefore public debate, into these narratives and provoke a ‘need to know’ feeling over how they might continue and how they might end. In this way, just as in counter-cultural narrative shift, doubt can be cast on the motives or the facts of a situation or a person and, central to this particular narrative manipulation, important issues can be drowned by the pull of stories designed to distract.

An example of this designer distraction is the bait and switch manoeuvre, where an issue of dire importance is drowned by the viral release of an alternate story

designed to divert the audience. For example, a story was retweeted thousands of times of a young boy fundraising to pay off student lunch debt.¹³⁸ The celebratory tone of the story, lauding the young person's efforts, ignited a tsunami of online support, but the story was designed to distract from the issue behind the fundraiser — that children whose parents have accrued lunch money debt due to grinding poverty worsened by legislative choices driven by ideology are expected to go without food and are often even humiliated by their schools. Punished for being the child of struggling parents. This contempt of the poor is a feature of right wing mythic-system ideologies, assuming a lack of responsibility or effort on the part of those struggling to make ends meet, rather than any outcome of policy or poor political handling of the economy. Instead of seeing this reality so that we may enact change upon it, we are introduced to this hero, this young man, as a more compelling story, a character we can identify with, or in some cases, rail against, because such stories serve both agendas. They distract those who would seek to prevent such inequality through affirmative action, and offer those whose ideology aligns with the mythic-systems behind this inequity the opportunity to malign an action or a behaviour by framing it as inappropriate in some way or as anathema to certain beliefs. The same principle of bait and switch applies to the growing number of fundraisers for medical debt and upcoming procedures, which drown out the narrative of poor healthcare in the US, charged at point of service and at extortionate rates, unchecked by congress or senate, often driving ill people to bankruptcy or to die needlessly.¹³⁹ Stories on these fundraisers place a focus on kindness and support

¹³⁸ See news story for background: Lee, A. (2020) 'An 8-year-old boy paid off the lunch debt for his entire school by selling key chains', CNN, 2020, URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/04/us/boy-pays-off-lunch-debt-trnd/index.html> (Accessed September 2022)

¹³⁹ This is a complex issue and has a great deal of context and background surrounding the fundamental failure of healthcare provision in the US and attitudes to medical insurance etc. There is little room for nuance on this subject in the body of this thesis but I provide a few links here to provide some pertinent information on the issue: Zdechlik, M. (2018) 'Health Inc, Patients Are Turning To GoFundMe To Fill Health Insurance Gaps', NPR. Available at: <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/12/27/633979867/patients-are-turning-to-gofundme-to-fill-health-insurance-gaps> (Accessed September 2022)

to strangers in these cases to obscure the fact that the price of late-stage capitalism is dignity, humanity, a basic standard of living, not to mention the fact that the vast majority of these fundraiser will, in fact, fail. These actualities, these narratives of the actual, are effectively drowned in the din of edited reality. One can clearly see how such fluff pieces, stripped of the underlying weight of their facts, are designed to float to the surface, offered without context to appease and enthrall, much as the 'migrant as invader' narratives were offered without context to provoke racial tension and divisions during Brexit and the 2016 Presidential election campaign, and these are only some of the ways our inference processing similarities might be manipulated against us. This hacking of processes inaccessible to the conscious mind, our backstage cognition, is a feature rather than a bug of edited reality, using our psychology as a weapon to prevent us from noticing the blatant alteration of the narrative landscape. These examples of bait and switch offer insight into one of the primary weapons of edited reality, the signifier removed wholesale from the signified, and reframed as a signifier on its own merits. In this way, the object or image becomes the meaning, a meme-driven mind-hack designed to separate us from our cultural, historical and symbolic understanding of the world. This attack on the symbolic, on the meaning of things in the actual and the power and influence of their significance, is another aspect of the erosion of meaning value within post-truth tectonics. And how in all this mayhem do we begin to interpret such symbolism, removed from its context? That's the rub and the ruin of the post-truth tectonic landscape of the 21st century, whose overwhelming outcome seeks a dearth of understanding, a gradual devolution in awareness and knowledge, or the pursuit

Kenworthy, N. & Igra, M. (2022) Medical Crowdfunding and Disparities in Health Care Access in the United States, 2016-2020, *American Journal of Public Health*, 112, pp 491-498. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306617> (Accessed September 2022)

Martinez G. (2019) 'GoFundMe CEO: One-Third of Site's Donations Are to Cover Medical Costs', *TIME*. Available at: <https://time.com/5516037/gofundme-medical-bills-one-third-ceo/> (Accessed September 2022)

of either. For the mythic-systems in alignment with the post-truth tectonic this is a design feature and not a bug. One cannot, after all, interpret the uninterpretable. One cannot make sense of the nonsensical. If we are trapped in these mazes of the meaningless, the imperative is to either become frantic, seeking for the exit, and perhaps gradually becoming more and more lost in dead ends and optical illusions, or to give up hope. Either is acceptable when the outcome is that all eyes and attention are elsewhere, offering an opportunity to build those old foundations back over the new by destroying progress and removing rights and freedoms by offering reasonable doubt on the basis of the actuality of the necessity of these things for certain groups, and then by inference of that right to removal, the limiting or removal of the rights of other, comparable groups. What is interesting here, however, is that no matter how convincing this editing of actuality may be, it is still subject to the rules of fiction, the narrative rules that humanity lives by. For the most part, living in edited actuality is somewhat akin to the suspension of disbelief invested in a story or a film, so long as the narrative follows the expected rules, the audience is willing to accept almost any interpretation of what is seen and heard and the meaning therein, particularly if the story is arresting, or well told. But what happens when the story loses its thread, or a character displays behaviour or actions so unbelievable that the audience is no longer convinced enough to play along? That is when narrative breach can occur, allowing a glimpse of unedited actuality to be viewed, a glimpse that is sometimes wide enough to shatter the understanding of what was thought to be actual.

Summary

Offering insight into the mythological basis of much of the post-truth narrative encountered in the synthesised spaces, I have shown how older mythic-systems which have faced effective narrative extinction mirror and connect with post-truth tectonics as they fight to secure their preservation. I have outlined how the loss of self and the threat against a shared identity forms the basis of this alliance and fuels this desire to re-write reality in their own image and persist as the primary drivers of 21st century tectonics. I have offered as an example of this, the phenomenon I call counter-cultural narrative shift, where these progenitors of outgoing systems seek to reframe as the victims of cultural erasure, when a primary aim of their movements is to erase culture that does not fit their ideological paradigm. This brief foray into counter-cultural narrative shift then opens an exploration into the editing of reality by means of narrative manipulation and control, which has formed a central role in the construction of the post-truth tectonic and its resulting environment. To explore this phenomenon, I used the subject of bait and switch stories in the media, whose role is to be an effective distraction from the actuality hidden beneath and the ways in which these manipulations distract and contain a willing audience whose inclination is to treat narrative encountered in the synthesised space the same as any other story. I spoke about suspension of disbelief, the willingness to follow stories so long as they follow the rules of narrative, leading finally to the question of what might happen if they fail to do so and a narrative breach occurs, offering the audience within the synthesised space a view of the actual such narrative manipulation seeks to obscure, reframe, or redefine.

5.

WHEN THE LEVEE BREAKS**Introduction**

The intention of this chapter is to explore inbuilt defences against narrative manipulation and look at an example of such defences by way of the presidency of Donald Trump and its effect on the world at large. I ask if these inbuilt defences suffice as a defence in totality or whether there are better methods to subvert the manipulation of post-truth narrative manipulation. To that end, this chapter opens with Bruner, and an exploration into the formation, tolerances, and outcomes of narrative breach to better understand the basis of our need for narrative defences. Although Bruner mentions breach only in brief, I demonstrate that the foundation of his theory offers compelling reasons to delve further into the subject of narrative breach, and of narrative defence mechanisms. From there, looking through the lens of Gibson's membrane and his FQ, I move on to thinking about the role the uncanny plays in the lead up to and the occurrence of narrative breach and our awareness thereof.¹⁴⁰ I use Gibson's self-described defence mechanisms for narrative awareness and self-protection to explore what shape such defences might take, and how they might work in cases of impending or sudden breach. Pivoting to the matter of breach itself, I undertake a case study into President Trump as a canary in the mine, an example of slow-moving uncanny narrative fracturing followed by sudden breach. These sections outline how narrative noise and manipulation of post-truth in the synthesised space obscured what Trump represented to those in the Gibsonian

¹⁴⁰ FQ: Fuckedness Quotient – the metric by which Gibson measures the gradual fracturing of actuality effected by the spread and ongoing ubiquity of technology in the late 20th/early 21st century.

position and explore the motives of his base in supporting him, their views curated by the tenets of entrenched mythic-systems aligned with the post-truth tectonic.

5.1 Once More Unto The Breach

“A seeming breach in the ordinariness is requested to trigger the other dynamic of narrative – how to cope with it, to domesticate it, to get things back on Familiar track.” (Bruner, 2002, p.89)

I have referenced Bruner’s extensive body of work on the importance and role of narrative in human action, interaction, and self-telling at several key points in this thesis as it is vital to the view of self and cultural narrative creation that I find most affected by post-truth tectonics. For this chapter I return to Bruner once more to focus on a subject touched upon briefly in his monograph *Making Stories* (2002), that of narrative breach and the ways we adapt to counteract the unexpected, those clashes of culture and narrative between groups of people sharing the same space but different perspectives.¹⁴¹ Bruner consistently speaks of the self-narrative and the cultural narratives as a dialectical process, one of constant balance and change, and he comes back to this once more with narrative breach to speak of how human beings elide narrative discordance by means of domestication, and how many of our cultural narratives, particularly our myths, are formed of these domesticated narrative breaches, instances of the unexpected that we have tamed and assimilated into our everyday understanding of the world and one another. Bruner writes of the “stock unexpected” (2002, p.91), those genres of narrative regarded as an acceptable

¹⁴¹To be clear, narrative breach within the context this thesis refers to instances of socio-cultural narrative that fall outside of the accepted parameters for what has been agreed as acceptable, either because they are foreign or uncanny or deviations from the norm. This is not what Bruner meant by narrative breach but a bastardisation thereof, a reframing of his theory to highlight a particular pattern within the socio-cultural narratives that drive group and individual behaviour. I turned to Bruner in this instance, for this purpose, as narrative breach offered the most flexibility as a framework for explanation.

transgression. These are deviations on a norm, or on cultural expectations, so one might use here as an example, a choice to be childless. Culturally speaking, this is a deviation of the norm, one still regarded as transgressive, however those who choose to have no children are trying to reframe this deviation so that it fits the familiar, by choosing the term 'child free', denoting autonomy and contentment in the choice rather than lack or despair.^{142 143} Bruner's examples of narrative breach, such as the unfaithful spouse, are old-fashioned and do not particularly feel like breach as such, more like alterations of interpretation in basal tectonics by means of societal progression (which my example emphasises), but the purpose of Bruner's argument was to highlight how we adapt to allow changes to narrative, based on recurring abnormalities in the accepted conventions and this offers a means to understand a similar pattern occurring within the socio-cultural narratives. Much as we have created narratives to explain behaviour and culture and personhood, so too have we created narratives to bridge and repair minor breaches in our disbelief. We do this, as Bruner states, by bending these unexpected slips in the narrative order until they fit, subsuming them into accepted culture. This trick of domestication is not infallible, but it is founded upon the tectonics we utilise to decide what denotes normal behaviour. So it is by domestication, by making the unfamiliar ordinary and familiar, that we seal those breaches, that we reassert our suspension of disbelief, able to pretend that everything is familiar, conventional, and therefore normal. Normality, or familiarity, is the human default, and the maintenance of this state

¹⁴² A few pieces articulating the continued disapproval around choosing not to have children: Nynat, S, (2021), 'Voluntary Childlessness And The Enforcement of Patriarchy: The Footholds of Conservatism', *AnInjustice*, Available at: <https://aninjusticemag.com/voluntary-childlessness-and-the-enforcement-of-patriarchy-the-footholds-of-conservatism-936def6d67ecd> (Accessed September 2022), Miller, S, (2017), 'Here's Why Couples Without Kids Are Stigmatized', *LiveScience*, Available at: <https://www.livescience.com/58094-child-free-parents-moral-outrage.html> (Accessed September 2022), Gregoire, C, (2018), 'This May Explain Why So Many People Feel Outraged About Childfree Adults', *HuffingtonPost*, Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/childless-women-discrimination_n_58b6f352e4b0780bac2f3413 (Accessed September 2022)

¹⁴³ More information about the childfree movement: Navlakha, M, (2021), 'The rise of the childfree movement on TikTok', *Mashable*, Available at: <https://mashable.com/article/childfree-tiktok> (Accessed September 2022), King, T, (2017), "'I'm childfree, not childless – here's why that difference matters'", *Stylist*, Available at: <https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/childless-child-free-importance-terminology-women-damaging-language-feminism/72077> (Accessed September 2022), Browne, M, (2020), 'Why terms like 'childless' vs 'childfree' matter', *Women's Agenda*, Available at: <https://womensagenda.com.au/life/why-terms-like-childless-vs-childfree-matter/> (Accessed September 2022)

powers an endless motivation to flow around the editing of actuality and accept it *as* actuality. We orientate to a horizon of familiarity. This orientation occurs every time we encounter something that shakes the foundations of our beliefs, our personhood, our mythic-systems, or our tectonics, which is where I now turn my attention. In his work on breach, Bruner focused on the smaller tectonic narratives, the scripts, frameworks, or inner maps surrounding the construction of self and other, I seek now to expand this notion to explore the idea of breaches which impact our understanding of the nature and composition of the actuality around us, breaches capable of triggering a total change in perspective. I argue that whilst larger breaches of this type can be domesticated, they require far more effort, and although they can be domesticated, the process for such requires exponentially more mental and psychological energy and commitment than any combination of simple breaches might demand.

“The transition between realities,” Berger and Luckmann write, “is marked by the rising and falling of the curtain.” (1967, p.66). They speak here of theatre, of being lost in the reality of the world onstage and then finding oneself, as the curtain falls, back in the real world. They define this as the actuality that they *know* exists, but I have argued that all we know is what we *believe* is actual, because actuality is not simply the solidity of a chair or a wall, or a car, or a road. These are signs, and their actuality, much as all actuality, is bound within the symbolic, and our symbolic actuality is contained within the familiar / domesticated, therefore we cannot say that it is *actual*, only an approximation of such, seen through a glass darkly. I refer here back to Berger and Luckmann, who state, “As the curtain falls, the spectator returns to reality, that is, to the paramount reality of everyday life by comparison with which the reality presented on the stage now appears tenuous and ephemeral,

however vivid the presentation may have been a few moments previously.” (1967, p.66) I apply this metaphor of theatre and the curtain to edited actuality, to the glimpses a narrative breach might offer of what is being hidden behind that editing. Edited actuality relates to the use of narrative manipulation in the mass media and online, particularly in SNS, which frame the actual within the philosophical boundaries of the contested mythic-systems I spoke about in chapter four, and along specific storylines designed to distract.¹⁴⁴ Such narrative manipulations can impact actions and reactions in the actual, which then have a wider distorting influence on outcomes in the actual (such as in elections, or by provoking interracial division etc).¹⁴⁵ But there comes a moment when the breach runs too far, the curtain is raised for too long, forcing the audience to confront the actual as it is, which is radically different from the edited version on the stage. At that moment, the actual becomes impossible to ignore. There are two responses to this sudden vivid presentation of the actual. The first is an attempt at domestication, to morph or assimilate this assault of the actual into our ordered reality by offering excuses and explanations, by dissembling the facts. The second is a forceful acknowledgement of the actual as being fundamentally different from that which was shown. Both responses demand action. To morph or assimilate the actual into the edited requires tenacity, a willingness to *enforce* meaning or symbolism upon it, to change its meaning in ways that do not quite tally.¹⁴⁶ The edges will never quite match up in this scenario and so

¹⁴⁴ Further information: Herman, E, Chomsky, N, (1988), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon Books: New York, Fontenot, J, (2016), ‘Mass Media Is Distracting Us From The Real Truth’, *Odyssey*, Available at: <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/media-distracting-real-issues-daily> (Accessed September 2022), Bevan, T, (2020), ‘The Media’s ‘Distraction’ Deception’, *Real Clear Politics*, Available at: https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/05/29/the_distraction_deception_143322.html#! (Accessed September 2022), Engckhardt, T, (2014), ‘How Sensational News Stories Distract Us From Real Crises’, *TheNation*, Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/how-sensational-news-stories-distract-us-real-crises/> (Accessed September 2022)

¹⁴⁵ For example, the rise of violence against Asian communities during the height of the Covid19 pandemic. For a thorough analysis read: Asian American Bar Association of New York, and Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP, (2021), ‘A Rising Tide of Hate and Violence against Asian Americans in New York During COVID-19: Impact, Causes, Solutions’, Available at: https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.aabany.org/resource/resmgr/press_releases/2021/A_Rising_Tide_of_Hate_and_Vi.pdf (Accessed September 2022)

¹⁴⁶ For instance, people who still do not believe in anthropogenic climate change. This is attributed to many psychological responses, all of which support a desire to ignore signs of an actuality in opposition to their core beliefs. For context see: Pierre, J, (2022), ‘Why Don’t People Believe in Climate Change?’, *Psychology Today*, Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202204/why-dont-people-believe-in-climate-change> (Accessed

one must blur one's vision to never see. The maintenance of this attempt to tame the actual necessitates constant, painstaking curation, a persistent shifting of the lines to allow for the smoothing over of inconsistencies. This is how one must strive to domesticate the actual, by dint of constant, exhausting effort. The same, however, applies to the converse reaction, when action must be taken to subvert the actual glimpsed behind edited actuality, and I speak here without bias, acknowledging that positions on either side of a philosophical divide will encounter a breach of their notion of the actual in the precise same fashion. In this way, seeing the actual can be a fulcrum for powerful, and often painful, changes, and yet also a fulcrum for cataclysmic moments of reversal, wherein the loss of progress becomes progress itself (and again I speak without bias – the progenitors of older mythic-systems would regard progressive politics as a reversal of their philosophy as much as progressives regard retrogressive policy as a reversal of theirs). Therefore, these tectonic shifts manifesting from the breach, arise from the clash and subsequent battling of opposing and equally ferocious positioning based on pre-existing tectonics and mythic-systems whose sets of narratives and values are already, and always, at war with one another. However, it is not a case of the most popular winner, it is simply a case of the most resolute, and in an age of widespread, diverting mass media, SNS, and post-truth tectonic shift, that battle unfolds in ever-shifting tides of thrust and counter-thrust, or rather, narrative and counter-narrative. So what are the ways in which these narrative breaches might occur, are they entirely reliant on external events or might we have internal mechanisms offering a warning systems for incoming breach? To examine these questions in more depth, I turn now to William Gibson and his experiences of narrative breach, how he

September 2022), Hall, D, (2019), 'Climate explained: why some people still think climate change isn't real', *The Conversation*, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/climate-explained-why-some-people-still-think-climate-change-isnt-real-124763> (Accessed September 2022)

describes the various mechanisms by which he interprets the warping of the actual that signifies an incoming breach.

5.2 Gibson's Membrane and the F.Q.

Gibson is an acute observer of the zeitgeist, who in his more recent writings has focused on placing his stories in a narrative space delineated by a future that is “already here – [it's] just not evenly distributed.”¹⁴⁷ It is this remarkable sense of the immediate and the nascent futures bound within it, and his ability to parse the one from the other, that elevates Gibson's work, even when delving deep into the fantastical. Part of this acute awareness are his internal warning mechanisms, which enable him to pinpoint areas of change indicating the existence of impending fractures in edited actuality. The first of these mechanisms that I'd like to examine is what Gibson refers to as his F.Q., or his fuckedness-quotient. F.Q. is a term Gibson uses to describe the gradual *unwinding* of the world, primarily occurring around technologically induced social change. For example, in an interview in *The New Yorker* in December with Joshua Rotham (2019), Gibson spoke of how, as the internet grew in accessibility, he noticed people's interest for the medium began to translate to a sort of hunger. An addiction. The more access to this strange, new online world they had, the more they wanted. And this ever-growing attachment was not exclusive to the internet. Gibson found that his friends' fascination for the internet seemed to be expanding their enthusiasm and engagement in other media. He recalled a friend introducing him to “Cops”, which although not the first ‘real-life’ television show to air on terrestrial TV can certainly be described as the very first

¹⁴⁷ Author Unknown, (2020) “The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed” William Gibson, *The Economist*, December 4, 2003, Cities & Health, 4:2, 152, Available at: DOI: [10.1080/23748834.2020.1807704](https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2020.1807704) (Accessed June 2020)

'reality TV' show.^{148 149} This remarkable, long-running exercise in cinema verité followed the day to day, unscripted comings and goings of law enforcement across the United States and eventually law enforcement in other countries. For Gibson, this transformation of law enforcement into entertainment, the monetisation of a performance of policing, signified a rise in the F.Q. of the world. It's not hard to imagine why — what might first be considered pure entertainment is in truth turning the serious business of upholding the law, of protecting and serving, into a theatre for the masses. This sets a dangerous precedent that reality television, far from avoiding, has leaned ever further into, the commodification of people's lives, hopes and dreams. In the world of reality TV, nothing is sacred, everything is bankable, reality eats itself for fun and profit and therefore becomes less and less palatable. Moreover, the very notion of reality itself, of actuality, loosens. When we know such shows, meant to stand for 'real life' are in fact heavily scripted, a seed of doubt is settled into our understanding of what counts as 'real'. It is no wonder that Gibson's F.Q. rose in response. Moreover, as people around him sunk their interest into the virtual, he turned his eye to scrutinise the spaces around him, and found them gradually decaying noting that, particularly in the poorer neighbourhoods, there could be found "more 'interstitial spaces'—places that had fallen through widening civic and economic cracks." (New Yorker, 2019) This is a problem of the actual that the virtual hides for those of us fortunate enough to have access, that those who cannot access these ever-growing spaces are left behind, and if they have no voice in those spaces, we might well miss the ripple effect of their dissatisfaction. That is until it grows wide and deep enough to create fractures in our edited reality, allowing us to finally see what we have been missing all along and either react to change it, or to conceal it further.

¹⁴⁸ *Cops*, 1989. Fox.

¹⁴⁹ The first real world television show would be "An American Family" in the 1970s: *An American Family*, 1973. PBS.

After finishing *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Gibson felt let down by the experience of writing, by the notion that what he was doing “felt like it belonged to a previous era”.¹⁵⁰ This reaction arose from a certainty that the world was different in ways that could no longer be imagined, “the world outside the window” he said, “was beginning to look considerably stranger to me than the ones I was imagining for my fictional futures.” It was at this point, whilst seeking around for a direction that Gibson discovered Ebay, the first online site he genuinely liked, with its mess of human debris and detritus for sale. Ebay led him down a rabbit hole onto a watch forum, from which he learned a great deal about military watches, about which Rotham states: “Gibson noticed that people with access to unlimited information could develop illusions of omniscience. He got into a few political debates on the forum. He felt the F.Q. creeping upward.” For Gibson this shifting of the F.Q. aligned with what he perceived as a shifting of the boundaries between the online world and the physical world; the lines between the two beginning to blur and overlap. Online was no longer a destination one travelled to periodically “it was our Here while those awkward “no service” zones of disconnectivity had become our There. ... as though cyberspace were turning inside out, or “everting”—consuming the world that had once surrounded it.” This eversion altered the way in which the people around Gibson navigated and interacted within the online and physical spaces, their behaviour gradually warping as the spaces themselves warped and melded together. This observation aligns with the psychogeographic aspects of our narrative ecology I touched upon in chapter three, speaking of the unmooring of narratives within a synthesised space and how we too swiftly become unmoored within those narratives. As the online space has continued a relentless incursion into

¹⁵⁰ Gibson, W. (1999), *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Viking Press: New York

our everyday lives, so has it begun to subvert and control our narratives — some of that is orchestrated by marketing and sales campaigns but a significant portion of that alteration of our narrative pathways is merely an instinctive response to the landscape changing beneath our feet. It is interesting to note how closely Gibson's take on the collision of the online world with the physical mirrors my notion of a synthesised space, and how he too saw the ways in which this began to change our narratives:

In Japan, he had learned the word *otaku*, used to describe people with obsessive, laser like interests. The Web, he saw, allowed everyone everywhere to develop the same *otaku* obsessions—with television, coffee, sneakers, guns. The mere possibility of such knowledge lay like a scrim over the world. A physical object was also a search term: an espresso wasn't just an espresso; it was also Web pages about crema, fair trade, roasting techniques, varieties of beans. *Things were texts; reality had been augmented. Brand strategists revised the knowledge around objects to make them more desirable, and companies, places, Presidents, wars, and people could be advantageously rebranded, as though the world itself could be reprogrammed. It seemed to Gibson that this constant reprogramming, which had become a major driver of economic life, was imbuing the present with a feeling—something like fatigue, or jet lag, or loss. The suddenness with which the world's code could be rewritten astonished him.* (The New Yorker, 2019 – italics are my emphasis)

This notion of the rewriting of the world's code is an apt illustration of the hijack and morphing of narratives in this post-truth tectonic shift. As is this slow reprogramming of our understanding of reality, the gradual fissuring that takes

place beneath our understanding of the everyday world as it gradually skews out of true beneath our feet, and beneath our narratives. However, breach is not always slow and steady, sometimes it happens without any obvious warning. Even Gibson, with his augmented radar for the warp in the weft, is capable of being blindsided by hidden actuality.

In this second example, to show how breach can occur in a far more abrupt and absolute manner, I'd like to talk about Gibson's experience of the loss of what he has referred to as his "defensive membrane" (The New Yorker, 2019). The subject of the membrane arose in the same extended interview undertaken by Rotham with Gibson, over the period of a year or so, before the release of *Agency* (2020), the second book in Gibson's Jackpot Trilogy, in reference to the events that caused Gibson to suffer an elongated battle with both the direction and the atmosphere of the novel in question. He was writing this novel during events that shook not only North America but the world at large, the candidacy, campaign, and subsequent win in the US Presidential elections of Donald Trump for the Republican party. This latter shock was the moment that most impacted Gibson, as he explained to Rotham:

It used to be, Gibson had told me, that a defensive membrane divided his life from his work. He could consider the future as a professional, without picturing his own life, his kids' lives. "I never wanted to be the guy thinking about 'Mad Max' world," he said. "I had some sort of defence in place. . . . It's denial, some kind of denial. But denial can be a lifesaving thing, in certain lives, in certain times. How on earth did you get through that? Some reliable part of you just says, It's not happening." The membrane, he went on, "which I very, very much miss, actually held until

the morning after Trump's election. And I woke up and it was gone, whatever it was. It was just gone, and it's never come back.

Paying close attention to the tides of the world's narratives as he does must lead Gibson to an awareness that there is much to be worried about. Too much worry is not conducive for living, so holding this awareness of the world separate from his private life, his personal narratives, allowed Gibson certain psychological freedoms. This is true for anyone whose work involves paying careful attention to the social, economic, technological, and political climate of the world. It also rings true for anyone who considers it important to remain informed. The loss of this divide therefore is a significant one, as it is a collapse of an important psychological shield and, with it, as Gibson noted, that accompanying sense of safety. It must be said at this point that not everyone is privileged to experience such a feeling of safety, there are many people in the world who have never had the opportunity to form a defensive membrane. Those who live in a warzone, under a dictatorship, or in the daily grip of terror caused by gang warfare and guerrilla warfare. However, this fact does not diminish the impact of such a loss for those who do possess a defensive membrane. For those privileged enough to have one, the loss thereof often marks a permanent alteration in their relationship with their understanding of the world and I suspect that, in the case of Donald Trump's election victory, Gibson was one of many waking up to the sudden disappearance of their defensive membrane. As for those for who supported Trump, his election likely reinforced their defensive membrane, which perhaps then would have collapsed upon the election of Joe Biden in 2020. Much as any other breach, the outcomes depend upon positioning.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ To find another example of the membrane collapsing or reinforcing narratives, one can look to Brexit in the UK. For those who voted Leave, the morning after was an affirmation of their beliefs and positions, but those who voted Remain woke to a country they no longer recognised, surrounded by strangers whose positioning was at right angles to their own. That sense constitutes a profound narrative breach, spurring those who chose Remain to re-examine their understanding of the UK, having found the actuality of it at odds with their prior view thereof. As for those who emigrated to the UK, or sought asylum,

I think at this point it has become clear that, no matter the speed with which such a major breach occurs, it challenges to breaking point any ability to fold the new understanding of the world into pre-existing narratives, because the resultant realisation shatters certain portions of these narratives. The only logical response in this case is adaption to a new shape of actuality, leaving the old actuality behind. In the post-truth tectonic shift, such breaches seem to be accelerating along with technology, time, and history. Much of that, I believe, can be explained by the fact that, in this strange new century we inhabit, we find ourselves in a super-positional state of future-present, defined by a chaotic melding. There is no definitive future — no advances, technological or otherwise, whose existence ploughs a straight line into the unforeseen. The mystery is as Gibson states, one of uncertainty, where present events muddy the waters of possible futures until we can no longer see where the world might be in x years' time, apart from the fact that it will be vastly different and quite possibly awful, especially if one takes into account all the possible upheaval indicated by the worst outcomes of climate change, the gradual acceleration of Far Right politics into power, and the economic devastation unravelling in the post-Covid world. For the greater part of the 20th century, technological advance gave us a window into the future, but the world now changes so fast and so immediately that all change is of the present, it has nothing to say about the future. I think it can be said that this lack of future-sense contributes to the pressure and anxiety of the post-truth tectonic, whose main effect is an atmosphere of disorder, obfuscation, and uncertainty. In his interview with Rotham (2019), joined by his friend Jack Womack,

their narrative breach may well have been twofold, composed of the more immediate breach the morning after, that all Remainers shared in, and a longer, more torturous process of breach as the actuality of Brexit and its affirmation of their Otherness as undesirable became glaringly apparent in policy and public behaviour.

Gibson made mention of his inability to parse the future from a present involving Trump and Brexit, a sentiment Womack shared. Of that exchange, Rotham wrote:

What I find most unsettling," Gibson said, "is that the few times that I've tried to imagine what the mood is going to be, I can't. Even if we have total, magical good luck, and Brexit and Trump and the rest turn out as well as they possibly can, the climate will still be happening. And as its intensity and steadiness are demonstrated, and further demonstrated—I try to imagine the mood, and my mind freezes up. It's a really grim feeling." He paused. "I've been trying to come to terms with it, personally. And I've started to think that maybe I won't be able to."

Womack nodded. "My daughter's sixteen and a half," he said. "Sixty years from now, she'll be in her mid-seventies. I have absolutely no idea what the physical world will be like then. What the changes will be."

"It's totally new," Gibson said. "A genuinely new thing." He looked away from us, into the room. Another song came on the sound system.

Incandescent light gilded the mirrors. A young woman in round glasses leaned back in her chair. I felt, suddenly, that we were all living in the past.

Taking this exchange into account and an understanding of narrative breach as a warping of the everyday, I suggest another conspicuous parallel with the concept of the uncanny. In this parallel, narrative breach is definable as the strange object that is framed within the familiar and yet cannot be signified as such or explained and therefore provokes a feeling of deep unease. This definition of the uncanny relates heavily to Freud's, but I introduce into the definition of this parallel Lacan's notions

of the uncanny as a form of anxiety — or rather perhaps as a sensory/emotional reaction to unfamiliar objects, or familiar objects out of context.¹⁵² Certainly, it can be said that the uncanny provokes feelings of anxiety, after all, the uncanny is that which cannot be explained, however, what brings this parallel into acute focus as part of a dissection of narrative breach are Lacan's remarks about anxiety that can be related to our comprehension of the actual. He states: "Anxiety is this very cut, without which the presence of the signifier, its functioning, its entry, its furrow in the real is unthinkable." (1962, p.68) Sometimes it is difficult to access Lacan's direction, but one could take this notion of the cut and apply it to the severing of connections between objects and their meanings. A feature of the human condition is the need to understand; removed from its context, from its signifier, an object without meaning would seem a perfect storm for the provocation of anxiety. I see something and do not understand why it exists or what it means, anxiety is my reaction to this failure of analysis. One can also relate this idea of anxiety as the cut to narrative breach and how it creates fissures in the understanding of the everyday by introducing unanswerable questions; objects without signifiers; items and incidents without context. In another of Lacan's assertions about anxiety, he refers to it as the cause of doubt, the flash of the real imposing upon the unreal: "Anxiety is not doubt; anxiety is the cause of doubt." (1962, p.68)¹⁵³ For Lacan, this doubt arising from anxiety is not to be dismissed, it is a sign that something is wrong: "anxiety is the one which does not deceive. Anxiety then is the signal of the real ... an irreducible mode under which this real presents itself in experience." (1963, p.144) Conceiving of anxiety as a form of doubt whose presence frames incursions of the actual aligns beautifully with

¹⁵² Freud describes the uncanny (unheimlich – unhomely) as 'that kind of frightening that goes back to the well-known, the long-familiar.' (p.298) as in something being revealed about the familiar that casts it in an unsettling light. This revelation leads to a desire to seek out the safe and familiar (Heimlich – homely): Sigmund, F, (2010), *The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Uncanny*, Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34222/34222-h/34222-h.htm> (Accessed June 2020)

¹⁵³ Lacan, J, (1962-1963), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X: Anxiety*, Translated from the French by Gallagher, C, Available at: <http://www.lacaninireland.com> (Accessed June 2020)

the notion of narrative breach serving to trigger a confrontation, or a reckoning, with the actual. And whether we catch sight of these unfamiliar / uncanny objects, these signals of the actual, slowly over time, or whether they are revealed all at once in a single event or moment, they serve to provoke this anxiety, the precursor to doubt whose presence is often the trigger for reparative action. So, what might a breach into the actual look like? To offer an answer to this question, the next section of this thesis undertakes a case study of Donald Trump, whose presence served as a canary in the mine for unseen narrative problems in the actuality, the rise of the F.Q., and whose election win sparked the breach profound enough to put paid to Gibson's defensive membrane.

5.3 Concerning Trump

From the moment he announced at Trump tower his intention to run for the Republican Party, Donald Trump made a parody of the whole process of running for political office, and of political candidacy itself. The outrageous nature of his behaviour, his language, and his political positioning were such that his presence was impossible to take seriously, and indeed was not. From stories lampooning his past and present actions and speeches to the ridiculous spectacle made of his hair, the orange tone of his skin, his golden toilet, and his signature outfit of a blue suit with a red tie, nothing about Trump, or his candidacy, was given credence.¹⁵⁴ No thought or merit was given to the notion that he may win the candidacy and head to the election as a serious contender. Even when he won the candidacy, he was still not

¹⁵⁴ Video compilations of media coverage and response on Trump's candidacy, second video also outlines Clinton's presumed lead, as indicated by polling etc, which proved to be thoroughly misleading: Boonie, J, (2016), *In the Hall of the Trumpen King*, 20 March, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CilYGV8faZw>, (Accessed July 2022), Bcomm, G, (2016), *In the Hall of the Trumpen President*, 11 November, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqEddipbpkw&t=0s>, (Accessed July 2022). An op-ed written when it seemed certain Clinton would win, detailing the level of contempt generally felt by those watching Trump's candidacy unfold: Venugopal, R, (2016), "Dr Strange Trump: How we should stop worrying and learn to appreciate The Donald", *The Wire*, Available at: <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/dr-strange-trump-stop-worrying-learn-appreciate-donald> (Accessed July 2022)

considered a serious contender with the self-same stories that lampooned his campaign for candidacy plaguing his election campaign. In fact, if one had paid attention only to the polls, to statistics, and to the tenor of the news and opinions regarding him during Trump's election campaign, it seemed as if he had no chance of winning.¹⁵⁵ By all accounts the edge appeared to be Clinton's.¹⁵⁶ This despite the spectacle of a divisive election with two so-called bad candidates whose past and present actions and behaviour were the focus of significant controversy, debate and criticism. In the final balance, weighing Clinton against Trump, the question of experience was writ large against these controversies and their endless debate online and in mass media (even perhaps for those who may not prefer Clinton but saw no possibility of ever giving Trump a shot at office). However hawkish she was deemed to be, Clinton had political experience in spades and Trump had none, and moreover did not seem particularly motivated to garner any. His entire political demeanour revolved around the scattershot firing of divisive soundbites and declarations whose tenor often crossed the line into perceived bigotry, racism, sexism, and xenophobia. To those sharing Gibson's perspective, Trump's rallies, speeches and conduct in the presidential debates made the notion of a win risible. And yet, at the final hurdle, Trump emerged the winner.

When considering what may have, in the end, tipped the weight of public opinion, and therefore the election, in Trump's favour, one can perhaps point to the ultimate damage caused to Clinton's campaign by the "email" controversy, but that would be

¹⁵⁵ In-depth overviews of polling etc in the 2016 Presidential race: Donovan, T, Bowler, S, (2018), "Donald Trump's challenge to the study of elections, public opinion, and parties", *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties*, 28 (2), pp 125-134, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2018.1443713>, (Accessed July 2022), Panagapoulos, C, Endres, K, Weinschenk, A, (2018), "Pre-election poll accuracy and bias in the 2016 U.S. general elections", *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties*, 28 (2), pp 157-172, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2018.1441850> (Accessed July 2022)

¹⁵⁶ Whilst Clinton did go on to win the popular vote, this has no bearing on who wins the presidency. The US presidency is decided solely on the electoral college, and Clinton was shown as being more likely to win in this category also. See: Tamman, M, (2016), 'Clinton far ahead in Electoral College race: Reuters/Ipsos poll', *Reuters*, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/US-usa-election-poll-electoral-idUSKCN12M0JR> (Accessed September 2022),

using the obvious to ignore a subtler, deeper tidal flow of causation occurring within the states whose weight of power in the electoral college often decides the win.^{157 158} Considering those numbers, one also cannot turn to the popular vote to argue that Clinton was in with a chance. In this instance, the case of popular versus electoral reflected the shape of these deeper tides and offers insight into factors occurring beneath the surface of the story as seen throughout the synthesised space. In other words, the pattern of voting in states with a greater electoral college advantage shows that the campaign had somehow always been Trump's and that those who assumed it would be Clinton because of what polls etc appeared to be suggesting were very much mistaken. Given the sheer absurdity of Trump's performance as a candidate, his win came as an enormous shock to the system for the political left. Trump as president simply did not make sense and, as I have previously made clear, when narratives don't make sense according to our notion of the actual, that is when breach occurs. What is interesting here is *how* Trump failed to make sense, despite in his absurdity reflecting a deeper absurdity inbuilt into the post-truth environment. This thesis examines post-truth tectonic shift as a narrative issue and highlights this increasing absurdity, exacerbated by the warping of narrative in the synthesised space, the ongoing fictionalisation of news and events in the media, and the impact to normality posed by our increasing addiction to curated content on SNS. Trump's candidacy, campaign, and subsequent win constituted a particular theatre of the absurd in this already absurd environment and I want to take a moment here to examine the cause and effect of such a spectacle.

¹⁵⁷ Timeline of the email controversy that reared its head at the most inopportune time during Hillary Clinton's campaign: Hicks, C, (2016), "Timeline of Hillary Clinton's Email Scandal", *CNN Politics*, Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/28/politics/hillary-clinton-email-timeline/index.html> (Accessed July 2022)

¹⁵⁸ States such as Florida, Texas, Ohio, and Georgia.

As I have explored in previous chapters when speaking of narrative ecologies, a mediated environment, and the synthesised space created by a pervasive online culture, there is a definite feeling in the 21st century of living in fictional times. That is, we live in a highly edited media environment whose tactics for storytelling mimic those of the fiction novel so closely as to be indistinguishable. That experience resembles a babushka doll of narratives, all nested within one another, but unlike the doll wherein one eventually finds the solid figure at the centre, the synthesised space causes a seeming continuous descent, a *mise en abyme*, through hollow iteration after hollow iteration. It is often difficult or impossible in this narrative pattern to locate a story that feels factual in any sense. In short, a highly edited reality appears designed to create a dislocation, a derealisation, whose ultimate outcome is a sharp veer towards an experience located firmly within the absurd. For instance, viewing ongoing events like the Ukraine invasion, the California fires, the Pakistani flooding, the reality of Taliban control in Afghanistan through the lens of the synthesised space and its hollow narrative iterations renders the already strange ever more peculiar, unreal, and storied. And that distance, coupled with an anxiety that is not distant in the least, forms the basis of the strangeness, the absurdity, of the 21st century. But even within the bounds of this daily reel of the absurd, there remains an expectation for certain patterns of narrative to be maintained, to that effect, any deviation beyond the acceptable must lead to a rise in the F.Q.. Consider the idea of the ridiculous in politics, specifically the politics of the White Western world, because it is these politics for which Trump stood as representative and stood out as anomalous. Where other right-wing politicians, such as Ted Cruz, Matt Gaetz, Mitch McConnell etc, used their political power to enact or inhibit legislation aligned or at odds with their ideologies, Trump's language, his demeanour, his opinions, divisive as they were, were shared without demur, often in a coarse and derogatory fashion,

a form of self-assured bluster not supported by knowledge or evidence. Such inflammatory, divisive and provocative speechifying, common in dictatorships across the world but not within Western politics, might be described as unprecedented in American politics, and yet here he was, mocking veterans, the disabled, vilifying immigrants with little or no evidence and leading chants of 'lock her up!' to a braying audience of supporters.¹⁵⁹ Couple this with the spectacle of Trump as a man; his sexism, his disregard for process and protocol, the epitome of brash, unapologetic macho posturing, his egotism writ large across the frontages of his self-named towers, and one can make the case for his candidacy appearing no less than ridiculous to those from the Gibsonian position. Not only ridiculous, in fact, but so absurd as to appear uncanny in that self-same fashion I alluded to earlier, wherein the uncanny is a psychological expression of anxiety caused by the signal of the real. In this case the improbable real-world event of a man such as Trump actively fighting to take the presidency. But of course, as I have already made clear, this absurdity, this sense of the uncanny, was a positioning not shared by everyone, and if one is to fully understand the phenomena of Trump, it is necessary to approach the appeal he held for those who voted him into power.

5.4 Why Trump? An Analysis and Explanation

The question of why in this instance is a particularly interesting and thorny one, because Trump cultivates via his self-telling and the curation of his presence in the media the heroic narrative of rags to riches, and yet the appeal this holds for one side perhaps only adds to the sense of absurdity for the other. It seems ridiculous to

¹⁵⁹ See: Stephenson, P. (2016) 'A brief history of the 'Lock her up!' chant by Trump supporters against Clinton', *Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/22/a-brief-history-of-the-lock-her-up-chant-as-it-looks-like-trump-might-not-even-try/> (Accessed September 2022), Cillizza, C. (2020) 'How 'Lock Her Up!' just blew up', *CNN Politics*. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/10/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-justice-department/index.html> (Accessed September 2022)

those from the Gibsonian position that a man who could access a “small” loan of a million dollars from his father (which, reportedly, was more correctly many millions¹⁶⁰) can suggest that he is a self-made everyman. However, for those who hold the counter position to the Gibsonian, such divergence from the rags to riches heroic journey does not seem to register as problematic. It barely seems to register at all. The overweening opinion of Trump’s supporters is that he is the epitome of the self-made man, to be admired for his persistence and grit, his endless pursuit of success and wealth. This perspective of Trump’s narrative can perhaps be attributed to tectonic narrative variants deriving from mythic-systems, such as the redemptive narrative, personal exceptionalism, and the story of the self-made man. McAdams identified the redemptive self as a narrative type in his 2016 book *Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* and gives this definition: “In the prototypical life story told by the highly generative American adult, the protagonist encounters many setbacks and experiences a great deal of pain in life, but over time these negative scenes lead to especially positive outcomes, outcomes that might not have occurred had the suffering never happened in the first place.” (p. 8). He also describes a sense of personal destiny defining the origins of such a self, arising from an awareness of privilege, not necessarily economic or class privilege but a sense of having been blessed in some way as opposed to others. The awareness of this creates a moral imperative to give back. Personal exceptionalism on the other hand is an acute awareness of one’s own greater potential as compared to one’s peers, an ability to achieve things others could not.¹⁶¹ So that special sense of destiny with no outside

¹⁶⁰ The exact amounts seem to differ, but evidence shows the loan amount to be considerably higher than one million dollars. See: Breuninger, K. (2018), ‘Trump claimed he turned a ‘small’ \$1 million loan from his father into an empire. The New York Times says it was more like \$60.7 million in loans’, *CNBC*, Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/02/trumps-small-loan-from-his-father-was-more-like-60point7-million-nyt.html> (Accessed July 2022), Berzon, A, Rubin, R. (2016), ‘Trump’s Father Helped GOP Candidate With Numerous Loans’, *Wall Street Journal*, Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trumps-father-helped-gop-candidate-with-numerous-loans-1474656573> (Accessed July 2022)

¹⁶¹ This interview with a venture capitalist offers a good overview of this narrative type: Manning, B. (2017) ‘Personal Exceptionalism’, Available at: <https://www.briancmanning.com/blog/2017/10/15/personal-exceptionalism> (Accessed September 2022). This is a list of various examples of exceptionalism narratives: Spacey, J. (2020) ‘11 Examples of Exceptionalism’, *Simplifiable*, Available at: <https://simplifiable.com/en/exceptionalism> (Accessed September 2022)

context, more of an inner certainty and not coupled with a moral imperative to give back, but instead a determination to fulfil that greater potential no matter what. The self-made man archetype could be described as the central tenet of American mythology, that idea that anyone can make it in America no matter how humble their origin.¹⁶² It is a sort of rags to riches story and yet seems to find its way into the self-telling of men such as Trump, who come not from humble beginnings but from great privilege. The combination of these narratives seems to take only the sense of personal destiny from the redemptive self, coupling it with the awareness of superiority one finds in personal exceptionalism and transplanting the combined force of that narrative into a self-made man uber-archetype. Jeff Bezos might be described in this fashion, or Elon Musk, men who have made a great deal of money, whose story speaks of great personal struggle to achieve a goal they knew only they could achieve and having done so by sheer grit and determination. Despite the evidence of help, through parental loans, childhoods defined by privilege, and access to the kind of business advisors most people do not possess, these men are held up as examples of what one can, and should, achieve in America. In his constant battle for significance, for wealth and success at all costs, Trump also embodies these narratives. I argue that his obsessive focus on wealth and power is seen by his supporters as an undying drive toward the betterment of the self and as such is deemed laudable, aspirational, indicative of deeper purpose, and therefore something to be admired. To those from Gibson's position, however, the self-made man uber-archetype denotes the callous pursuit of wealth and power at any cost and is not a narrative to be admired and becomes absurd when coupled with the evidence of failure and ineptitude one finds looking into Trump's business dealings

¹⁶² See: Leducq, D. (2013). Self-made Man. In: Carayannis, E.G. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Creativity, Invention, Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. Springer, New York, NY. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-3858-8_229 Accessed September 2022)

and investments.¹⁶³ But this is not merely a man who lacks business acumen, this is a man who seems, in his public persona, to be vain, thin-skinned, crude, and callous. For his base I suspect the bombast and bluster arising from these character flaws are seen as a sign of wilful independence, a refusal to conform, a rejection of the norms, and therefore admirable, but to those in the Gibsonian position this behaviour denotes no less than a lack of character.

For McAdams (2019), Trump's public presentation of self arises from something more fundamental, the lack of a narrative identity, suggesting that Trump may in fact have failed to create a self at all. He refers to Donald Trump in these extraordinary terms:

"In McAdams (2016) and in a forthcoming study, I make the strong case that Donald J. Trump is, and has always been, the episodic man. Refusing to engage in introspection, retrospection, or prospection, Trump lives instead in the combative moment. As a highly extroverted and disagreeable social actor and a motivated agent who focuses nearly exclusively on narcissistic goals, Trump moves through life without any narrative understanding of himself whatsoever. All actor and agent, but no author. As such, he has no need to show personal consistency or moral accountability as he travels from one life scene to the next." (McAdams, 2019, p. 82)

¹⁶³ See: Murse, T. (2020) 'Why Donald Trump's Companies Went Bankrupt', *ThoughtCo*, Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/donald-trump-business-bankruptcies-4152019> (Accessed September 2022), Feinberg, A. (2016) 'A Complete List of Donald Trump's Business Disasters', *Gawker*, Available at: <https://www.gawker.com/a-complete-list-of-donald-trump-s-business-disasters-1764151188> (Accessed September 2022)

Detailing the notion of Trump as a man without selfhood, McAdams' profile is extensive, covering the Trump family's rise to business success, their credo, the convoluted machinations undertaken to squeeze profit from business that tripped elegantly along the line of what constitutes legality and Trump's growth as a young man in that environment, his rise as a businessman in his own right, his construction in the public eye and his rise to presidency.¹⁶⁴ All this balanced against McAdams' argument of Trump as a man without an internal narrative, a man who lives in the moment, regarding everything as a battle and every interaction as the foundation of a deal of some kind from which he must emerge the winner. To cement this image of Trump McAdams quotes his personal credo: "Man is the most vicious of all animals, and life is a series of battles ending in victory or defeat." (2020, p. 233).¹⁶⁵ This philosophy confirms Trump as a man who personifies traits of toxic masculinity such as domination and aggression. However, McAdams' study describes a man not only steeped in such notions of masculinity but driven to hide anything personal, or narratively inclined, about himself from public view. McAdams goes as far as to argue that the presidential nominee, in the summer of 2016, outright rejected the opportunity to present as more appealing to the American public by sharing his story to humanize himself. I argue this point, countering that Trump had already been telling his story, or the story he wanted the American public to think was his, over years of careful construction in the media and through his books, such as *The Art of The Deal* (1987) and *How to Get Rich* (2004). There was, in that case, no need to humanize, only a need to live up to that construction. This version of Trump is supported by McAdams' own words from the same chapter: "*In his own mind*, he [Trump] is more like a persona than a person, more like a primal force or superhero,

¹⁶⁴ Profile in full: McAdams, D. (2016) 'The Mind of Donald Trump', *The Atlantic*, June Issue, Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/the-mind-of-donald-trump/480771/> (Accessed March 2020)

¹⁶⁵ My use of McAdams' work here is to highlight an argument rather than align with it or use it as a part of methodology, it is a framework for my own argument regarding Trump's self-creation as an outcome of a warping of the redemptive-self narrative.

rather than a fully realized human being.” (2020, p. 234) I have suggested that an entanglement of the redemptive-self narrative, personal exceptionalism and the self-made man story so entrenched in American mythology (anyone can make it in America) create what I call an uber-archetype of the self-made man. I assert that Donald Trump is one of many in America who have internalised this narrative. For Trump it would appear to be foundational, his admiration for men such as Hitler and Putin indicates a leaning towards the idea of power as integral to this uber-archetypal man, not only gaining power but gaining power over others. Looking at his self-creation from this angle, one finds, far a man with *no* internal narrative, a man whose internal narrative was chosen for a specific purpose and rigidly adhered to. In other words, Trump’s narrative identity *is* a story, and that essential unreality informs not only his presence but his self-presentation, it *is* who he is. Trump’s obsession with and pursuit of fame seems to tie directly into this self-narrative, motivated by a desire to showcase the superiority he perceives within himself. It seems as though Trump thinks he deserves to be famous and much as deserves to be rich and as much as he deserves to be powerful.

Whether or not this impulse drives his highly public, media-savvy career path, the notion of his storied self as *being* a story acted out in his everyday life adds explanation and context to the impression Trump leaves on those who meet him. People such as Tom Griffin, a Scottish real estate owner who met with Trump to discuss a business deal in 2006 and “could not shake the impression that there was something unreal about him, that Trump was not quite a person.” (McAdams, 2020, p17) Of the meeting, Griffin had many vivid recollections, including the rigidity of Trump’s approach to the deal, his refusal to give way on any single aspect thereof, which aligns with McAdams assertion that Trump lives in the moment, treating each

deal as a battle to win. Griffin's most acute memory, however, was of this unreality he felt about Trump's presence:

"It was Donald Trump playing Donald Trump," Griffin observed. He was like an actor playing a role. Griffin recalls that Trump played the role really well. He had it down. This guy was good! He made all the right moves. He looked like Trump. Talked like Trump. Shouted, grimaced, and pounded the table— just like Trump does on TV. There is the old saying: "If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck." It really *was* Donald Trump, right? It had to be. He was just like the real thing. And yet he was always in character. Always enacting the persona. Never let his guard down. That is what made it so weird— that Trump remained the actor, through and through, for the entire lunch, reading his lines and sticking with the script, it seemed, deeply immersed in the role, as if he was *at one with* the role. As if he *was the role*, and *only* the role. He was so authentic, but fake, too. A truly authentic fake. (2020, p.18)

This experience of Donald Trump as an actor playing the role of Donald Trump as he has manipulated it to be portrayed in the media adds credence to the theory I have put forth and offers extraordinary insight into the drama of Donald Trump. A drama that most assuredly has the power to speak deeply to those entrenched in the same viewpoint, and to repel those who abhor the selfish drive to wealth and power, particularly when it comes devoid of warmth and essential humanity. Considering this perceived lack of humanity and warmth which Trump's detractors find so unappealing, one can point to the implications of the redefinition of moral or ethical

behaviour as delineated within the uber-archetype self-made man. The so-called mavericks who personify this narrative, the sovereign individual, have no time for what is morally acceptable or politically correct, they only have interest or use for the expedient.¹⁶⁶ This abandonment of altruism equates to a wholesale rejection of liberal values and therefore of humanitarian tendencies. There is, attendant to this, a contempt for the opinion of others and that rejects outside expertise, driven by a deeply-held certainty in their own intellectual prowess. From the Gibsonian position, behaviour of this nature provokes a kind of disbelieving horror, but how does this aspect of Trump's behaviour appeal to his supporters? For them, I suggest that Trump, warped through the prism of the heroic-exceptionalism narrative and the patriarchal and conservative values of their mythic-systems, must have looked like the answer to a problem. Imagine then this man running for president, acting in the way he does on television and refusing to apologise for his language, his tone, his opinions, for his tendency to speak plainly with contempt for expertise or science. No political rhetoric or double-speak and a clear mandate to exclude the Other, in every iteration that is anathema to the mythic-systems of this supporting base. Here is a man speaking as they speak, vocal in his complaints, complaints that align with their own (whether justified or not, or manufactured or not) and, unlike them, in a position to possibly change everything. To make their world theirs again. Take back what they feel is being taken from them by decades of progressive civil changes that have transformed the world beyond their understanding. As such, for them, he is not only the embodiment of the heroic-exceptionalism narrative figure, he represents an explicit permission to act upon and express long-held frustrations,

¹⁶⁶ I refer to the thesis derived from the book *The Sovereign Individual: Mastering the Transition to the Information Age* written in 1997 by William Rees Mogg and James Dale Davidson, wherein they suggest the wealthiest will withhold their money from taxation as they are not beholden to Government and equally will not be constrained by the law of the land: Mogg, W.R. and Davidson, J.D. (1997) *The Sovereign Individual: Mastering the Transition to the Information Age*. Simon and Schuster: New York

anger, and opinions they might previously have kept silent due to fear of reprisals. For Trump's supporters, he is their fulcrum for change and, perhaps even more importantly, their justification for not changing at all.

Another dimension, or answer, to the 'Why Trump?' conundrum might be found in Girard's mimetic desire, wherein mimesis "functions as a drive that patterns human behaviour." (Flood, 2000, p. 210). This type of mimesis relates to Aristotelian mimesis, which Halliwell (1998) describes as formal, and includes a category used to describe a sort of behavioural imitation seen in various works of philosophy, that of emulation as a means to become alike with someone. I have spoken several times in this thesis about the dynamics of the group and how individual interacts with tectonics lead to a desire to fit in, to connect by relating. Mimetic desire is yet another way of describing this process of self-creation driven by basal tectonics, that of similitude as a driver of kinship. Speaking of this drive, Flood (2000), says that it is driven by recognition of someone as an agent, or person with agency, and alike to oneself. When answering the question 'why Trump?', I argue that likeness is a significant driver, but the likeness driving this positioning is based on an inward-facing perspective, one that looks for a direct reflection of the self, and indicates a failure to recognise agency in those who do not exhibit such likeness, those who might be regarded as Other. This is a positioning that drives division by placing caveats on what can be considered human, meaning that anyone who falls outside of those caveats can be considered inhuman. The converse to this positioning is the outward-facing perspective, where likeness is filtered through a vector of alikeness and seeks only a recognition of agentic, AKA human, experience to recognise humanity, which opens the way to differentiation and progression by keeping the category of 'what is a human being' open to its widest capacity. Though such voters

are by no means the full picture of Trump's base, there were a large core group, that Clinton labelled deplorables whose behaviour is an example of this inward-facing perspective in action, a narrowing perspective that atrophies any desire to understand other experiences as being just as human as one's own.^{167 168} This narrowing perspective begins to occur via tectonic shaping in the narrative environment and then continues as the expression of these tectonics in daily life throttles encounters through which someone might be educated about the world beyond this perspective. In *Understanding, and the Consultation: A Fusion of Horizons*, Clark outlines why such encounters are vital to our development, stating: "Understanding happens when our present understanding or horizon is moved to a new understanding or horizon by an encounter. Thus the process of understanding is a 'fusion of horizons'. The old and the new horizon combining into something of living value." (2008, p58) In narratology, the fusion of horizons is dialectical, and pertains to the utilisation of what we already know when we are exposed to something new and how that knowledge can be actioned for the purposes of teaching and of analysis. Using Clark's description as a platform, I would like to propose an alternate usage for the term, one more directly applied to our perspectives and how they might transform after encounters with others. In chapter two I wrote about storied beings, about how our experience and personhood forms a narrative of the self. In this fashion, so too does our perspective arise, it is a narrative of all that we understand, all that we have experienced. It forms our horizon. Therefore, when speaking of an outward-facing perspective, I refer to a perspective whose outcome is a constant encounter with the horizons of others, leading to the

¹⁶⁷ Please see: Reilly, K. (2016) Read Hillary Clinton's 'Basket of Deplorables' Remarks About Donald Trump Supporters', *TIME*, Available at: <https://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/> (Accessed September 2022)

¹⁶⁸ Very useful and informative breakdown of the common factors seen in Trump's supporter base, including a desire for authoritarianism, which is usually triggered by a sense of threat (existential threat): Pettigrew, T. F. (2017) 'Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 5(1), pp 107-116.

formation of new horizons by a process of growth and understanding. As Clark puts it, “We are constantly breaking apart our understanding comparing it to another view or new experience and then putting it back together to produce a new understanding or horizon. (2008, p59) However, if someone is locked into a mythic-system, into a systematic positioning or viewpoint, their gaze acquires a tendency to turn inwards. This is the inward-facing perspective, the result of which, as I have described above, is a drive to seek and emulate only reflections of the self — an outcome further accelerated by the ways in which social media and the internet enable the compartmentalise of interactions into filter bubbles and echo chambers. This holds true for any position (including the Gibsonian). When this happens, the horizon becomes fixed in place, and though someone in a fixed horizon may think they are seeing clearly, they can only see that which is available to their restricted vision (a view aligning with what they *wanted* to see), and nothing beyond it, thus occluding significant dimensions of the landscape. So, when the question of ‘Why Trump’ is asked, or perhaps more accurately ‘How we did we not see this coming?’, the answer lies in that inward-facing perspective failing to observe the tidal shift happening in the occluded parts of the landscape. And though awareness of somewhat of the shape of this shift could be found amongst those sharing the Gibsonian position, full comprehension of the sheer breadth of such shifting came only with Trump’s election win and the subsequent loss of the defensive membrane, which became a clarion call to pay attention. At least for the time being.

Summary

Taking the notion of narrative breach and applying it to post truth, this chapter has explored the ways in which we might be protected from some of the narrative

outcomes thereof. Beginning with a breakdown of breach itself, what it is, how it is meant by Bruner and how it can be utilised to understand reactions to post-truth narratives themselves, this chapter moved to explore the notion of narrative defence mechanisms whose function is protective. Gibson's membrane and his FQ were the examples used to explore this notion, offering a comprehensive insight into their purpose and function, which is both to offer forewarning that the actual is not all it seems, and to allow for immediate awareness in the event of catastrophic breach. Such immediate awareness may be uncomfortable, but we rarely act from a position of comfort, and breaches in narrative are, more than anything else, an opportunity for action. To illustrate such a breach and why this is important, this chapter presented a case study of a breach pertinent to Gibson's experience, Donald Trump's candidacy and his subsequent winning of the 2016 Presidential election. This chapter then culminated in a study of Trump's base to show how mythic-systems, and therefore the post-truth tectonic, played a vital role in the overall picture of Trump's election win.

Conclusion

Much like this thesis, my conclusion comes in two parts, because I acknowledge that I cannot speak of the urgency of a thing without perhaps attempting to offer somewhat of a solution. Extant literature on post-truth certainly always seems to conclude by seeking to offer strategies and solutions for tackling the issues of post-truth they most specifically target, such as misinformation, disinformation, alternative facts, and fake news. These solutions often suggest the teaching of media literacy in schools and colleges etc, which is certainly an excellent foundation for tackling post-truth's effects in the media, as the earlier one begins to learn how to see the hallmarks of fake news and misinformation and to discern the correct places to look for properly researched information and news grounded in facts and evidence, the easier it is to avoid being fooled. There is in fact a small amount of evidence that strategizing to tackle such issues from an educational basis works to help the public differentiate between actual news and news curated to encourage obfuscation, division, disorder, and distortion.¹⁶⁹ But as I have demonstrated, these are far from the only challenges we face when it comes to post-truth. I have shown quite clearly that we are living in fictional times, and that our story-telling, our self-creation and our group creation, not to mention our means of communication, has all been drastically affected by the post-truth narrative shift and the subsequent atmosphere that shift has given rise to. It is demonstrable then, that the problems of post-truth are far more pervasive, that they run far deeper than their surface symptoms would seem to suggest, and thanks to the ever-growing diversity of the tools of the digital

¹⁶⁹ One such place is Finland, where anti-disinformation lessons are now being taught in high schools to equip students with a set of tools to help them determine whether what they are reading or seeing online comes from a trustworthy source or not. These media literacy courses are of course invaluable but have not prevented the gradual slide toward a more conservative political landscape, because they tackle only one symptom of the post-truth atmosphere: Frye, D. (2022) 'How Finland Fights Disinformation: Finland is a model for media literacy training at any age', *Psychology Today*, Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/misinformation-desk/202205/how-finland-fights-disinformation> (Accessed 9th May 2023), Horn, S., & Veermans, K. (2019). 'Critical thinking efficacy and transfer skills defend against 'fake news' at an international school in Finland.' *Journal of Research in International Education*, 18(1), pp 23-41

age, and the rise of AI, there is no doubt that those issues will grow ever thornier and more complicated to tackle. Therefore, these media literacy strategies, whilst useful, and an excellent start in the fight against post-truth narratives, cannot offer an over-arching solution to the problem. So, what might a solution look like for the deep and ever-growing issues that I have identified? Unfortunately, in all my studies and my research, I have found very little in the way of a definitive answer to that question. Moreover, I do not believe, having completed this research, that any one person *could* define a solution, as the problem itself is complex, multifaceted, and covers many differing areas of discipline and theory. Simply put, it would be hubris to suggest that one person might be capable of providing any manner of solution to such a large and complicated set of problems, and I am not interested in engaging with hubris. In fact, I would go so far as to declare that I consider myself unequal to such a task, and this is not a matter of a lack of confidence, it is more an excess thereof. I am incredibly confident that I am *not* equal to the task of offering a solution for these systemic issues, and that it would be foolish and irresponsible of me to suggest otherwise. What I seek to do with this thesis is raise the fact that the problem of post-truth is far deeper and broader than has thus far been noted and try to delineate as much of the real extent of the problem as I am able, or as I can see, because knowledge is indeed power and it is absolutely vital for any kind of change that we first have knowledge of why it is required and of the obstacles that might be faced to achieve it. My skill set lies within finding a pattern and highlighting it, nothing more, and I am more than at peace with that. This does not mean, however, that I believe it impossible to find a solution, even one triggered by the acts of individuals, though I am convinced in this instance that the problems would require several individuals working together toward the same end. That outcome requires an awareness of the problem, in which case, this thesis, and hopefully many other

works like it, which seek to identify other important aspects of this troubling narrative environment, may work as a catalyst to spark those with the proper set of skills to begin that concerted group effort towards solutions. Sadly however, it is pragmatic to note that we have many paths we could tread here, and I can see a situation wherein this culture war, this battle between mythic systems, between different manuals for being, life and living, leads to a salting of the earth for progressive ideals such as those espoused by King and other figures like him in other civil rights movements rather than any step toward a generally more inclusive world. However, I do believe that a win for progression is more than possible, even without that outcome of a group effort working toward strategies to tackle post-truth. My hope therein lies generationally speaking, from those who have grown up in this post-truth atmosphere and its resulting outcomes and are therefore able to view it with perhaps a touch more objectivity and pragmatism, or rather without the trappings of a nostalgia for bygone ages that can lead to considerable self-delusion. I have already mentioned in this thesis the startlingly effective activism of Gen Z. These young people and their willingness to sit within discomfort and demand change, demand equity, demand to be a voice for the unheard rather than be soothed by the platitudes of edited actuality, offers much hope for a future shift in the sociocultural agreements. I assert that in their online and offline behaviour we can gather significant evidence that they see through the synthesised space to the actuality beneath and want to act in its best interests, mainly because their daily lives are acted out within the very present effects of that actuality. I would not think to suggest that this is universal amongst Gen Z, or Gen Alpha, the generation after Gen Z, who grew up most explicitly affected by the digital age and its issues, but such changes have never required a universal accord, all they take is enough weight of opinion, of agreement, to form that critical mass which then rolls into powerful

tectonic change. Considering the multitude of actual world issues that Gen Z have been born into, the economic, climate, and political disasters they have become accustomed to witnessing and surviving, I suggest that the critical mass they represent might move faster and with greater urgency to enact change within their lifetimes, as they recognise the urgency of our situation and how little time we may have left as a species. This accelerated change would most assuredly be in keeping with the times, where the pace of technological progress moves fast enough to leave those who lived before the digital explosion feeling ever further left behind, that state of being which drives their determination to remould the world to a recognisable and familiar shape. Speaking of those left behind, the progenitors of those dying mythic systems, I return briefly here to that possibility of progressive ideas losing in the culture war. Having conducted this research and gained more insight into the philosophy and thought behind older mythic systems I state with some certainty that it will be most interesting to see the outcome should they emerge as the victor in this culture war. The dichotomy they will demand, that of the world remaining in a narrative shape that no longer suits its dimensions, speaks more to my mind of failure than success, and I imagine that, much like those who thought Trump would be their ultimate weapon only to find themselves dealing with an ever-spiralling PR disaster, those who win in this scenario may find themselves nursing a considerable case of buyer's remorse. To put it bluntly, their mythic systems comprise a series of inbuilt obsolescence's that no new and thriving system for the twenty-first century can be constructed around, and this is why they are dying out, because they are no longer fit for purpose. Perhaps such a win for the progenitors of these older mythic systems will allow them to finally acknowledge and accept this, or else it will not, and the last legacy of humanity will be the most monumental hoisting upon its own petard.

With that said, I now come to the second part of this conclusion, which follows slightly more conventional lines, wherein I summarise the findings of this thesis with regards to the post-truth atmosphere and its effects. One of the most prominent and dangerous of the effects that I have demonstrated within these pages is that the world on the ground, the actual, does not look as it is described variously online and throughout the synthesised space. Simply put, the narrative spread we see online does not indicate or follow the narrative spread on the ground, but it does successfully obscure it to a large extent. This is how we risk missing patterns indicative of narrative manipulation and the re-writing of actuality until a breach occurs large enough to expose the extent of the problem, by which time it is often too late to course correct to avoid the worst. As we have seen with Trump and Brexit, beneath the murkiness of the post-truth narrative atmosphere lies a battle for dominance between mythic-systems, between conflicting notions of what actuality should look like and whom it should most benefit. The unmooring and subsequent fracturing, dissemination and rewriting of narratives as they enter the synthesised space makes it far harder to see and understand possible implications, outcomes, and perspectives. This prevents the accumulation of a proper weight of concern until the only means of seeing that which is occluded becomes a catastrophic narrative breach. Through the lens of the Gibsonian positioning, I have shown that no matter your position, the experience of encountering breach follows a specific patterning: you know where you are, you expect to be in the reality you live within but then, out of nowhere, actuality presents itself as fundamentally different to your expectations. Immersion within the synthesised space enables any and all users of all positions to be corralled by edited reality and the occluded horizon of their own attendant mythic-system. So, it can be said that all positioning effectively obscures, obfuscates,

and muddies the actual from view. To look through the vector or prism of a position, as I have already pointed out, is to only see oneself. Is to *look* only for oneself. And the same applies narratively speaking. When a position seeks only a similarity inference from its narratives it offers only reflections of the accepted narratives back through the prism of said positioning so that, effectively, one sees nothing at all.

When one has only a proportion of the data available, one cannot make a judgement as to the shape of the situation, the form of the actual. And though narrative breach offers, by means of our inbuilt defence mechanisms, a means to see the shape of the actual and fight to either preserve the status quo or push for progress, it is not a foolproof solution. Thanks to the nature of the synthesised space and its effect on the public attention span, as soon as the problem appears to have been solved, it will be forgotten, and thus can occur all over again. Of course, as it re-occurs, it will continue to force narrative breaches and expose the shape of the actual, offering the chance to once again course correct, until it does not. Consider Brexit. Consider the loss of *Row vs Wade*. Consider Trump. Consider a Trump voted back into power and turned effective dictator, continuing the dismantling of the federal government and the protections for countless vulnerable citizens. All this and more becomes possible when our attention is distracted by narrative unmooring and manipulation in the synthesised space, and this means it is more important than ever to understand the power of narrative, the purpose of narrative, and the formative nature of narrative in our culture, our self-making and our sociality. Not only because narrative shifts move faster than riptides through the synthesised space, altering our narrative ecology as they go, but because they can be used, almost discretely, to persuade us to go against our own interests. Twisted and repurposed to reframe a story in its entirety so we no longer see the implications therein. For post-truth tectonics, this is a valuable and much-utilised weapon, aided and

magnified by the synthesised space, and so subtle that often we are ensnared and turned toward an unwanted narrative positioning before we understand exactly what is happening, or indeed that anything is happening at all.

Ultimately, I think this thesis establishes that when it comes to post-truth, our actuality has been weaponised, not only as a means of disseminating misinformation and disinformation but as a strategy to obfuscate the ways in which the meaning value of the actual has been delegitimized, and the actual itself hidden behind a wall of warped and addictive narrative smoke. In other words, the rhetoric of post-truth as a weapon purposely muddies the waters by creating an environment of narrative uncertainty, particularly in the synthesised space, but I wish to emphasise yet again that online spaces are not the problem, the ways in which they can and are being exploited are very much the problem. Particularly by way of exploiting the narrative unmooring that takes place within the synthesised space to further confound the matter of meaning. When no information can be trusted, where does one find reliable information? Put plainly, if you can make all information appear equivocal, enough to break public trust, then there is a strong enough argument to be made for removing access altogether. And *that* is the point. Taken to its conclusion, the post-truth narrative atmosphere, or the *response* that is gleaned from within it, appears to be an argument for the removal of the right to free information in all spaces, a position that serves only those outgoing mythic-systems so interested in preserving a status quo that no longer holds relevance in the 21st century. There is a tipping point, and I suggest that we are close to reaching it, particularly when one looks at recent events in the West, such as the overturning of *Roe vs Wade* and the rise of fascism. These choices resonate across the world, who look to the West (particularly to America) for what is no longer impermissible. In this case, understanding post-

truth as a narrative tectonic with a prevailing atmosphere of obfuscation, distortion, division, and confusion, rather than a political problem or a 'truth and facts' problem, presents a vital tool in the battle against this outcome, because it affords the narrative shift of post-truth an appropriate level of urgency. Once we comprehend how deleterious the post-truth narrative atmosphere is to our basic understanding of the times that we are in, we can understand that it is necessary to make changes to offset the issue, which of course means looking to our narratives and being certain that they are serving us. First and foremost, we should be making sure that the language used to describe events in the actual is clear and contextual, allowing no room for error or misunderstanding. This requires considerable effort at the outset and clear comprehension of the context and meaning of that which we wish to describe or speak about, but we can all benefit from such measured consideration. Language is important because it informs our meaning, so the language we use must serve meaning in the first instance, which again requires an acceptance and acknowledgement of the narrative foundation of the post-truth tectonic. Fundamentally, if this basis and its effect is left unacknowledged and unchecked there is a risk of losing more in the way of meaning, and as this thesis has demonstrated, without meaning, we have no means to make sense of anything.

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