

Language – Image – Meaning. The Deconstruction of Certainties from the Hollywood Seventies to *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) and *The Watcher* (2022).

Nunca se sabrá cómo hay que contar esto,  
si en primera persona o en segunda, usando la tercera del plural  
o inventando continuamente formas que no servirán de nada.

Si se pudiera decir: yo vieron subir la luna, o:  
nos me duele el fondo de los ojos, y sobre todo así:  
tú la mujer rubia eran las nubes que siguen corriendo  
delante de mis tus sus nuestros vuestros sus rostros. Qué diablos.

(Julio Cortázar, “Las babas del diablo”)

#### I. Intro: *Three Days of the Condor*

A nice, historic building in New York. A sign at the front door that reads *American Literary Historical Society*. Inside, we see an impressive machine automatically ‘reading’ and turning the pages of a large book. Simultaneously, we see a piece of paper composed of two columns coming out of a printer. The computer adds sentence after sentence. On the left side, there is a Chinese text, transcribed into the Latin alphabet; on the right side, apparently, we see the English translation. In an adjoining room, a group of people debates how a gunshot murder they have read about may have possibly taken place since there is no bullet to be found. A young, blond, jolly man who just arrived on a small motorbike, is being mildly rebuked by his boss, an elderly gentleman. The young man – Joseph Turner – immediately solves the puzzle about the mysterious gunshot murder: it must have been a bullet made of ice, conveniently melting away after the shot. He is, however, unable to solve a mystery of another kind. He tells his colleague and girlfriend Janice, a young American of Chinese origin, that there is this Chinese detective story, a book that does not sell well and that has, however, been translated into a handful of unusual languages: into Turkish, Arabic, Spanish, and Dutch, but not into French, Russian, or German. He asks Janice to translate a Chinese ideogram for

him. It means ‘heaven’, she replies, also ‘the best’, or ‘tops’. Joe, unsatisfied with the translation, insists there must be another meaning hidden in the sign. A while later, Joe leaves through the back door to order lunch for everyone. When he comes back, he finds all of his colleagues, including his girlfriend, his boss, the female receptionist, and the janitor brutally murdered by – not so mysterious – gunshots. Horrified, Turner flees. For the rest of the film, he will be on the run from his own employer, the CIA, trying to make sense as the codes he knew have been turned upside-down.

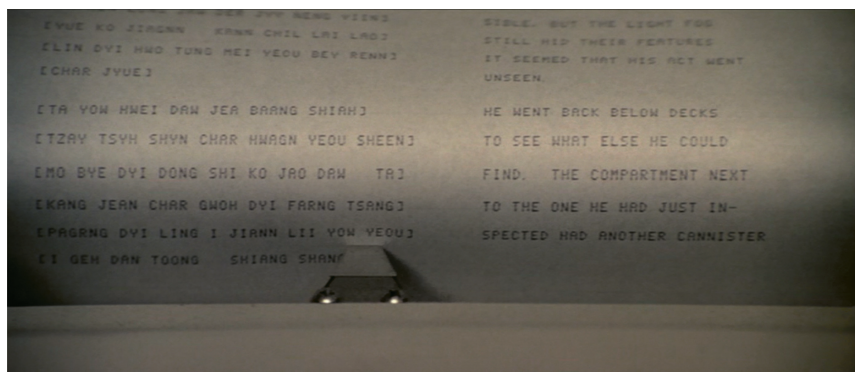


Figure 1 THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (1975): Translation in process.

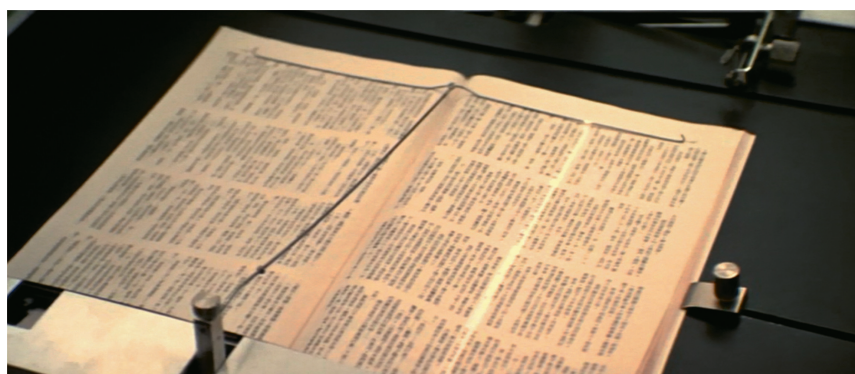


Figure 2 THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (1975): A machine ‘reading’.

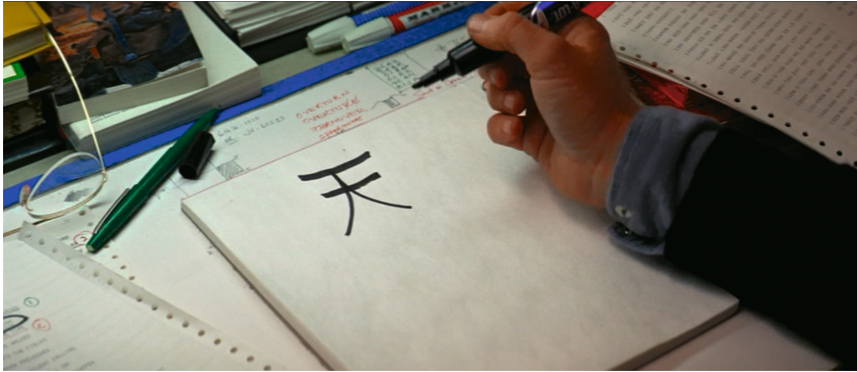


Figure 3 THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (1975): The mysterious ideogram.

What I just described are the first approx. 17 minutes of Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* from 1975, starring Robert Redford as protagonist Joseph Turner. *Three Days of the Condor* is not a phantastic film – although in 1976, it received the Edgar Allan Poe Award by the Mystery Writers of America association, which might give us a clue as to what extent its uncanny, paranoid over- and undertones always remain within a mysterious, inconclusive realm. It might therefore not be entirely coincidental that the opening scenes of the film – when we see the machines ‘reading’ and translating a large number of books as well as Joe’s and Janice’s conversation about the Chinese ideogram and its potentially ambivalent meaning – bear certain similarities with two phantastic short stories from Argentina. The first of them will play a bigger part again later on in this article, when we will take a look at the films *The conversation* and *La mujer sin cabeza*: Julio Cortázar’s short story “Las babas del diablo” (“The Devil’s Drivel”).<sup>1</sup> This *cuento* begins with the narrator’s reflection about how stories can be told and what role machines like a typewriter or a camera play in the process of creating, recording, and remembering a story. He wonders how much a machine knows about the other; knowledge a human being might never acquire. *Three Days of the Condor* also deals with the fascinating, yet slightly uncanny autonomy of computers, taking over the reading, analyzing and translation process after having received a few orders from a human being. The implicit issue dealt with both in

1 Cf. Julio Cortázar: „Las babas del diablo” (1959), in: id.: *Las armas secretas*, ed. by Susana Jakfalvi, Madrid 2022, pp. 115–129.

Cortázar's story and in Pollack's film is a certain uneasiness towards the ideal of correct, unambiguous interpretation – an ideal that has been or will be shattered dramatically over the course of the respective stories. The other fantastic short story *Three Days of the Condor* seems to be an implicit successor of, is Jorge Luis Borges' cuento "El Jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" ("The Garden of Forking Paths") from 1941.<sup>2</sup> This hybrid story oscillates between spy story and fantastic narrative. During the First World War, Dr. Yu Tsun, chair of English at the German University in Tsingtao, works as spy for Germany. He has to deliver a message before an Irish man working for the British gets to him and kills him. He travels to a city where he meets Stephen Albert, an elderly man dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the works of one of Tsu Yuns ancestors, Ts'ui Pên, who has created a labyrinth consisting of books and texts designed to hide the mystery of time. The forking paths are different time lines in different possible futures, leading to a possibly endless story where the protagonist can die in one chapter and be alive in the other. Like Borges' complex story, *Three Days of the Condor* too alludes to the combination of mysterious texts, hidden messages, and ambivalent translation and decoding processes. In both narratives, someone is being chased and in need to decode a riddle, realizing, finally, that there are different 'truths' to be applied to their situation. The labyrinth Joe Turner is caught in and which he step by step reveals, is constituted by the 'forking paths' of ambivalent government institutions and hidden groups within these institutions, operating beyond the public, and communicating via a complicated braid of codes and linguistic signs. The mystery Turner has gotten himself into is conveyed through the potential ambiguity of a Chinese ideogram, which works as a metaphor for the ambiguity of his own sign system and which also lies at the heart of Borges's story. *Three Days of the Condor* is hence, I would argue, a harbinger to a specific genealogy of phantastic films, which are characterized by their unusual relationship to the ambivalence of language and (democratic) politics. I chose it as an entrée to my article because *Three Days of the Condor* conveys a profound discomfort and anxiety in the face of an omnipresent yet not openly visible and hard to prove threat to the democratic system. *Three Days of the Condor* stands out from thematically similar films made in the post-Watergate and late-phase Vietnam era that feature a paranoid plot

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2 Cf. Jorge Luis Borges: „El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" (1941), in: *Ficciones* (1944), in: id.: *Obras completas*, ed. by María Kodama, Buenos Aires 2005, pp. 506–514.



emerging from a deep distrust regarding government agencies such as the CIA or the FBI.<sup>3</sup> Unlike productions like *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), or *Executive Action* (David Miller, 1973), *Three Days of the Condor* prominently features questions of the contingency and instability of language, communication, and signs.<sup>4</sup> It is about bestowing apparently unambiguous terms or facts with latent connotative significations and revealing concealed relationships between different signifiers, hence twisting and destabilizing their conventional meaning, and, along with this, the political order.

After the opening sequences, when the *American Literary Historical Society* has been hit, it is gradually revealed that Turner and his colleagues are a group of “book worms”<sup>5</sup> who work for a peculiar branch of the CIA. They are in charge of reading “everything that’s published in the world”<sup>6</sup>: adventurous novels, journals... They feed computers with every scheme, plot, trick, and code they read about, having the machine cross-referencing them with actual CIA plans and operations. It is Turner’s job to screen the stories and reports he reads for potential leaks and possible new ideas for future operations. While doing so, one day he apparently comes across the mysterious Chinese ideogram which he believes could be key to the deciphering of some conspiracy he is not yet able to point his finger on. All he has are disparate pieces of information, like the languages the Chinese detective story has been translated to (and to which it has not). The implicit spectator does not have any more insight into this riddle than Joe has – on the contrary, we basically join the story *in medias res*, when Joe has already begun to try and put some pieces of the puzzle together.

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3 As Pollack stated in an interview about *Three Days of the Condor*: “I tried to deal, as much as I could, with trust and suspicion, paranoia, which I think is happening in this country, when every institution I grew up believing sacrosanct is now beginning to crumble.” Quoted after Jonathan Kirshner: *Hollywood’s Last Golden Age. Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America*, Ithaca 2013, p. 155. For a detailed description of how the Nixon era shapes, or, as he himself puts it, “haunts” (133) the seventies film, see *ibid.*, pp. 133–165.

4 As Drügh and Mergenthaler remark, the realm of language here is reversed – or subverted – in the manner that it is not fictional texts, e.g. crime fiction, that forms the associations the readers or viewers have regarding the sphere of the CIA here. It is, rather, the CIA that trawls popular culture in the search for useful material. Cf. Heinz J. Drügh, Volker Mergenthaler: „Ästhetik des Spionagefilms. Überlegungen zu einem Genre“, in: *id.* (eds.): *Ich ist ein Agent. Ästhetische und Politische Aspekte des Spionagefilms*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 7–50, p. 7.

5 Sydney Pollack: *Three Days of the Condor*, USA 1975, 00:25:17.

6 *Ibid.*, 00:40:28.

We are thus forced to join the mystery with even less information, trying to make sense of the terrible and seemingly unrelated events to come. The ideogram scene opens the door into a strange, nightmarish world where signs could lose their conventional connotations at any time. For the rest of the film, Turner will not be able to close that door and return to his previous, stable sign system. Together with the spectator, he is captured in a paranoid, yet deadly real world that requires the subject to step out of their traditional sign system, to form new associations and decode new meanings in order to make sense of the things happening around them. The ideogram has opened Pandora's box, which, in this case, holds a bunch of new meanings and concealed semantics. When Joe asks Janice about the meaning of the sign, he hopes for a wider range of possible significations and distrusts her ability to fully decode it:

JANICE. Look at this face. Could I be wrong about an ideogram?

JOE (chuckling). It's a great face. But it has never been to China.<sup>7</sup>

Janice's face, her Asian traits, might refer to her ability to master the Chinese language, but her outer appearance is misleading as she is an American who is, as Joe's remark implies, essentially alienated to the culture of her ancestors. He therefore continues to believe that there is still some other, hidden signification to the sign. It is never revealed if he is right or not. In the end, it turns out that he *was* right about a conspiracy taking place. This conspiracy, however, is not one happening outside the USA with some criminal external entity behind it. It is rather a scandal happening *inside* the CIA, proving there is an *imperium in imperio* at work, carrying out its own criminal plots for a supposed 'greater good'. The matter at stake is the procuring and securing of US-American dominance over countries in possession of oil fields – probably via the invasion of said countries. This is why the apparently inconspicuous Chinese detective story had been translated into Arabic, Turkish, Spanish and Dutch, but not into German, Russian, and French. Further details are, however, never revealed to the spectator. Turner, so it seems, accidentally stumbled across the scheme that turns out to have been taken out more or less unofficially by a small group within the CIA. The leader of this group, Leonard Atwood, Deputy Director of Operations for the CIA's Middle East division, hence ordered an Alsatian hitman to take out Joe Turner and the other book worms.

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7 Ibid., 00:06:00-00:06:07.

Both the idyllic atmosphere inside of the house where this peculiar CIA division works, as the profound ambiguity of meaning, signification, and interpretation apparent in the exposition sequence are conversely mirrored by the all too definite and unequivocal shooting sequence. One group member after another fall victim to the precise and inescapable gunfire. The deadly accuracy of the gun shots is not at all ambiguous, but it is unmistakably related to the paradigm ‘text – code – translation – signification’: We directly witness how the receptionist, the janitor, the boss, and the two male colleagues are brutally shot. We see the machine gun fire; we see them bleed and fall. At the moment when Janice is murdered, however, the camera pans to the right and focuses on the printer. We hear the shots *hors-champs*. The printer still prints, however now, he only prints out the English translation. The left column with the transcribed Chinese text is missing. The killings provoke a major rupture leaving Turner with profound anxiety; Janice’s death, however, marks a void in the processes of the interpretation and decoding. The original – if we can even speak of such, has the Chinese text already been transcribed into the Latin alphabet – is missing; a blank space has taken its place and all we are left with is a contingent copy whose faithfulness we cannot determine. The stable, and, as it were, transcendental element of the deciphering process has been cut off and what remains is an empty translation without original. The blank spaces in the paper column correspond to the inexplicable blanks that open up in front of Joe Turner from the very moment he tries to solve this riddle: formerly easy to categorize political institutions of the democratic state, such as the CIA, cannot be trusted anymore. They become ambiguous blank spaces to which traditional code and belief systems are no longer applicable.

*Three Days of the Condor* expresses a rapid loss of trust in constitutional democracy, including the press. At the end of the film, Turner meets Higgins, his ambivalent Deputy Director. Turner tells him he just gave the details of the intrigue and the murder of his colleagues to *The New York Times*. Higgins asks him how he can be sure the *Times* will print the story. The film ends here, leaving the implicit spectator with the awkward feeling that a corrupted and/or frightened press might suppress the scandal after all and thereby provoke a later assassination of Turner – the only man who not only knows the truth but is willing to tell it. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at how another film of the 1970s highlights the connection between paranoia, language, codes, signs, and the phantasmatic breakup of previous securities: Francis Ford Coppola’s

*The Conversation* (1974). This film not only has its origins in the realm of the literary fantastic – it also features a phantasmatic storyline that spells out how the drifting apart of signifier and signified, of sound, sight, and interpretation points to a deeper crisis of trust, community, and liberty in the post-Watergate democratic polity. First, however, let us dive a bit into the theoretical frame of the fantastic and of the linguistic system we are dealing with here.

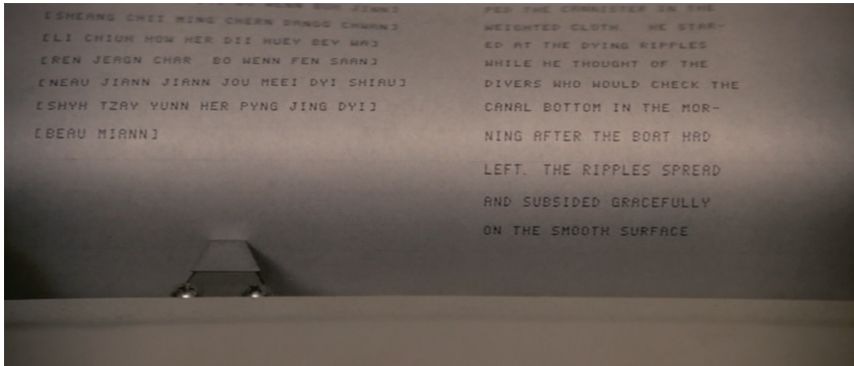


Figure 4 *THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR* (1975): Void left by Janice's death.

## II. Catalyst: *The Conversation*, or, How Shattered Signs Shape the Fantastic

If we follow Todorov's definition from 1970, a fantastic story is characterized primarily by the hesitation the (implicit) reader feels regarding the nature of the presented events. In a fairytale, marvelous creatures like fairies or talking animals are part of the setting. Their existence is neither questioned nor does the implicit reader perceive the presented world as a world similar to their own, following the same laws of physics and nature. If, however, the reader is presented with a world similar to their own where, suddenly, events take place which do not seem to have a natural explanation, said hesitation can emerge. We wonder if the events we read about have a natural cause – for instance, staged spook, hallucinations or dreams –, or if the events have a supernatural cause: the actual presence of ghosts, for example. As long as the real nature of the strange event is not cleared up, the implicit reader remains within a state of hesitation. Stories which oscillate between the two possibilities without ever clarifying how the events presented are to be categorized, belong, for Todorov, to the

pure fantastic (*fantastique pur*). Stories where the supernatural or natural character of the events is revealed at some point, belong to either the category of the fantastic-marvelous (*fantastique-merveilleux*) or to the category of the fantastic-uncanny (*fantastique-étrange*).<sup>8</sup>

One of the lesser known and rarely cited passages of Todorov's famous *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* is a paragraph where he talks about the ambivalent connections between literature and language. According to Todorov, one of the main functions of literature in general is to bypass and destroy "the metaphysics inherent in all language. The nature of literary discourse is to *go beyond* [...]; literature is a kind of murderous weapon by which language commits suicide."<sup>9</sup> Fantastic literature is, in turn, a "quintessence of literature"; "on every page [it] subverts linguistic categorizations"<sup>10</sup>. The dialectics between real and unreal inherent to all literature, come to its peak in the genre of the fantastic because it "questions precisely the existence of an irreducible opposition between real and unreal."<sup>11</sup> "[B]y combatting the metaphysics of everyday language", Todorov states, "it [the fantastic] gives that language life; it must start from language, even if only to reject it."<sup>12</sup> Michail Bakhtin, too, made an interesting case for the critical potential of fantastic narratives within certain linguistic genre structures when he stated that the Menippean satire was such a privileged organon of expressing (social) critique precisely because "its bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic [...], serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it."<sup>13</sup> To criticize the discourses and "truths" of an epoch by means of a subversion of language, can therefore be an important role of the fantastic – even if one defines it in broad terms, as Bakhtin does here. In audiovisual narratives, however, this capacity can develop an even greater impact, as they extend the potential

8 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970, pp. 46–62.

9 Tzvetan Todorov: "The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (1970)", in: David Sandner (ed.): *Fantastic Literature. A Critical Reader*, Westport (CT) 2004, pp. 135–143, p. 137 (emphasis in the original).

10 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 Mikhail Bakhtin: "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works (1963)", in: David Sandner (ed.): *Fantastic Literature. A Critical Reader*, Westport (CT) 2004, pp. 116–132, p. 118 (emphasis in the original).

subversion of language – of linguistic signs – from the domain of written and spoken language to the realm of the visual and the audible.

My hypothesis is that postmodern cinematographic productions, which exhibit elements of the phantastic are often characterized by a specific handling of language as a semiotic system. They strive to destroy the, as Todorov put it, metaphysics of language and they do so by testing, challenging, or shattering the linguistic sign as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure. Audiovisual fantastic entertainment seems ideal for this undertaking as films and series bring the different sensual aspects of the sign, namely sound, image, and concepts – spoken or written signifiers – together. They are therefore able to expose the always already arbitrary relationship between signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept) in its ontological instability. The potential result is the falling-apart of formerly stable codes, relations, and certainties. One key difference to some Avantgarde-films, which may also play aesthetically with the breakdown of, for example, visual conventions like *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), is that the shattering of semiotic certainties in the field of the political is more disturbing if it happens casually and against the background of an otherwise 'normal', even naturalistic world. If a narrative starts out appearing rather conventional, the unexpected, unsettling *fissure* is more effective, as Roger Caillois himself stated in his *Anthologie du fantastique*:

Tout semble comme aujourd'hui et comme hier : tranquille, banal, sans rien d'insolite, et voici que lentement s'insinue ou que soudain se déploie l'inadmissible.<sup>14</sup>

In a world where the mysterious is not expected to take place, the fissure producing an ontological rupture and uncertainty, evokes anxiety or at least uneasiness:

Cependant dans les lois immuables de l'univers quotidien, une fissure s'est produite, minuscule, imperceptible, douteuse, suffisante cependant pour livrer passage à l'effroyable.<sup>15</sup>

In many audiovisual narratives of the last decades, plots with latent or manifest fantastic elements mingle with fissures on the levels

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14 Roger Caillois: *Anthologie du fantastique*, Paris 1966, p. 11. Translation J.B.: "Everything seems to be the same as it was yesterday and today: quiet, banal, with nothing unusual about it, and then the inadmissible slowly creeps in or suddenly unfolds."

15 Ibid., p. 10. Translation J.B.: "However, in the immutable laws of the everyday universe, a crack has appeared, tiny, imperceptible, dubious, sufficient however to give way to the appalling."



of communication, language, sight and sound. They hereby produce ontological ruptures which help conflicts concealed in the official discourse come to the surface in a distorted or shifted way. Hidden or repressed conflicts can hence, I would argue, be articulated in certain audiovisual fantastic narratives by means of divesting the linguistic sign and exposing it in its arbitrariness. This divesting of the sign has, in turn, a political semantics. In order to unfold the socio-political dimension of the linguistic sign and its constituents, signifier and signified, let's have a closer look on Saussure's theory of the sign and the extent to which parts of it are influenced by cultural, economic, and political developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Saussure: Value and Democracy

A central feature around which Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic system evolves is the arbitrariness of the sign. Meaning arises exclusively inherent to the system and has to be defined relationally. Objects of reference outside of language are insignificant for the structure constituting language:

[...] la langue est un système de pures valeurs que rien ne détermine en dehors de l'état momentané de ses termes. [...] nous venons de voir qu'en linguistique les données naturelles n'ont aucune place.<sup>16</sup>

Meaning, for Saussure, is thus accompanied by the notion of *valeur* (value). The value of a linguistic entity is constituted solely by the relations these entities have to one another. The connections between the linguistic entities and extralinguistic reality is maintained by convention, that is, by the operating of language in the social world. This is a major difference to the medieval approach of the *modistae*, for instance, who saw language as a reflection of the things existent in extralinguistic reality.<sup>17</sup> Saussure, in turn, has a strong sensitivity for the arbitrariness of the sign and he combines it with notions he borrows from contemporary economy, such as the *valeur*: a coin does not receive its value from the metal it is made

16 Ferdinand de Saussure: *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. by Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, Geneva 2005, p. 88. Translation J.B.: "[...] language is a system of pure values that nothing determines apart from the momentary state of its terms. [...] We have just seen that natural data have no place in linguistics."

17 Cf. Angela Beuerle: *Sprachdenken im Mittelalter. Ein Vergleich mit der Moderne*, Berlin/New York 2010.

of, but, rather, from a consensus over its value in relation to other coins of the same or of another country's currency and to other goods (e.g. how much bread I can buy for a five-franc piece). The general economic principals of comparability and exchangeability are now transferred to the linguistic system<sup>18</sup> – but without a stable, fix value like the gold value (which, even in economy is not necessarily experienced as guarantor of stability either). The only stable relation therefore stems from a social consensus accepting a signifier in its relation to a certain signified. As Roland Barthes states in his short essay on Saussure and democracy:

Le petit drame de Saussure, c'est que, contrairement aux conservateurs superbes, il n'a confiance ni dans le Signe ni dans l'Or : il voit bien que le rattachement du papier à l'or, du signifiant au signifié, est mobile, précaire ; rien ne le garantit ; il est offert aux vicissitudes du temps, de l'Histoire. Dans son idée de la signification, Saussure en est, au fond, au point de la crise monétaire actuelle : l'or et son substitut factice, le dollar, s'effondrent : on rêve d'un système où les monnaies se tiendraient entre elles, sans référence à un étalon naturel [...]. Finalement, ce système de soutien, Saussure [...] l'a trouvé. Partant de la constatation que la phrase fonctionne autrement que par la simple juxtaposition, le long de la chaîne parlée, de signes fermés sur eux-mêmes, et qu'il faut autre chose pour que le langage "prenne", il découvre *la valeur* : il peut alors sortir de l'impasse de la signification : le rapport au signifié (à l'or) étant incertain, fragile, le système entier (de la langue, de la monnaie) se stabilise par la tenue des signifiants entre eux (des monnaies entre elles).<sup>19</sup>

18 For a more detailed discussion, see for instance Christine Bierbach: *Sprache als "fait social". Die linguistische Theorie F. de Saussure's und ihr Verhältnis zu den positivistischen Sozialwissenschaften*, Tübingen 1978, or Dirk Delabastita: *There's a Double Tongue. An Investigation into the Translation of Shakespeare's Wordplay, with Special Reference to Hamlet*, Amsterdam/Atlanta 1993.

19 Roland Barthes: "Saussure, le signe et la démocratie", in: id.: *L'aventure sémiologique*, Paris 1985, pp. 221–226, p. 224. (emphasis J.B.) Translation J.B.: "Saussure's little tragedy is that, unlike the superb conservatives, he has no confidence in either the Sign or the Gold: he clearly sees that the connection between paper and gold, between signifier and signified, is mobile, precarious; nothing guarantees it; it is open to the vicissitudes of time, of History. In his idea of signification, Saussure is basically at the point of the current monetary crisis: gold and its dummy substitute, the dollar, are collapsing; we dream of a system where currencies would support each other, without reference to a natural standard [...]. In the end, Saussure [...] found this support system. Starting from the observation that the sentence functions differently from the simple juxtaposition, along the spoken chain, of signs closed in on themselves, and that something else is needed for language to "take hold", he discovers value: he can then break the deadlock of signification: the relationship to the signified (to gold) being uncertain, fragile, the entire system (of language, of money) is stabilized by the holding of signifiers together (of money together)."

The relationships between signifiers are, as Barthes argues, primarily constituted on behalf of analogies – their value is determined via analogous relations:

Ne dites pas, comme tout le monde, que “magasinier” vient de “magasin”; dites plutôt que “magasin/magasinier” a été formé sur le modèle de “prison/prisonnier”. [...] contentez-vous de placer le mot dans configuration de termes voisins, dans un réseau de rapports [...].<sup>20</sup>

If it has been noticeable so far that Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* is an endeavor with significant roots in the social and economic conditions of its time,<sup>21</sup> it is only logical that Barthes goes even one step further. He shows that Saussure’s theory of the sign is also profoundly political and, in the wake of the French Revolution(s) and the final abolition of the Ancien Régime, thoroughly inspired by democratic ideals. According to Barthes, the primacy of analogy over derivation and “génétisme”<sup>22</sup>, corresponds to the primacy of a horizontal, democratic relationship among citizens, instead of a vertical – hierarchical – relationship between a sovereign ruler and their people. The linguistic contract mimics, Barthes suggests, the *contrat social*. Words are no longer affiliated by a same origin; they are, rather, fellow citizens:

La langue, dans son devenir même, n’est plus une seigneurie mais une démocratie : les droit et les devoirs des mots (qui forme en somme leur sens) sont limités par la coexistence, la cohabitation d’individus égaux.<sup>23</sup>

The linguistic sign with arbitrariness as its main characteristic, the conclusion that only a (trans-generational) social pact guarantees the value of linguistic entities and that those values are, like in the world of economics, prey to change, might already be proof enough that the semiotic system

20 Ibid., p. 222. Translation J.B.: “Don’t say, as everyone else does, that “magasinier” comes from “magasin”; rather, say that “magasin/magasinier” was formed on the model of “prison/prisonnier”. [...] Simply place the word in a configuration of neighboring terms, in a network of relationships [...].”

21 Besides of the borrowing the notion of value from economics, Barthes also mentions connections between Saussure’s theory and Gabriel Tarde’s roughly contemporaneous theory of mimesis. This also implies a political and hierarchical dimension as classes who did not belong to the bourgeoisie could use fashion to mimic members of the bourgeoisie. If they dressed the same, social distinctions were harder to maintain. Cf. *ibid.*

22 Ibid., p. 221.

23 Ibid. Translation J.B.: “Language, in its very becoming, is no longer a seignior but a democracy: the rights and duties of words (which in short form their meaning) are limited by the coexistence, the co-existence of equal individuals.”

of language is a system prone to instability. Barthes's daring but also compelling hypothesis, however, would add the fickleness of democracy to that of the linguistic social pact and conventionally assigned values. The metaphysics inherent to language, to quote Todorov again, would then extend to the metaphysics of democracy.

Metaphysics, or, better yet, transcendence and democracy are by no means antipodes – to the contrary. There are religious transcendental categories, which, according to Marcel Gauchet, for instance, are – although hardly successfully – transcended from God to God and King in the monarchy and to the people in the democratic Republic. He sees modern societies as being characterized by a transcendental void.<sup>24</sup> This void is, however, filled in different ways by (secular) strategies of legitimation, which can in turn take on latent religious undertones. Examples for the creation of credentials in democratic states are – sometimes contradictory – signifiers like freedom, the dignity of man, tradition, progress, nature, history. Democracy is not immune to creating fetishisms, taboos, myths and elevating them to transcendental entities to be found, for example, in narrations, pictures, performances etc.<sup>25</sup> Language would, then, be another factor in this network of transcendental entities, and Saussure's theory would work, if we follow Barthes, at least in part as an additional pillar on which the democratic system could base its legitimation.<sup>26</sup> Values assigned to the linguistic entities can, however, fall apart and forfeit their legitimation; the system thus remains susceptible to disruption. In this, it mirrors the liability of its counterpart, the democratic order. With the term 'disruption' or *rupture* in mind, we can now return to our (latent) fantastic narratives and the crises they convey via the breakdown of different, sensual parts of the linguistic sign: crises, which often lie at the heart of the *res publica*. In the following audiovisual narratives, Cailllois' *rupture* will take place predominantly on the level of language, sound, and image,

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24 Cf. Marcel Gauchet: *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris 1985.

25 Cf. Hans Vorländer: "Demokratie und Transzendenz. Politische Ordnungen zwischen Autonomiebehauptungen und Unverfügbarkeitspraktiken", in: id. (ed.): *Demokratie und Transzendenz. Die Begründung politischer Ordnungen*, Bielefeld 2013, pp. 11–37, here esp. p. 18–20.

26 A remark by Beuerle would sustain this notion, as she states that, in Saussure's methodology, language becomes equally comparable to other sociocultural systems and institutions from the realms of politics, economics, or ethnology. Cf. Beuerle: *Sprachdenken im Mittelalter*, p. 314.

and of the dissociation of the sign, provoking ontological – and political – instability.

### Better Call Caul

*Three Days of the Condor*, the film I started with, is a film with a mystery that sticks out by the extraordinary weight it lays on the crumbling of translation, interpretation, and semantics and by exposing the visual materiality of the sign in its radical opacity. A – not chronological but topical – middle stage between the *Condor* and the post-millennium productions two examples of which we will see later on,<sup>27</sup> is Francis Ford Coppola's phantasmatic film *The Conversation* (1974).<sup>28</sup> Here, the anxiety in face of the state and its institutions is going into a state of inner migration, so to speak. Paranoia retreats into the realm of the private – at least on the surface, as the action is built implicitly around the Watergate scandal causing president Richard Nixon to resign in 1974.<sup>29</sup> Protagonist Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) has the order to intercept a young couple meeting at the Union Square in San Francisco. Caul is a well-known surveillance expert with a private firm and a traumatic past which is partly revealed over the turn of the film.<sup>30</sup> His client is the director of a company who apparently wants him to spy on his wife and her lover. Together with several freelance colleagues, he stages an elaborate wire-tapping scenario, intercepting the couple from different positions and angles using directional

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27 See also the "Opening remarks" as well as many of the articles of this volume.

28 Francis Ford Coppola: *The Conversation*, USA 1974. Regarding the role of political anxiety in both Coppola's and Pollack's films, Ian Scott states: "Francis Ford Coppola's subtler *The Conversation* (1974) and Sidney [sic.!] Pollack's tense *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) brought social dislocation, political anxieties and cultural terror to the fore in films that sat uneasily with traditional Hollywood notions of linear narratives, satisfactory resolutions and traditional heroic protagonists." *American Politics in Hollywood Film. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, Edinburgh 2011, p. 137.

29 At the Tar Hotel, Harry switches on the TV after he has – or has not – heard the screaming and seen the bloody handprint at the door separating his balcony from the one of adjoining room. The reporter on the TV screen says information was received that Nixon would not deliver the State of the Union message in person, and asks why that might be.

30 When Harry was still in New York, he somehow managed to wire-tapped private conversations taking place on a small boat in a lake. The politician whose career was damaged by the contents of the recording consequently believed his closest employee to have revealed the information and had him, his wife and his child murdered.

microphones as well as, like he comments later, conventional tailing. The eponymous, seemingly harmless conversation leads Harry to believe that the couple is in danger of being murdered by the cuckold. He follows them to a hotel where, according to the intercepted conversation, they were supposed to meet the next Sunday. He rents the adjoining room and directs a microphone under the sink through the wall into the room in question. Soon, Harry overhears a loud dispute between the young woman and his client. Fearing that the director is going to murder her, he rushes out on the balcony, just in time to see a silhouette pressed against the milky partition wall separating the two balconies. A second later, we hear a loud scream, a body seems to be thrown against the wall, blood splashes. Freaked out, Harry returns to his room, shuts the curtains, turns on the TV, and crouches on the bed, trying to rid his mind of the violent images he might – or might not – have seen. The next morning, he makes his way into the other room and examines it: it looks perfectly clean; no traces, no evidence of a murder. When he goes into the bathroom and flushes the toilet, however, a huge amount of blood uncannily gushes out of the toilet bowl. Horrified, Harry flees the hotel. A bit later, he sees the young woman, whom he expected to be victim of the crime, sitting very much alive at the backseat of a limousine. Simultaneously, a newspaper article reports that the director – his client – has been killed in a car accident. Harry, however, concludes now that he misinterpreted the recordings. Who was in danger of being murdered was not the couple but the director himself, who apparently fell victim to a conspiracy led by his assistant, his wife, and her lover. Back in his flat, a bewildered Harry plays the saxophone. Suddenly, the telephone rings and an anonymous caller tells him, “we know that you know, Mr. Caul. We’ll be listening to you.” The caller then plays him a recording with his saxophone performance from a few seconds ago. Then he hangs up. During the last roughly six minutes of the film, we see Harry searching his flat for the listening device. He starts out with the walls, the telephone receiver, the painting, the lamp, the curtains... As he cannot find anything, he proceeds with the wooden floor panels and the wallpaper. In the end, he sits in a completely ravaged, de-constructed apartment, playing once again the saxophone.





Figure 5 THE CONVERSATION (1974): Opening scene at the Union Square.



Figure 6 THE CONVERSATION (1974): The couple seen through a camera.



Figure 7 THE CONVERSATION (1974): When Harry flushes the toilet ...



Figure 8 THE CONVERSATION (1974): ... blood spills out of the bowl.



Figure 9 THE CONVERSATION (1974): Harry searches for the bug ...



Figure 10 THE CONVERSATION (1974):... but his search remains inconclusive.

The opening scene of *The Conversation* is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and most memorable in film history. It starts with a panorama shot over the Union Square. The camera slowly zooms in. In the front part on the left, we see a mime walking towards, behind or directly next to several passers-by crossing the square, imitating and exaggerating their gait. From a distance, we hear a jazz duo singing and shouting slightly dissonantly; then an effervescent, almost frantic trumpet. The mime moves a

bit to the music, then he starts tottering around and goes back to mimicking the passers-by. The music stops. Now, we hear the garbled sound for the first time that will accompany us through the sequence: it sounds like language being transmitted over a voice distorter, making it illegible. In the background, another song starts: this time the female singer performs “When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin’ along”. As it gets louder, it sounds a bit improvised and dissonant, losing its soothing quality. A little later, during the intercepted conversation, the Red Robin song will be sung by the young woman tailed and bugged by Caul. The recording where she sings the chorus is subsequently one of the sound pieces that are played over and over again during the course of the story. This seems hardly accidental as the lyrics are an ideal example of what Roman Jakobson called the poetic function. The word ‘robin’ contains the word ‘rob’ which becomes ‘bob’, which works here as the verb ‘to bob’. It is repeated three times – “bob-bob-bobbin” –, thus imitating, like the mime does, the hopping of the little bird when it moves on the ground. The alliterations and sound repetitions in this refrain work in almost the same way as they do in Jakobson’s iconic example “I like Ike”, the slogan for the election of president Eisenhower.<sup>31</sup> The small sound piece therefore conveys the weight the poetic function has over the referential function of the message in this film. The referential content of the recorded conversation is misinterpreted by Caul; the poetic function of the refrain, however, alludes to both the referential arbitrariness of the sign system and the allegorical message about the crisis of the democratic polity delivered to Caul – and the implicit spectator – in a paranoia provoking manner. As the opening scene proceeds, we continue following the mime who now staggers into the lower left edge of the frame and mimics a man in a grey coat with brown hair and glasses, who is drinking coffee. It is Harry Caul. When he notices the mime, he calmly walks away; the street artist, however, follows him. The song gets louder, more obtrusive, and a bit reverberant. The mimic follows Harry until he has crossed about half of the square. There, he finally desists and Harry continues walking. We start hearing the distorted noises again and the Red Robin song starts over. Then, we see one of the observers who directs his camera at the young couple.

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31 Roman Jakobson: “Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics”, in: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.): *Style in Language*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1960, pp. 350–377, p. 357.

The mime artist who imitates and follows random passers-by, sometimes without their noticing, mirrors the general feeling of paranoia conveyed by the film in a comic way. His performance is a foreshadowing to a sequence at an exhibition in the Convention Center of the city, taking place shortly after the wire-tapping at Union Square. At the exhibition, products are presented designed to help not just state officials and professionals but virtually anyone to eavesdrop and spy on their fellow human beings. One can buy clocks with integrated cameras, devices to bug a telephone etc. In *The Conversation*, the political paranoia comes into the private sphere. This means, in turn, that every uttered word can potentially be recorded and turned against oneself, be it about private, professional or political issues. There are hence no actual free spaces anymore where critique could form and articulate itself without being directly absorbed by the entity it is directed against. Against the background of the Watergate affair, when Nixon had his entourage wire-tap the offices of the Democratic party, Coppola creates an atmosphere where even the most private aspects of life can equally become political any time. If the thereby obtained information is also deciphered correctly, is, however, a whole other story. Coppola expresses this two-fold dilemma by stripping the linguistic sign of its substance; by destroying the metaphysics of (recorded) language on behalf of a phantasmatic fragmentation and distortion of signifiers and signified, of deciphering and interpretation processes. This is brilliantly conveyed in the wire-tapping sequence itself, following the opening scene. In backflashes, we see the young couple wandering around the square, we *see* them talking, but what we hear are only distorted sound fragments. In one shot, we watch Harry Caul walking across the square while we do not see but hear the young woman speaking. Then again, we *hear* the couple clearly but do not see them talking. Images and words drift apart, sound and content do not match.<sup>32</sup> The different elements composing signifier and signified and hence Saussure's sign – sound/image and (psychological) concept – are showcased in their arbitrariness. They are presented as raw material, as sensually experienced, disruptive

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32 As Johannes Seuffer argues, sound and images keep drifting apart in a phantasmatic way also later, when Caul (re)assembles sound files from the different sources in his lab. In this scene – as later in the hotel room – we see images the source of which remains unclear. They could be Harry's subjective memories, emerging while he tries to associate sound with image; or they are produced by the visual narrator itself (the camera). "Die Film-apparatur als Spion in Francis Ford Coppolas *The Conversation*", in: Drügh/Mergenthaler (eds.): *Ich ist ein Agent*. 143.



factors, creating a distance to the language system and the possibility of decoding it easily by means of social convention. The sound-image itself is distorted and decomposed into its individual components. While we listen to sometimes clear, sometimes distorted sentences, we also see a mixture of clear and blurry pictures: at times filmed directly and thus sharp, at times mediated through a camera within the camera and hence bloomy. The signified to which the deformed signifiers refer remain scattered. Only afterwards, Harry filters and orders the recordings in such a manner that they become intelligible and provide a coherent meaning. A meaning, which is, however, as Harry learns by the end, not the only one available.

As mentioned above, *The Conversation* includes several phantasmatic elements, which place it in a certain vicinity with Todorov's key element of the phantastic: the hesitation. The storyline starts out relatively unambiguous – what the protagonist Harry Caul sees, records, and hears does at first not seem to provide a case for a fantastic *sujet* in the sense of Todorov. By the last third of the film, however, the latent phantasmatic elements of the plot become a lot more prominent. And in fact, *The Conversation* has fantastic roots. Coppola started writing the screenplay under the direct influence of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up* (1966).<sup>33</sup> Here, a young London photographer enlarges photos he has taken in a park and comes to believe he accidentally shot a murder. On the blow-up, he sees a hand holding a gun and what looks like a lifeless body. When he comes back to the park, however, there is no trace of a crime to be found. Antonioni's film, in turn, was inspired by a fantastic short story by Julio Cortázar, named "Las babas del diablo" ("The Devil's Drivel"), which I already mentioned above. This story is told by a peculiarly split narrator: sometimes he appears as homodiegetic, sometimes as heterodiegetic narrator, reflecting the usage of linguistic signs and grammar, in short: the use of the semiotic system of language. The protagonist is a photographer, who takes pictures of young boy and a woman at the Conciergerie in Paris. While doing so, he notices an elderly gentleman in a car close to the park who apparently

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33 Cf. Frederick Wasser: "Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) and Walter Murch's Sound Worlds", in: Peter Krämer, Yannis Tzioumakis (eds.): *The Hollywood Renaissance. Revisiting American Cinema's Most Celebrated Era*, New York 2018, pp. 221–238, p. 221. James Chandler suggests that the mime from the opening scene seems as if he has stepped out of Antonioni's *Blow-up* and "found his way [from London] to Union Square in San Francisco to pester Gene Hackman". *Doing Criticism Across Literary and Screen Arts*, Hoboken (NJ) 2022, p. 98.



watches the couple. When he later looks at his pictures, the narrator fears that he has drawn the wrong conclusions from the scene. He now believes that something more frightening, maybe even a crime might have taken place and that the woman was actually beguiling the boy in order to bring him to the man – the motive remains unspoken by the narrator. He keeps looking at the pictures, enlarging them again and again, and suddenly the photographs come alive before his eyes and open up a strange, phantasmatic world; sucking him almost into his own picture. The situation repeats itself; the woman tries to lure the boy; however, now the elderly man becomes openly creepy and menacing, approaching the narrator. Once again, he can help the boy flee the threatening situation, while the man, furious, comes ever closer, opens his mouth, showing a black, trembling tongue, before the picture finally becomes blurry and the narrator seems to be back in his apartment, telling us about clouds and birds passing by.

In his filmic adaptation of Cortázar's story, Antonioni focuses primarily on trans-medial ontological questions like the status of reality transposed into a photograph, or a painting, and vice versa.<sup>34</sup> Coppola, in turn, examines the phantasmatic quality of sound and the paradoxical ambiguity of sound recordings. 'The conversation' is split into various visual and sound bites recorded from different positions, which have to be logically put together piece by piece in Harry Caul's studio, after the conversation is long over. The message, subsequently assembled in this way, is revealed to him piece by piece – or so it seems. In fact, he misinterprets the spoken words and composes them in a way that fits into his imaginary. Furthermore, Harry uses photographs taken during the conversation to further support his suspicion: the adulterous couple, so he believes, is in danger of being killed by his client. In the hotel room, however, when he sees the blood swirl spilling out of the toilet, the opaqueness and contingency of the recordings and of his own decoding process is radically revealed, and this is where the story makes room for hesitation: is the blood really there or is it a figment of Harry's imagination? Has the blood from the murder not been flushed down properly, so that it comes back now? Or does it come

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34 For a detailed analysis of the interdependences of photographic image and narrated text, the coexistence of image-creating and language-creating acts in the short story as well as in Antonioni's *Blow-up*, cf. David Klein: *Medienphantastik. Phantastische Literatur im Zeichen medialer Selbstreflexion bei Jorge Luis Borges und Julio Cortázar*, Tübingen 2015, pp. 144–166; pp. 167–194.

back against all technical logic as a transcendental ‘hint of fate’, as a bearer of the violent act Harry believes to be a passive part of? Harry Caul, we learned this before in the plot, is a devoted Catholic. But then again, did somebody actually die in that room the other night, or did he imagine it? The latter possibility seems not too far-fetched as Harry sees the bloody hotel room already before, in a dream. In whichever direction we tend to here, the scenes in question have a decisively phantasmatic quality. This includes the strange threat at the end of the film and the recording of his own Saxophone play transmitted to Harry by telephone, prompting him to tear down his apartment. If the recorded conversation is the eponym of the film and the catalyst of the plot, then Harry’s speaking surname ‘Caul’, homonymous to the (phone) ‘call’ could be the actual hidden message the protagonist was to find all along. Harry, as it were, waited for that one call that would allow him to ravage his flat and thereby metonymically strap his entire existence of any given system of deciphering, encoding, decoding and interpreting. Having turned his apartment into a ravaged ruin, Harry Caul has finally taken himself out of the symbolic completely. Here we come full circle to Cortázar’s split protagonist, who is, apparently, drawn into his own, autonomous photograph, repeating and changing his story, and ending his previous existence in a sign system that had already begun to crumble. Furthermore, Harry’s ruined ‘house’ can be read as a metaphor for the ‘national house’ – that is, the state – the trust in which is destroyed. The democratic state does not provide a safe haven for Caul anymore – as its semiotic cornerstones are upside-down, it now needs to be stripped of sense and signification completely to allow for re-orientation and new codes.

### III. Avoiding Peripeties: Headless in Argentina

*Three Days of the Condor* and *The Conversation*, two US-American films of the 1970s, can be labeled pioneers of audiovisual fantastic narratives as they have come to live, predominantly, in Latin America and the US since the millennium; dealing with impending crises by means of a crumbling sign system. At the peak of a form of fantastic narratives characterized by a falling out of the symbolic structured by the linguistic sign, Argentinian director Lucrecia Martel’s film *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) stands out. *La mujer sin cabeza*, ‘the headless woman’ circles around a specific, Latin American collective crisis difficult to verbalize adequately. This film, also

known and distributed under the title *La mujer rubia* (*The Blonde Woman*), is the last part of Martel's 'Salta trilogy' consisting furthermore of *La ciénaga* (*The Swamp*) and *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*); films, which also took place in Northern Argentina, Martel's home region.

*La mujer sin cabeza* features María Onetti as Vero, a dentist in her forties, married and with two grown daughters who study law at the University of Tucumán. The film starts with a group of boys of indigenous origin and their German shepherd dog playing and running right beside the street, close to a dry sewer, which serves to collect the rainwater. They playfully jump, climb, and shout at one another, talking about a bicycle never to be seen. One of them runs down into the dry channel and climbs up again with some difficulty. The camera is unsteady, restless; it follows the boys in blurred close-ups, creating a dynamic but also hectic, and erratic atmosphere.



Figure 11 LA MUJER SIN CABEZA (2008): Blurry, dynamic images of one of boys and dog running beside the road.

Afterwards, we switch to a group of women and children standing outside a country club and discussing, among other things, the questionable water quality of the new swimming pool. Again, the faces and bodies are shot in abrupt and unexpected close ups; we join the conversation in medias res. The protagonist Vero, a tall, sympathetic woman, is being complimented for her new blond hair color. Small children romp around the adults, lock themselves in Vero's car and press their hands against the dusty windshield. The camera always stays close by, without allowing for a bigger overview of the scene, the group and their surroundings. In contrast to the opening scene, this one is static, mirroring the enclosed children who

have locked themselves in the car for fun. As they finally open the door, Vero kisses them goodbye, gets into her car and drives away. We see her driving on a dusty country road with no other cars to be seen. Then, her cell phone rings. Vero bends down to look for it when the car suddenly bumps twice, accompanied by a loud noise. Vero hits the brakes. She closes her eyes for a moment. She reaches for the handle, but doesn't open the door. Then, she puts on her sun glasses and drives on. Behind her, we see a silhouette lying on the dusty road. It looks like a dog, maybe the German shepherd from the beginning. However, it seems to be lying on the left side of the road, making it seem visually odd that Vero should have just run it over, as her car does not seem to have been significantly moved out of its track. When she drove on after the bumps, she did not have to rearrange the direction in which the car was headed. As she now keeps driving, we lose sight of the silhouette. After a short while, Vero stops again and finally gets outside, helplessly standing by the car. A strong rain starts. She drives to a hospital and has an x-ray done but she does not put her name on the admission paper and leaves the hospital without the results. She then checks into a hotel where she has a tryst with her lover Juan Manuel, an in-law of hers. After he has taken her home, she flees from her husband into the bathroom and gets, fully-dressed, into the shower, 're-enacting' the rain shower from before. Basically, for the rest of the film, Vero will wander around like a ghost. She does not communicate properly, seems to forget the name of her daughter, does not know how to treat her patients any more – she practically loses her identity. What had been hinted at in *Three Days of the Condor* und especially in *The Conversation* comes to full fruition here: Vero loses her place in the linguistic sign system and falls out of the symbolic. Language in this film is not only fragmented into various components, broken down into separate sound and image elements – it drops out completely as far as Vero is concerned. Everyone around her acts, reacts, asks, talks, while she seems to have lost her place in the language system. She does not answer her phone anymore and in face-to-face conversations, her answers mostly do not match the questions she has been asked. For instance, when her lover asks her, "Quieres que te deje en la puerta o en la esquina?", she replies, "Bueno."<sup>35</sup> Before, when he asks her why she has taken a room in the hotel, she somewhat paradoxically says "quería un té."<sup>36</sup> When she

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35 Translation J.B.: "Should I drop you off at the door or at the corner?" "Alright."

36 Translation J.B.: "I wanted some tea."

goes to her medical practice, she does not go to her office, but sits down in the waiting room like a patient. An assistant has to take her to her office and help her into her overall as she is not able to put it on herself. Almost as weird as Vero's acting, however, is the behavior of the ones around her for they not actually seem to notice that there is something wrong with her. Everybody, including the indigenous help, acts as if there was nothing particularly unusual about the situation. In addition, most of the people who interact with Vero – apart from some members of her family – are not shown closely; we often only see parts of their bodies but not the faces; we hear their voices but do not see them speak. This does not apply to her cousin Josefina however, who is depicted as a strong, caring, confident woman, mother of several teenage children. We often see her face closely and clearly, but she acts to Vero's strange behavior the same way the other people do: she does not seem to notice. When Vero visits her aunt – *tía* – Lala, Josefina and her daughters, the elderly and bed-ridden woman is watching Vero's wedding tape. *Tía* Lala seems to be the only one post-accident Vero can somehow relate to as both do not fit into their surroundings anymore and both fail to make themselves actually heard to the family who just takes over stagnant conversations for them. Lala insists on the presence of a not closer defined person named "la Genoveva" in the wedding video although Josefina assures her, she cannot be in the video as she was already dead at the time. Later, Lala tells Vero there are ghosts (*espantos*) all around them in the room and that they would go away if she didn't look at them. There is a peculiar short scene in a room of the house, before Vero goes to her aunt's bedroom. At one moment, Vero is surrounded by a bunch of family members, walking in and out of the picture, kissing her on the cheek. Then, we lose sight of her and follow cousin Josefina who searches for a gift card. Next, there is a cut and suddenly, we see Vero from behind sitting all alone on a chair in a shadowy room. She turns around and a subjective camera shows the other side of the room from her perspective with two half open doors. From the left side, a boy with indigenous features crosses the scene and rapidly leaves through the left door. His appearance and his haircut are very similar to one of the boys from the opening scene. Is he actually there, or merely an expression of Vero's concerns, or is he joining *tía* Lala's *espantos*, manifesting himself as a ghost in the old woman's house?



Figure 12 LA MUJER SIN CABEZA (2008): Vero, sitting alone in a dark and empty room, looking at ...



Figure 13 LA MUJER SIN CABEZA (2008): ... a half-open door through which a phantasmatic silhouette disappears.

Days later, Vero tells her husband during their shopping that she ran over something with her car a few days ago. Together, they drive back to the spot and find a dog lying at the curbside. The husband, Marcos, is convinced it was this creature she ran over. Some time later, however, Vero is on the country road again with Josefina and her children. They see how a body is pulled out of the canals which are now full with rain water. The body, it turns out, was, most likely, the body of one of the indigenous boys from the beginning. But was he the victim of a car accident or did he



really drown, maybe while playing in the canal, surprised by the sudden rain? Again, doubt arises in Vero. When she finally goes to the hospital and the hotel again, she finds that every trace of her being there has disappeared. Nobody seems to remember her. The film ends with Vero being apparently reintegrated into the symbolic, attending a party in a hotel. She has dyed her hair and is brunette (again).

The isotopy of sound, image, and language drifting apart and losing their capabilities for clear signification is something Martel already tested or prepared for in the first two films of the Salta trilogy. *La niña santa* is, from this point of view, mostly about the capacity of hearing and listening correctly, about hearing absent voices and indistinct humming sounds, about the possibility of losing hearing. In *La ciénaga*, we deal with abrupt, unsteady, fuzzy or sudden, unexpected images and shots, while the conflicts implicitly dealt with in the family do not become entirely clear, but point, like in *La mujer sin cabeza*, to a greater, hidden collective conflict – the uncertain, undetermined guilt of a white, well-to-do bourgeoisie in face of much less privileged indigenous residents. In the third film, however, these elements become manifest. They go along with a fantastic aesthetics of doubt in the sense of Todorov: The protagonist – and the implicit spectator – can, for one, not be sure what really happened at the accident and what or whom Vero ran over. The events after the accident also remain opaque. Did the episodes in the hospital and the hotel really happen or not? Did a family member of Vero's erase the documents that would prove her x-ray and delete her book entry at the hotel? And what about the ghosts *tía Lala* refers to? Are they manifestations of guilt, a revealing of the unconscious, or visions of an old, demented lady? Or is *Lala* actually the only one able to see late family members and other ghosts manifesting themselves in home videos and living rooms? What about the strange boy crossing the room when nobody apart from Vero is there? Are the events shown 'true' at all, or are the nightmarish structure of the accident and of Vero's subsequent incapacity to talk and act results of the fact that she is actually having a nightmare the whole time? Given the ambiguous imagery applied by Martel, a dreamlike imagery that always provides doubt, *La mujer sin cabeza* matches Todorov's conditions for the pure fantastic, where the hesitation is never completely resolved. Although the plot itself seems to hand out clues, which tend into the direction of Todorov's hybrid form of the *fantastique-étrange*, providing some plausible rational explanations to the events, an in-betweenness still remains. Moreover, the accident has produced a fissure or rupture in

the sense of Caillois. This momentaneous fissure, however, is sustained by Vero's falling out of the world of language and communication. The drifting apart of signifiers and signified and the constant misinterpretation of Vero executed by the people around her, as well as her own constant misinterpretation of what is expected from her, is key to the ontological rupture separating Vero from her life before the accident.

In certain ways, *La mujer sin cabeza*, or, *La mujer rubia*, is another 're-writing' of Cortázar's already described short story "Las babas del diablo". Here, the fissure is provided by the uncertain ontological status of the photographs the narrator has taken. After developing and blowing-up the negatives, the pictures seem to start an uncanny life of their own, autonomously widening their frame, repeating and continuing the events from before, when they were taken, including the narrator in the events. The potential autonomous 'afterlife' of recorded, supposedly fix images is mirrored in Martel's minor character tía Lala and her claims of perceiving people in an old home video which had long been gone by the time the video was made. Also, *la mujer rubia*, the alternative film title that refers directly to Martel's dyed blonde protagonist Vero, is the exact description used multiple times by Cortázar's narrator to refer to the woman on his photograph, probably a demimondaine, beguiling the young boy.<sup>37</sup> Even more remarkable, however, are the resemblances between the instable (linguistic) condition of the narrator and Vero. The narrator begins with an odd – and almost impossible to translate to a non-generic language like English – meta-reflection about how to write a story, or *this* story. Should it be written in the first person or in the second or third; in plural or singular? Of what use are linguistic rules and forms anyway? Maybe one could just combine the grammatical forms of, for example, third and first person in one sentence, in the manner of 'themselves myself hurt(s) the back of the eyes'. Cortázar's narrator starts out telling the reader about the events in the first person; later he switches to a heterodiegetic narrator presenting the protagonist as Franco-Chilean translator and photographer Roberto Michel. Sentences later, he switches back to a homodiegetical narration. Over the course of the story, the narrator inserts apparently unrelated parentheses several times, commenting, for example, on the shape of the clouds passing by. He also suggests he might already be dead (seeing the passing by clouds from within 'heaven'). He thereby

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37 Cf. Cortázar: *Las babas del diablo*, p. 115 et.al.

creates an unstable, fragmentary narrative situation, mirroring and foreshadowing the strange, ‘fantastic’ ontology and the autonomous life of his own pictures. Martel’s *Vero*, on the other hand, experiences language and communication as entirely volatile and instable categories that escape her. After the accident, language almost completely collapses for her. Questions and phrases directed to her lose their meaning while she answers with grammatically correct but apparently senseless, unsuitable words and phrases that lack coherence. *Vero* does not ask herself, like Cortázar’s narrator, how to tell the ‘story’ that happened to her on the country road – she simply does not tell it at all. Or, rather, she tells it by challenging the values assigned to signifiers in the language system and by denying them their conventional usage. Like in *The Conversation*, torn, twisted, ambiguous language becomes the prime indicator of a deeper crisis, which is located on a different, more abstract level than the sphere of individual tragedy.

*La mujer sin cabeza* is an ambiguous, not clearly to decode film, implying several possible socio-political messages. Martel’s aesthetics do not allow for clearness; it takes the implicit spectator on a journey through blurred or cut-off images and a braid of erratic, incomplete threads of information.<sup>38</sup> One of the crises conveyed rather openly in the film seems, however, to be found in the unspoken breach between the lower classes of an indigenous origin and the middle and upper class of white Argentinians as manifested in the region of Salta,<sup>39</sup> where the indigenous population is by far higher than in Argentina as a whole, where the indigenous percentage of the population amounts to less than 0,2 percent.<sup>40</sup> As Deborah Martin states, one of the aspects of the film which bestow it

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38 For the profound ambiguity and polyvalence of *La mujer sin cabeza* cf. also the elaborate analysis by Deborah Martin: *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, Manchester 2016, pp. 80–105.

39 As Gerd Gemünden states, at the center of *La mujer sin cabeza* lies class difference, which could be attributed as well to another important feature of present-day Argentinean democracy: the middle-class’s dealing with the dictatorship. The eagerness to cover up any traces, he argues, can be read as a reference to the estimated thirty thousand people who were disappeared during this era. He also states, however, that Martel herself, while admitting that her films are “completely political” (p. 69), strictly avoids committing herself to one interpretation, “insisting that the ambiguity of *La mujer sin cabeza*, as well as her other films, resists clearly defined political messages.” *Lucrecia Martel* [= *Contemporary Film Directors*], Urbana (IL) 2019, p. 72.

40 Walter Bruno Berg: *Lateinamerika. Literatur – Geschichte – Kultur. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt 1995, p. 40.

with a sense of haunting, is “a repressed and spectral gaze which is often trained on Vero”<sup>41</sup>. This ominous, invisible gaze adds to the phantasmatic quality of the film and is, as Martin shows, initiated by the close-up of a young indigenous man or boy, who, in the opening scene, hides behind tree branches, watching and putting a finger to his lips “in a gesture of silence”<sup>42</sup>.



Figure 14 LA MUJER SIN CABEZA (2008): Hiding behind branches of trees.

Martin, however, does not elaborate on the fantastic implications of and the moments of hesitation in the film. She rather robs it of some of its ambiguity, when she confirms it had to be Vero's family who surely covered up Vero's traces after the accident.<sup>43</sup> The gaze of the young man and his gesture – which, it needs to be added, *could* be a gesture of silence but is not distinctly readable as such – could be evocative of the notorious role pacts of silence played during the Argentinean dictatorship, for instance. The ambivalent gesture, however, hints, I would argue, even stronger to the isotopy of failed communication, unclear codes, muteness, and the shattering of language as a semiotic sign system, which dominates the rest of the film.

Historically, the arbitrariness of the sign, as articulated centuries later by Saussure, is of special significance in Latin America. As Todorov pointed out, among the most significant acts performed by Columbus was the constant naming of things he found – e.g. rivers, landmarks, hills – and

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41 Martin: *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, p. 81.

42 Ibid.

43 Cf. *ibid.*

the belief that words and terms had a natural connection to things: he took words to be mere images and referents of things:

[Colon] révèle plus encore sa conception naïve du langage, puisqu'il perçoit toujours les noms confondus avec les choses : toute la dimension de l'intersubjectivité, de la valeur réciproque des mots (par opposition à leur capacité dénotative), du caractère humain, et donc arbitraire, des signes, lui échappe.<sup>44</sup>

Instead of trying to reveal how one indigenous term related to other terms of the same language; instead of looking for its *valeur*, its hierarchical status amongst other terms of the same isotopy, Columbus was looking for the direct linguistic equivalence in Spanish. Thereby, he not only overlooked the individuality of the indigenous languages but also assigned to the Spanish language the ability to merely reproduce the “état naturel des choses” (the natural state of things).<sup>45</sup> The (European) beginning of what would later become Latin America was hence marked by a troubled sign system, endowed with alleged metaphysical qualities. In addition, the later history of the colonial and postcolonial era was – and partly still is – characterized by the dichotomy of speech vs. speechlessness. The latter is experienced by the remaining, oppressed indigenous peoples, whose ‘voicelessness’ is an essential part of the historical experience in Latin America and subject of critical literary texts, for instance by José María Arguedas or Ernesto Cardenal.<sup>46</sup> The conditions for a form of the fantastic manifesting itself via a crumbling of the linguistic sign, a dissociation of words, sound, and images hence seem to fall on unusually fertile ground in Latin America. The speechlessness of the indigenous peoples, represented by the boys we see at the beginning of the *La mujer sin cabeza*, transfers to Vero, who is, for most of the rest of the film, unable to assign ‘proper’ names to things. She uses inept phrases which do not apply well to the context. The linguistic fissures point to an ontological problem and an identity crisis as she can hardly recognize and interact with her family and perform as a dentist anymore. The shouting boys from the first scene, their conversation, which remains fragmentary and ungraspable, is

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44 Tzvetan Todorov: *La conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre*, Paris 1982, pp. 41-42. Translation J.B.: “[Columbus] reveals even more his naive conception of language, since he always considers names as being confused with things: the whole dimension of intersubjectivity, of the reciprocal value of words (as opposed to their denotative capacity), of the human, and therefore arbitrary, character of signs, escapes him.”

45 *ibid.*, p. 42.

46 Cf. Berg: *Lateinamerika*, esp. pp. 65–78.

the mirror image of the almost mute Vero. The conversation fragments, framed in blurry, unsteady images, are the expression of unheard voices, of a *bruit* (noise) in the sense of Jacques Rancière,<sup>47</sup> trying to make themselves heard but remaining, however, at the margins of the road. They are uncanny reminders in the tradition of fantastic narratives, which are only visible and audible temporarily: through blurred images, abrupt frames and the extreme, terrible noise<sup>48</sup> arising from a car that runs something – or someone – over.

To conclude this article, I will close with a recent US-American Netflix mini-series launched in 2022: Ryan Murphy's *The Watcher*. Loosely based on a true story,<sup>49</sup> this production is peculiar in several ways. It alludes to the atmosphere of paranoia seen in Pollack and Coppola, combining phantastic elements of hesitation with the gothic topos of a family terrorized by a haunted house, and the somber atmosphere of a murder mystery only a witty private eye might solve. Furthermore, we find several absurd, almost surreal components of unexpected violence which seem to have a close alliance to the curious atmosphere of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* – a series that is at the same time nightmarish and ludicrous. Also, like in *Twin Peaks*, language and its reliability play a significant, not easily to be grasped role in *The Watcher*,<sup>50</sup> and what is more: language, communication, and false information are displayed here as disruptive forces. Not

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47 In his book *La Méésentente*, Rancière famously elaborates his theory about political structures relying on a specific form of language not every individual can or is allowed to take part in. Subjects who do not have, as it were, “the license to speak”, who cannot make themselves heard while the subjects who can speak are in undisturbed consent with one another, can only make noise: “[L]es sujets qui se font compter dans l’interlocution ‘sont’ ou ‘ne sont pas’, s’ils parlent ou s’ils font du bruit.” Transl. J.B.: “[T]he subjects who are to be counted in the interlocution ‘are’ or ‘are not’, whether they speak or make noise.” *La Méésentente: Politique et philosophie*. Paris 1995, p. 79. Democracy, Rancière states, only happens when the noise is taken into account and political dissent takes over the previous consent.

48 One of Vero’s relatives, who has good connections to the police interestingly states the most shocking aspect about such car accidents is the horrible noise they provoke: “Es un ruido espantoso.” *La mujer sin cabeza*: 00:45:22.

49 Cf. Elena Nicolaou: “Is 657 Boulevard real? All about the house that inspired ‘The Watcher’“, in: *Today*, 17.10.22, [www.today.com/popculture/tv/the-watcher-657-boulevard-real-house-now-rcna51927](http://www.today.com/popculture/tv/the-watcher-657-boulevard-real-house-now-rcna51927) (22.08.23).

50 For a detailed interpretation of *Twin Peaks* in these respects, see Julia Brühne: “‘Dig Yourself out of the Shit!’ Violence, Language Trouble and Ideality, or, why the Un-dead Father needs to Roar Back in *Twin Peaks* – *The Return*”, in: Georg Mein/Isabel Baumann (eds.): *The Ends of the Humanities*, Luxembourg 2021, without page references, DOI: 10.26298/melusina.pdh9-hd16.

only the subjects supposed to use linguistic signs but language itself, so it seems, has fallen out of the symbolic now.

#### IV. Outro: Are you happy, Mrs. Brannock? *The Watcher*

NORA. And I know it's not happening just to us. It's happening to everyone all across the country. Your life can just be destroyed. You're targeted. You're not really safe anywhere.<sup>51</sup>

These words are spoken by Nora Brannock, female protagonist of *The Watcher*, after she and her family have gotten threatening letters and after her son's ferret has been mysteriously killed inside their house. Her statement is designed to convince her husband to not just yet sell the dream house they have only bought shortly before, but to withstand the threats and find the person(s) responsible, calling themselves "The Watcher". The message transported in Nora's words does not actually fit the situation as the family is apparently "targeted" precisely because they are living in that particular house – if they moved out, they probably wouldn't be a target anymore. The threat posed by 'the watcher' hence seems to be a specific one – and not one that could affect anybody. However, the different incidents and stories that unfold over the course of the series show that it is precisely this statement of Nora's, which should be taken seriously as a motto of the series and as a comment on the impending socio-political crises implicitly conveyed in *The Watcher*. It is a series about extreme and suddenly bursting aggression, about paranoia, anxiety, and brutal accusation. Language is taken to its limits here, as communication and sense-making seems more and more impossible.

*The Watcher* begins like a classic horror or thriller movie featuring a somehow haunted house: A family of four moves from the city to a quiet, beautiful suburb called Westfield, allegedly one of the safest cities in America. For roughly three million dollars, they buy a large residence – a dream house they cannot actually afford. Shortly afterwards, they receive a threatening letter from a person calling themselves 'the watcher', claiming to have been in charge of watching the house for decades. The letter accuses the family of being greedy, indirectly menacing them with the house's alleged desire for young blood, and the assertion that 'the watcher'

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51 Paris Barclay: "Blood Sacrifice" (Ep.2), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.



will always be watching. From now on, the uncanny epistoler is hovering over every aspect of the family's life, claiming to see absolutely everything. In the letters, correspondingly, 'the watcher' refers to things actually happening in the house, to the children playing, to the family reconstructing the kitchen etc. Similar to *The Conversation*, paranoia has reached another peak here. Like in the post-Watergate films discussed above, the protagonists are not safe even in their own house; the possibility of being watched and spied on is omnipresent.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, like in *Three Days of the Condor*, state institutions, in this case the police, are highly ambivalent and not actually to be trusted. When the Brannock's state they would go to the FBI, disgruntled detective Chamberland tells them he is good friends with the respective colleagues and that they would not lift a finger for them. Like it was for Harry Caul and Joe Turner, what formerly used to be taken for granted is radically compromised in *The Watcher*: in this case, the conviction that the green, peaceful suburb is safer than the packed city with its high crime-rates, and that state institutions can be trusted to help (and not to potentially be in cahoots with the criminals<sup>53</sup>). Moreover, like the listening device Harry Caul unsuccessfully searches for in the end in his apartment, throughout the series, 'the watcher' remains invisible like a phantom. While the things 'the watcher' refers to, the signified, are actually there, the observing body itself remains shapeless and ghostly. It is merely a signature under a letter, that is: a signifier without signified.

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52 The series, furthermore, hints several times at the Nixon era: neighbor Pearl one time requests Nora to bring a casserole dish named *Nixon Chicken*, said to have been the favorite dish of the former president and his family. Also, the murdered girl's name (see footnote 54) is Pat Graff, relating her to Richard Nixon's wife who was also named Pat. Another allusion to the Nixon family could be one of the minor characters who is called Trish, or Tricia like Nixon's daughter. The character Trish was married to another character the Brannock family later suspects to be 'the watcher' – his name is Roger Kaplan. This name, in turn, is a combination of Roger Thornhill and his involuntary agent alias Kaplan, the hero from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) In this film, too, the protagonist is confronted with a sign system turned upside-down and of the instability and ambiguity of language and codes as he is mistaken for the fictitious agent Kaplan and therefore chased by criminals and spies who want Kaplan, whom they believe to be real, dead.

53 In one episode, Nora surprises her real estate agent Karen and detective Chamberland having lunch together and flirting with each other at the country club. She now believes the two of them to be the head of the conspiracy, trying to get the Brannocks to sell the house cheap in order to buy it for themselves.

The Brannock family quickly comes to suspect the neighbors, a bunch of strange individuals: Pearl, an elderly lady with pigtails presenting herself as head of the Westfield preservation society and showing concerns about any reconstruction possibly done at the house, including the potential cutting of old trees and the removal of an historic dumbwaiter her mentally unstable brother Jasper loves to ride – with or without the knowledge and permission of the house owners, as the Brannocks soon find out. Other neighbors are the equally ambivalent senior citizens Mitch and Mo who dislike daughter Ellie practicing her piano and are not happy about Dean Brannock's request they do not harvest the arugula that has migrated from their own fence to the Brannock's fence and garden. Pearl as well as Mitch and Mo violently scream at the Brannock's several times, unfolding a deep, hidden aggression bursting all of the sudden and emerging to the surface. All three of them abrasively assure Dean they will be watching or keeping an eye on them, strengthening their status as suspects.

The open, sometimes campy aggressiveness of the neighbors and the developing aggressiveness of the Brannocks, especially Dean, is accompanied by several inexplicable events. In the first episode, during the viewing, Ellie sees the mirror image of a figure in a grey suit in one of the bedrooms. The room seems to be empty though; the light white curtains are flitting in the wind, no one is seen who could be hiding. After they have moved in, first Ellie and then other family members as well hear music coming from the top floor, but when they get there, everything is quiet. Mo, in turn, once snaps at Dean because Ellie, she says, practiced on the piano again when apparently, she has not. Furthermore, in several episodes, the implicit spectator sees the milky, elusive silhouette of someone standing and moving in the house, but none of the family members notices as they have their back to the silhouette. This ominous entity also seems to be responsible for killing the ferret of Ellie's brother Carter during their first weeks at the new house. In a later episode, Nora receives a video in black and white, showing Dean asleep in bed with a young, dark-haired girl wearing pigtails. The girl has a stunning resemblance to someone Dean knows to be dead and she even wears the very same nightgown the dead girl did on the night of her murder.<sup>54</sup> Another

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54 Theodora Birch, the private eye the family hires, shows Dean a box taken from the evidence room of the Westfield police department with the permission of Detective Chamberland. It contains photos from a horrible crime scene – a murder that has taken

strange element that points to the realm of the fantastic is a casual remark made by detective Chamberland in the first episode. Westfield, he says, is one of the safest places in America; during the last decades all there was were a few “disappearances”. “Disappearances?”, an alarmed Nora repeats, but she does not get any explanation and we never learn more details about the mysterious occurrences. Furthermore, it is insinuated that the house might have a strange, manipulating aura to it, driving fathers who formerly behaved otherwise to disproportionately reprimand their teenage daughters’ awakening sexuality, trying to ‘protect’ them from physical desire: Dean Brannock considers this when he learns that a previous owner, a father, shot his entire family there in the nineties – including the girl in the nightgown who is then seen in the video with Dean.<sup>55</sup> For the implicit spectator, all of these elements provoke hesitation in the sense of Todorov. It remains unclear if they belong to the realms of the marvelous or the uncanny. For some of them, an uncanny explanation is offered over the course of the series, when the family discovers a secret tunnel in their basement allowing, apparently, for people to get into the house anytime without being seen. The tunnel, however, does neither fully explain the music – even if it is played over an intercom as suggested, its source remains unclear – nor the mirror image of the figure in the suit at the viewing, or the possible resurrection of the dead girl, who comes into the room like a ghost without Dean even noticing there is someone lying in bed beside him.

The mysterious, uncanny atmosphere initiated by the ambivalent letters of the unseen ‘watcher’ and by the exaggerated aggressiveness and intrusiveness of the neighbors is further enhanced by peculiar language,

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place in the very same house the Brannocks now live in. A man named John Graff supposedly killed his elderly mother, wife, daughter and son, arranging the bodies in the living room where they were only found two weeks later by the neighbor Jasper. Graff, who had cut himself out of every photo before so that nobody could identify him, had disappeared; before, however, he had turned the intercom and Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* to make it heard throughout the house and outside (cf. Ryan Murphy: “Götterdämmerung” (Ep.3), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022). His daughter Pat who has been shot in her nightgown looks exactly like the girl supposed to be sleeping with Dean in the video Nora receives (cf. Paris Barclay: “Someone to Watch Over Me” (Ep.4), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022).

- 55 Dean rebukes his daughter for wearing lipstick and shirts that let her bra stripes show; John Graff, the former owner, supposedly killed his daughter, among other reasons, because she was sexually active (cf. footnote 50). Dean even asks Theodora if she believes the house itself had influence on his and Graff’s behavior, which she denies.

quirky or slanted communication, and phrases perceived as strange by either the characters or the implicit spectator, or both. For instance, in the first episode, during the viewing, an elderly gentleman in suit and bowtie interrupts the realtor Karen, asking her out of the blue: “Excuse me, did indentured servants build this home? Do you know?” Karen does not know, but the friendly gentleman will later become one of the prime suspects for being ‘the watcher’ because he has invented the idea for the “Ode to a House” – a creative writing assignment, so to speak, for his high school students. For decades, students wrote “odes” to old houses they liked and put them as letters in their respective mailboxes. They addressed the houses directly, like “Dear 89 Hollyhock Ridge”<sup>56</sup> – just like ‘the watcher’ later refers to the house the Brannocks live in (657 Boulevard). It remains unclear if there is a connection between the “odes” and the watcher letters. Both are, however, peculiar acts of communication. The odes remain just as anonymous as the watcher letters, and although they are friendly and flattering, they still prove someone must have been watching and studying the respective house closely and intimately for a while before writing a detailed ode to it. Therefore, the odes add to the general atmosphere of anxiety and the anguish of potentially being observed in secret. Furthermore, the odes are an incomplete act of communication as they contain a sender but do not have an actual receiver. They are messages to an addressee who never answers and thus never ‘gets’ the message – in the double sense of the word.

Another example of odd communication and the effort to try and decode language in order to unravel dimensions beyond the value of the sign, is the usage of identical expressions by two different people within a short period of time. To the open surprise of Nora and Dean, private detective Theodora Birch uses the same figure of speech as Chamberland: “barking up the wrong tree”. Later, when Nora talks to her about the video allegedly proving Dean is cheating on her, Theodora refers to the girl “in pigtails”. Nora is astounded, as she admits she had not heard that expression for 20 years, but shortly before, it was uttered in just the same way by their realtor Karen. Both times, when asked about it, Birch does not address the apparent coincidence and simply keeps on talking as if nothing has happened. Another curious character is the impulsive realtor Karen herself, whose particular way of speaking often consists of hushed,

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56 Jennifer Lynch: “Ockham’s razor” (Ep.5), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.

elongated utterances marking her (fake) surprise, outrage, or empathy. Conspicuously, she urges Nora to sell the house hardly after they bought it (“you need to sell, sell, sell!”<sup>57</sup>). She awakens doubt in Nora about the loyalty of her husband, speaks about her own emancipation, and tries to talk Nora into selling her Prius as she would be in need of a prestigious car if she wants to become a valued member of the country club. Later, she yells at Nora, who – falsely – accuses her of being the watcher herself, in blunt aggression, like Pearl, Mitch, and Mo had before.

Concealed as well as open aggressiveness, oblique communication, the anxiety of being watched and the disquieting ending of the series that remains – just like the true story it was inspired by – without closure, are the ingredients, which metaphorically point to a deeper underlying crisis. Like in *Three Days of the Condor*, *The Conversation* and *La mujer sin cabeza*, this crisis can be read in sociopolitical terms. The suburb Westfield, I would argue, is to be taken as a synecdoche for the United States as a whole. Nora’s statement described above as well as something she says to Dean towards the end of the series convey the idea that the conflicts dealt with here are neither a question of city vs. country nor of being targeted by a specific ‘watcher’ or not:

DEAN. This fucking city. Something’s going on. It’s like a sickness and I tried to get us someplace safe. And here we are, back in our old place again and I can’t accept it, Nora. We had it.

NORA. No, we didn’t.<sup>58</sup>

Nora, Dean, Ellie and Carter move to Westfield to flee the city but they encounter even worse problems. The homeless person on the street right next to the New York apartment they move back to in the end, is a reminder of what has been suppressed with their flight to the country side. The oppressed elements of poverty, crime, and violence have emerged with all the more force in allegedly tranquil Westfield. In addition to the invisible threat by ‘the watcher’, there are even brutal murders taking place. First, the former owner of the ‘dream house’ who murdered his entire family in the 90s, and then, during the narrated time, Mitch’s and Mo’s addict son who takes two elderly people from a homeless shelter, who have the same body features as his parents and kills them to get ahold

57 Paris Barclay: “Blood Sacrifice” (Ep.2), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.

58 Jennifer Lynch: “Haunting” (Ep.7), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.

of the insurance money. This completely absurd act of extreme violence, rendered almost burlesque due to the peculiar genre mixture *The Watcher* displays, shows how the allegedly peaceful suburb works as a distorted mirror image of the big city problems the family wants to escape from. The extreme violence, on a verbal as well as on a physical level, works, in turn, as a metaphor of a deeper conflict at the heart of the *res publica*. Westfield functions, I would state, as a caricature of a distorted polity. In a mixture of camp aesthetic, crime drama and fantastic narrative, Westfield combines elements of dominant discourses in an ambivalent, opaque manner, creating a nightmarish atmosphere. The small Westfield preservation society, for instance, hyperbolically fears (architectural) change and idealizes a nostalgic view of 19<sup>th</sup> century East Cost America, idolizing the beautiful houses of the epoch. The “odes to a house” by the students, too, would be efforts to get in touch with this long-gone national past – efforts that potentially turn into aggressiveness if the intended addressee does not answer and the appreciation is not returned. Pearl wants to save the old trees in the garden and the dumbwaiter at all costs, and Mitch and Mo display hostility right from the start when they grimly stare from their garden at Dean during the viewing appointment. All three neighbors’ behaviors embody the impossibility and danger of a discourse that does not leave room for – polite – discussion or debate, let alone compromise, but goes straight to the edge of disruption: something further enhanced by Dean who turns aggressively territorial very soon. Karen in turn seems like a parody of a parody, honoring parts of the ‘Karen meme’<sup>59</sup> by snapping at the waiters in the Country Club and by arrogantly lecturing Nora about ‘adequate’ social behavior; more or less terrorizing her about selling the house below value (so that she can buy it for herself). The problem of racism also connected to the ‘Karen meme’ is not evoked in the realtor Karen. This topic is, however, brought up in the relationship between Ellie and the young security specialist Dakota. When Dean and Nora learn from Theodora Birch that she believes Dakota is ‘the watcher’ because this is the name of his avatar, Dean publicly confronts Dakota who swears to be innocent – which he is. As they don’t believe him, they ground Ellie and forbid any more contact between the two as well as the use of her phone etc. Ellie then scrounges her brother’s

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59 Cf. for instance: Elle Hunt: “What does it mean to be a ‘Karen’? Karens explain“, in: *The Guardian*, 13.05.20, [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/13/karen-meme-what-does-it-mean](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/13/karen-meme-what-does-it-mean) (22.08.23).

tablet and sends a message on social media accusing her father of being a racist. When Dean desperately tells her he is not and that she should know that, she replies: “I know. And I don’t care.”<sup>60</sup> Both accusations, the one Dean throws at Dakota, and the one Ellie spreads about her father, are destructive. They are, at the same time, the climax and the mirror of a supposed fissure in society which is conveyed in *The Watcher* in various forms, and manifests itself through the fissures and ruptures on the levels of distorted, abrasive communication and equally destructive, inexplicable fantastic events. Communication has gone awry in *The Watcher*.

When Nora argues there is practically no way out of whatever they flee, no alternative ‘safe place’, she mimics the narrative structure of the series: Dean Brannock ends up continuing the work of the watcher. Instead of finding a new job in the city, he drives by their old house every day, stalking the new owners, presenting himself as John – the name of the ominous murderer who supposedly killed his family in the 90s. As the uncanny, invisible murderer continuously reproduces himself, being reincarnated again and again, becoming the new watcher, the sociopolitical crises, one could argue, keep moving in circles too: reproducing themselves again and again, only interrupted by sudden outbreaks of violence posing temporal threats to the sign system of dominant discourses, which are – yet – contained by the “targeted” subjects leaving their previous environment only to promptly enter just another circle.

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60 Paris Barclay: “Someone to Watch Over Me” (Ep.4), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.



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