

A person stands in a field of tall grass, holding a black rectangular frame in front of their face. The frame is empty, showing a plain white background. Several sheets of paper are flying through the air around the person, some caught in the frame. The background shows a line of trees under a cloudy sky.

IMAGINAIRES^{#28}

From Margins to Mainstream: Narrativizing Power on Screen

Edited by IMEN YAAKOUBI & MARGAUX COLLIN

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Crédits couverture : *Femme en veste en jean bleue debout sur le champ d'herbe verte pendant la journée*,
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Revue du Centre interdisciplinaire de recherches sur
les langues et la pensée (CIRLEP) éditée avec le soutien
de l'université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne.

Directrice de publication : Yannick BELLENGER-MORVAN

Conception graphique et mise en page : Éditions et
presses universitaires de Reims

ISSN : 1270-931X

DOI : 10.34929/imaginaires.vi28

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Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, 2026
Bibliothèque Robert de Sorbon, Campus Croix-Rouge
Avenue François-Mauriac, CS 40019, 51726 Reims Cedex
www.univ-reims.fr/epure

IMAGINAIRES #28

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sur les langues et la pensée CIRLEP ///
Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne

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Introduction



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This issue is the outcome of a one-day conference organized by the Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherche sur les Langues et la Pensée at the Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne on 13 June 2025. The conference revolved around a central concern in media studies and the history of representation: the ways in which power is staged, negotiated, and contested on screen. By examining the movement of marginalized voices, identities, and narratives from the cultural margins to the mainstream, we sought to explore the processes through which certain narratives become visible, legible, and culturally authorized, while others remain at the edges of representation. Indeed, far from designating a neutral cultural center, the mainstream must be understood as a shifting and deeply ambivalent space, structured by institutional power, commercial imperatives, ideological norms and historical struggles over representation. If mainstream visibility can offer recognition to marginalized subjects, it can also neutralize dissent and reproduce dominant hierarchies under the guise of inclusion.

The one-day conference was therefore conceived as a space for reflecting on the tensions that structure the passage from marginality to cultural centrality in film, television, and visual media more broadly. Drawing on scholarship in cultural studies, critical race theory, feminist and queer theory, we invited participants to interrogate how representation is produced, controlled, and circulated; how dominant narratives absorb or resist counter-hegemonic voices; and how visual culture mediates the relationship between visibility and power. Such questions resonate

with the work of thinkers including Michel Foucault (1972), Stuart Hall (1997), Homi Bhabha (1994), John Fiske (1989), Judith Butler (1990), bell hooks (1996), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), and Angela McRobbie (1991, 2009), among others, whose interventions have shown that representation is never merely descriptive, but always implicated in the making of norms, identities, and social hierarchies.

In what has now become this issue, several questions have been addressed: how do marginalized voices move from the periphery to the center of media narratives? What political, aesthetic, and economic forces enable or obstruct that movement? And when such voices enter the mainstream, does this transition open up transformative possibilities, or does it more often lead to form of co-optation that leave existing structures intact? These interrogations were addressed in relation to race, gender, class, and geopolitical conflict, since each of these categories reveals how the politics of representation can operate both as a site of domination and as a space of resistance.

The contributions gathered in this issue approach these questions from a wide range of perspectives, while all remaining attentive to the complex relation between visibility and power. Several articles examine how dominant institutions regulate belonging, produce exclusion, and shape subjectivity from within. In “Split Selves, Alienated Subjects: Mr. Robot and Severance Against Corporate Capitalism,” Juliette Devaux explores how contemporary television represents the corporation as both an external structure of domination and an internalized force that fragments the self. Through the divided subjectivities of Elliot and Mark, the article shows how capitalism operates not only as an economic system but also as a mode of subject formation, turning the self into a productive resource while exposing the psychic costs of alienation.

In “‘I’ll Be a Teacher, Just Like Mama’: Miss Vera and the Politics of Racist Education in Little Marvin’s *Them*,” Imen Yaakoubi similarly turns to institutional power, but through the lens of race and pedagogy. Her analysis of Little Marvin’s TV series *Them: Covenant* reads the figure of Miss Vera as an illustration of a white supremacist school system in the U.S., revealing how the classroom becomes a site of surveillance and exclusion. By situating the series within the tradition of Black horror, the article also highlights the ambivalent movement of the genre into mainstream culture, showing how visibility does not necessarily dismantle the structures of racial domination it depicts.

Questions of mediation, legibility, and the mainstreaming of marginalized narratives are at the core of Margaux Collin’s paper, “Negotiating the Mainstreaming of a Long-Silenced Testimony in John Ridley’s *12 Years*

a Slave.” Focusing on the screenplay as a crucial yet often overlooked site of negotiation, the article argues that the passage from Solomon Northup’s testimony to cinematic form is carefully constructed at the level of writing. The article shows how the script works to make a historically marginalized narrative both accessible to mainstream audiences and resistant to simplification, thereby foregrounding the screenplay as a space where the politics of representation are actively reshaped.

The issue also broadens the reflection on margins and mainstream by looking at the spatial, geopolitical, and transnational configurations of visibility. In “Mapping Heterotopias: Looking Beyond the Security-Obsessed Aesthetics of the Border Discourse on The Turkey-Syria Border,” Mustafa Can Günay examines the security-centered aesthetics imposed by Turkish mass media narratives and proposes a counter-mapping methodology to challenge them. Drawing on fieldwork, participant observation, interviews, and GIS mapping, the paper reconstructs the dominant discourse of the border while identifying heterotopic spaces that exceed or disrupt its official representation. In doing so, it reveals how bordering functions not only through territorial control, but also through visual and discursive regimes that organize public perception.

A related concern with visibility and its limits informs Sudipta Karki’s article on queer representation in mainstream Nepali cinema. Focusing on commercially oriented films from the early 2000s to the present, the article traces the movement from invisibility to increased queer visibility, while showing that such visibility often remains constrained by dominant codes. Indeed, queer identities become more present on screen without necessarily escaping the stereotypes and commercial conventions of mainstream cinema. The article thus offers a nuanced account of visibility as both a political gain and a representational trap.

Finally, Kaouther Douzi’s article on the Tunisian revolution shifts the focus from representation in fiction to the politics of appearance in moments of historical upheaval. Drawing on interviews with participants in the events of December 2010 to January 2011, the article argues that the revolution transformed not only the political order but also the very condition under which individuals and groups could appear in public space. By tracing the uneven shift from the visibility of actions to the visibility of actors, the article offers a reflection on how political transformations reconfigure the terms of public legibility and self-representation.

These contributions show that the movement from margins to mainstream cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of inclusion. Rather, it designates a complex process through which subjects become visible under conditions they do not fully control, and through which representation

remains bound to institutions, markets, ideologies, and struggles over legitimacy. Whether addressing racialized institutions, capitalist alienation, slavery's afterlives, queer visibility, border aesthetics, or revolutionary appearance, the articles in this issue all demonstrate that the visual field remains a crucial site for narrativizing power and for interrogating the fragile and often ambivalent passage from the margins to the center.

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Split Selves, Alienated Subjects: *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* Against Corporate Capitalism



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Abstract: *Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail, 2015-2019) and *Severance* (Dan Erickson, 2022-) portray corporations as a capitalist structure that is simultaneously formative, dehumanizing, and antagonistic. Rather than reducing capitalism to an external structure, these series also present it as an internalized force that shapes and divides the self. In *Mr. Robot*, Elliot, suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder, is split between his roles as a corporate employee and a hacker; in *Severance*, Mark undergoes a medical intervention to separate his professional and personal identities. Drawing on Marxist theories of alienation and post-Fordist approaches to subject formation, this article demonstrates how these crises of subjectivity reflect the subsumption of the self by capitalism as a productive resource. While such representations risk neutralizing the critique of capitalism by being overly individualizing, they nonetheless provide an inventive entry point for revealing—and critiquing—the social pathologies and power dynamics inherent to capitalism.

Keywords: *Severance*, *Mr. Robot*, Television, Capitalism, Corporation, Alienation.

Résumé : *Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail, 2015-2019) et *Severance* (Dan Erickson, 2022-) mettent en scène l'entreprise corporatiste comme une structure capitaliste à la fois matricielle, déshumanisante et antagoniste. Plutôt que de réduire le capitalisme à une structure extérieure, ces séries en font aussi une force internalisée qui façonne et divise le sujet. Dans *Mr. Robot*, Elliot, souffrant de trouble dissociatif de l'identité, est partagé entre ses rôles de salarié et de *hacker* ; Mark, dans *Severance*, a accepté de scinder, par le biais d'une intervention médicale, ses identités personnelle et professionnelle. S'appuyant sur les théories marxistes de l'aliénation et sur les approches post-fordistes de construction du sujet, cet article montre comment ces crises reflètent la subsumption du sujet par le capitalisme en tant que ressource productive. Si de telles représentations risquent

de neutraliser la critique du capitalisme en étant trop individualisantes, elles constituent néanmoins un point d'entrée inventif vers le dévoilement – et la critique – des pathologies sociales et des rapports de domination inhérents au capitalisme.

Mots-clés : *Severance*, *Mr. Robot*, séries télévisées, capitalisme, entreprise, aliénation.

Introduction

“F— Wall St.,” read *Mr. Robot*’s striking first ads ahead of its 2015 premiere. The show emerged at a moment of transformation for USA Network: a shift from the bright optimism of the “Blue Sky” era to the darker, more defiant ethos of “We the Bold,” a turn toward stories of “unlikely heroes who defy the status quo,” per NBCUniversal CEO Chris McCumber.¹ Sam Esmail’s series introduces Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), a corporate cybersecurity engineer at Allsafe Security by day and vigilante hacker by night, driven by a “deep, visceral hatred of modern-day capitalism” (Cook, 2015). Nearly a decade later, Dan Erickson’s dystopian drama *Severance* (Apple TV, 2022–) follows Mark Scout (Adam Scott), a mid-level employee at Lumon Industries, whose labor is divided using “severance”, a surgical procedure that splits “work” and “life” selves into separate entities sharing the same body: the “innie”, the worker inside the corporation, and the “outie”, the person outside the workplace. Initially integrating into the company, Mark, along with other severed workers, gradually becomes aware of Lumon’s coercive labor regime.

At first glance, both series appear to critique corporate capitalism. Yet their entanglement with the very institutions they seem to criticize complicates this reading. Produced by Apple TV, *Severance* depicts Lumon as a sinister mega-corporation whose sleek, minimalist design, corporate mystique, and technology-based control bear a curious resemblance to Apple’s own branding. Whether this resemblance functions as a self-reflexive critique or merely reflects the show’s institutional embeddedness remains an open question. Consequently, the series’ capacity to critically examine the corporate structures that finance, produce, and distribute it appears limited, with its institutional context possibly shaping the limits of its critique. *Mr. Robot* presents an adjacent issue: the show premiered with provocative “F— Wall St.” advertisements, positioning it as openly antagonistic towards financial capital. However, this tagline was censored

1. PETSKE, Denise, “USA Network Unveils Revamped Brand Image, Tagline”, *Deadline*, 2016, <https://deadline.com/print-article/1201737705/> (last accessed November 25, 2025). Full quote: “‘We The Bold’ reflects the kind of stories we want to tell—rich, captivating stories about unlikely heroes who defy the status quo, push boundaries and are willing to risk everything for what they believe in.”

from its original profanity, pointing to potential efforts by USA Network to contain political ideas within marketable boundaries. Both Esmail and Erickson have voiced early concerns that overt criticism of capitalism could jeopardize their projects' greenlighting prospects (Alter, 2025; Marcos, 2025), indicating potential industry pressures to temper political messaging. These productions thus reflect a long-standing question about mainstream culture: whether anticapitalist or leftist critique can meaningfully survive within high-profile, corporate-backed media, or whether such critique is inevitably absorbed and repurposed by the system it purports to challenge (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947; Debord, 1994 [1967]; Jameson, 1991; Fisher, 2009).

I shall extend this concern to the corpus's narratives and representational strategies. In both series, corporations—understood as the primary sites through which capitalism operates today—form the protagonists' immediate environment, but in the overall narratives, capitalism does not predominantly manifest itself as an external structure against which the protagonists push back, but rather as an internalized force besieging the characters. As such, one may question the extent to which concentrating the critique of capitalism on internal struggles neutralizes its political charge.

This apparent limitation, however, may reflect broader transformations in contemporary capitalism, as labor, now largely immaterial, extends beyond the factory or office to permeate subjectivity. As Lazzarato observes, new management techniques under capitalism involve “the worker's subjectivity within the production of value” (1996: 135). Post-industrial paradigms of capitalism have shifted toward “prescription of subjectivities”, encouraging workers to “become subjects” by actively mobilizing their creativity, affect, and sense of self within the labor process. Subjectivation—the process through which individuals are constituted as subjects—may initially appear to expand autonomy and self-expression, but post-Fordist theorists contend that these capacities are increasingly harnessed by capital, as workers are called upon to produce not only goods and services but also forms of subjectivity that themselves generate value. From this perspective, subjectivity becomes both the product and the “raw material” of immaterial labor (1996: 142). Going back to industrial capitalism, this apparent contradiction reflects Marx's assessment that capitalist production creates “not only an object for the subject but also a subject for the object” (Marx, 1993 [1859]: 92). To sustain itself, capitalism absorbs human creativity, desire, and drives for self-realization (Berardi, 2009: 96), while mainstream culture manufactures the assumption that human existence is bound to the market (Haber, 2013: 286). Film and television often perpetuate this alignment, portraying heroic figures whose relations to themselves, to others, and to the world are seamlessly

integrated into capitalism (Haber, 2013: 286). Unlike these heroes, the protagonists of *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* fail to achieve such integration.

In *Mr. Robot*, Elliot is overtly cynical and seeks to reject the E Corp ecosystem even though he works for the conglomerate. In contrast, *Severance* presents Mark's "employee" self as initially compliant and idealistic, eager to succeed within Lumon, only gradually recognizing that he cannot find fulfillment in this environment. In both cases, corporate power demands a paradoxical subject: workers are expected to be servile and "perfect employees" but also authentic. Caught in these paradoxical injunctions, the protagonists struggle with fractured identities and conflicted purposes. While both series depict capitalism as an oppressive structural force shaping labor and subjectivity, these dynamics are often displaced onto the motif of the split self. Dissociation, first introduced as the characters' coping mechanism, thus becomes the central narrative conflict, staging the tension between external structures and lived subjective experience.

From a classical Marxist perspective, this division can be read as a dramatization of alienation: the problematic separation of self from labor, from others, and from oneself in capitalist society (Leopold, 2018). In this sense, the protagonists' fractured identities may challenge the naturalization of capitalist norms, by rendering their violence visible and felt. This interpretation, however, presupposes the existence of a coherent self from which one can be estranged. As David Harvey argues, contemporary capitalism increasingly fragments subjectivity, extending alienation beyond the sphere of production and into virtually all aspects of life (Harvey, 1990). If fragmented subjectivity has itself become the norm, alienation can no longer be understood simply as a departure from an otherwise unified self. Rather than confronting subjects as an external force, capitalist social relations participate in the production of subjectivity itself. Under these conditions, alienation becomes more difficult to identify as a distinct condition and, consequently, may appear a less secure basis for critique, no longer providing a clear vantage point from which to contest the system that produces it. Consequently, the distinction between resistance and complicity, between the margins of the system and its center, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, as subjects can no longer position themselves wholly outside the structures they seek to oppose.

This paper contends that in *Mr. Robot* and *Severance*, the crisis of subjectivity serves simultaneously as a symptom of alienation under post-industrial capitalism and as a potential locus for revealing, critiquing, and resisting the social pathologies and power dynamics inherent to capitalism. While the model of corporate capitalism depicted in the shows retains structural features such as wealth accumulation, hierarchical control,

and domination over a vulnerable working class, conflict arises less from overt class struggle and more from the protagonists' troubled incorporation into the corporation. Capitalist power is therefore both imposed from above and internalized, shaping workers' identities while estranging them from themselves. Beginning with the corporation as a central institution, this discussion focuses on how the series portray alienated workers who exist in a liminal space—neither fully integrated nor entirely detached from these structures—caught between enmeshment and separation. Contemporary capitalist production mobilizes subjectivity as a productive resource, turning workers into hybrid entities torn between human agency and machinic function (Lazzarato, 1996), and engendering alienation manifested as psychobiological suffering (Marx, 1844; Haber, 2006). Through these dynamics, the shows depict capitalism as a totalizing system that, in generating alienation, simultaneously produces the conditions for collective resistance and contestation.

Capitalism, the Corporation and its Characters

Scholars in the field of television studies have consistently characterized *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* as depicting near-future or alternate societies shaped by intensified capitalist pressures. Sherryl Vint and Jonathan Alexander describe *Mr. Robot* as resembling our present but “even more devastated by forces of neoliberal, global capitalism and disenfranchisement than ours” (2022: 169). Nathan Palmer and April M. Schueths argue that *Severance* portrays the logic of capitalism “taken to an extreme that is simultaneously shocking yet recognizable” (2024: 43). An initial consideration should involve clarifying the meaning of the term “capitalism” itself, though this task proves complex. In contemporary political debates, the modalities of capitalism are frequently conflated with discourses on inequality and injustice. Within literature, extensive theoretical discussions regarding the nature of capitalism have yet to yield a scientific consensus. Indeed, in scholarly circles, definitions of capitalism are multiple, overlapping, and at times contradictory.

Here, capitalism will be understood from a critical perspective as a system characterized by inequality. In this regard, Marx's contribution to this literature remains central. Marx describes capitalism as a mode of production rooted in class relations and economic exploitation, where private ownership of the means of production enables capitalists to extract surplus value from wage labor. As the defining dynamics of the capitalist system, profit and accumulation inevitably lead to class struggle (Marx, 1990 [1867]: 808). Conversely, Max Weber sees capitalism as a rational, bureaucratic organization linked to cultural factors (the Protestant ethic)

that promote disciplined and systematic economic behavior necessary for the pursuit of profit (Weber, 2002 [1905]). More recently, post-Fordist theories have traced a historical shift from industrial capitalism to a “post-industrial” phase characterized by immaterial labor (affective, cognitive), dispersed production, and flexible networks replacing rigid hierarchies (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Berardi, 2009; Lazzarato, 2014). French philosopher Stéphane Haber considers capitalism as a historical formation that evolves toward an organic, adaptable form, emphasizing its capacity to adapt and expand through continuous transformation and to escape human control even as it penetrates deeper into social life, thus undergoing a “vitalist revolution” (Haber, 2013: 286). Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher draw on Ernest Mandel’s concept of “late capitalism” (Mandel, 1999 [1972]) to describe a further stage of capitalist development characterized by globalization, post-industrial economy, and accelerated expansion of market relations. In Jameson’s account, late capitalism names not only an economic configuration but also a “cultural logic”, in which circuits of commodification and consumption largely include the arts and lifestyle forms (Jameson, 1991). Fisher, building on this framework, uses the term to describe a pervasive social condition in which capitalist realism renders capitalism itself fully naturalized, and therefore difficult to imagine beyond (Fisher, 2009). Together, these perspectives reaffirm capitalism’s multifaceted nature: its complexity, which resists simple boundaries, and its pervasive influence across economic structures, social relations, and regulatory practices.

The present study draws on these theoretical perspectives as a conceptual framework for identifying capitalist dynamics within fictional narratives. Given this broad theoretical scope, it is important to note that a television series cannot fully capture the systemic complexity of capitalism, let alone offer an exhaustive critique. Still, some academic readings of fiction tacitly assume as much. This is not to dismiss the potential for social or political critique in fictional narratives; rather, it is to recalibrate the conditions under which television can meaningfully articulate such critique. Simply mapping capitalism as an undifferentiated totality is insufficient, since fiction may easily construct an identifiable “capitalist diegesis” without necessarily providing a critique. Instead, shows such as *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* are better understood as highlighting processes of power, labor exploitation, and subject formation that underpin the capitalist ethos.

Present-day television shows center on a “subject,” usually the main character, through which the “semantic and symbolic core” of the show unfolds. This core shapes not only the narrative but also its moral and

philosophical outlook (Soulez, 2011).² Since “the connection to the series is established” through the characters, they must be given some “ontological weight” and political responsibility (Chalvon-Demersay, 2015: 37).³ If capitalism in these shows is to be meaningfully critiqued rather than just depicted, that critique must operate through the experiences of characters navigating capitalist constraints. Therefore, we can find a productive entry point into the shows’ politics by examining how their characters inhabit, negotiate, and resist hegemonic structures.

Aligning with Perroux’s (1948: 18) assessment of capitalism as a “company-based economy” organized around the “cardinal institution” of the firm,⁴ both *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* situate their central conflicts within the protagonists’ relationships with the corporations that influence their work. These antagonistic relationships originate from a structural divide: the protagonists are integral to corporate systems yet pushed to their margins, each in unique ways.

In *Mr. Robot*, Elliot Alderson’s antagonistic relationship with corporate capitalism initially appears ideological rather than directly material. Working as a cybersecurity engineer at Allsafe, his job is to protect the digital infrastructure of the very conglomerate he despises, the Enron-inspired E Corp, which he pejoratively calls “Evil Corp.” However, the series mostly glosses over sustained portrayals of workplace exploitation. One rare example occurs in the pilot episode, when Elliot responds to a late-night emergency call to counter a “DDoS attack”—a malicious hack of E Corp’s servers. Even so, Elliot is treated with relative professional respect, particularly by his manager, Gideon. Yet the protagonist harbors an internal, often unexplained resistance to the company. As he manages to reboot the system and stop the hack, he discovers a file hackers embedded in E Corp’s servers: “Leave me here,” it says, and Elliot, though taken aback by his own reaction, ultimately complies: “Time to shut them down... why can’t I delete it? I don’t want to delete it. I want it to stay. What’s wrong with me?” (S1E1 [30:00]). The note, as it turns out, was left by none other than himself, *via* the “fsociety” vigilante group. Alderson forgot, because he suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), and the person—or rather persona—who planted the message was “Mr. Robot”, Elliot’s alter ego made in the image of his late father. Indeed, as a mental disorder, DID is the “disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct

2. My translation. Original quote: “La psychanalyse comme chemin, cure, quête d’un sens, fait ici partie de la matrice sérielle, qu’on pourrait définir comme le noyau sémantique et symbolique qui commande le récit et son horizon moral ou philosophique.”

3. My translation. Original quote: “[...] c’est par [l’intermédiaire des personnes] que s’opère le lien à la série [...] Une telle démarche suppose de leur donner un peu plus de dignité ontologique pour qu’on puisse, sans trop perdre la face, envisager de dialoguer avec eux.”

4. My translation. Original quotes: le capitalisme est “une économie d’entreprise”, et “l’entreprise est le microcosme capitaliste, l’institution cardinale du capitalisme.”

personality states,”⁵ but in the show it also assumes a symbolic significance. From its inception, the show frames Elliot as divided between corporate conformity (as a model employee) and anarchist opposition (as a vigilante hacker), with these complex positions contaminating and folding into one another, as well as negotiating control within the character himself.

In contrast, *Severance* grounds its protagonist’s split identity in direct material exploitation. For Mark S., along with his colleagues—Helly R. (Britt Lower), Irving B. (John Turturro), and Dylan G. (Zach Cherry)—working within Macrodata Refinement (“MDR”) at Lumon is fundamentally coercive, as it presupposes adherence to the company’s voluntary severance procedure. This procedure involves surgically partitioning the employee’s consciousness into an “outie” (denoting the “outside” of the workplace) and an “innie” (“inside” the workplace). The innie functions as a captive employee, confined to an interminable workday and deprived of autonomy. The innie remains connected to Lumon; upon crossing the company’s spatial boundary, their consciousness is automatically deactivated and replaced by the outie persona. Conversely, the outie abstains from labor entirely and has limited, if any, access to the innie’s experience. Furthermore, as a byproduct of their outies, severed employees neither choose their condition nor retain the ability to resign. In this context, the title of the series conveys a deliberate irony: it appropriates the term “severance,” originally associated with the actual compensation packages awarded to employees involuntarily terminated. The show repurposes this term to describe an existential state in which labor is devoid of voluntary agency, and from the perspective of the individual, where abstaining from work equates to nonexistence.

Reflecting the class stratification characteristic of capitalist societies, Lumon’s labor organization is hierarchically arranged, creating a top-down control mechanism over vulnerable employees. In practical terms, this translates into an inability to resign, mass surveillance by the corporate hierarchy, as well as various strategies to hinder workers’ autonomy. Paradoxically, one of these strategies is precisely the obfuscation of control: when Harmony Cobel (Patricia Arquette), the manager of the severed floor, promotes Mark S. to the role of Macrodata Refinement department chief, she declares that she confers upon him “the freedom to serve” Kier—the founder of Lumon—and by extension the company (S1E1 [15:33]). Lumon’s very own corporate Newspeak collapses freedom and servitude into a single concept—an ideological contradiction that masks the

5. As part of the DSM-V’s diagnostic criteria; American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.), “Dissociative Identity Disorder” - F44.81, 2013, 330.

subjection of employees to the corporation while revealing, to the viewer, the logic of wage slavery.

This mode of corporate governance is a fundamental aspect of what Boltanski and Chiapello identify as the “new spirit” of capitalism. This evolution shifts away from overt hierarchies toward a rhetoric focused on autonomy and flexibility, without the firm relinquishing power or altering the relations of domination (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2011 [1999]: 126). Both *E Corp* and *Lumon* are multinational, all-encompassing entities operating through the “system” to gain power, ultimately governed by a small cadre of influential executives. This dynamic epitomizes capitalism’s fundamental principle of concentrating benefits among a select few at the expense of many. Although the corporate hierarchy remains formally intact, the figures of power within capitalism tend to recede from direct, everyday interactions, appearing only through distant, abstract imagery. From its opening moments, *Mr. Robot* exemplifies this spatial and symbolic detachment of corporate authority, depicting shadowy figures of *E Corp* executives congregated in a busy conference room atop a New York skyscraper while the protagonist’s voice-over narration introduces them as “the top 1% of the top 1%—the ones that play God without permission” (S1E1 [00:35]). Similarly, in *Severance*, *Lumon*’s authority resides within “The Board”, a mysterious governing body whose influence is reduced to indirect commands, and whose only known member within the diegetic timeline is Jame Eagan, the company’s current CEO.

The power of this wealth-hoarding class is undeniable; however, it remains as abstract as their transient appearances. The shows provide limited insight into their operations, instead alluding to an indistinct notion of absolute control, which risks devolving into a conspiratorial fantasy of “puppet mastery.” To prevent this from undermining structural critique, Vint and Alexander suggest we understand such groups as “an aesthetic shorthand to capture the larger structural forces of financialized capital”, which prove difficult to depict if not by way of figuration (2022: 174). Viewing *Severance*’s Board and *Mr. Robot*’s “DEUS Group” as allegorical representations of a broader capitalist ruling class makes for a compelling interpretation; in turn, it may enable us to view Mark S. and Elliot Alderson as embodied manifestations of a working class suffering under the unjust regime of capitalism. Nonetheless, allegory functions here as both a solution and a symptom. On one hand, it grants some visibility to the diffuse and abstract structures of contemporary capitalism, providing a conceptual and visual understanding of otherwise intangible forms of power. On the other hand, it may create the illusion that 21st century capital is embodied rather than operating through dispersed, networked, and often immaterial processes—such that the overthrow of a handful of individuals appears sufficient to right the system, effectively obscuring the

structural dimensions of exploitation and rendering traditional avenues of class confrontation progressively obsolete. This allegorical opacity is mirrored at the diegetic level: the protagonists themselves are similarly unable to identify the apex of corporate power. This displacement may cause a significant shift in the shows: when the ruling class cannot be directly challenged, conflict moves inward and laterally, targeting the self and fellow workers.

Structurally, this power is omnipresent yet unreachable, creating a pronounced divide between the workers and those in power. *Severance* makes this divide literal: outies retain control over their innies while remaining shielded from the realities of the severed floor. But this is taken to an extreme through the character of Helly. First introduced as a confused and expendable new hire, she is revealed as the alter of Helena Eagan, the CEO's daughter, who, by all means, is the "face of the company", Lumon using her severed status as a publicity stunt to boost the company's image. Worker and corporate power are here both literally and figuratively divided. Yet by inscribing this division within a shared body, the series underscores their mutual implication in the same overarching structure. A similar conflation is made in *Mr. Robot*: the first time we see Elliot work at Allsafe, he is shown examining the log files of a recent cyberattack on E Corp, which he audibly calls "awesome." Gideon (Michel Gill)—the CEO of Allsafe and Elliot's boss—immediately responds: "You think this is awesome? This is killing us, Elliot" (S1E1, [08:22]). Gideon's choice of language draws Elliot—and, by extension, the rest of the employees—into a manufactured sense of solidarity with management. Suddenly, Elliot is incorporated within the corporate "we," even though moments earlier, he had nearly expressed satisfaction regarding attacks toward E Corp. This linguistic strategy obscures the fundamental divide between those who possess ownership of the enterprise and those whose labor sustains it.

The implications extend beyond rhetorical flourish. When Gideon employs the term "we," he personifies the company, treating it as a living subject, as though the company's survival were a shared bodily concern in which employees are organically implicated. Etymologically, the term "corporation" derives from the Latin *corpus*, meaning "body" or "person". Under U.S. law, a corporation is an "artificial person or legal entity [...] which is regarded in law as having a personality and existence distinct from that of its several members."⁶ In the shows, corporate power appears not just as an external structure but, symbolically, as a collective body which individuals are expected to belong to. Conflict does not take the form of a confrontation between two clearly opposed classes but emerges

6. *Black's Law Dictionary*, 11th ed. (St. Paul, MN: Thomson Reuters, 2019), s.v. "corporation."

from the protagonists' uneasy incorporation into the corporate "person" itself. Capitalist power, therefore, is not solely exerted from above; it is internalized and experienced from within.

Machinic Labor and the Production of Subjectivity

Mark's first on-screen appearance within the workplace is depicted as a sequence of mechanical thresholds (S1E1). Set against a subdued, ominous extradiegetic score, the protagonist proceeds silently across the lobby towards the reception desk at its center. Without uttering a word, he presents his identification badge; the secretary, equally silent, places a call to confirm his clearance. He scans his badge once to pass through the gates and again to access a secure room; subsequently, a guard conducts a routine scan with a handheld device. Mark then enters the elevator and turns around, now facing the viewer. After a brief interval, the musical score diminishes, and a bell chime signifies the elevator's arrival at his designated office level [09:07]. Suddenly, Mark's eyelids flutter. A high-pitched whine emits a screech, the camera dolly-zooms in—the split is complete. The elevator doors open, and upbeat, groovy music starts playing. Innies Mark navigates the brightly lit, minimalistic corridors of the severed floor in a manner reminiscent of a programmed agent: each step is deliberate, each turn precise. The transition from outie to innie is portrayed as an automatic procedure, a machine-like switch, which subjugates "human gestures to mechanical rhythms" (Berardi, 2009: 111), transforming the individual into a compliant employee.

Upon first observing Elliot enter the workplace, we see him operate a personality transition. As he crosses the office threshold, he pulls back the hood of his hoodie and reflects in a voice-over: "But I'm only a vigilante hacker by night; by day, just a regular cybersecurity engineer, employee number ER28-0652" (S1E1 [07:38]). Later in the episode, he introduces himself to E Corp's Senior Vice President of Technology, Tyrell Wellick (Martin Wallström), as "just a tech" [18:45]. Concerning Allsafe and E Corp-related matters, the protagonist consistently diminishes his own subjectivity, affirming that he is merely a number, a "cog in the machine". Far from simply representing a strategy to distance himself personally or ideologically from the corporation, such self-dehumanization points to a broader logic of 21st century capitalism, wherein labor, identity, and value are mediated through technological systems. As Mr. Robot, Elliot's alter ego, observes in the pilot episode, "Money hasn't been real since we got off the gold standard. It's become virtual. Software, the operating system of our world" (S1E1 [45:32]). Despite Elliot's professed efforts to disengage from capitalism—rejecting mainstream culture and

conspicuous consumption—he remains constrained by its structures. His social anxiety drives him to seek connection predominantly through digital interfaces. Rather than engaging directly with others, he hacks into their lives, watching their online presence and reconstructing their identities from their digital footprint. Social relations, much like capital, have become virtualized, as have identities. Elliot laments that nothing appears to be genuine anymore; nonetheless, his vigilantism, his principal form of opposition, is mediated by technology. Confronting someone equates to confronting his virtuality, and vice versa: in the series’ opening scene, when he exposes a cybercriminal and facilitates his arrest, Elliot claims to have “deleted him”: “In three short minutes I destroyed a man’s business, life, existence” (S1E1 [06:45]). The protagonist presents hacking as a way to contest corporate authority: “The higher-ups don’t like someone with my power,” he declares. Yet this resistance remains deeply entangled with the system it opposes. Elliot relies on the same technological infrastructures and techniques through which corporate power operates, making hacker culture in *Mr. Robot* less an external challenge to capitalism than one of its internal contradictions; a form of resistance that inevitably reproduces aspects of the structures it seeks to contest because it shares their technological and economic foundations. In brief, the main characters in both series are caught in a liminal space where the principles pertaining to the corporate structure and capitalism at large have converged with their existence. As Lazzarato contends, post-industrial capitalism reconfigures the relations between “subject/object, human/machine, or agent/instrument” into heterogeneous forces that are variously “animated” (2014: 27). It thus uses and produces “ontologically ambiguous,” hybrid entities (Lazzarato, 2014: 30). In both *Mr. Robot* and *Severance*, this condition manifests as a crisis of subjectivity whereby the characters’ internal lives become inextricably linked to the technological systems that organize their work, such that subjectivity itself is both mobilized by and tethered to “the machine.” This duality is already encapsulated by the oxymoronic title of “Mr. Robot,” which bridges (and separates) human and machine, or by the technologically mediated existence of the severed workers. With regard to labor, this duality is evident at Lumon: the Macrodata Refinement process, although digital in nature, depends heavily on the subjective judgment of the employees. Seated before an outdated computer interface, the refiners are tasked with sorting grids of seemingly arbitrary numbers—not according to any explicit logical criteria, but based on the emotional responses they evoke: “how the numbers feel”. In “Half-Loop” (S1E2), Helly, who is still a novice, encounters difficulties in refining her first set of numbers. After unsuccessful attempts to skim through the interface, she ultimately hovers over a specific set of numbers [48:33]. The camera eerily zooms in on the computer screen, honing in on the digits. When she sorts them, the action visibly leaves her shaken and breathless. “They were scary,” she says; an admission that demonstrates that subjectivity is not excluded by

Lumon's machinery, but rather integrated as a fundamental aspect of the labor process.

Because Lumon's operations derive value directly from subjectivity, the innies are sometimes compelled to cultivate authentic aspects of their personalities, rather than merely performing rote tasks. This includes sharing "something about themselves" during welcome parties or expressing preferences for one of the company's nine core principles (S1E2 [13:45]). However, most of the time, what appears personal becomes entangled in the Lumon mythos or in Lumon-branded commodities. Mark possesses a crystal head cube of himself; Dylan proudly boasts to Helly about the several caricature portraits of himself he has acquired—Lumon's fifth-tier incentive reward for completing 100% of a work file [09:51]. Subjectivity itself becomes both the raw material and the product of labor, shaped through rituals, rewards, and narratives that align personal meaning with corporate value. So much so that Dylan reacts to Helly's suicide attempt—an extreme effort to escape the corporation—by attributing it, without much sarcastic tone, to her lack of material possessions: "She needs to start earning perks; I'd end my life if I didn't have any finger traps yet." (S1E5 [20:55]). This reflects the idea, prevailing since the advent of capitalism, that mass consumption serializes "behaviors in relation to existing merchandises" (Berardi, 2009: 111). Furthermore, according to Hardt and Negri, "the great industrial and financial powers [...] produce not only commodities but also subjectivities" (2009: 32). In the third episode of *Severance* (S1E3, "In Perpetuity"), Irving (John Turturro) informs Helly that "he was shapeless" upon awakening on the severed floor for the first time. "It's an unnatural state for a person to have no history," he elucidates; "History makes us someone. Gives us a context. A shape" [37:30]. He further states, "But then I learned that I work for a company that has been actively caring for mankind since 1866," thereby framing Lumon's assignment of an identity to the severed employees as a providential act.

The second season's "Cold Harbor" episode (S2E10) reveals the function of Macrodata Refinement—at least as it pertains to Mark's duties—as the systematic depletion of other severed individuals' psyches, turning their bodies and minds into neutralized vessels prepared for the implantation of new consciousness. This process relies on the engagement of human emotion: effective refinement necessitates that the data operator is acquainted with the individual whose psyche is being eroded; what might appear as mindless labor actually involves the effort to diminish the mind. A complex triangulation emerges here: the labor performed by an employee, whose subjectivity (or rather their outie's) is essential for the task, acts upon another individual whose subjectivity is being systematically extracted, all mediated through computer interfaces and biomedical technologies. Once again, the paradoxical logic inherent in corporate

capitalism is laid bare, as it simultaneously demands and exhausts subjectivity, forging connections between minds and bodies only to tear them apart. Lumon ultimately functions as a capitalist grinding machine in which individual suffering is neither alleviated nor eradicated but recycled into productive force. Mark's trajectory is ironic: although he chose to utilize severance technology to escape the grief associated with his wife's death, it is ultimately revealed that Lumon bears culpability in that loss, and by continuing to serve the corporation, Mark does not suspend his suffering but unwittingly reproduces it.

Capitalist powers, Hardt and Negri argue, "produce agentic subjectivities within the biopolitical context: they produce needs, social relations, bodies, and minds—which is to say, they produce producers" (2009: 32). Lumon generates workers who will, in turn, sustain the corporation by training others to do so. The ubiquity of this recursive model is evident from *Severance*'s opening scene, which shows the "orientation procedure"—a protocol that new hires undergo to acclimate them to their life at Lumon. The opening scene begins with a black frame accompanied by an asynchronous diegetic voice of unknown origin, asking, "Who are you?" through a vintage speaker. After a delay, the first image appears: a God's eye view of a newly severed worker, unconscious and laid out on a conference table. As she awakens, the show cuts to a close-up shot of the vintage speaker, now emitting static feedback. A reverse close shot reveals Helly's face. Visibly disoriented, she can only respond with "Hello". The character first introduced to the viewer is Helly rather than Mark, who is the unequivocal main character of the show, whose voice the viewer has already heard without yet knowing it. He now requests Helly to participate in a "brief survey." Her unsuccessful attempts to leave the room compel her to comply, yet she is unable to remember answers to simple questions about her name or her date of birth. Tension escalates as Mark remotely identifies all the "Unknown" responses; by not knowing herself, Helly seems to have failed the assessment. The door opens, ultimately revealing Mark; he stands in the doorway, his figure dressed in an office suit, shrouded in darkness and faintly illuminated by a dim green glow behind him. The anxiety-inducing nature of this mise-en-scene is instantly contrasted by Mark's enthusiasm as he cheerfully announces, "That's a perfect score!". A reverse close-up lingers slightly on Helly, who is now panting with fear. Her fear, confusion, and dispossession are reclassified as success, because from Lumon's perspective she has been cleared of history, attachments, and autonomy. Although the show does not specify the exact duration of Mark's tenure at the corporation, it is implied that he has been employed there for at least one or two years by this point. Having become fully acquainted with his role, he is now assigned the responsibility of training Helly, to serve as the "producer" of her new corporate identity, mirroring the assistance once provided by his former friend Petey when

he initially joined the company. Helly's lack of self is not a disadvantage but an asset: she is prepared to be shaped into whatever Lumon requires of her. In accordance with Hardt and Negri's framework, *Severance* portrays capitalism not merely as an exploitative system but as one that sustains itself by generating the very forms of subjectivity it necessitates.

In this context, Mark embodies capitalist incentives whereas Helly, as a frightened newcomer, conveys the distressing experience of being dehumanized within the workforce. The subsequent cut—accompanied by glitching sounds—transitions seamlessly into the opening titles, only to be interrupted by an image of Mark weeping alone in his vehicle in the company parking lot. This temporal, spatial and formal cut not only repositions Mark as the “true” protagonist but also delineates and interconnects (inward and outward; Helly and Mark; inner and outer), thereby highlighting the duality and hybridity inherent in such states through juxtaposition. Furthermore, this “technologically mediated” cut aligned with electronic sounds is reminiscent of the switch between innie and outie, of the fusion of human and machine, corroborated by the rhetorical ambiguity of the term “speaker” (denoting both a human speaker and electronic apparatus). An additional significant element in this introductory scene is the suffering endured by both Mark and Helly. Within this framework, subjectivity is more indicative of corporate control than a promise of humanization; instead, subjectivity exists solely “for the machine,” and “subjective components are functions of enslavement” (Lazzarato, 2014: 29). One of Lumon's key selling points for the severance procedure is the appealing prospect of achieving a “work-life balance,” which Mark references during his interview with Helly: “I understand you're confused about the severance procedure. Before we hop on that, let's chat about something I bet you have heard of, the work-life balance.”

Historically, this concept rests on the premise that the “ideal capitalist workplace was ruthlessly concerned with efficiency and did not care at all about the well-being of their workers,” leading “the idealized home” as “the space where one was loved and nurtured regardless of their output” (Palmer & Schueths, 2022: 50). *Severance* introduces an ironic dimension to this myth: since the innie and the outie possess separate consciousnesses, no “balance” exists, rendering each side absolute, with perpetual work for the innie and no work whatsoever for the outie. Moreover, the notion of “work-life balance” implies that work is not equivalent to life, and consequently, that workers are not “living,” thus perpetuating their exploitation as dehumanized individuals. This is further complicated by Mark's own motivation for undergoing severance: an attempt to escape the burdens of his personal life. This central paradox finds an articulation in the lyrics of Styx's “Mr. Roboto” song, featured in the penultimate episode of *Mr. Robot* (S4E12, “whoami”): “Machines to save our lives /

Machines dehumanize.” Ultimately, the mechanisms intended to save the characters undermine the very essence of human subjectivity.

The traditional dichotomy between human and machine, or authentic self and professional persona, grows increasingly indistinct. While capitalism incorporates subjectivity and fosters hybridity, this does not mean that the self is seamlessly integrated. Instead, this fusion generates instability. The self is caught between conflicting demands: to demonstrate authenticity and to satisfy the corporation’s expectations of an ideal worker; to act human and to perform mechanically. Capitalism exploits this discrepancy, manipulating the division to generate greater value, yielding not seamless adaptation but crisis. Consequently, the crisis of subjectivity directly translates into alienation, experienced as lived suffering.

Fractured Subjectivity and the Experience of Alienation

According to Stéphane Haber, alienation is the “concept par excellence of social pathology *as experience*—more *precisely, as first-person lived experience*” (2006; the author’s italics).⁷ While the previous section examined how subjects become fused with machines and corporate systems, alienation signifies the experiential toll of such fusion: the suffering that ensues when subjectivity is both demanded and depleted by capital. Alienation no longer remains confined to power structures or mere identity; it now pertains to embodied suffering—a “concrete diminishment of the self, a vital limitation, that is originally psychobiological,” as well as the “pathology of a life diverted from itself and gone astray” (Haber, 2006).⁸ This psychobiological dimension is instrumental in understanding how the machinic labor conditions discussed earlier translate into visceral, lived distress.

Both *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* dramatize this suffering through their protagonists’ fractured subjectivities. As we know, in *Mr. Robot*, Elliot suffers from “DID”, a psychological ailment that manifests visually as a multiplication of selves on screen. This is particularly salient in “eps1.7_ wh1ter0se.m4v” (S1E8): the distressed protagonist stares at his reflection in front of a mirror [41:12], and “glitches”, a myriad characters taking his place in rapid succession while he utters, *via* voice-over, “Do I even exist?”. The scene’s frantic editing narrows the distance between mental experience and bodily reality, presenting them as inseparable dimensions

7. My translation. Original quote: “En effet, au-delà des formes grossières par la fiction, l’aliénation nous paraît finalement être le concept par excellence de la pathologie sociale comme expérience et, plus précisément, comme expérience vécue en première personne.”

8. My translation. Original quote: “Nous verrons ainsi plutôt l’aliénation comme la pathologie d’une vie détournée d’elle-même et qui se manque.”

of a single pathology. Elliot's dysfunction is irreducibly psychobiological, resulting in what Haber calls "diminishment of the self". We see here a crisis of ontological uncertainty so acute that the protagonist can no longer affirm his own existence. Per Marx's formulation, Elliot is estranged "from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence [*Wesen*], his *human* essence" (Marx, 1992 [1844]: 329). His dissociative condition is not just a psychological issue but also a symptom of the machinic subject position; the self fragments because no clear role exists for someone who must be both subject and object, both agent and tool, both living person and machine.

In *Severance*, dissociation is also at once psychological and corporeal: it is a parting of the psyche caused by a technological chip inserted into the severed worker's body. The severed workers are ostensibly diminished, now being partial, "reduced" in their daily lives, and not knowing who they are when they first enter the workplace.

To situate this crisis within a longer genealogy of capitalist exploitation, we must return to Marx's foundational analysis of alienation. Tracing back to the Latin *alienare*, alienation means to "cause a separation to occur", to "take away", or to "remove". In its broader usage, alienation denotes a condition in which "living human beings are controlled by a force that exists outside of them but that is in reality their own combined force" (Ross, 2020: 535). At face value, this definition echoes the shows' motif of split self: the characters struggle against entities—the corporation, their colleagues, their "alter"—that are simultaneously external antagonists and emanations of their own labor and desire. The split self, in both texts, is already literal: workers fight for control against forces that are both Other and intrinsically part of themselves.

Quoting Marx's *Capital: Vol. 1* (1990 [1867]: 175), Ross argues that alienation, within the context of capitalism, means belonging "to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite" (Ross, 2020: 536). Workers lose control over their labor, adapting to an external, impersonal system rather than directing it according to their needs and purposes. The alienated worker's labor exists outside him, "*as something alien, as a power independent of the producer*" (Marx, 1992 [1844]: 324). More precisely, Marx situates the alienated worker within industrial manufacturing, transforming raw materials into tangible commodities through a combination of manual and machine labor. This sheds light on Marx's "primary grievance with capitalism" (Ross, 2020: 537): that alienation is "broadly speaking, the living being ruled by the dead, producers being ruled by products". The *Manuscripts*, in particular, support a dialectical inversion of Capital development and worker self-realization.

The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The *devaluation* of the human world grows in direct proportion to the *increase in value* of the world of things. Labor not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a *commodity* and it does so in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general (Marx, 1992 [1844]: 323).

Given that workers are compelled to sell their labor power as a condition of survival, they enter the market as commodities alongside the goods they produce. In a system in which the means of production are owned by capital rather than by the workers themselves, workers become disposable, valued only insofar as their labor can be profitably exploited. Consequently, the value of the worker diminishes directly in proportion to the increase in the value of the commodities they produce: heightened productivity increases their replaceability. Initially, the more workers contribute to expanding the realm of “things,” the more their own significance diminishes, as capitalist production prioritizes the realm of commodities over the individuals who create them.

As one might expect, this 19th century analysis does not map neatly onto the forms of corporate capitalism depicted in *Mr. Robot* and *Severance*. The protagonists’ labor model is broadly consistent with Marx’s theory insofar as their labor produces outputs that they neither fully comprehend nor exercise control over, which are immediately appropriated by corporate systems and later manifest as instruments of their own domination. However, these outputs never appear to be made “material in an object”; they never quite undergo what Marx describes as “*objectification* of labour” (1992 [1844]: 324). The product of their labor, which accrues to the capital of Lumon and E Corp, exists not as tangible matter but as digital information: “data refinement” in Mark’s work department and cybersecurity protocols for Elliot. Furthermore, as previously argued, labor is contingent not only on data but also on the subjectivity of the worker. Subjectivity constitutes the fundamental “raw material” of immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996: 142) in conjunction with data. But it is also the outcome of labor. Both Elliot and Mark are “subject-objects”. Mr. Robot—Elliot’s alter ego—serves as a hybrid form of subject-object upon which Elliot “has bestowed life,” but who eventually confronts him as an “hostile and alien” autonomous force (Marx, 1992 [1844]: 324), threatening to subsume Elliot despite its origin as a protective mechanism. Similarly, outie Mark has brought innie Mark into existence, yet the latter has grown independent, resisting his outie’s authority over the body they are forced to share. Both shows depict a 21st century corporate capitalism in which the transition from material to immaterial production fundamentally alters the structure of alienation. In circumstances where physical commodities are absent, and production yields code and data rather than tangible

goods, *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* figure the alienated product as inwardly directed toward the worker's own subjectivity. The alienated product is, in effect, subjectivity itself, reconfigured as a corporate asset.

The worker is not only estranged from the product of their labor but from the act of labor itself. "So if the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation [...]. The estrangement of the object of labour merely summarizes the estrangement, the alienation in the activity of labour itself," Marx surmises (1992 [1844]: 326). In the shows, this manifests in two contrasting ways: first, in the value the characters assign to their labor; and secondly, as active detachment within the workplace.

Although Lumon's Macrodata Refinement employees carry out repetitive and opaque tasks—such as sorting numbers without comprehending their purpose—their managers persuade them that their work is "mysterious and important." Mark, like other innies, initially accepts Lumon's narrative despite his complete lack of understanding regarding the overall objectives of his responsibilities. The perceived value of the work fundamentally depends on its elusiveness: ignorance becomes a blank slate upon which employees can inscribe illusions of significance within the company's operations. Lumon cultivates this sense of importance through the "secular religious fervor of capitalist workplaces" (Palmer & Schueths, 2024: 51). Founder Kier Egan is venerated as a divine figure, to the extent that the innies understand their work as serving a higher purpose in the continuation of "His project". Marx posits that devotion to a transcendent figure operates as a form of self-alienation, whereby "the more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself" (1992 [1844]: 324). Without venturing into the theological stakes of this argument, this discussion draws on the 1844 *Manuscripts* to examine how the corporation instrumentalizes faith. Indeed, beneath Lumon's religious veneer lies corporate capitalism's subjectivation of the individuals as workers (Prevas, 2024); a twofold process that deepens rather than alleviates alienation. First, Lumon's sanctifying narratives substitute the worker's need for meaningful labor with false consciousness, obstructing any impulse to understand the real nature and purpose of their work. This is so the innies remain in a state of detached, alienated labor. Second, if the innies' sense of self and significance in the workspace is inflated—and indeed, they feel part of a grand historical project—then they are less likely to quit or resist, which keeps them compliant and ever more distant from their outie counterparts.

Conversely, Elliot Alderson is acutely, even pathologically aware of his work's value—or lack thereof. Jaded and cynical, he regularly addresses the topic of his work's meaninglessness using voice-overs. Yet this consciousness offers no escape. Elliot's cybersecurity work at Allsafe is dictated by corporate protocols, forcing compliance with routines he neither

controls nor endorses, all in service of companies he despises. Because his experience of alienated labor is conscientized, it allows the protagonist to indulge in escapist fantasies; but those fantasies are superseded by a detached resignation. In *Mr. Robot*'s pilot episode [19:18], Elliot reflects:

ELLIOT (V.O.): Sometimes I dream of saving the world. Saving everyone from the invisible hand, one that brands us with an employee badge. The one that forces us to work for them. The one that controls us every day without us knowing it. But I can't stop it. I'm not that special. I'm just anonymous. I'm just alone.

Where Mark S. is unaware, Elliot is in a state of hyperawareness. Invoking Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the protagonist recasts the "invisible hand" metaphor for market self-regulation as an apparatus of systemic domination. For Alderson, the invisible hand is shorthand to corporate capitalism: the character deplores being "branded" as an employee, and, as he told the viewer, forced to labor for "Evil Corp", the megaconglomerate that owns "70% of the global consumer credit industry" (S1E1, [46:18]).

Throughout the presentation, Elliot's heightened awareness of global issues and his dissatisfaction with his professional environment lead him to frequently "detach" from his sense of self, maintaining his role "only as a *physical subject*" (Marx, 1992 [1844]: 325) while his consciousness drifts elsewhere. In the early moments of the pilot episode, his colleague and friend Angela approaches him at his workplace to address his absence from her birthday celebration the previous evening. In response, Elliot promptly withdraws into a flashback; we observe him lingering outside the venue where the party was held, paralyzed by social anxiety, unable to commit to either entering or leaving. However, his fugue is broken by Angela's reproach [09:20]:

ANGELA: Stop thinking about something else when I'm talking to you. I hate when you do that.

ELLIOT: Sorry. I was thinking about work.

ANGELA: Maybe that's why Gideon loves you so much. He thanks me all the time for bringing you in. But for some reason, I think you secretly hate it here.

ELLIOT (V.O.): She was right. I liked most of the people, but our business, a cybersecurity firm that protects corporations—I can't think of anything I hate more.

ELLIOT (*aloof*): No, I love it here.

The editing of this interaction draws attention to Elliot's dissociative tendency to "zone out" as a form of psychological escape, while his physical

presence remains in the workspace. Elliot seeks to justify his disengagement by asserting that he was “thinking about work”. This arches back to the idea that professional concerns take precedence over personal matters within capitalist frameworks; more notably, it indicates that the character consciously exploits this concept. Angela perceives this duplicity; for example, she senses that their manager’s admiration for Elliot is not reciprocated, and the voice-over immediately confirms her suspicion: by providing the audience with direct insight into Elliot’s internal feelings, the narrative emphasizes the tension between the protagonist’s feigned compliance to corporate norms (his blasé “No, I love it here”) and his personal disdain for the firm (“I can’t think of anything I hate more”). Here, Elliot assumes a metaphorical mask: that of the “good corporate employee.” “How do I take off a mask when it stops being a mask? When it’s as much a part of me as I am?” later ponders Elliot (S2E1 [29:10]). E Corp emerges as an antagonistic force from which Elliot cannot disentangle himself. He is estranged not only from the work he performs but also from genuine social expression: he is unable to establish an authentic connection with Angela despite his affections for her, nor can he attend her birthday celebration without overwhelming anxiety, even as he concedes that he “likes most of the people”. His alienation extends beyond the professional environment into all aspects of life, articulating a broader critique of how labor under capitalism obstructs subjectivity itself.

Both Mark and Elliot demonstrate that neither mystification nor demystification alone offers a resolution to alienation within the context of corporate technological capitalism. Mark’s adherence to Lumon’s official narrative ensures his compliance but leaves him profoundly dissatisfied; conversely, Elliot, who perceives corporate mechanisms with clarity, finds that heightened awareness only amplifies his feelings of isolation and despair, leaving him trapped within a system he fundamentally opposes. Ultimately, whether or not they are aware of their alienation is of little consequence; in either scenario, the suffering endures, and such distress is inherently unsustainable.

Overall, the insistence on dissociation lends itself to a Marxist reading, though this is not to say that Marx offered diagnostic tools to comprehend alienation in a clinical sense. Rather, the motif of split identity, in the corpus, is figurative: a way to convey personal conflict as much as it is a metaphor for social pathology. In regard to *Mr. Robot*, Vint and Alexander confer a similar meaning to Elliot’s condition of split personality, presenting it as “an internal ‘split’ that metonymically traces larger structural, economic, and political splits” (2022: 180). For the characters, the experience of being dual, of existing at the margins yet at the core of corporate systems, can generate awareness that this stems from structural dynamics of power, not from individual shortcomings.

From Dissociation to Dissidence



The risk, however, is that this inward turn displaces class struggle, undermining material analysis and weakening critique, potentially reducing corporate power to a matter of infighting among subjects. The question thus arises whether this subjective turn precludes the possibility of collective action by redirecting antagonism inward and laterally—toward oneself and one’s peers—instead of toward the “system” or the ruling class. The corpus navigates this tension by staging infighting on two levels: interpersonal and intrapersonal.

Interpersonal dynamics in both *Severance* and *Mr. Robot* illustrate how capitalist structures influence relationships between colleagues, transforming peers into enforcers of corporate imperatives despite sharing similar goals or interests. As we showed before, Mark is assigned to “training duty” upon receiving his promotion, which entails the responsibility of orienting new employees so that they conform to Lumon’s labor standards. A similar dynamic unfolds in the narrative arc of Elliot’s childhood friend Angela. Following the death of her mother from leukemia caused by a toxic chemical spill at an E Corp factory in the 1990s, Angela endeavors to hold the corporation accountable. But unable to secure redress, she decides to start working for the conglomerate with the hope of enacting change from within, using a non-revolutionary approach (S1E10). Contrary to her initial ambition, by the second season, Angela has relinquished her efforts. Indeed, over the course of her tenure at E Corp (Season 2), she “begins to orient her desire toward success within the system” (Vint & Alexander, 2022: 192), soon finding herself in direct opposition to Elliot. What is especially notable is how both Mark and Angela end up as instruments of the very systems that harmed them. In both shows, capitalist institutions create “bespoke-for-capitalism” identities: selves carefully crafted to support and sustain corporate agendas. This process of forming identities ensures that employees climbing the corporate hierarchy internalize these values and reinforce them laterally among colleagues, rather than holding accountable those who hold actual authority above them. As such, workers police each other, often without recognizing that they do so. Mark disciplines Helly; Angela betrays Elliot. Corporate power does not operate solely in a top-down fashion. Instead, it is perpetuated by enlisting employees as inadvertent agents of their own and each other’s subjugation.

Perhaps most significant, however, are the internal processes depicted in these narratives. The struggle is not merely external, as workers contest the authority of management; it also manifests as an inner conflict, in which individuals are torn between competing roles, allegiances, and class

identifications. In *Mr. Robot*, from Season 2 onward, the Mr. Robot alter⁹ attempts to drive radical actions and frequently clashes with Elliot's moral hesitations, producing overt conflict. Though the protagonist tries to work independently, Mr. Robot continues to act through him. Most frequently, this manifests in narrative and formal ruptures: "the screen cuts to black and then 'jumps' to another time and place—we follow only Elliot, whose experience is disrupted by chunks of lost time during which Mr. Robot has taken over" (Vint & Alexander, 2022: 192). The struggle manifests physically as well, while remaining resolutely internal. In "eps1.9_zer0-day.avi" (S1E10), as an argument in a café escalates between the two, Mr. Robot shoves Elliot against a wall and begins to strangle him—only for the illusion to abruptly shatter, revealing that Elliot is, in fact, choking himself while other patrons look on in confusion [36:45].

Mr. Robot's motif of the split self carries multiple layers of significance. As established earlier, divided identity functions as a symptom of alienated labor and the contradictory demands on subjectivity imposed by corporate capitalism; simultaneously, it becomes a site of class struggle. For all his ideological discomfort with capitalism, Elliot's "inside the corporation" employee persona nevertheless occupies a relatively secure and privileged position as a cybersecurity engineer at Allsafe in New York City. He earns a stable salary and possesses technical skills that grant him a degree of leverage within the labor market. By contrast, Mr. Robot, the "outsider", appears as a marginal, anarchic figure who, when first encountered in a subway station, is quite literally asking for change. But there is a certain ambivalence to his class position: although visually coded as homeless and dispossessed, his outsider status does not straightforwardly amount to being working class, given his continued dependance upon Elliot's resources and social position. Elliot, notwithstanding his pervasive anger, largely retains a reformist orientation, whereas Mr. Robot—though benefiting from Elliot's material conditions—advocates for a radical break with the *status quo*, an impulse toward post-capitalist transformations. This ambiguity invites a reading of Mr. Robot's radicalism as, at least initially, performative; however, it may also operate as a narrative and aesthetic mode through which distance from the institutions and values of corporate capitalism is staged. Either way, the conflict between the two characters extends beyond Elliot's internal psyche and takes on a political dimension: reform *versus* revolution, accommodation to the system *versus* its complete dismantlement, class compromise *versus* class war. This dynamic unfolds within a single conflicted, fragmented individual. Not only can Elliot's dissociation be read as reflecting class struggle, but it also mirrors the dilemma experienced by many workers under late capitalism:

9. The word "alter" (instead of "alter ego") is used in the show to refer to the protagonist's different personas.

an aspiration for stability juxtaposed with an acute awareness of the system's inherent inequities.

Severance presents the inverse configuration, reversing the class positions occupied by its divided subjects. The earliest instance of intrapersonal foiled resistance occurs in episode four, "The You You Are." Innie Helly, struggling to adapt to the severed lifestyle, is forced to rehearse an apology for her manager, Mrs. Cobel, multiple times. She eventually retracts the apology and demands a resignation, even threatening self-harm. Although Cobel complies, Helly returns to the severed floor to find that her outie, Helena, has denied the request. In a video recording, Helena insists on Helly's subordination: "I am a person, you are not; I make the decisions, you do not" [22:34]. There is a clear dehumanization of the employee here, which we may expand to the dehumanization of the working class, as Helena—the public face of the company and a committed adherent to its capitalist ethos—denies personhood to Helly, her worker-self. The split here maps directly onto class hierarchy: Helena embodies capital; Helly embodies labor.

Mark's outie/innie dynamic is more ambiguous and therefore more revealing of intermediate class positions. In the Season 2 finale ("Cold Harbor"), Mark's innie and outie finally get a chance to communicate directly through a camcorder setup arranged by Harmony Cobel and Devon (Mark's sister) at a Lumon birthing cabin. Because of the severance procedure, the two identities cannot interact in real time, thus they communicate by leaving messages for one another, creating a back-and-forth dialogue. Initially, their interaction is polite. Outie Mark shows regret for undergoing severance, then reveals that his wife Gemma is alive, being held at Lumon, and that he needs his innie's help to rescue her. There is some mutual understanding at first. Over time, outie Mark gradually realizes the truth about Lumon's operations. He acknowledges benefiting from the arrangement, as he receives quadruple the pay for being severed, and feels guilty for sending his innie to a distressing life. The conversation soon becomes tense. When outie Mark promises to free his innie by ending his suffering, innie Mark resists. He disputes the idea that life inside Lumon is a "nightmare," arguing that innies have formed meaningful identities and connections. Outie Mark suggests that reintegration might give them a shared life outside Lumon, but innie Mark remains doubtful, fearing erasure and mistrustful of his outie's intentions. As much as outie Mark's intentions seem benevolent, his perspective remains framed by bourgeois assumptions: he pities—and thereby dehumanizes—his innie, failing to recognize the innie as a fully realized subject with distinct needs and aspirations. He wishes to ease his innie's pain, yet his solution is ending his innie's life. Positioned at an intermediary class point, outie Mark possesses

limited power and remains subject to corporate capitalism, while retaining enough stability to lack revolutionary impetus.

Both *Severance* and *Mr. Robot* illustrate the pervasive influence of power on individual subjectivity. The protagonists strive to resist, yet the principal conflict is internal—manifested as fractured identities and internal struggles, all intricately linked to corporate domination. But these series do more than depict class struggle; they show how experiences of dissociation and alienation can constitute the very foundation of resistance. Dissociation and alienation, in other words, are not merely symptoms to be resolved but potential sites which political consciousness can emerge from. As Stéphane Haber (2006: 65; the author's italics) contends:

The impossibility of being oneself is not merely a moral or philosophical theme—it is a *lived* experience of suffering, humiliation, powerlessness, and constrained consciousness and movement—and it is this very experience that can initiate critical reflection and political action.¹⁰

Experiencing alienation can lead to the realization that one's pain is not merely a personal shortcoming, but rather may stem from a broader structure, which in turn may foster class consciousness and the possibility of collective action.

It is this trajectory that *Mr. Robot* narrativizes. The fragmentation of the self does not remain solely an inward affliction but becomes the catalyst for the protagonists to pursue systemic change: Dissociative Identity Disorder sparks the formation of fsociety, a hacker group targeting E Corp. What begins as individual vigilantism expands, by the end of Season 1, into collective action. In turn, fsociety's influence fuels broader movements, mirroring real-world uprisings such as Occupy Wall Street (2011) and the Arab Spring (2010-2012). Near the series' conclusion, after fsociety successfully erases American consumer debt records, their actions culminate in what Elliot's sister Darlene deems "the greatest redistribution in history" (S4E10), an outcome made possible by Elliot's collaboration with Mr. Robot.

Severance presents a more intricate scenario. Should Mark choose to leave Lumon, his outie self could reclaim his life and reunite with his wife, Gemma. However, for his innie, departure from the company would mean deletion and permanent separation from Helly, as Helena would never

10. My translation. Original quote: "*L'impossibilité d'être soi-même n'est donc pas en premier lieu un thème propre à une philosophie morale surplombante, voire méprisante, puisque cette impossibilité est vécue – comme souffrance, humiliation, sentiment de décalage ou d'impuissance, restriction du champ de la conscience et de l'action – et que c'est cela qui met en marche la réflexion critique comme aussi, parfois, l'action politique.*"

accept undergoing reintegration or sharing time with Helly outside the workplace. For innie Mark, the only viable option is to remain at Lumon and resist from within. In “Cold Harbor” (S2E10), Mark, Helly, Dylan, and Irving, who are, at this stage, worn down by Lumon’s relentless exploitation, coalesce to challenge their superiors, Milchick and Drummond. Such nascent worker solidarity resistance hints at the potential for unionization. Although their struggle remains confined within the corporate environment, this does not diminish its radical nature. They refuse both absorption (continuing to comply) and escape (reintegration or resignation), instead choosing a third path: to organize collectively at the very center of the system that oppresses them.

My analysis has thus far examined the motif of the split self within corporate capitalism, following prior scholarship in treating these narratives as depictions of an intensified, dystopian and dysfunctional form of capitalism. Such framing invites a tempting inference: that, in the shows, torn subjectivity and alienated labor are pathologies of capitalism’s excess, resolvable under more moderate arrangements. But near the close of its last season, *Mr. Robot* engages with this fantasy and appears to dismantle it.

In “411 eXit”, the eleventh episode of *Mr. Robot* Season 4, Elliot is caught in a building’s explosion and loses consciousness. The scene of the incident fades to a red screen, which then dissolves into a close-up view of a smartphone: “This is your wake-up call”, the device’s digital assistant announces [35:00]. From this point, the episode stages another subjective “split”: an alternate version of the diegetic world, nested deep within Elliot’s mind, in which the protagonist experiences a realized, utopian version of capitalist success. Now Chief Executive Officer at Allsafe, Alderson has the “perfect life”. His family is loving and supportive; he is engaged to his childhood friend Angela; his career flourishes. Before starting his workday, his routine includes getting ready to cheery music. However, cracks gradually become evident. Elliot’s routine is initially disrupted when his vinyl record becomes stuck in a loop, continuously replaying “Everything is just right / Everything is blue sky” (lyrics from OK Go’s “Turn up the Radio”). While initially comforting, this cheerfulness soon takes on an uncanny, almost mechanical quality. The song becomes hollow, conveying a sense of entrapment rather than satisfaction. Subsequently, while viewing the news at work, Elliot observes F Corp’s rainbow-colored logo glitch back into the original E Corp insignia. This subtle visual disturbance disrupts the illusion, revealing that the ostensibly ethical and friendly rebranding is merely a façade concealing the corporation’s unchanged nature. A following TV report celebrates an alternate version of Chinese Minister Zhang, an influential member of the DEUS group and one of the series’ central antagonists: “Zi Zhang, the world’s richest person, continues to make news for

her philanthropic behavior” [43:00]. This constructs her as the “benevolent billionaire”, a myth which recasts concentrated wealth as moral stewardship rather than structural exploitation, and wherein social power appears as the property of enlightened individuals while the collective labor that generates this wealth remains invisible.

Even Tyrell Wellick—the Patrick Bateman-esque antagonist in the primary timeline—has become surprisingly humane. Now CEO of “F Corp”, he listens sympathetically as the protagonist confesses during a meeting that he feels stuck in “a repetitive, boring routine that feels endless” [45:00], a sentiment Tyrell immediately admits he shares. Cosmetic changes, such as ethical branding, philanthropic narratives, and inclusive aesthetics, do not conceal the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, even in its most idealized version. The motif of the loop conjures the persistence of the system itself: as long as capitalism reproduces its circuits of accumulation, as long as workers feed the machine, alienation persists and genuine fulfillment remains unattainable. But the protagonist breaks the cycle. He awakens, leaving the realm of fantasy. In doing so, he avoids indulging in “the fantasy of postwar American prosperity [...] the fantasy of capitalism in its welfare-state form, before outsourced globalization” (Vint & Alexander, 2022: 193). Ultimately, this final split from the self (from the “dream version” of Elliot who seamlessly integrated into corporate capitalism) retroactively frames the episode as critical not only of capitalism’s shortcomings, but also of one of its most alluring promises: that alienation can be fixed if one achieves success, manages wealth ethically, or trusts the wealthy to be charitable.

During one of the last major confrontations of the show, Whiterose (Zi Zhang’s alias) forces Elliot to play a computer game (S4E11). In order to win the game, the player has to find the exit and free their friend, a non-playable character. Each round presents two choices, and the protagonist must pick. In the game, Elliot tries different options but cannot escape; because his friend is wounded, he must leave them behind. Finally, when Elliot stops trying to escape and chooses to stay with his friend in the dystopian world, the game ends. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as a form of “capitalist realism”: there is no escape from the system (Fisher, 2009). “The virtual and the possible are wedded as irreducible innovation and as a revolutionary machine,” Hardt and Negri argue (2009: 369); as such, refusing the fantasy could mean rejecting the ideal of a post-capitalist system. I will not dispute that the conclusion of the show ultimately amounts to a certain resignation to the capitalist structures regulating life. On the other hand, however, one should not overlook the choice that ended the game: refusing to escape alone, and precisely, staying with a friend.

Indeed, solitary attempts to flee capitalist structures—whether through Elliot’s individual vigilantism, or Helly’s desperate suicide attempt, for instance—proves ineffective. Progress is only possible via collective resistance, not through isolated efforts. According to Boltanski and Chiapello the pursuit of individual autonomy does not yield genuine liberation unless it is integrated into the collective (2011 [1999]: 569).¹¹ *Mr. Robot*’s fourth season and *Severance*’s second season conclude with similar gestures. Rather than complying to capitalist demands or fleeing, the characters choose to resist “within the system”. Though this outcome is *a priori* reformist, their decision acknowledges that capitalist structures are now totalizing and, in this context, that resistance must emerge from within.

Conclusion

In *Mr. Robot* and *Severance*, capitalism is not a force acting upon the characters externally: it is embodied and internalized. Elliot and Mark are bound by its logic but attempt to navigate and resist its constraints. Corporate capitalism, here, is dramatized through crises of subjectivity; the dynamics of coercion and domination inherent to capitalism manifest as a split between two selves sharing a body, between labor and its value, between structure and the individual, between personal experience and collective action. This, in turn, may risk displacing antagonism away from direct class confrontation, as such representations may be too character-driven or individualized to be generalized as a broader evaluation of capitalism itself. Nonetheless, they provide an inventive entry point for revealing—and critiquing—the social pathologies and power dynamics inherent to capitalism.

Drawing on post-Fordist theories, I have argued that these crises of subjectivity reflect the subsumption of the self by capitalism as a productive resource (Lazzarato, 1996, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Berardi, 2009). Post-industrial capitalism produces and uses “ontologically ambiguous” workers, who are composites of subject and object, of human and machine (Lazzarato, 2014: 30). By portraying tech-mediated characters, *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* illustrate capitalist hybridization of self in a corporate context. In the shows, corporations such as E Corp and Lumon weave the

11. My translation. Original quote: “Selon la seconde ligne argumentative suivie par la critique de la libération que le capitalisme est censé offrir, l’exigence d’autonomie ne peut conduire à une véritable libération si elle ne rencontre pas les limites que lui impose une autre exigence : celle de constituer un collectif. Le capitalisme n’est donc pas condamné en tant qu’il imposerait aux personnes une discipline plus sévère que celle à laquelle il leur aurait permis d’échapper mais en tant que, à l’inverse, il devient impossible, sous son empire, de faire régner sur les aspirations individuelles et sur les désirs une discipline suffisante pour empêcher la société de se dissoudre.”

protagonists in the fabric of capitalism, in the “machine”, so that they can hardly separate their identities from the capitalist structures around them. This sets the ground for corporate capitalism to sustain itself. Indeed, not only do capitalist powers “produce agentic subjectivities”, but they also “produce producers” (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 32), that is, they produce subjectivities tailor-made for the imperatives of the corporation, and who will eventually contribute to the formation of more subjectivities—of other workers.

Nevertheless, within the corpus, the protagonists do not seamlessly incorporate into capitalism. Caught in a system that both demands and denies expansive subjectivities, the characters experience capitalist structures as ultimately antagonistic and a cause of significant distress. Their dissociation of the self aligns with Marx’s conception of alienation, wherein capitalist production exerts control over the worker, the worker’s labor becoming a “hostile and alien” object, existing “*outside him*, independently of him and alien to him” (Marx, 1992 [1844]: 324). As Stéphane Haber argues, alienation is not just a theoretical condition but a structural pathology experienced firsthand (Haber, 2006). Since *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* translate capitalism into embodied suffering, the shows avoid presenting its mechanisms as natural and inevitable. Alienation is reframed not as an individualized, detached psychological failure, nor as a normal circumstance, but as a structural condition that calls for collective recognition.

However, according to David Harvey, the contemporary capitalist epoch—which he calls “postmodern”—is marked by a new condition, that of fragmentation (1990). For Harvey, postmodern individuals develop an endless array of selves. Consequently, the individual no longer maintains a coherent identity, which, as Harvey asserts, renders the classic Marxist view of alienation obsolete: one cannot be estranged from oneself if one is not whole in the first place. If, as I argue the series suggest, the crisis of subjectivity and alienation serve as foundational steps through which the individual, under capitalism, may recognize its dysfunctions and the need for collective action, then the normalization of divided identity may foster passivity rather than resistance:

We can no longer conceive of the individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated [...] If, as Marx insisted, it takes the alienated individual to pursue the Enlightenment project with a tenacity and coherence sufficient to bring us to some better future, then loss of the alienated subject would seem to preclude the conscious construction of alternative social futures (Harvey, 1990: 53-54).

Harvey's assertion does not imply that alienation has ceased to exist; rather, it indicates that individuals, under postmodern capitalism, are hyper-alienated—that alienation has become normalized or naturalized. Such normalization potentially undermines the emancipatory possibilities associated with the state of being alienated. However, Harvey's assertion regarding the loss of alienation in the Marxist sense may conflate transformation with loss. In *Mr. Robot* and *Severance*, alienation has intensified and grown more sophisticated: whereas classical Marxist alienation assumed estrangement from a coherent self and its products, these shows dramatize how post-industrial capitalism both demands subjectivity and denies it. I argue that the characters' dissociative states, while indicative of an intensified form of alienation—as Harvey suggests—remain dynamic spaces of tension and negotiation with the dominant structures of capitalism.

In sum, *Mr. Robot* and *Severance* reconfigure alienation not as an individualized predicament, but as a basis for collective action. Admittedly, neither series provides a genuine emancipatory resolution: revolt remains partial and unstable, and, in the case of *Severance*—whose overarching narrative is incomplete at the time of writing—ultimately unresolved. Moreover, as cultural representations, these series should not be understood as producing political consciousness. Their significance lies instead in framing alienation as a shared social condition; political change, however, is ever contingent upon praxis beyond the screen. What is ultimately significant, therefore, is the emergence of collective resistance to capitalism in both series, whether in “intrapersonal” form (Elliot and Mr. Robot cooperating, innie Mark and outie Mark acknowledging the dysfunctions of Lumon and seeking common ground) or “interpersonal” form (fsociety, Mark organizing the innies). Subjective experience becomes politically meaningful only when individual pain is recognized as a shared condition and translated into collective action. If the search for “unity within difference” (Harvey, 1990: 359) remains elusive in these fictional narratives, their final gesture is not toward the restoration of the self to a desired coherence—the characters' struggles offer no utopian end-point—but toward something more tangible and operative: community.

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horizons. Against longstanding critiques of television as a standardized and ideologically conformist medium, she argues that it remains a significant site for contesting dominant understandings of capitalism.

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“I’ll Be a Teacher, Just Like Mama”: Miss Vera and the Politics of Racist Education in Little Marvin’s *Them*



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Abstract: Little Marvin’s *Them: Covenant* (Amazon Prime Video, 2021), the first installment of the anthology series *Them*, mobilizes supernatural horror to expose the enduring legacies of racism, segregation, and intergenerational trauma in the United States. This paper examines how *Them: Covenant* uses horror conventions, such as haunted-houses and supernatural monsters as allegories for the structural violence confronting African Americans, and more specifically explores how the series exposes the racialized mechanisms embedded within educational institutions in post-war America. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, this paper situates *Them: Covenant* within the broader tradition of Black horror, a genre that reclaims horror conventions to expose racial oppression and the persistence of systemic inequality while bringing historically marginalized experiences into mainstream cultural narratives. The paper focuses on the character of Miss Vera, a narrative device through which the series explores how White supremacist ideology shapes the educational experiences of Black children and restricts their access to social mobility through exclusion, surveillance, and psychological violence. Alongside Miss Vera, the paper examines other forms of supernatural “hauntings” in the series to highlight the connections between educational exclusion and broader histories of racial trauma and displacement, challenging narratives of colorblindness and meritocracy that continue to underpin American institutions.

Keywords: Black Horror; Critical Race Theory; *Them*; Little Marvin; Education; American television

Résumé : *Them: Conventant* (Amazon Prime Video, 2021), premier volet de la série anthologique *Them* créée par Little Marvin, mobilise les codes de l’horreur surnaturelle pour mettre en lumière les héritages persistants du racisme, de la ségrégation et des traumatismes transgénérationnels aux Etats-Unis. Cet article analyse la manière dont la série recourt à des motifs classiques du genre horrifique, tels que la maison

hantée ou les créatures surnaturelles, comme métaphores des violences structurelles auxquelles sont confrontées les populations afro-américaines. Il s'intéresse plus particulièrement à la façon dont *Them: Covenant* dévoile les mécanismes de racialisation à l'œuvre dans les institutions éducatives de l'Amérique de l'après-guerre.

En s'appuyant sur la théorie critique de la race (*Critical Race Theory*), cette étude inscrit *Them: Covenant* dans la tradition plus large de l'horreur noire (*Black Horror*), un courant qui réinvestit les conventions du genre pour dénoncer les formes d'oppression raciale et la persistance des inégalités systémiques, tout en donnant une place centrale à des expériences longtemps marginalisées dans les récits culturels dominants. L'analyse se concentre sur le personnage de Miss Vera, utilisé comme un ressort narratif permettant d'explorer la manière dont l'idéologie suprémaciste blanche façonne l'expérience scolaire des enfants noirs et entrave leur mobilité sociale par des mécanismes d'exclusion, de contrôle et de violence psychologique. Au-delà du personnage de Miss Vera, l'article s'intéresse également aux différentes formes de « hantise » qui traversent la série afin de mettre en évidence les liens entre l'exclusion scolaire et les histoires plus larges de traumatisme racial, de déplacement forcé et de dépossession. Il montre ainsi comment la série remet en question les discours de neutralité raciale et de méritocratie qui continuent de structurer les institutions américaines.

Mots-clés : Black Horror ; Critical Race Theory ; Them ; Little Marvin ; éducation ; télévision américaine

Introduction

Little Marvin's anthology series *Them* (Amazon Prime Video, 2021–2024) is a psychological horror drama that mobilizes supernatural horror to interrogate deeply rooted historical traumas in the United States, particularly racism, segregation, and intergenerational trauma. The first season of the series, *Them: Covenant* (2021), the subject of this study, follows a Black family who relocates from North Carolina to an all-White neighborhood in 1950s Los Angeles during the Great Migration. On the surface, *Them: Covenant* adopts the conventions of the haunted-house narrative, but beneath this framework, the narrative unfolds around a host of supernatural forces that prey upon the family's fear, grief, and social isolation, transforming racial hostility into a form of psychological and spectral terror.

While supernatural horror in the series takes the form of a hostile entity that “possesses” its victims through various manifestations, this paper focuses specifically on one of these incarnations called Miss Vera, who takes the shape of a schoolteacher and attaches itself to the family's youngest daughter, Gracie Jean, or Gracie. The paper analyzes Miss Vera as the embodiment of the complicity of the American school system in the devaluation and marginalization of African American children and

how it ultimately obstructs their access to social mobility. Through this figure, the series exposes the power mechanisms through which mainstream institutions police belonging and restrict access to the promises of the American Dream. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the paper argues that Miss Vera symbolizes a White supremacist educational structure that reinforces racial hierarchies and sustains systemic inequality by keeping Black students in a state of stasis and paralysis.

The analysis begins with an overview of the horror genre's growing engagement with racial issues, particularly through the lens of "Black horror," a sub-genre that uses horror tropes to articulate the ongoing failure to achieve racial and social justice in America. Special attention will be paid to the emergence of Black horror as a mode of cinematic expression that has moved from the margins of film and television production into mainstream popular culture, by placing Black experiences at the center of a genre traditionally dominated by White protagonists and perspectives.

Race, Representation, and Horror Conventions

Black horror provides a particularly productive framework for examining how racial power operates through everyday institutions and social practices. In *Them: Covenant*, the use of this genre not only serves to depict the aspects with racial terror but also reveals the quieter, more insidious ways in which racism is reproduced through spaces conventionally associated with safety, belonging, and social advancement, including the family home and the school. In an interview with *Collider*, Marvin explains that in order to write a narrative packed with such complexity, horror provided a useful narrative framework, thanks to its "tremendous capability of couching really complex and nuanced social conversations in a package that is palatable" (Radish, 2021). In this sense, the series incorporates multiple supernatural entities that prey upon the characters' insecurities and traumatic histories, drawing on the Black horror tradition of mobilizing the supernatural to allegorize the racial grievances of African Americans and the enduring legacies of slavery and segregation.

"Black horror," a term coined by Robin R. Means Coleman in her book *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (2011), refers to a genre that uses traditional horror conventions to explore Black culture and experiences, particularly the question of race. Means Coleman distinguishes between this term and "Blacks in horror" films, that is, films that merely feature Black characters. This genre challenges the longstanding marginalization and stereotyping of Black

individuals within horror cinema, a genre that often functions as a microcosm of broader systemic racial dynamics (Means Coleman, 2011).

Kevin Wynter (Wynter, 2022), who observes that American horror films “have historically been unkind” to Black characters, argues that the relegation of Black individuals to secondary roles reflects a longstanding tendency within the genre, whereby Black characters serve merely as auxiliaries to White protagonists, are reduced to sources of comic relief, or are sacrificed early in the narrative (2022: 4). In very similar terms, Catherine Zimmer (2023: 314) notes that horror has historically been “unkind to racial Others,” a tendency rooted in the Gothic tradition, where racial alterity is often coded as monstrous. In her book *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997), Isabel Cristina Pinedo argues that race functions as a “structuring absence” in most mainstream horror films, which feature predominantly White characters, while racial minorities are either excluded or positioned as disposable victims. This absence reflects both the dominance of Whiteness as an “unmarked” category and the theoretical frameworks that have prioritized gender over race (29).

Means Coleman (2011) delineates a spectrum of archetypes in the history of the representation of Black characters in the horror genre, some of which closely echo the racial typologies outlined in Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* (2003), where Blackness is historically confined to marginal cinematic roles. These include representing Blacks as objects of ridicule and associating them with violence and zoomorphic imagery in works like D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *King Kong* (1933). This representational marginalization also took the shape of relegating Black characters to secondary roles or defining them through their loyalty to White protagonists (Means Coleman, 2011).

While Black Horror benefited from the expansion of the home video market and offered more significant roles for Black actors in the 1990s, it was especially the late 2010s and early 2020s that Black horror saw an increased preoccupation with contemporary systemic racism, such as the mass incarceration of Black males under “the New Jim Crow” (Alexander, 2010). This cinematic shift was precipitated by the increased visibility of state-sanctioned violence and heightened racial tensions through social media, but it also took advantage of the increasing dialogue between film and Critical Race Theory, which, taken together, offers a useful framework for fostering dialogue on race and representation (Wynter, 2022:4).

Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022), along with *Bad Hair* (Simien, 2020), *Black Box* (Osei-Kuffour Jr., 2020), *His*

House (Weekes, 2020), *Antebellum* (Bush & Renz, 2020), and *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), are part of this wave, which Allison Landsberg (2018) identifies as a distinct subgenre and terms “horror vérité”. Landsberg posits that unlike traditional horror, which operates through escapism, “horror vérité” reveals everyday realities as the true horrors and exposes “the very real, but often masked, racial landscape of a professedly liberal post-racial America” (2018: 629). She further notes that the cinematic conventions of horror vérité use “a specific set of formal and narrative strategies” that are “uniquely suited to render everyday, endemic and chronic horror – a horror that many in U.S. society do not, or perhaps more accurately refuse, to see” (2018: 630). Alexandra Hauke’s term “critical race horror” (2021) is instrumental in enabling a reading of Black horror films “through the intersectional lens of critical race horror,” as this definition looks into the subgenre’s exploration of “emerging discourses around the intersecting categories of Black history and Black horror” (Hauke, 2021:36).

Schooling Whiteness: Education and Racial Formation

The proliferation of Black horror in cinema has increasingly permeated the medium of television, although at a slower rate than film. Series such as *Lovecraft Country* (Misha Green, HBO, 2020), *Them: Covenant* (Little Marvin, Amazon Prime Video, 2021), *Them: The Scare* (Little Marvin, Amazon Prime Video, 2024), and *The Underground Railroad* (Barry Jenkins, Amazon Prime Video, 2021) have contributed to the expansion of Black horror and racialized storytelling on television.

Little Marvin’s *Them: Covenant*, the focus of this analysis, follows a nuclear family of four as they migrate from the Jim Crow South to suburban Compton in Los Angeles in 1953. Their move becomes possible through the legal dismantling of discriminatory housing restrictions known as racial covenants, clauses historically designed to prevent Black families from purchasing property in White neighborhoods. The Emory family consists of Henry (played by Ashley Thomas), a military veteran and civil engineer; Livia, or Luck (played by Deborah Ayorinde), his wife and a former teacher; and their daughters, Ruby Lee, or Ruby, (played by Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Gracie Jean, or Gracie, (played by Melody Hurd) who are in high school and kindergarten respectively. Prior to their relocation to California, the family suffered the traumatic lynching of their infant son Chester at the hands of White Supremacists in North Carolina, an event that the show revisits in its fifth episode through flashback. The family’s westward migration can be read as part of their search for healing and renewal, marked by the deliberate creation of both physical

and psychological distance from the traumas of the Jim Crow South. At the same time, the move reflects their desire to align themselves with the promises of the postwar conceptualization of the “American Dream,” associated with prosperity, homeownership, and social mobility, as evidenced by their conversation about the future during the trip, in which they discuss the prospect of purchasing a new car (“Day 1,” 00:04:51).

As the camera follows the family’s car and trailer along the road westward, an on-screen text situates the narrative within its broader historical context, linking the Emorys’ journey to the larger movement of the Great Migration:

Between 1916 and 1970, roughly 6 million African Americans relocated from the rural southern United States to the Northeast, Midwest and West. Widely known as the Great Migration, many Black families were drawn to California by the promise of industrial jobs and a chance to leave the Jim Crow South behind. On September 14, 1953, Henry and Livia ‘Lucky’ Emory moved their family from Chatham County, North Carolina to Compton, California. The following occurred over 10 days in the family’s new home at 3011 Palmer Drive (“Day 1” 00:05:47).

The introductory scene immediately grounds the series in the realities of racial displacement and segregation, but also establishes the deep entanglement between the family’s trauma and their pursuit of a better future. It is on this tension that Marvin establishes the foundation of the narrative, as the Emory family’s search for happiness is immediately ensnared within a network of systemic, racialized barriers. This is later embodied in the hostility of White neighbors, the discrimination Henry faces in the workplace, the predatory real estate structures that lure Black families into segregated and hostile neighborhoods with the expectation of eventual displacement, and the bullying and racialized violence the daughters experience in their predominantly White school environments. These antagonistic elements merge with supernatural forces that the family encounter upon moving to Compton, triggered by the specific emotional vulnerabilities and psychological fractures of each member of the family. In the case of Gracie, the Emorys’ youngest daughter, the figure of Miss Vera embodies the classic “possessing entity” of horror conventions.

Miss Vera’s first appearance occurs during the family’s trip to California in the opening episode, during which Gracie and Ruby occupy themselves by leafing through various publications. Ruby reads a women’s magazine filled with images of White celebrities and models, while Gracie turns to a book entitled *Miss Vera Says*, an illustrated didactic text that prescribes proper behavior for young girls through the authoritative voice

of the fictional schoolteacher called Miss Vera. In one of the book's illustrations, Miss Vera is depicted as a tall, austere though benevolent-looking figure, dressed in a prim high-collared gown and wearing a tightly pulled-back hairstyle ("Day 1" 00:05:47). Both the book and magazine appear to function as vehicles of ideological conditioning structured around Whiteness. *Miss Vera Says* encodes Eurocentric pedagogical norms and presents them as universal standards of conduct, while the women's magazine constructs and circulates ideals of feminine beauty from which Black femininity is systematically excluded. In this sense, both texts participate in a broader cultural apparatus that naturalizes Whiteness as the implicit benchmark of propriety, desirability, and social legitimacy.

Gracie's second encounter with Miss Vera occurs the following day, when Livia discovers her youngest daughter staging an imaginary classroom in which she assumes the role of teacher to her dolls and repeats directives she attributes to Miss Vera. These include: "Miss Vera says to be a good little girl, always mind our teachers too," and "Miss Vera says good little girls should mind their teacher," before she expresses her desire to attend a "real school" ("Day 1" 00:29:00). Several elements in this scene underscore the series' nuanced critique of schooling and education. Although Gracie is about to begin pre-school, her imaginative play positions her in a dual role: she is simultaneously a student of Miss Vera and a teacher to her dolls. This doubling signals a more complex relationship with education than simple anticipation or excitement about school. Her make-believe activity reveals how her early understanding of school operates across three interconnected registers: the real (her imminent entry into formal schooling), the imaginary (her interaction with Miss Vera and her role as a teacher within play), and the hypothetical (her desire to become a teacher like her mother that she had expressed the day before). Taken together, these layers suggest that school functions at once as a space of aspiration, imagination, and ideological formation.

Moreover, the Black dolls that Gracie uses as pretend students underscore the reciprocal relationship between teacher and learner. They may be considered as a counterpoint to the images of blonde, White celebrities on the magazine cover Ruby reads in the car the day before, since Gracie up to this point, is still largely unexposed to racialized forms of social conditioning through school compared to her sister Ruby. The dolls and the images in the magazines therefore appear to occupy opposing ends of the representational spectrum. The magazine plays a central role in shaping Ruby's persistent desire to align herself with White beauty standards throughout the series, which is later reflected in the construction of her imaginary White friend, Doris. By contrast, the dolls reflect Gracie's comparatively less mediated relationship with her Black identity, since they offer a space for imaginative play that does not yet fracture her sense of self.

While the classroom setting and the dolls carry seemingly positive associations with learning, they are also fraught with symbols of power dynamics. The stick Gracie uses while “teaching” her dolls—and which we see Miss Vera carrying in Gracie’s book—reproduces the authority structure typical of formal schooling, where control is visually and symbolically concentrated in the figure of the teacher. Her performance thus reveals an early internalization of normative frameworks rooted in White disciplinary authority. In addition, even if the dolls reflect Gracie’s unproblematic relationship with her identity, they carry ambivalent symbolism within the broader visual economy of the series. In Episode 4, they turn into instruments of oppression, when the Emorys’ White neighbors reenact a lynching by hanging Black dolls in their porch (“Day 4” 00:00:45). When Henry leaves the house the following morning, he notices White children silently observing him (“Day 4” 00:01:27). The act transforms the dolls into a disturbing signifier of racial terror and suggests that racist ideologies are reproduced through generational transmission. Within this framework, the dolls acquire an ambivalent status: on the one hand, they enable Gracie to imagine herself following in her mother’s professional footsteps; on the other, they become ominous symbols of the racial violence and structural oppression she is likely to encounter if the White children follow in their parents’ footsteps.

In light of this, Livia’s presence in this scene lends Gracie’s experience to a more affirmative dimension. She is not only a mother but also a role model, since she had previously worked as a teacher. When Gracie asks whether she misses school, Livia responds, “I miss my students every day” (00:29:28). Her statement underscores her emotional and ethical investment in education, which echoes bell hooks’s argument in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) regarding the central role of female African American teachers within their communities, particularly in guiding children through complex social realities while combining academic instruction with emotional and moral support. This nurturing and reciprocal bond between mother and daughter mirrors the teacher–student relationship and highlights both the importance of schooling for Black girls and the figure of the “good” teacher as a stabilizing presence.

Racial Trauma as Absence

Although Livia’s teaching is never directly shown on screen, it is evoked through fragmented references. The first of these moments occurs in the opening episode during the family’s trip to Compton, when Gracie declares, “one day, I’ll be a teacher, just like Mama,” shortly after Livia awakens from a disturbing dream in which she relives the flashback of

her son's murder (00:05:20). A similar moment appears in a flashback in Episode 2 involving Ruby Lee before the family leaves North Carolina, when Livia encourages her to aim for A's rather than B's ("Day 2" 00:02:00). These sporadic references to Livia's work as a teacher are not incidental. The narrative repeatedly implies that the daughters' education is inseparable from Livia's profession, which blurs the boundary between Livia's role as a mother and her profession.

These references also point to a significant absence at the core of the narrative, which can be read as a deliberate structural gap. Because Livia's professional identity is repeatedly invoked but never fully developed, the narrative produces a sense of "incompleteness." Although the narrative remains deliberately vague about why Livia quit her job, this absence may be linked to her inability to continue her profession following the murder of her son, Chester. The residual traces of her work therefore function less as biographical detail than as narrative fragments, with the references signaling a suspension of Livia's professional identity. The absence ends up creating a conceptual and emotional void that Miss Vera ultimately comes to occupy within Gracie's world. In this sense, it parallels the emergence of other supernatural figures that begin to haunt the Emory family as soon as they settle into their new home, each of them embodying psychological and affective aspects of trauma, displacement, and loss.¹ At a semantic level, the figure of Miss Vera itself encodes this tension: the title "Miss" signals absence, distance, and a disrupted form of presence, while "Vera"—derived from the Latin *veritas*, meaning "truth"—ironically destabilizes its own claim to authenticity, as the character functions precisely through deception and illusion. The word "miss" equally echoes Livia's loss of her professional identity, which she explicitly articulates when she states to Gracie that she "misses" her students.

This breakdown at the heart of Livia's identity is reinforced through the theme of mental instability. Early signs of this deterioration appear in Episode 1, during the scene where Livia interacts with Gracie as she plays teacher with her dolls. When Gracie begins singing "Old Black Joe" to her mother and claims that Miss Vera had taught her the song, Livia experiences a flashback to the day her son was murdered, as the song was sung to her by one of the perpetrators. The song also carries a broader racial significance, since plantation nostalgia is a dominant theme in this song, and since it was written by Stephen C. Foster, who is famous for writing famous plantation songs that became associated with minstrel performances such

1. These hauntings are contextualized through the revelation of a curse rooted in Compton's foundational history, disclosed in Episode 9, "Covenant II," when Dutch settlers violently lynch a Black couple that sought refuge in their community. From that point onward, the curse manifests in multiple forms that target Black residents who move into Compton, through mental destabilization, paranoia, and, ultimately, the forced abandonment of their homes.

as “My Old Kentucky Home” (Lynch, 2024). Livia reacts by grabbing Gracie by her shoulders and shaking her to stop her from singing, but the outburst frightens the child, who then asks, “You’re not crazy anymore, right, Mama?” (“Day 1” 00:30:00)

Through Gracie’s question, the narrative shifts its focus more explicitly toward Livia’s trauma and psychological deterioration. As the series progresses, Livia begins to behave unpredictably and experiences intrusive thoughts, including fantasies of harming her children. Her instability becomes so pronounced that Ruby starts to think that their mother may have killed her infant brother. Livia is eventually institutionalized after it is revealed in Episode 8 (“Day 9”) that she had exhumed Chester’s remains and placed them in a box, which she brings to Compton. The motif of insanity thus becomes central to the series’ portrayal of Black womanhood, since it draws attention to how Black women’s mental health is frequently pathologized without adequate recognition of the structural violence and racial trauma underlying their suffering. This pattern is further reflected through other characters, notably through the story of Arnette Beaumont (played by Latarsha Rose), another Black resident of Compton who murders both her husband and child after being “possessed” by the supernatural force tied to the town’s curse in Episode 6.

By linking psychological collapse to histories of racial terror and displacement, the series reframes “madness” not as an individual pathology, but as a response to systemic oppression and inherited trauma. Livia’s institutionalization can also be interpreted within the long history of controlling Black women’s bodies through medical and institutional practices that discipline, regulate, and punish Black womanhood, as evidenced by her interactions with the psychiatrist assigned to her case, Dr. Moynihan in Episode 8. Although Dr. Frances Moynihan (played by Kate McNeil) tells Henry that she specializes in treating Black women with conditions similar to Livia’s (“Day 9”), her treatment centers on mutual surveillance, and electroshock therapy, and sequestering patients from their families, all designed to render her patients more docile.

Such tactics operate as forms of emotional control rooted in isolation and psychological coercion. Dr. Moynihan’s assertion that she understands “the pressures facing [Livia] are different from those of a normal woman” also exposes the failure of medical practice to address the violence that pushes Black women to psychological breaking points. Instead of confronting the conditions producing trauma, institutional frameworks frequently redirect blame onto Black mothers themselves, by portraying them as emotionally unstable or inherently inadequate. This dynamic echoes bell hooks’s discussion of the psychological toll of racism and sexism on Black women:

I believe that on some deeper level, black women are used to tragedy. We expect it. Death is not a stranger to our lives, to our worlds. We've lost our fathers to hypertension and heart attacks, our brothers to frontline battles in American wars, our husbands and lovers to black-on-black crime or police brutality, and our sons to drug-laced streets or upstate prisons. All this while grappling with the stress and burden of all that is black life in America: Babies born to babies, dehumanizing ghettos, inferior schools, low wages, on-the-job racism...the slow but steady death of our people. We are just used to pain (hooks, 2015: 115).

Hooks also underscores the emotional labor involved in concealing pain and donning a “mask of ‘normalcy’ even when we know we are suffering life-threatening “blues” (2015: 117). Likewise, Livia’s mental breakdown reflects the gradual disintegration of her identity to her increasing inability to maintain the normalcy of “performing” her dual role as mother and teacher.

Within this context, Miss Vera comes to embody the void produced by Livia’s collapse, leaving Gracie emotionally defenseless and vulnerable. This fragility becomes more prominent as Gracie’s encounters with Miss Vera increase in frequency. In Episode 6, while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at school, Gracie suddenly catches a glimpse of Miss Vera staring at her through the classroom window, which causes her to forget the words of the pledge and to start acting frantically (“Day 7” 00:23:13). Her teacher then summons Livia and insists that Gracie be removed from the classroom, claiming that she is “not ready for this level of education” and that her presence disrupts “the ones here to learn” (“Day 7” 00:27:20). The visual and sonic aesthetics of this scene—combining the alphabet, the American flag, and the recitation of patriotic discourse—are reintroduced in a later Episode 10 (“Day 10” 00:24:55) during Gracie’s final confrontation with Miss Vera, who threatens her with a stick as the patriotic song “My Country, ’Tis of Thee” plays in the background. Placed side by side, the two scenes, one set in an actual classroom and the other in a distorted, spectral version of it, indicate that ideals associated with American democracy, citizenship, and equality are but empty rhetoric.

The spectral classroom in which Gracie finds herself after she is excluded from the “real” classroom mirrors a movement from the “mainstream” learning space to the ramshackle and historically under-resourced learning spaces imposed on Black children, and which function as tools of degradation, containment, and racialized exclusion. As Miss Vera leaks from the pages of a children’s book into Gracie’s lived reality, Gracie’s first school experience becomes “contaminated,” forcing her to internalize the psychological burden of navigating a racist educational system, much as

her sister has already begun to do (Ruby has a similar experience, when her teacher decides to send her to timeout after her White classmates begin harassing her by imitating ape noises in Episode 2 “Day 3”). In this process, Miss Vera is no longer a fictional figure that imitates “real” teachers; instead, it is “real” teachers who begin to mirror her, and it is precisely this reversal that epitomizes true horror in Gracie’s experience.

The series thus establishes a direct relationship between racist educational environments and the psychological fragmentation of Black children and suggests that schools can turn into sites that reproduce and recycle racial trauma. While the open ending in which the Emorys confront the police and their neighbors (Episode 10 “Day 10” 00:46:43) provides no clear resolution to the family’s trial, this moment illustrates how the white-washing of the American Dream in postwar America happens in concert with racial trauma. The focus on this theme gains further prominence in Season 2, *Them: The Scare* (2024), where the curse of Compton continues to haunt the descendants of the Emory family in 1990s Los Angeles, illustrating how trauma is transferred across generations in a way that profoundly shapes Black experience. This cumulative process illustrates Joy DeGruy’s conceptualization of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), a term she uses to refer to the results of multigenerational trauma from centuries of slavery, compounded with ongoing oppression, institutionalized racism, and the belief that society’s benefits are inaccessible (2005). Within this framework, the classroom itself becomes one of the key institutional spaces where PTSS is reproduced, because of the repeated exposure to exclusion, discipline, and racialized invalidation that young Black learners are subjected to.

Another aspect of this trauma is the state of psychological stasis in which the family is trapped, visible not only in the way Compton’s red-lined neighborhoods continue to reproduce the Jim Crow South despite the family’s relocation, but also in the way historical trauma halts their forward momentum, symbolized most powerfully by the son’s exhumed remains that Livia kept in her closet. Hauke weaves her analysis of critical race horror with the history of Black physical restriction, which she reads through what sociologist Mimi Sheller calls “mobility regimes,” to refer to systems that historically and currently safeguard White power by defining who can move freely and who is forcibly immobilized or policed (Sheller, 2018).

The family’s migration in *Them: Covenant* shows that geographical movement for Black Americans is a highly policed and politically charged battleground over who has the right to move and where they can settle. The show deconstructs the romanticized illusion of the open road by delineating the redlining policies that permeate every communal, institutional

and emotional facet of Black experience, including schooling. This emotional and geographical immobility is mapped onto the education of the two Emory daughters, whose presence in all-White schools triggers the defense mechanisms of White mobility regimes. In this sense, Miss Vera's spectral presence is a reminder of a racist antebellum school system, as she functions as a gatekeeper who denies Black children access to equitable education and inflicts terror upon Gracie for harboring aspirations that exceed the boundaries imposed by these regimes.

Gloria Ladson-Billings's research about the racialized organization of educational spaces equally offers insight into the ways in which schools often reproduce systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). A foundational premise of her argument is that U.S. society is built on property rights rather than human rights, and that school quality and access are deeply linked to property ownership. Whiteness itself functions as a form of "property," conferring the right to exclusion, to clean neighborhoods, and to alleged safety, and when Black families enter historically White spaces, White communities perceive it as an infringement on their property value and structural privilege. As such, the Emory family's move to East Compton is a literal attempt to claim property in a "higher quality" neighborhood, but the disproportionate reaction of the White neighbors defines the family as a threat to their exclusive property value. By extension, when both Gracie and Ruby go to their new schools, they enter a space guarded as "White property," which triggers the school system to act as an arm of the neighborhood's gatekeeping and to treat them as trespassers that violate their pristine, suburban educational ecosystem.

Ultimately, by framing these structural dynamics through the lens of critical race horror (Hauke, 2021), *Them* pulls these academic concepts into mainstream cultural discourse, and forces audiences to confront the reality that institutions designed to nurture and educate have historically functioned as extensions of racial exclusion. If mainstream ideology relies on the premise of meritocracy, by assuming that educational institutions naturally reward hard work regardless of race, the school narrative in *Them* directly challenges assumptions of race neutrality, meritocracy, and colorblindness in social and institutional contexts by exposing how racism is ordinarily embedded within social structures as Kevin Wynter argues (2022: 14). Being an allegory for the "hidden curriculum" of racialized policing presented in the shape of a recognizable horror trope, Miss Vera therefore serves as a tool to bridge the gap between abstract academic concepts that Critical Race Theory and mainstream horror entertainment.

Conclusion

In an interview with *Script Magazine* (Dean, 2021), Little Marvin explains in an that through *Them: Covenant*, he sought to mobilize horror as a lens through which to examine the terror experienced by Black Americans within their most intimate space: the home. The series also extends this logic to another taken-for-granted intimate institution, the school, by exposing how it too can become a site where racialized fear, discipline and psychological violence are reproduced. This idea is most clearly embodied in the figure of Miss Vera, a character who, though shaped according to conventional horror tropes of supernatural monsters, breaches conventional beliefs about the safety and fairness of educational spaces. The character not only reveals how the American school system is embedded in the racialized dimensions of Black experience but also raises broader questions about how institutional structures across education, employment, and housing work together to sustain and reproduce racial hierarchies, as evidenced by the Emory family's unresolved fate.

Moving beyond its narrative strategies, the series must also be situated within broader debates surrounding Black horror as a genre, particularly the tensions that arise as it shifts from the margins of cinematic production to increased visibility within mainstream cultural and critical discourse. In parallel with this shift, the genre has generated competing interpretations of its significance. As Gabrielle Bellot (2021) argues, it has become "America's most powerful cinematic genre," while Hannah Giorgis (2021) notes a growing fatigue surrounding narratives that risk transforming Black trauma into consumable entertainment. Yet whether understood as a critical intervention or as a contested cultural form, Black horror has undeniably reshaped contemporary discussions of race, memory, and representation. *Them: Covenant* exemplifies this dynamic by using horror to engage with emerging paradigms of racial terror, whether in the home, at work, or at school. In doing so, it drags the anxieties of Black experience from the margins of institutional critique into the mainstream cultural spotlight and sheds light on the ongoing transmission of historical trauma.

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Negotiating the Mainstreaming of a Long-Silenced Testimony in John Ridley's *12 Years a Slave*



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Abstract: This paper examines the adaptation of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* through the lens of John Ridley's screenplay, arguing that the process of mainstreaming a marginalized narrative is carefully negotiated at the level of writing. Rather than treating the screenplay as a purely technical or descriptive document, the analysis positions it as a key site of mediation, where the conditions of legibility and representation are actively worked through. Drawing on close readings of stage directions, the article shows how Ridley's script translate Northup's testimony into a cinematic form that remains both accessible and critically demanding.

Keywords: Screenplay Studies; Film Studies; Slavery; Mainstreaming; Cultural Memory; Mediation

Résumé : Cet article propose une analyse de l'adaptation de *Twelve Years a Slave* de Solomon Northup à partir du scénario de John Ridley. Il défend l'idée que le passage d'un récit longtemps marginalisé à une œuvre *mainstream* se joue en grande partie au niveau de l'écriture scénaristique. Loin d'être un simple document technique ou descriptif, le scénario apparaît comme un espace de médiation essentiel où se négocient les modalités de représentation d'un témoignage historique. À travers l'étude des didascalies, l'article montre comment Ridley reconfigure le récit de Northup pour l'inscrire dans une forme cinématographique capable d'assurer sa circulation auprès d'un large public tout en préservant sa portée critique.

Mots-clés : études scénaristiques ; études filmiques ; esclavage ; *mainstreaming* ; mémoire culturelle ; médiation



Although widely read upon its publication in 1853, Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* never acquired the canonical status of other slave narratives and remained relatively marginal within public memory until Steve McQueen's 2013 film adaptation brought it to international prominence (Gates & Burke, 2017: xiii). While scholarship has extensively examined the relationship between Northup's narrative and McQueen's film, far less attention has been paid to John Ridley's screenplay, the intermediary text through which this transformation was first negotiated. By focusing on this comparatively overlooked stage of the adaptation process, this article explores how a nineteenth-century slave narrative was reformulated into a mainstream cinematic event.

While screenwriting has long been overlooked in film studies, with the screenplay still frequently regarded as a mere technical document (Nemes, 2010: 3-15), John Ridley's *12 Years a Slave* offers a particularly compelling case for analyzing the process through which Solomon Northup's narrative was reframed and ultimately mainstreamed. Indeed, if academic scholarship often defines the screenplay as a concise and predominantly descriptive text, one that simply organizes characters' actions and therefore appears to offer limited interpretive value (Bordwell & Thompson, 1988: 89), John Ridley's script clearly challenges this assumption. Far from functioning as a purely technical document, it is rich in detail and reveals a precise reading of the events represented on screen. Rather than relying solely on dialogue, Ridley's script offers substantial insight into the mechanics of adaptation through its unusually detailed scene descriptions. These extended passages explicitly frame the thematic purpose of specific scenes and dictate how they are meant to be understood – an aspect I will examine more closely in the following section. At this stage, however, it is important to stress that such expansiveness should not be reduced to a simple stylistic feature of Ridley's writing. Rather, these detailed descriptive passages point to a broader ambition underlying the adaptation itself: the effort to translate Northup's narrative into cinematic form in a way that preserves its political significance. In this respect, the screenplay reveals that the visual dimension of the film was carefully constructed in order to confront the viewer and guide interpretation. The density of these descriptive sections therefore signals the complexity of the adaptation process. Rendering the 1853 narrative on screen required the meticulous organization of visual material capable of mediating the original text for a contemporary audience.

Negotiating a Contested Archive

To understand why John Ridley's scripting of *Twelve Years a Slave* is relevant, it is important to situate the text within the broader history of the slave narrative as a genre. Although slave narratives occupy a foundational place in African American literary and political history, they have long been shaped by unequal conditions of production and reception (Taylor, 1999: 25-21; Crispin, 1988: 48-62). Often published through abolitionist networks and mediated by white editors who were expected to guarantee their authenticity, these texts were never received as transparent testimonies, but as highly framed objects subject to suspicion and ideological negotiation (Gates, 2002: 2-13; Roy, 2018).

Published in the wake of the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852), Solomon Northup's narrative attracted immediate attention, yet its reception was deeply divided: while some readers praised its documentary power, others filtered it through the template of Stowe's fiction or dismissed it as opportunistic abolitionist propaganda (Burke & Gates, 2017: 197). The widespread yet deeply fractured reception underscores the systemic reluctance of a nineteenth-century audience to grant full authority to black testimonies on slavery. *Twelve Years a Slave* thus belongs to a literary corpus that remained insufficiently recognized for much of its history, despite its crucial value as historical evidence and as an archive of enslaved voices (Roy, 2018). Only later historiography fully re-established slave narratives as central sources for understanding slavery from the perspective of the enslaved (Blight, 2004; Gates, 2002). In this way, Northup's text was both disputed and overlooked: challenged at the moment of its publication, and only belatedly acknowledged as a major literary and historical document.

What was at stake in John Ridley's screenplay, then, was the transformation of a disputed and long-marginalized testimony into a form capable of circulating within mainstream cinema without severing it from its archival and ethical force. As Ridley himself explains, the project had to negotiate between several competing demands: remaining faithful to Northup's testimony while rendering it accessible to a broad contemporary audience:

The challenges are: you have 12 years, and what are the moments in those 12 years that stand in the starkest relief? You don't want a film that is all pain and suffering, but at the same time, you don't want a film that turns its head away from those difficult aspects of the storytelling. (*Confluence*, 2013)

In this sense, the screenplay functions as a site of mediation in which the authority of the slave narrative is necessarily reformulated. Its stakes are both historiographical and aesthetic, as Ridley had to restore Northup's account to visibility, grant cinematic centrality to a long-contested black testimonial archive, and do so without reducing slavery to spectacle while ensuring the film's broader cultural circulation. Ridley's work thus participates in a broader process of legitimization, one that positions him as a cultural mediator negotiating between distinct historical moments and competing imperatives.

“A Constant and Continual Canvas”: Violence and Systemic Visibility



Rather than residing solely in dialogue or plot, the force of Ridley's adaptation emerges most clearly in the stage directions, where the violence of the 1853 narrative is carefully rearticulated. Through the precision of its lines, Ridley's screenplay maintains a clear connection to the testimonial project of Northup's narrative, translating the documentary authority of the text into concrete demands of cinematic representation. This logic is already visible in the kidnapping sequence, which functions as a decisive point of rupture: violence is told in a mode that appears designed to refuse any form of narrative comfort:

With no preamble, Burch begins to beat Solomon about the back with the paddle. Burch strikes him wordlessly – no taunting, no sneering. Solomon screaming against each blow. His back immediately SWELLING WITH WELTS AND BRUISES. This beating continues on and on and on until quite literally Burch WEARS HIMSELF OUT with the effort.

[...]

Burch continues to strike, and strike... This time until the paddle SNAPS IN HALF. Burch then GRABS THE WHIP. Hardly missing a stroke, he whips Solomon relentlessly, the flails cutting into Solomon's back. Again, Burch's arm tires before Solomon “breaks.” (Ridley, 2013: 25)

This passage corresponds to the sequence in which Burch subjects Solomon¹ to an act of extreme corporal punishment. What first stands out is the abruptness of the writing. The assault begins “with no preamble,” as if the screenplay refused the gradual escalation that might turn violence into a conventionally dramatic scene. The screenplay moves directly to the

1. In this analysis, I use “Solomon” when discussing the character as constructed in the screenplay and movie, while using “Solomon Northup” to denote the historical person.

blows inflicted on Solomon's body, foregrounding the mechanics of punishment and its effects. The beating unfolds through a succession of physical actions and injuries: the repeated strikes of the paddle, the swelling of Solomon's back, the formation of welts and bruises, the breaking of the weapon itself, and finally the transition to the whip. Violence is thus rendered as a sustained process of bodily degradation, with the stage directions remaining fixed on the material consequences of the assault.

Ridley further heightens the brutality of the sequence by neutralizing the verbal dimension of domination. The stage directions insist on Burch's silence ("no taunting, no sneering") thereby stripping violence of expressivity and reducing it to a punitive mechanism. Here, violence is transformed into procedure. In the absence of speech, the scene no longer belongs to the register of conflict, it shifts instead toward the logic of pure coercion. The screenplay renders this reduction legible through its sustained attention to the immediate physical effects of the beating, described with an almost clinical precision. Indeed, far from a mere typographical convention, the capitalization of "SWELLING WITH WELTS AND BRUISES" underscores the physical consequences of the assault by isolating and amplifying the description of bodily injury. The emphasis falls on Solomon's wounded body, whose swelling flesh, welts, and bruises register the cumulative effects of repeated blows. The screenplay therefore extends the narration of violence beyond the act itself to include its visible traces, inscribing punishment directly onto the body. In this way, Ridley translates Northup's testimony into a detailed record of corporeal suffering, foregrounding the lasting marks it leaves on the flesh.

This logic becomes even more pronounced in the passage's reliance on repetition and duration. Phrases such as "on and on and on" and "continues to strike, and strike" stretch the moment beyond the need of narrative efficiency. The syntax itself mimics the persistence of the assault, extending the action and stressing its relentless character. Equally significant is the detail that Burch repeatedly exhausts himself before Solomon yields, suggesting a violence whose brutality lies in its persistence. The scene thus foregrounds the endurance of punishment, representing slavery as a regime of ongoing physical coercion rather than a succession of isolated acts.

What emerges here is a sustained attempt to find cinematic forms capable of translating the violence of Northup's testimony. Arguably, it shows how the challenge of adaptation lies in rendering the physical realities of enslavement in cinematic form rather than simply selecting episodes from the 1853 narrative. Through its dense and detailed stage directions, the screenplay reveals Ridley's effort to translate Northup's testimony into

a visual representation of bodily suffering and systemic violence. Later in the script, the following line appears:

For the first time Solomon sees true and severe slavery. These are not visiting servants, such as Jasper was back in Saratoga. These are humans held in strict bondage – herded like cattle, chained together as if in a “chain gang.” Slaves are evident not merely by the color of their skin. The residue and accessories of slavery are everywhere. Blacks almost universally display scars – THICK AND HEAVY DEAD TISSUE FROM LACERATIONS LEFT UNTREATED – brands, and are often missing limbs. Blacks are held in all types of shackles, from simple chains to elaborate bindings, to neck collars that are spiked. Some are muzzled or forced to wear bits. One slave is attacked by a dog and the slave owner. The dog pulls and tears at the slave’s clothes. THESE IMAGES SHOULD BE A CONSTANT AND CONTINUAL CANVAS TO THE PIECE. EVER PRESENT, BUT NOT REALLY COMMENTED ON AS THEY ARE THE NORM. They should be a reminder that not only are people being oppressed, but that there is an entire system of oppression in place. (*Ibid.*: 36)

This passage is revealing of the ways in which Northup’s narrative is reconfigured in cinematic terms, as the stage directions foreground Solomon’s first encounter with the realities of enslavement through a dense accumulation of corporeal traces and signs of punishment. Indeed, the script catalogs “scars,” “brands,” “missing limbs,” “shackles,” “neck collars,” “muzzles,” and “bits,” multiplying concrete visual details that transform oppression into a material landscape. Such an enumeration performs an important cinematic function, as it renders slavery into a series of visible signs. In this way, the screenplay bears witness to a close attention to representation. More strikingly, the emphasis on the body is especially pronounced; the phrase “THICK AND HEAVY TISSUE FROM LACERATIONS LEFT UNTREATED” exceeds the economy associated with screenwriting. Just as in the passage describing Burch’s beating of Solomon, the use of capitalization functions as a directive of attention. The text reveals its concern with controlling not only narrative content but visual intensity, as it underscores the corporeal traces most capable of confronting the durability of violence.

At the same time, the script moves beyond the isolated image of suffering to insist on the systematic and normalized character of oppression. This is most evident in this line: “THESE IMAGES SHOULD BE A CONSTANT AND CONTINUAL CANVAS TO THE PIECE. EVER PRESENT, BUT NOT REALLY COMMENTED ON AS THEY ARE THE NORM.” Here, violence is represented as a permanent feature of everyday life. The accumulation of scars, brands, shackles, and physical

punishments situates oppression within the ordinary fabric of the plantation world. Rather than concentrating violence in a few spectacular moments, the screenplay presents it as a continuous condition that shapes social relations and daily existence. Slavery thus emerges as a system sustained through the constant presence of coercion, punishment, and bodily vulnerability.

The final sentence makes the passage's purpose fully explicit: "They should be a reminder that not only are people being oppressed, but that there is an entire system of oppression in place." What matters here is the shift from individual acts of suffering to the broader structures that sustain them. In this way, John Ridley reorders Northup's narrative around recurring signs of coercion, injury, and constraint that connect separate moments into an organized apparatus. In this respect, the script functions as a space of negotiation, determining how a historical testimony centered on lived experience can be reworked into a representation of slavery as an enduring and pervasive system of domination.

Scripting the Collective

Translating these marginal histories into mainstream cinema – and thus into the realm of collective memory – requires confronting the inherently collective stakes of the slave narrative (Gates, 2002: 36). Because the genre is fundamentally defined by this shared dimension, the primary challenge of screen adaptation lies in its structural translation. The core question for the screenwriter is not merely how to dramatize Northup's ordeal, but how to formalize his experience within a broader historical horizon.

A major indication of this lies in the use of generic expressions such as "Blacks," (Ridley, 2013: 45) which immediately group the characters under a shared condition and shift the spectator's gaze toward a systemic rather than anecdotal reality. In a passage already quoted ("Blacks almost universally display scars – THICK AND HEAVY DEAD TISSUE FROM LACERATIONS LEFT UNTREATED – brands, and are often missing limbs. Blacks are held in all types of shackles, from simple chains to elaborate bindings, to neck collars that are spiked"), the accumulation of bodily marks function as an inventory designed to render oppression visible. Although such generalization may appear depersonalizing, it operates here as a structural reminder, insofar as the screenplay makes clear that what is being narrated is not merely the tragic fate of an exceptional individual, but a systematic condition affecting an entire group. In this way, the screenplay constructs a sort of "web" in which individual suffering is

constantly reinscribed within a shared memory. Testimony, then, is reconfigured so as to reveal, through and alongside Solomon's trajectory, the collective dimension of slavery.

Notably, the screenplay pays sustained attention to the sonic dimension as a vehicle for the collectivization of experience. By prescribing a stripped-down acoustic environment ("THE SOUNDTRACK TO THE SCENE IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE RUSTLE OF LABOR, THE MALE CICADAS BUGS 'TYMBALS' IN THE HEAT and a SPIRITUAL SONG BY THE SLAVES" (*Ibid.*: 91)), Ridley refocuses perception on a shared sensory wavelength. The presence of the "spiritual," carried by "the slaves" as a group, shifts attention away from individual destiny and toward a shared experience. The soundtrack, then, materializes a community compelled to labor and survive together in a space where the rhythm of work becomes the very texture of everyday life.

This sonic choice also helps make the continuity of exploitation perceptible by replacing dramatic eventfulness with a collective and repetitive temporality. Ridley emphasizes the extension of labor beyond the ordinary limits of the day: "Evening, but the day is not yet done. Slaves attend their various evening chores; feeding livestock, doing laundry, cooking food. There is no respite from a slave's charge. (*Ibid.*: 92)" The phrasing generalizes the experience and organizes a temporality that exceeds singular trajectories, since the screenplay underscores the structural absence of rest for an entire group. By describing evening tasks as an extension of daytime labor, it presents slavery as a total regime of temporal mobilization, in which collective life is absorbed by the economy of coercion.

This work on banality and repetition becomes legible in the scene where Mistress Epps throws a decanter at Patsey's face while the enslaved are being forced to dance. The stage direction then specifies: "The slaves, however, react as though it is not the first time they've seen as much from the Mistress." (*Ibid.*: 96) Here, what is at stake is not simply the violent act itself, but the collective lack of surprise, which signals a form of violence integrated into everyday life, rendered predictable by its regularity. The text thus stages a form of enforced habituation, whereby the enslaved community appears to be accustomed to arbitrariness and humiliation.

As a final example illustrating this point, the screenplay repeatedly locates oppression in the material organization of everyday life: "SLAVES are crammed into the shack – LITERALLY ON TOP OF EACH OTHER – as they try to sleep. Some lay, some sit up. Packed in like cattle, there is barely room to move let alone draw a deep, clean breath. There is real risk of suffocating in the mass. Some cough and wheeze." (*Idem*) This stage direction makes a shared condition perceptible through spatial saturation

and physiological constraint. The overcrowding (“LITERALLY ON TOP OF EACH OTHER”) and the risk of suffocation show that systemic violence is executed through the coercive spatial regulation of black bodies. The comparison (“packed in like cattle”) functions here as a critical shorthand, exposing a systemic logic that reduces human beings to mere livestock. In doing so, it highlights what the slave narrative seeks precisely to communicate beyond the “I” – not a succession of exceptional episodes, but a regime of dispossession inscribed in the ordinary conditions of existence.

Through lexical generalization, acoustic design, temporal extension, routinized violence, and the spatial organization of bodies, the screenplay underscores the lived structure of enslavement. What emerges, then, is a form of cinematic writing that does not isolate Solomon or make him a singular victim, but situates his experience within a network of shared distress. The collective dimension of the narrative is carefully crafted into the adaptation process itself. Even if this dimension is sometimes less visible in the film, it remains central to the project at the level of the script, which consistently works to situate Northup’s experience within a broader structure of shared suffering and dispossession. The screenplay consequently reframes Northup’s experience in ways that foreground slavery as a collective historical condition rather than as an isolated individual ordeal.

Scripting Discomfort: Reflexivity at Work



Another defining feature of the script – one that contradicts its usual characterization as merely descriptive – is its reflexive quality, which actively guides the interpretation of the events it presents. For example, in the scene depicting the sale of Solomon and Eliza, Ridley explicitly characterizes the situation (“odd,” “ironic” (*Ibid.*: 37)), signaling that the stakes are not merely narrative but also moral and political: what is shown must be understood as a violent paradox of the system, rather than as a simple episode. Likewise, when Eliza’s children are torn from her, the stage direction emphasizes this incident through repetition: “IT IS AN UGLY SCENE, UGLY SCENE.” (*Ibid.*: 40) This repetition constitutes a textual stance. By rejecting a purely informative tone, Ridley inscribes within the screenplay an obligation of interpretation: the scene *must* be read as a denunciation, not as a moment of spectacular drama.

These stage directions can thus be understood as genuine interpretive markers. They indicate to the reader how the event should be framed, what tone should be adopted, and what hierarchy of values should be established. In doing so, the screenplay shows that the depiction of slavery

should not be reduced to a consumable narrative or to a mere dramaturgical mechanism. The text's reflexivity therefore operates as a safeguard, seeking to maintain violence within a regime of critical legibility, but also ensuring that it remains unsettling – refusing ease, disrupting narrative comfort, and compelling the viewer to endure the scene rather than simply process it as spectacle. This reflexive writing sheds light on the privileged observational role attributed to the screenplay. Far from being a secondary document, the script emerges as a site where the conditions of legibility are negotiated – in other words, where decisions are made about what must be highlighted and what must be rendered unbearable. Ridley organizes the reading of Northup's testimony through a form of writing that directly anticipates the effects of staging.

Another example of this reflexivity can be found in the description of forced labor: "There is a GANG OF SLAVES chopping trees into timber. It is hard, laborious work made no more easy by the sweltering heat. [...] As Sam drives the wagon, the other slaves trudge alongside by foot. We should get the sense the travel is long and tedious." (*Ibid.*: 42) Here again, the stage direction prescribes the effect to be produced. The use of a lexicon emphasizing hardship ("hard," "laborious") and the directive to convey a specific sensation ("long and tedious") transform the description into a form of critical commentary, insofar as the labor is directly presented as a mechanism of dehumanization and of the system's appropriation of bodies. Once more, the stage directions function as a tool of assertion, establishing a clear interpretive horizon.

In the film, the sequence of Solomon's hanging is striking for its temporal extension and for its reliance on a mode of staging that refuses any escape, transforming duration into a sort of constraint for the viewer. A reading of the screenplay reveals that this choice is already programmed at the textual level, which explicitly anticipates the conditions of the scene's reception and constructs its critical function. Indeed, the stage direction prescribes a perceptual regime intended to prevent any rapid consumption of the violence:

HOURS HAVE PASSED. The sun is now at its apex. The sight and smell of the red rose bush is more than vivid as Solomon remains tied and dangling exactly where he was left. The scene is both tranquil and horrific. Life on the plantation continues. The OTHER SLAVES work in the field. CHILDREN make their way playfully in the yard. It should all underscore the fact that a black, hanging even partially from a tree, is nothing unusual in this time and space. (*Ibid.*: 58)

In this sequence, the reflexive dimension lies in the fact that the stage direction comments on the effect to be produced and designates the

viewer as its implicit addressee. The passage formulates a meta-statement (“It should all underscore...”) that transforms the description into an interpretive directive. Ridley does not allow the scene to “speak for itself”; rather, he indicates what the viewer is meant to understand from the juxtaposition between the unbearable and the continuity of everyday life.

By explicitly stating that the image must underscore the normalized character of the situation, the screenplay directs reception toward a systemic diagnosis. The horror resides not merely in the act itself, but in its social banalization, made perceptible through the uninterrupted flow of life around it. In this way, the stage direction functions as an operator of reflexivity, as it reveals the mechanism by which slavery produces an order of the visible in which violence ceases to be an event and becomes a norm, while anticipating how the viewer is supposed to experience this contradiction.

A reading of the screenplay also makes it possible to assess the critical scope of certain stage directions, which produce an implicit commentary on what is shown and how it is meant to be received. For example, in the sequence devoted to Celeste – ultimately cut from the final edit – Ridley explicitly highlights the interpretive function of the scene: “This should be a moving part of the film, which stirs the audience and, for a moment, relieves them of the seemingly chastising environment.” (*Ibid.*: 98) Through this indication, the stage direction assumes a metadiscursive dimension: it reflects on the place of the sequence within the economy of the film, describing it as a temporary release within an otherwise harrowing apparatus, and thereby acknowledges that the representation of slavery is also structured through a management of reception.

Another example can be found in the scene in which Solomon and the others are forced to dance for Epps’s satisfaction. After reporting Mistress Epps’s words (“Don’t trouble yer self with it. Same as the rest, Master brought yah to work. Tha’s all. And any more’ll earn a hun’red lashes” (*Ibid.*: 68)), Ridley adds: “Having delivered her cool advice, Mistress heads back into the house.” (*Idem*) The qualification (“cool advice”) constitutes a sharp critical commentary, as it signals the cynical coldness of a statement that naturalizes violence, while underscoring the ease with which the mistress returns to the domestic space after issuing a threat of punishment. In both cases, the stage direction functions as a critical marker, as it guides interpretation, highlights mechanisms of normalization, and shows how the screenplay is built as a site where a moral and political reading of the situations represented is being constructed.

The screenplay’s reflexivity reveals that the mainstreaming of the narrative is not a byproduct of adaptation but is already embedded in the

writing process itself. By guiding interpretation and anticipating reception, Ridley's script organizes how the story can be made accessible without diluting its critical force. The text thus demonstrates the passage into a mass medium is carefully constructed at the level of writing.

Narrative Continuities

The reflexive dimension of the screenplay does not imply the script's complete autonomy from its text. Rather, it is articulated through a structuring tension: on the one hand, the screenplay presents itself as a structure that already anticipates *mise-en-scène*; on the other, it remains constrained by a testimonial source whose authority it seeks to preserve. In other words, Ridley's reflexivity is not constructed against the 1853 text, but from within it: the script draws from the text the moral and memorial legitimacy of its project while reconfiguring that material in specifically screenwriting terms.

This movement can be seen in the recurrent presence of borrowings, paraphrases, and at times direct lexical reprises that function as markers of textual anchoring. The screenplay displays a fidelity to the language itself, as if the adaptation were required to keep its debt to the testimony visible. The stage direction describing the altercation between John Tibeats and Solomon offers a particularly revealing example: "With concentrated vengeance, Tibeats springs for Solomon, seizing him by the throat with one hand and raising the whip with the other." (*Ibid.*: 54) The phrase "concentrated vengeance," directly borrowed from Solomon Northup's account ("I was about to say something further in justification, but with concentrated vengeance, he sprang upon me, seizing me by the throat with one hand, raising the whip with the other, in the act of striking" [Northup, 1853: 85]) materializes an explicit link between the 1853 text and the screenplay. Such reprises produce a form of memorial continuity and serve an implicit guarantee, reminding the reader that the violence being represented does not proceed from novelistic invention but from attested speech. By absorbing the vocabulary and turns of phrase of the text, Ridley thus reinforces the authority – and, by extension, the legitimacy – of his text. It shows how the script's reflexivity described above does not supplant testimony, but relies upon it as a constraining matrix that determines its trajectory.

Shortly after the hanging sequence, the screenplay describes Ford's intervention and the brief respite granted to Solomon. Although the scene is relatively short on screen, Ridley invests it with particular density

through the way he constructs space as a subjective experience and a site of memorial contrast:

As we come into the scene, Solomon lays on a blanket on the floor. Eventually, his eyes flutter, then open. He is in the foyer of the Ford house. As he gets his bearings, he looks around the interior. THE SPACE IS HANDSOME, AND WELL DECORATED. It is sharp contrast to the bleak surroundings, shacks and dungeons Solomon has largely been accustomed to during his time of slavery. It will be the “first and last time such a sumptuous resting place was granted” during his twelve years of bondage. (Ridley, 2013; 59)

The way the stage direction already encodes a particular reading of the scene is reminiscent of the text’s reflexivity described above: the interior of Ford’s house functions as an operator of dissonance. The typographically salient phrase (“THE SPACE IS HANDSOME, AND WELL DECORATED”) imposes a point of emphasis and prepares an effect of contrast that clashes with the underlying logic of the slave system. The exception becomes legible only against the backdrop of the rule, and that rule remains the true horizon of the experience. It is precisely at this level that the screenplay’s critical engagement with the text becomes visible. Ridley explicitly reworks a formulation from the 1853 narrative (“first and last time such a sumptuous resting place was granted” (*Ibid.*: 101)), whose function is twofold. On the one hand, this reprise signals the screenplay’s grounding in the testimonial authority of Northup: the screenwriting does not “romanticize” a moment of respite, but situates itself within the very language of the testimony. On the other hand, it recasts that fidelity as a dramaturgical instruction, insofar as the phrase fixes the value of the scene as both parenthesis and limit. The brief sequence therefore illustrates a recurrent feature of the screenplay: lexical fidelity to the text is a way of making the text function as a matrix of meaning. By reusing Northup’s formulation, Ridley transforms an autobiographical observation into an interpretive cue, inviting the reader to perceive this moment as revelatory of a system in which humanity appears only in the form of a provisional exception, immediately closed off by the ordinary logic of domination.

Likewise, when Solomon is transferred to the Epps plantation and the film introduces the other enslaved individuals, Ridley’s writing manifests a distinct proximity to the 1853 text. The characterization of these figures borrows formulations from Northup, to the point where entire segments of the autobiographical narrative are directly reintegrated into the screenplay’s stage directions. Thus, where Northup writes: “she is the offspring of a ‘Guinea nigger,’ brought over to Cuba in a slave ship,” (Northup: 141) Ridley retains this phrase verbatim in the script. This mode of borrowing belongs to a strategy of tying the script to the primary testimony,

anchoring the scene in an already historicized language and endowing the adaptation with heightened documentary authority. This logic extends to subsequent sequences, in which the script maintains the same textual register, mobilizing the vocabulary and designations of the original account to ground the action in an explicitly referenced historical material.

For instance, further along in the screenplay, the scene of Patsey's punishment by Epps provides further evidence of the project's tight alignment with the 1853 narrative. Here, Ridley reactivates the prose of the testimony and retains certain lexical markers, among which is the expression "ten fold," which functions as a sign of textual filiation. In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Northup writes: "He then seized it himself, and applied it with ten-fold greater force than I had. The painful cries and shrieks of the tortured Patsey, mingling with the loud and angry curses of Epps, loaded the air. She was terribly lacerated – I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground." (Northup: 124) The screenplay explicitly reformulates this passage: "Epps takes up the whip and whips Patsey with 'ten fold' greater force than he had. The painfully loud and angry curses of Epps load the air. Patsey by now is terribly lacerated, literally flayed. The lash wet with blood which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground." (*Ibid.*: 109) This excerpt once again reveals an adaptive relationship grounded in phrasal continuity, as Ridley preserves Northup's vocabulary and retains the descriptive segments that emphasize the violence of the testimony. Where the 1853 text organizes the scene through narration and descriptive accumulation, the script reconfigures this material for cinematic legibility, sketching out a sequence of visualizable actions. The screenplay thus translates testimonial density into instructions while preserving the authority of the original account through linguistic anchor points. It also underscores the ethical stakes of the adaptive enterprise: by reinvesting Northup's language at a moment of extreme violence, Ridley signals that the scene is not conceived as an autonomous dramaturgical effect, but rather as the transposition of a firsthand account whose power resides precisely in its precision and its refusal of euphemism. The relationship to the text thereby anchors the film in a written memory.

Arguably, Ridley's screenplay stands at the intersection of two imperatives that reinforce rather than cancel each other out. On the one hand, it acknowledges what the scene is meant to do to the viewer. On the other, it preserves a clear testimonial grounding by reactivating the language and text of the 1853 narrative as a set of limits against the arbitrariness of invention. Taken together with the reflexive dimension analyzed earlier, this dual regime reveals the screenplay as a space in which the conditions of the film's mainstreaming are negotiated: it must render the narrative legible and affectively compelling for a broad audience, while remaining

accountable to the authority of the text and to the written memory it transmits. In this sense, the screenplay organizes the conditions for a critical reading of events, even as it remains indebted to documentary and memorial archive.

Conclusion

John Ridley's screenplay functions as a complex work of mediation and negotiation, in which the passage from a marginalized nineteenth-century testimony to a contemporary mainstream film is carefully organized at the level of writing itself. Far from simply arranging scenes or dialogues, the script actively constructs a form of mainstream legibility by shaping how the narrative is to be perceived and interpreted. Through its dense stage directions, reflexive commentary and strategic use of Northup's language, it organizes the conditions under which the testimony can circulate within a broader cultural field. This process of mainstreaming does not entail a dilution of the source material, but rather a balance between accessibility and critical integrity. In this way, Ridley ensures that Northup's account remains legible as the expression of a systemic and collective history. Ultimately, the screenplay emerges as a decisive intermediary space where competing demands are brought into tension, a space in which the margins are translated into a form compatible with mainstream cinematic legibility.

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Mapping Heterotopias: Looking Beyond the Security-Obsessed Aesthetics of the Border Discourse on the Turkey-Syria Border



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Abstract: This research, conducted between 2023 and 2024, analyzes the security-obsessed discourse of the Turkey-Syria Border as constructed by mass media narratives. The paper aims to reconstruct this state-imposed aesthetics of the border discourse in Turkey by using architectural methods and revealing the alternative spatial implications of bordering to what is served to the public. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in May 2023 in five Turkish provinces bordering Syria (Hatay, Gaziantep, Sanliurfa, Mardin, Batman), the research utilizes data from semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted in the region. The findings from the fieldwork, combined with GIS mapping tools, enabled the identification of heterotopic spaces along the border, in order to be subsequently spatially analyzed and illustrated. By synthesizing these findings using literature from border, migration, and media studies, the paper proposes a counter-mapping methodology to look beyond the imposed aesthetics of the border as a security mechanism in the mass media narrative. Ultimately, this research challenges the limited understanding of conventional cartographies and mobilizes alternative maps to confront the logic of design and the project of the border.

Keywords: Border; Securitization; Cartography; Heterotopia; Mass Media; Aesthetics.

Résumé : Cette recherche, menée entre 2023 et 2024, analyse le discours sécuritaire entourant la frontière turco-syrienne, tel qu'il est construit et diffusé par les médias de masse. L'objectif est de reconstituer cette esthétique de la frontière produite par l'État dans le contexte turc en mobilisant des méthodes issues de l'architecture, afin de mettre au jour les dimensions spatiales du contrôle frontalier qui restent invisibilisées dans les représentations destinées au grand public. S'appuyant sur un travail de terrain approfondi réalisé en mai 2023 dans cinq provinces turques situées le long de

la frontière syrienne (Hatay, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Mardin et Batman), l'étude mobilise des données recueillies à partir d'entretiens semi-directifs et d'observations participantes, menés dans la région. Les résultats de ce terrain, croisés avec des outils de cartographie par système d'information géographique (SIG), ont permis d'identifier différents espaces hétérotopiques à la frontière, lesquels ont ensuite fait l'objet d'une analyse et d'une représentation spatiales. En articulant ces résultats avec les apports des études sur les frontières, les migrations et les médias, l'article propose une méthodologie de la contre-cartographie destinée à dépasser l'esthétique frontalière imposée par les récits médiatiques dominants, qui présentent principalement la frontière comme un dispositif de sécurité. Cette approche cherche ainsi à rendre visibles d'autres réalités spatiales et sociales produites par les pratiques de contrôle et de délimitation territoriale. En définitive, cette recherche remet en question les limites des cartographies conventionnelles comme outils de compréhension des espaces frontaliers et mobilise des formes alternatives de représentation cartographique pour interroger les logiques d'aménagement, de contrôle et de production de la frontière.

Mots-clés : frontière ; sécurisation ; cartographie ; hétérotopie ; médias de masse ; esthétique

Introduction

For many people, the border is only encountered through images before it is ever engaged in space. Therefore, visual representations of the border (such as maps, photographs, satellite views, and other types of media) shape how borders are imagined and perceived by those who are far away from them. These limited sources pretending to conceptualize such complex phenomena have made it possible to frame borders as sites that should be securitized and militarized against the “undesirable.” Proliferating security-driven narratives not only produce images that promote the border as a project but also actively participate in producing it, influencing how bordering practices are justified and how violence, exclusion, and pushback are normalized.

I focus on the Turkey-Syria border as the core case study in this regard, and utilize research material from my master's thesis at Politecnico di Torino in Italy. This border region is particularly important since millions of displaced Syrians have sought refuge in Turkey after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, leading Turkey to increasingly enforce measures to securitize the shared border. These restrictive border policies have changed over time, and part of this process involved instrumentalizing mass media outlets to depict the border as a fortress and scapegoat the Syrian population in order to promote a security-driven discourse. While such images are produced to influence public opinion regarding the border, they also

obscure its spatial complexity as an inhabited space that is negotiated on a daily basis.

I argue that understanding the Turkey-Syria border requires looking beyond these security-obsessed aesthetics. By theoretically grounding the border as a project produced through design, discourse, and media, and by remapping it through heterotopic spaces encountered during fieldwork, I aim to challenge the limited understandings of the border and propose other ways of reading border territories. As Foucault (2015) suggests, heterotopic spaces refer to “other spaces” of the border; such sites could be considered deviations, thereby offering an opportunity to reimagine the border from a different perspective (Foucault, 2015). The term “heterotopic” draws on the medical term that Foucault initially drew inspiration from, heterotopic ossification, an orthopedic condition involving the presence of bone in soft tissue where bone normally does not exist. Ultimately, I employ the spatial concept of heterotopia to read the border through these alternative spatial conditions, thereby treating them as deviations from the dominant narratives.

Spatial Understanding of the Border

Human understanding of the world is very much tied to the borders that humans themselves have created (Sferrazza Papa, 2020: 22). The border must be understood as a constitutive element of the practices by which social groups and their identities are constructed and governed (Paasi, 2005: 17–31). This chapter focuses on the existing literature to view the border not as a bidimensional line on maps but as a continuous project that shapes territories and becomes instrumentalized by political actors to shape public opinion.

To better understand this, a critical exploration of the border-making process is needed, since it is portrayed as an ideological form as well as a symbol and marker of identity (Paasi, 2005: 17–31). When studying the border, it is fundamental to establish that the main focus is no longer the border per se, but the dynamic and continuous process of its objectification, which is explained by van Houtum as the power practices attached to a border construction that bears a spatial effect, giving a demarcation in space its meaning and influence (van Houtum, 2010).

The materialization process of the border generates socio-spatial effects, which, in Foucauldian terms, makes it a “dispositif.” In essence, beyond its physical form, the border operates as a complex system involving various elements with strategic functions that sustain the exercise of

power in diverse historical and geopolitical contexts (Foucault, 1980: 194–228). Undoubtedly, the way in which this “dispositif” exists in the material dimension is always subject to change. Borders have not always existed. On the contrary, borders are made and endlessly re-made, and their making has never ceased, resulting in a process of continuous “bordering.”

Within this process, viewing “bordering” as an active verb shifts our focus toward what the border does, which primarily is the organisation of territory through the modulation of movement, distributing and redistributing the movement that passes through and around it (Nail *et al.*, 2022: 2-3). The Turkey-Syria border as a project is an essential example of how the intention behind bordering is intricately connected to the creation of border spaces, which allows the control and regulation of circulations.

This process is captured by the concept of the «borderscape.» Perera argues that the concept can express “the border as a space that is not static but fluid and shifting; established and at the same time continuously traversed by many bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests across state, regional, racial, and other symbolic boundaries” (Brambilla, 2014: 19; Perera, 2007).

As one can reasonably expect, the continuous processes of making and remaking the border mechanism are not natural, but a result of top-down state-imposed policies. As a consequence, such processes have been both rejected and fought against, as well as embraced and fought for. Mezzadra and Neilson argue that “it is the intensity of the struggles fought on borders around the world that prompts our research and theoretical elaborations” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 18). Struggles arise from the very performances of border objectification, all too often forcing migrants to confront matters of life and death (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 18).

In the case of the Turkey-Syria border, the weaponized borderscape faced by people on the move has been portrayed as a project that defends the country from the “unwanted” and keeps those inside “safe.” This is certainly designed by political actors in an attempt to manipulate what is happening on the ground, especially for those who live far away from the region, and make people believe that the fortification of border spaces is necessary. However, selling this project to the public surely requires more than the actual physical infrastructure built in the region, as we can see it in the discourse of the Turkey-Syria border in Turkish mass media through a justified and normalised visual language.

The next chapter will investigate the aesthetics of this security-obsessed discourse by analyzing how the role of Turkish media functions as

a component of the border project to shape images of a «fortress» to justify the fortification of the border spaces.

The Aesthetics of the Security-Obsessed Border Discourse

Since 2016, whenever I do a Google search on the “Turkey-Syria border,” the immediate results are consistently about the construction of the border walls or content related to the migration crisis and the Turkish military interventions in the region. Analyzing these results shows a visual saturation of numerous maps depicting the territorial conflict, videos and photos of people on the move waiting at border crossings, and pictures taken during and after the construction of the border wall. Produced by diverse newspapers, self-proclaimed journalists, or anonymous social media accounts, this content certainly influences how we visualize the border. This research problematizes this security-obsessed narrative, delving into how it is designed to shape public perception and promote the border as a necessary project of fortification.

The way the Turkey-Syria border appears on the screens of media-consuming individuals is relevant because securitization involves an issue being considered a security concern when the public perceives it that way (Tagliapietra, 2021: 3). Therefore, the increasingly security-obsessed discourse regarding the Turkey-Syria border in the majority of Turkey’s mass media outlets is an example of how securitarian actors use the media as a tool to legitimize their actions. In the end, securitization links the process of defining an issue with the process of governing it (Balzacq *et al.*, 2016).

The previously developed point is crucial because, according to Lippmann (1922), the media are the primary sources of images constructed by individuals about parts or aspects of the world that are out of sight or reach for most people. This means that the images people have in their minds do not always match what is actually happening on the ground and are, therefore, more liable to manipulation. In fact, people will construct mental images about events that they did not experience directly through the stories shared by the media, which could be misleading (Tagliapietra, 2021: 4-5). Therefore, the media are capable of influencing people’s perception of reality, which can shape their opinions about specific events and lead them to act in certain ways. For example, throughout the past decade, media coverage in the EU tended to portray the migration issue as the “migration crisis” (Tagliapietra, 2021: 7). According to Eberl *et al.* (2018, 207), such narratives influenced public attitudes towards migration,

as the perception of a crisis differs significantly from that of a mere issue (Chauzy & Appave, 2013).

Similar to this, in the case of the Turkey-Syria border, the media play a crucial role in portraying the border as a project that “keeps Turkey safe” from unwanted people. Özçetin’s (2026) analysis of 2,285 news items across the Turkish political spectrum (ranging from socialist anti-government to ultra-nationalist pro-government news outlets) confirms that coverage of Syrian refugees in Turkey is largely massifying and predominantly negative in tone. Moreover, 40% of the coverage is framed through a “threat–security–control” lens while 32% of coverage maintains a “humanitarian–moral” lens, often addressing Syrian refugees as “guests,” “brothers and sisters,” and “people in need.” This rhetoric, which has largely echoes the Turkish state’s narrative until 2016, does not contradict the securitization narrative that mirrors an anti-Syrian sentiment; rather, it functions in parallel with it. As Özçetin (2026) and Korkut (2016) suggest, these competing lenses intersect to produce the figure of the good refugee, “by selectively humanizing only those who embody specific gendered, moral, or classed virtues.”

The alignment of this media rhetoric with the Turkish state’s narrative is no coincidence. In parallel to the influence media has on public perception, I should also briefly mention the relationship the ruling party, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), has with dominant media groups in Turkey. According to Bulut and Karlıdağ (2021, 32), with the accession of Erdoğan’s AKP to power, media ownership shifted to groups with close ties to political power. They also note that the mainstream media were turned into a political tool that stuck strictly to the government’s narratives, while other media groups outside this circle were pacified by threats to bring them into line with the government (Bulut and Karlıdağ 2021, 32). Therefore, the critical voices in the media are limited to low-circulation publications and social media posts, while the pro-government outlets are clearly dominant (BBC News, 2023).

To elaborate on the previous point, I can refer to BBC News’s “Turkey media guide” (2023), which suggests that television is still the leading news medium and that “statements by officials and live speeches by President Erdoğan are staple features of coverage.” The same guide also mentions that critical media outlets face police raids, hostile measures, tax fines, and the arrest of journalists on charges of terrorist organization membership, such as reporters for Kurdish media. Furthermore, it shows that courts regularly ban websites or block pages from critical news sites, considering them linked with terrorism (BBC News, 2023).

Since the mainstream media outlets are largely unavailable for those who are critical and/or support opposition in Turkey, they depend on social media to share their views. According to BBC News (2023), about 84% of Turkey's population uses the internet, whereas 72% also use social media. Nevertheless, the government gave itself the power to regulate social media content through a 2020 law that "obliges major platforms to store user data in Turkey and appoint a local representative to carry out content removal requests" (BBC News, 2023).

Being in control of the mainstream media and with its the ability to regulate social media content, the state in Turkey has the power to shape media narratives about the outside world, which is out of sight or reach for much of its population. The discourse around the Turkey-Syria border is, therefore, heavily influenced by the media, which serves as a political tool by the government. Since media outlets opposed to Turkey's border policies are visibly disempowered, the state now fully controls how the border should be viewed and represented. This is, substantially, how the border is sold to the public as a project performing like a security mechanism.

When the majority of the population in Turkey consumes media (both mainstream and social), the aesthetics of the border as a project are essential to promote it. This is because securitization can be justified when it turns into a matter of public debate. Therefore, the legitimization of what the securitarian actors do, both towards international and domestic audiences, goes through designing a border that performs like a fortress, constantly pushing back migrants and aiming to be impassable. Only then can the border project be sold as a necessity for securitization, justifying even the violence that takes place and the struggles it produces.

The images shared by the mainstream media outlets in Turkey regarding the shared border with Syria are thereby relevant to better understand the border as a project. Such images often have a low production value and usually involve editing that combines various components of military technology, such as drones, zeppelins, watchtowers, trucks, walls, barbed wires, trenches, and more. These images often show such military components juxtaposed and concentrated in the same location in certain border areas, such the 911-km-long Turkey-Syria border.

The severe exaggeration in collocating different military elements within the same scene reflects a certain pride in defending the border at all costs. Using the latest technologies, the tallest watchtowers, and the most sophisticated drones, Turkey's border policies have become increasingly restrictive since 2015, when the fortification of its shared border with Syria began, along with the militarization of the territory and the systematic pushback against migrants. These policies are corroborated by media that

aim to influence public opinion on the Turkey-Syria border and related issues, such as migration to Turkey, reflecting a growing security obsession with a hostile narrative towards migrants, especially those from Syria. This hostility is also evident in the election propaganda of Turkish politicians across different political spectrums, who continuously scapegoat Syrians when they speak about Turkey's domestic issues, like the financial crisis. Nonetheless, this is ironic considering the open-door policy Turkey adopted in 2011 for those fleeing the war in Syria, which has completely reversed to today's fortification and "*hudut namustur*" (border is *namus*) policies.

"*Namus*" is an expression borrowed from Arabic, originally meaning law or custom but somehow referring more to a notion of prudish morality in Turkish colloquial use (Nişanyan, 2015). For example, a family's "*namus*" would be associated with how romantically or sexually "pure" its females are, and if a wife sleeps with another man who is not her husband, she would be "defiling" the husband's "*namus*." Although the choice of terminology seems to deviate from the border discourse, the previously mentioned expression suggests that the border itself is "*namus*" for the country, and therefore the fact that it is being crossed by illegal migrants "defiles" Turkey's *namus*.

According to Yaşlı (2023, 2639), slogans like "border is *namus*" proliferated in Turkey, together with "I don't want refugees in my country," especially after "secular-nationalist" politicians and their supporters promoted these claims on social media thousands of times while asserting that the country is "under Syrian invasion." He also highlights that from time to time, disasters and major problems, such as the wildfires that broke out in different regions of Turkey, would be blamed on Syrian migrants, and ordinary street fights can be labeled as clan fights between Syrians and Turks. These attitudes resulted in Syrians becoming the first suspects in rape or harassment incidents, and when a Syrian does actually commit a crime, all Syrians in the country would take the blame for it (Yaşlı, 2023: 2639). This suggests that the "othering" of Syrians in Turkey does not result solely from political propaganda; rather, it is a multifaceted problem that is experienced and reproduced at multiple levels of daily life.

The slogan "border is *namus*" can be seen even in the streets, sprayed onto the walls, hung as banners on fences, written at the gates of military barracks, printed on t-shirts, or painted on the border walls. It is also very common to see specific groups of secular-nationalist politicians advocating for the fortification of the border and the deportation of migrants to their home country, holding banners with this slogan. This makes evident once again that politicians repeatedly use this rhetoric, both on social

media and in the streets, in order to manipulate the way people perceive certain issues.

The case of the Turkey-Syria border being promoted as a security mechanism in the media, therefore, inevitably influences people's understanding of border spaces and border-related issues, such as the migration of displaced Syrian people. The next chapter examines this state-imposed aesthetics by looking at alternative border spaces and remapping the territory not through security infrastructures, but through other spaces, in other words, "heterotopias."

Remapping the Turkey-Syria Border Otherwise



Looking beyond the state-imposed aesthetics of the Turkey-Syria border requires a methodological shift. If the dominant media narratives promote the border as a security mechanism, then remapping becomes necessary to challenge how the territory is understood and imagined by people who have never been in the region. This remapping does not aim to shift the focus away from the surveillance infrastructures built along the border, but rather to reveal other spatial objects that both confront and coexist with securitization dynamics.

By remapping the border territory, I also look beyond the components of military technology (such as drones, zeppelins, watchtowers, trucks, walls, barbed wires, and trenches) and focus on spaces shaped by the everyday practices of its inhabitants. These other spatialities offer alternative readings of the border, revealing spatial forms that are not only produced by securitization or militarization, but also by social relations, labor, oil industry, memory, and survival. This combined approach requires engaging with space beyond representational tools alone, which is why I conducted a field study in the region in 2023, soon after it was hit by two earthquakes.

The long trip through the cities of the border region in Turkey enabled the collection of ethnographic information and personally experiencing how people inhabit the encountered spaces. Although manipulating maps, territorial data, or literature to locate thought on the territory is essential, this journey allowed for fuller engagement with space and unlocked another level of understanding by involving all five senses to experience narratives and, especially, the different spatial conditions of the border. In doing so, the trip made it possible to encounter the "heterotopias" of the border, thereby offering an opportunity to reimagine the border through a different perspective.

The term heterotopia, literally meaning “the other spaces,” was originally used to define a medical irregularity, “a spatial displacement of normal tissue” or “a site in which biological material is out of place” (Goode, 2018: 227–250). A popular example is the orthopedic condition of “heterotopic ossification,” which refers the presence of a bone in soft tissue where the bone normally does not exist (Miller *et al.*, 2019; Goode, 2018: 227). This somehow inspired Foucault to draw parallels with the social world, possibly to gain insight into social and spatial practices (Goode, 2018: 227). Indeed, for Foucault, a heterotopia is “a space that challenges or subverts the hegemonic order” and, essentially, a place of deviation, “capable of containing within itself a diversity of spaces” as well as “valorizing differentness and diversity” (Goode, 2018: 227; Boano, 2011). I apply the notion of heterotopias as an instrument to represent the diversity of materiality and narrative in border spaces. Using the articulation of heterotopia enables confronting architectural thinking and the project of the border and therefore provides an opportunity to read the border through its deviations and different spatialities.

These spatial objects, or heterotopias, are material conditions through which we are able to think about other places along the border by revealing stories, components, and elements. They uncover different aspects of the border, and through these aspects, I aim to reconstruct the story of the border. In particular, I overlap these stories by remapping the Turkey-Syria border through the elements emerging from its heterotopic spatial conditions. This chapter presents the visual depictions of each heterotopia according to the chronological order of the journey, from west to east: starting with the kebab shop and the lake park in Hatay, followed by the Aleppo soap factory in Gaziantep, a holy grave in Şanlıurfa, and the oil refinery in Batman.

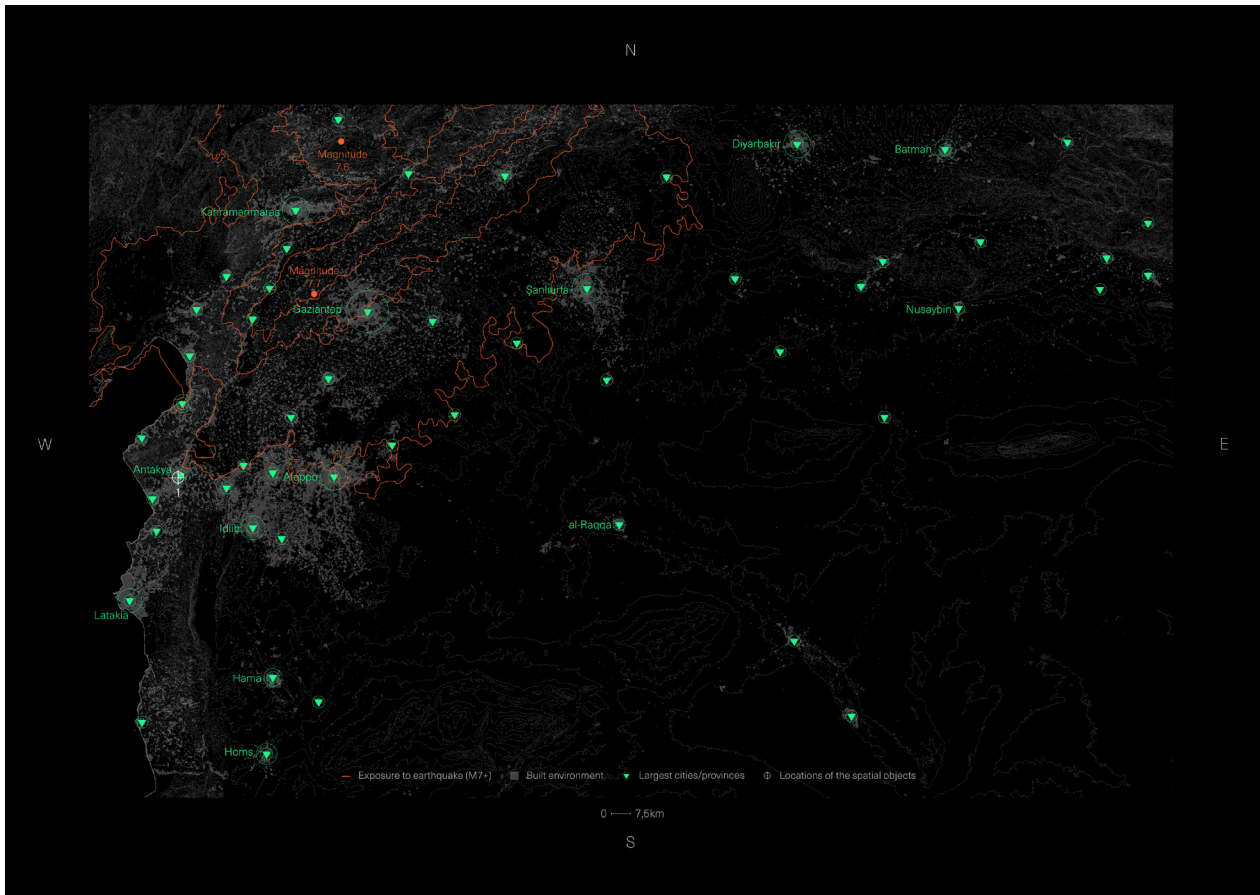


Figure 1. *Heterotopic Ossifications I*, 2024, Author's own work.

The first spatial object encountered is a kebab shop in rubble located in the city center of the significantly damaged Hatay. It is particularly interesting as it tells the story of everyday life within the border area after the twin earthquakes hit the region in February 2023. Amongst the rubble, this makeshift structure blurs the boundary between inside and outside, as an immediate result of the destruction. The shop serves as a point of reference for all the other makeshift spaces across the border, be they in Syrian or Turkish territories. The depiction reveals a story of social life in general, in which kebab shops are seen as significant sites of sociality.

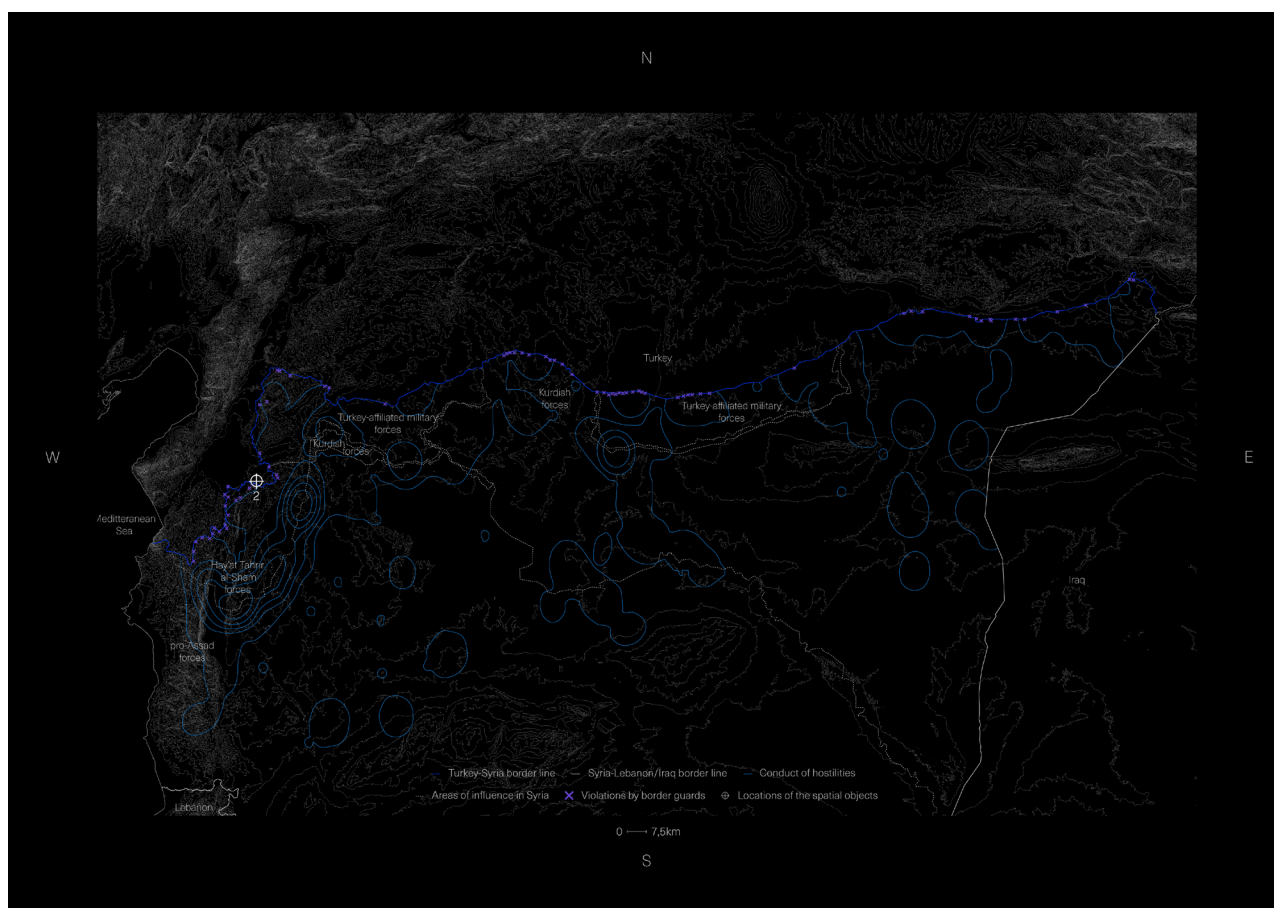


Figure 2. *Heterotopic Ossifications II*, 2024, Author's own work.

The second spatial object encountered is the Lake Park below the border walls, located in Reyhanli province of Hatay, one of the bordering areas of the city. The park is situated next to the hill that forms the division between Syria and Turkey, where border walls, watchtowers, and patrol roads are constantly kept under surveillance by armed Turkish border guards. However, at the foot of that hill, on Turkish territory, there is a park with a lake, playgrounds, sports courts, and restaurants, giving the impression of a “backstage” of the border. Indeed, this park highlights how borders are constantly shaped by such “backstages,” a dynamic that can be observed at various points along the Turkey-Syria border.

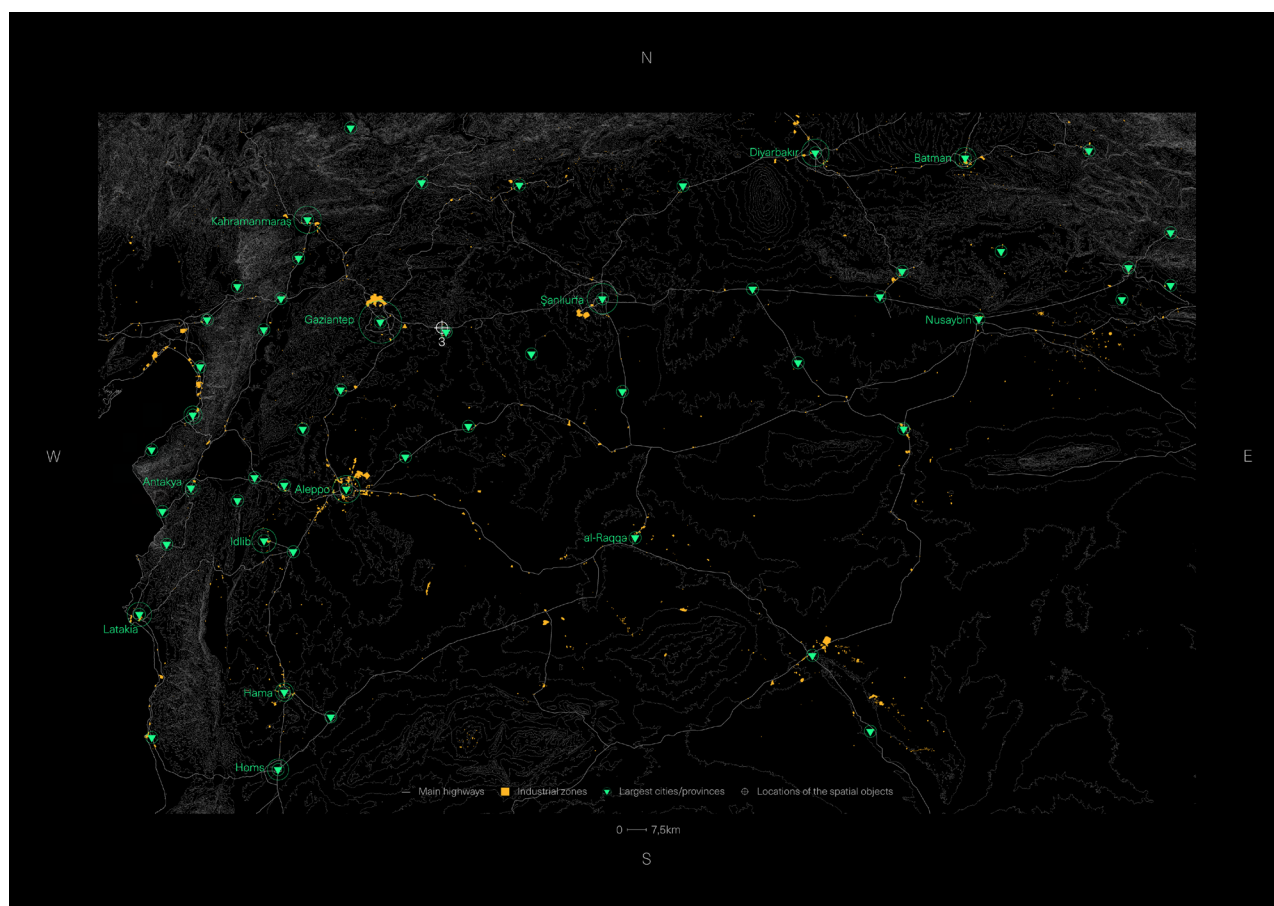


Figure 3. *Heterotopic Ossifications III*, 2024, Author's own work.

The third spatial object encountered is the Aleppo soap factory, located in the industrial zone of Nizip, in the city of Gaziantep. The factory is run by a young Turkish man who inherited the property from his father, and mass produces the famous Aleppo soap, a centuries-old recipe for olive oil soap originating in Syria. In the interview conducted with the factory owner during the trip, he explained that he also works as a lawyer and seeks to “send refugees off to their countries,” because he is a “Turkish nationalist.” However, all of the workers encountered at the soap factory were actually from Syria. Therefore, the story reveals the inherent ambivalence of this place, where Aleppo soap is made in a factory run by a Turkish nationalist lawyer who aims to send refugees back to Syria but makes a living thanks to Syrian labor. This is another lens through which we can read the border, since it reveals how a security mechanism designed to “push back the undesirable” functions selectively by facilitating the exploitation of refugee labor to benefit national capital. Although this space does not reject the securitized logic, it exposes the reliance on undocumented and underpaid Syrian workers who are simultaneously dehumanized and excluded by the same nationalist discourse that profits from their presence.

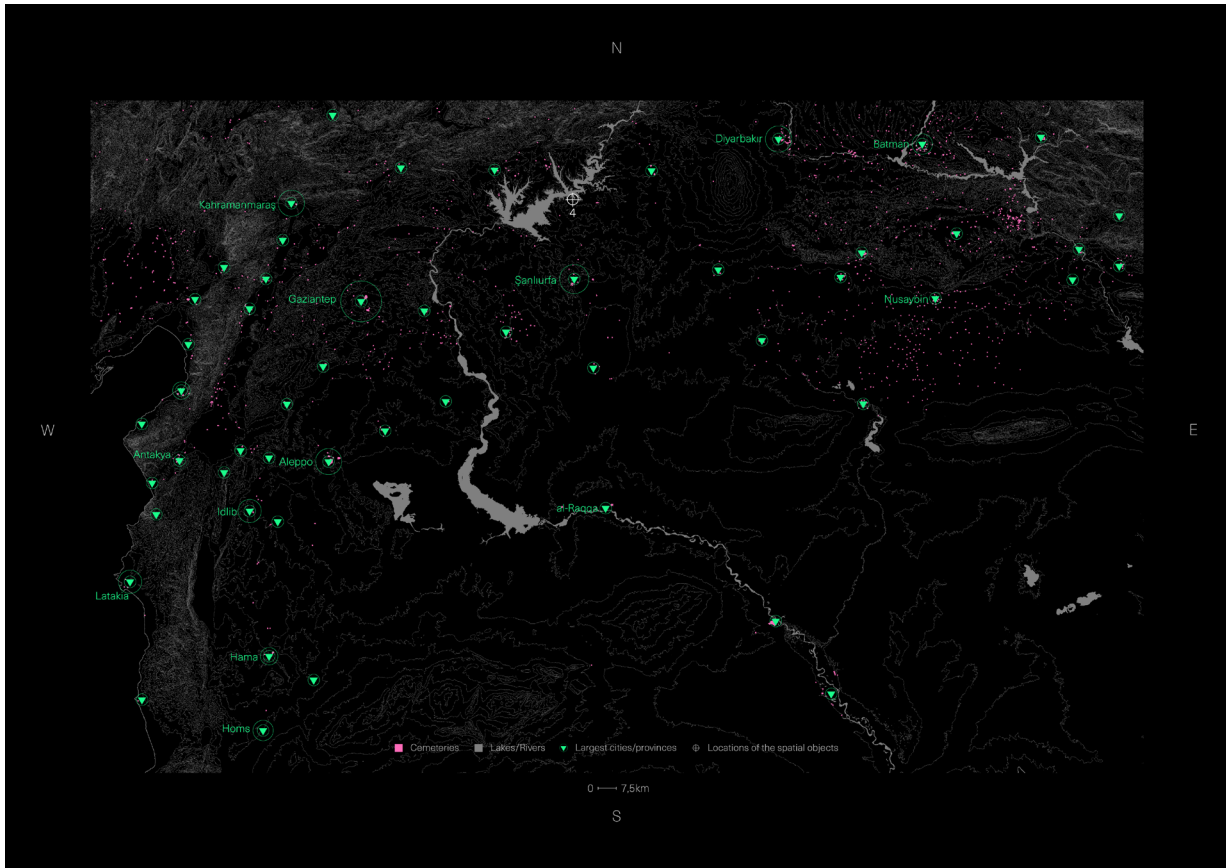


Figure 4. *Heterotopic Ossifications IV*, 2024, Author's own work.

The fourth spatial object encountered is a replica burial place on the riverbank, located on the edge of the Euphrates River, in the city of Şanlıurfa. It was a building observed during my exploration of the remote rural villages nearby. It looked abandoned, and had a locked door and a window without glass that offered a glimpse into the interior, where one could see a raised mound resembling the resting places of holy figures in Islam. A piece of paper left beside the raised mound indicated that it was dedicated to Imam Sayyid Martyr Zayn al-Abidin, who died in 713, and was now memorialized with this replica grave on the riverbank. There is little information available about the grave, but villagers have embraced its presence, with one stating, “It’s always been here.” This story reveals aspects of the border in relation to monuments from the past, particularly how people inhabiting border areas observe death rituals.

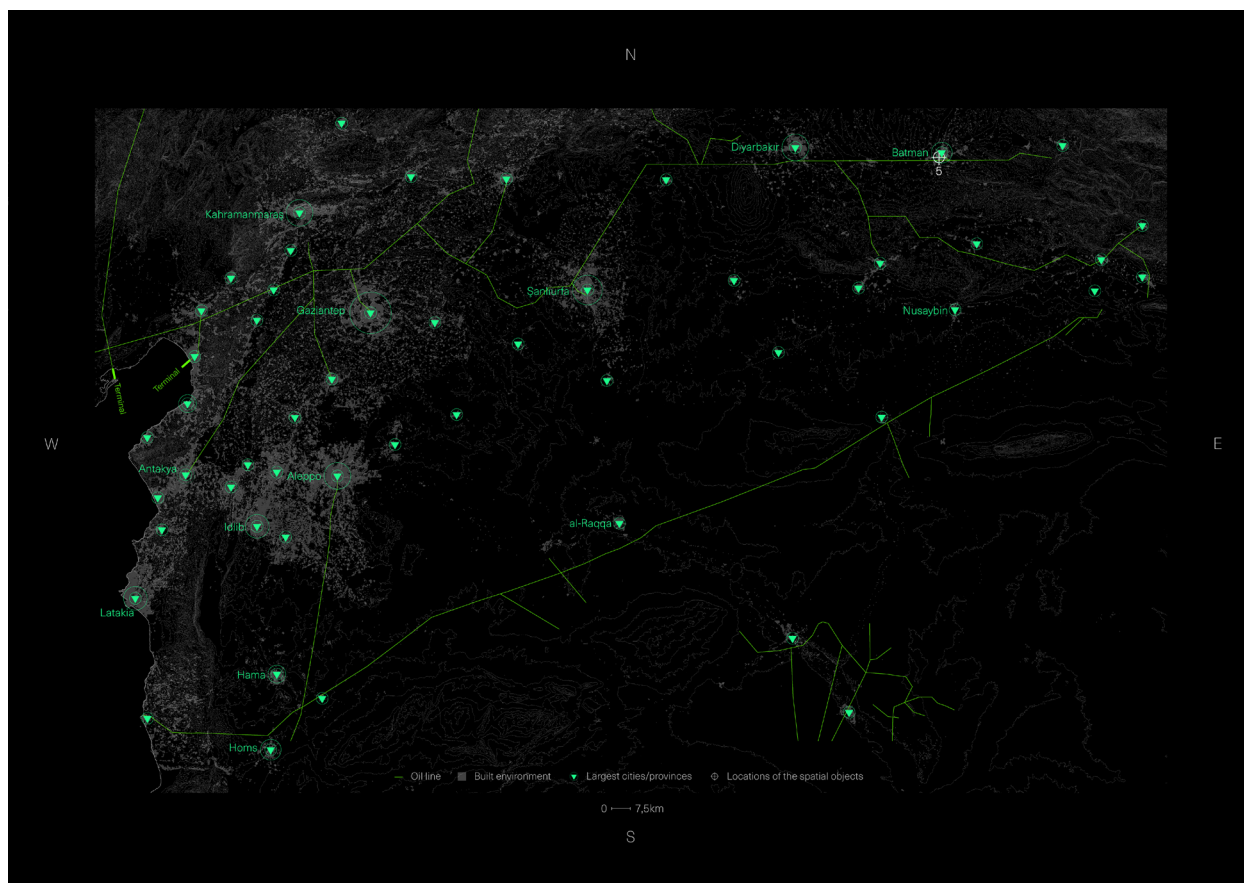


Figure 5. *Heterotopic Ossifications V*, 2024, Author's own work.

The fifth spatial object encountered is an oil refinery, located in the city center of Batman. Compared to the previous objects, this one has a much larger scale as it encompasses the privatized and securitized neighborhood of “Petrol Sitesi,” which consists of the crude oil refinery and its related buildings, hospitals, schools, sports clubs, suburban areas, and parks. The city has evolved around the fortified site; shortly after oil deposits were discovered in the region in the 1940s, the Turkish government built the refinery and granted Batman city status in the 1950s. This story reveals the kind of urbanization driven by privatization, securitization, and the oil industry, which is crucial given that oil evidently led to the emergence of places like Petrol Sitesi in the region. While this may appear to align with the securitized narrative of border discourse, I argue that such heterotopias must be taken into account to show how bordering practices shape spaces intended to secure capital and energy just as much as national safety. Therefore, Petrol Sitesi serves as a unique example of urban development in the region, radically deviating from the planning and logic of the surrounding cities.

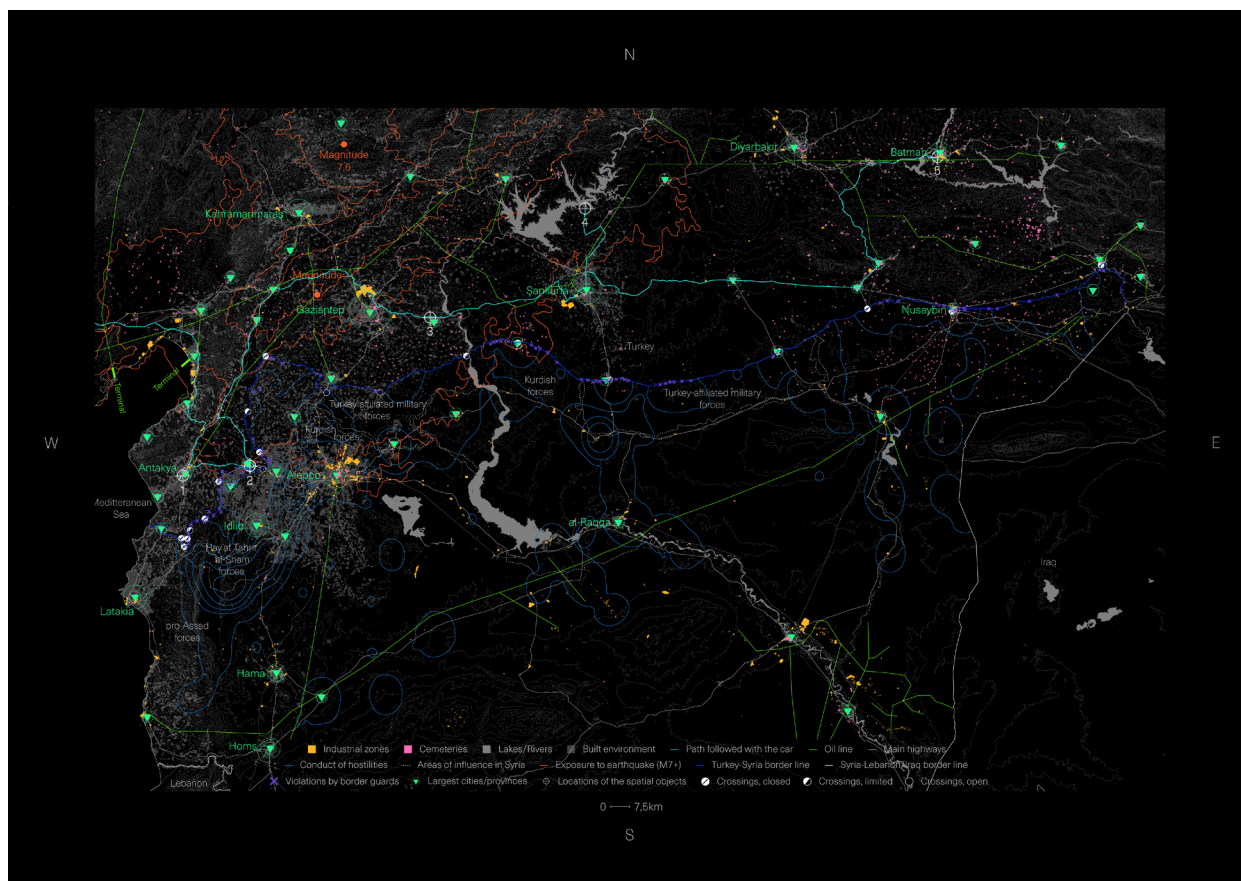


Figure 6. *Heterotopic Ossifications VI*, 2024, Author's own work.

In the end, by revealing the stories of these five sites, I propose an alternative spatial understanding of the Turkey-Syria border. This is because the territory is continuously constructed and negotiated through these different spatialities, in other words, heterotopias. By overlapping the maps of these spatial objects, I aim to reconstruct the state-imposed aesthetics of the border territory in order to provoke reflection within border discourses on the role of the media in engineering conformity in political discourse.

Conclusion

The border cannot be understood solely as a line on two-dimensional maps but should instead be read as a project produced by states and circulated through aesthetics that promote its securitization. By analyzing the case of the Turkey-Syria border and the ways in which Turkish mass media promotes it as a security mechanism, this paper argued that securitization operates not only through infrastructure and policy, but also through media narratives. These imposed representations of the border shape public perception, scapegoating displaced populations and legitimizing hostile

border practices, thus normalizing violence and exclusion as necessary actions to protect the country.

In order to confront this security-obsessed aesthetics, I propose remapping the border otherwise. Rather than reproducing visual narratives that focus on surveillance infrastructures, mapping and field-based inquiry should be mobilized to reveal alternative spatial conditions along the border. Through ethnographic fieldwork, this research examined how heterotopias contest the securitized logics within the border discourse. These heterotopias enable a different spatial understanding of the border, challenging interpretations that fully depend on visual narratives produced by mass media outlets. This approach allows for a multifaceted representation of the border, showing it not merely as a line, but as a densely inhabited territory.

By overlapping the maps of different heterotopias encountered in the region, the article does not seek to deny the presence of military infrastructures, but to challenge the way they shape our spatial understanding of the border. The five spatial objects presented, ranging from a makeshift kebab shop to an oil-driven urban site, demonstrate that the border is not only a fortress against the “undesirable,” but is also inhabited and negotiated in ways that go beyond security-obsessed narratives. In this sense, remapping the border becomes crucial in order to reveal its alternative spatial forms and to challenge its securitized aspects.

Ultimately, I propose looking beyond security-driven imaginaries when engaging with borders, shifting how they are read and represented by focusing on them as a project promoted to the public. By doing so, I aim to contribute to broader debates in border-related studies and to encourage alternative imaginaries informed by fieldwork and critical literature that reveal the diverse spatial implications of borders.

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Queer Visibility in Mainstream Nepali Cinema: Between Stagnation and Progress



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Abstract: Despite Nepal's international recognition for advancing the rights of sexual and gender minorities, the relationship between queer visibility and cinematic representation in mainstream Nepali cinema remains insufficiently explored. This article focuses on commercially oriented films produced within Nepal's domestic film industry and examines representations of queer and gender-nonconforming identities from the early 2000s to the present. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and José Esteban Muñoz's work on queer visibility, dominant publicity, and disidentification, the analysis considers films featuring cross-dressing characters, trans women, third-gender protagonists, hijra communities, and same-sex relationships. The findings indicate that queer representation in mainstream Nepali cinema has been shaped by both progress and stagnation. Although queer visibility has increased over time, these representations are frequently framed through humour, pity, melodrama, violence, and spectacle. Rather than indicating a linear progression toward inclusion, mainstream films often perpetuate familiar stereotypes and commercial conventions that limit queer subjectivity. The article argues that mainstream Nepali cinema reveals a movement from invisibility to stereotyped visibility, in which queer identities become increasingly present on screen while remaining constrained by dominant representational frameworks. By interrogating the relationship between visibility, representation, and social change, this study contributes to the limited scholarship on Nepali cinema and queer screen cultures in South Asia.

Keywords: Nepali Cinema; Queer Representation; LGBTQIA+ Rights; Gender Nonconformity; Mainstream Film; South Asian Film Studies

Résumé : Bien que le Népal soit reconnu à l'échelle internationale pour les progrès réalisés en matière de droits des minorités sexuelles et de genre, les liens entre la visibilité des personnes *queer* et leur représentation dans le cinéma népalais grand public

ont jusqu'à présent été peu étudiés. Cet article s'intéresse aux films commerciaux produits par l'industrie cinématographique népalaise et analyse les représentations des identités *queer* et des personnes transgressant les normes de genre depuis le début des années 2000 jusqu'à aujourd'hui. S'appuyant sur la théorie de la performativité du genre de Judith Butler ainsi que sur les travaux de José Esteban Muñoz concernant la visibilité *queer*, l'espace public dominant et la désidentification, cette étude examine des films mettant en scène des personnages travestis, des femmes transgenres, des protagonistes appartenant au troisième genre, des communautés hijras et des relations entre personnes de même sexe. Les résultats montrent que les représentations *queer* dans le cinéma népalais grand public sont marquées à la fois par des avancées et des résistances au changement. Si la visibilité des identités *queer* s'est accrue au fil du temps, ces représentations demeurent souvent associées au registre de l'humour, de la compassion, du mélodrame, de la violence ou du spectacle. Loin de traduire une progression linéaire vers une plus grande inclusion, les films grand public continuent fréquemment de reproduire ces stéréotypes récurrents et des conventions commerciales qui limitent l'expression de subjectivités *queer* plus complexes. L'article soutient ainsi que le cinéma népalais grand public est passé d'une relative invisibilité des identités *queer* à une visibilité largement stéréotypée. Si celles-ci occupent désormais une place plus importante à l'écran, elles restent souvent enfermées dans des cadres de représentation dominants. En interrogeant les liens entre visibilité, représentation et changement social, cette étude contribue à un champ de recherche encore peu développé consacré au cinéma népalais et aux culturelles visuelles *queer* en Asie du Sud.

Mots clés : cinéma népalais ; représentation *queer* ; droits LGBTQIA+ ; non-conformité de genre ; film grand public ; études filmiques Asie du Sud

Introduction

Nepali cinema remains among the least examined film traditions in South Asia. Although scholarship on South Asian cinemas has expanded, critical analysis of smaller industries, such as Nepal's, remains fragmented. Within this study, mainstream Nepali cinema is defined as commercially oriented feature films produced within Nepal's domestic film industry and distributed through conventional theatrical and media networks. While Nepali-language films are also produced in India, particularly in regions such as Darjeeling and Sikkim, this article focuses exclusively on films produced within Nepal's domestic film industry.

Within the limited body of existing scholarship, recent studies have primarily addressed themes of gender, culture, and social representation in Nepali cinema (Karki, 2019; Shrestha *et al.*, 2021; Bista, 2021; Sherma, 2025). However, sustained scholarly engagement with queer visibility remains limited, with most discussions occurring in media and public discourse rather than in academic research. As a result, both the historical

development and the sociocultural implications of queer representation in mainstream Nepali cinema remain underexplored.

Nepali cinema originated in the mid-twentieth century, marked by the opening of Janasewa Hall in 1949, where audiences predominantly watched Hindi-language films (Sharma, 2016: 49). These films featured escapist narratives characterised by songs, melodrama, spectacle, and depictions of the lifestyles of India's middle and upper classes (Whelpton, 2005: 172). The formal establishment of the Nepali film industry in 1964 introduced filmmakers trained in Bombay (now Mumbai), who incorporated Bollywood conventions that shaped the narrative and visual style of early Nepali productions (Sharma, 2016: 65). Consequently, mainstream Nepali cinema became heavily reliant on commercially successful Bollywood-style formulas, constraining creative experimentation and limiting sustained engagement with Nepal's social and cultural realities.

The development of Nepali cinema must also be situated within broader socio-political transformations, particularly shifts in the legal and cultural recognition of gender and sexual minorities. Although industrial conventions have shaped mainstream storytelling, Nepal's legal and social landscape has been undergoing significant reconfiguration. Nepal has made substantial legal progress in LGBTQIA+ rights, positioning itself as one of South Asia's most progressive nations in this regard. For instance, the 2007 Supreme Court decision recognised the rights of gender and sexual minorities, directing the government to implement anti-discrimination measures and to legally recognize "third gender" identities. This progressive momentum continued with the 2015 Constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In 2023, a Supreme Court order permitted the registration of same-sex marriages, marking a further step toward equality. In 2026, the Court delivered a final verdict granting same-sex couples full and equal marriage rights. Implementation of these rights is ongoing.

Despite notable legal and social progress, the everyday experiences of gender and sexual minorities in Nepal continue to be shaped by cultural stigma and persistent marginalisation. While legal protections have expanded, many individuals remain unaware of their rights or lack adequate social and institutional support to exercise them. As Sunil Babu Pant (2023) emphasises, gender and sexual diversity in Nepal have long existed within local cultural traditions and cannot be understood solely through contemporary Western frameworks of queer identity. Identities such as *maruni* in the hill regions, *meti* in eastern Nepal, and *hijra* in the Madhesh-Tarai have historically occupied distinct social, cultural, and ritual roles within Nepali society, indicating that forms of gender diversity were culturally recognised long before their formal legal recognition

by the state. However, this historical visibility has not necessarily translated into contemporary social acceptance or equality, underscoring the complex relationship between cultural visibility, legal rights, and lived experience.

This disconnect between legal rights, social visibility, and social acceptance is also reflected in mainstream cinematic representation. While cinema is often regarded as a reflection of society, it also actively constructs cultural meanings and identities. Cinema has become a significant medium for examining identities and sexualities due to its widespread cultural presence and ideological influence (Muraleedharan, 2005: 79). In Nepal, mainstream cinema continues to be shaped by commercial imperatives and dominant cultural norms, which in turn influence how gender and sexual identities are represented on screen. Consequently, film plays an important role in shaping public perceptions of queer identities and in mediating the relationship between social attitudes, legal developments, and cultural understandings.

To account for how such representational patterns are produced and stabilised in cinematic discourse, this study draws on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which understands gender as a repeated and socially regulated performance rather than a fixed identity (Butler, 1990), and on José Esteban Muñoz's work on queer visibility and dominant publicity (Muñoz, 1999). While dominant cultural forms often regulate the terms under which marginalised identities become visible, Muñoz's concept of disidentification also provides a framework for considering how queer subjects may negotiate, appropriate, or partially resist these representational constraints. In this context, even limited forms of visibility may function as ambivalent spaces of recognition, while remaining shaped by dominant heteronormative logics. Together, these perspectives, situated within broader queer and feminist film theory, enable an analysis of how Nepali cinema constructs, constrains, and occasionally negotiates queer subjectivities within dominant representational systems.

This article investigates the construction and marginalisation of queer identities within mainstream Nepali cinema, considering how these representations reflect broader social attitudes and Nepal's evolving legal recognition of gender and sexual minorities. By tracing the trajectory of queer representation, the article contends that mainstream cinema does not follow a linear progression from exclusion to inclusion. Instead, it demonstrates a shift from invisibility to stereotyped visibility, where queer identities become more prominent on screen but continue to be mediated through stereotypes, caricature, and heteronormative frameworks.

Historical and Sociopolitical Context

Before the 1990s, Nepal lacked both public recognition and linguistic frameworks necessary to articulate sexual or gender diversity. While queer individuals were present, their lives remained socially invisible and conceptually unacknowledged. Sunil Babu Pant, who later emerged as a leader in Nepal's queer rights movement, first encountered open discussions of sexuality while abroad. This highlights the pervasive silence that shaped Nepal's social landscape (Pant, 2023). The Panchayat era (1960-1990), an authoritarian political system in which the monarchy held absolute power and political parties were banned (Whelpton, 2005: 86), reinforced this silence through strict state control over civic life and cultural expression. The regime banned political parties and independent associations, promoting a singular national identity focused on monarchy, unity, and nationalism (Shah, 1967, as cited in Adhikary, 1995: 13-14). Film production was largely state-sponsored and functioned to disseminate Panchayat ideology. In the 1970s, government films specifically promoted loyalty to the monarchy and reinforced nationalist ideals, thereby limiting creative experimentation and critical reflection (Sharma, 1981: 238-239). Within this highly regulated cultural context, sexuality, gender, and individuality were suppressed, further entrenching the invisibility of queer identities in Nepali public life.

The People's Movement of 1990, a mass democratic movement led by the Nepali Congress Party and communist alliances against the Panchayat regime, represented a decisive shift from decades of authoritarian rule, culminating in the restoration of multiparty democracy (Hutt and Onta, 2017: 2). The end of the absolute monarchy created new social and political spaces in which previously suppressed issues of sexuality, gender identity, and ethnicity could gradually enter public discourse (Greene, 2015: 12). In 1996, the Maoist insurgency, known as the "People's War," emerged with the aim of replacing Nepal's constitutional monarchy with a communist republic (Ashraf, 2002). The resulting civil war (1996-2006) and the subsequent signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006 further reshaped Nepal's political and social landscape, opening new possibilities for renegotiating relationships between people, law, and the state. These transformations created spaces in which new discourses surrounding sexuality and rights could emerge, enabling sexual and gender minorities to advocate more visibly for recognition and equality (Boyce and Coyle, 2015, as cited in Greene, 2015: 12).

Within this evolving context, activists such as Sunil Babu Pant played a pivotal role in advancing Nepal's queer movement. Pant established the Blue Diamond Society in 2001, the nation's first organization dedicated to

advocating for the rights and health of sexual and gender minorities (Blue Diamond Society, 2023), followed by the formation of the Mitini Support Group in 2002 (later formalized as Mitini Nepal in 2005), a non-governmental organization that advocates for the rights, inclusion, and well-being of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minority communities in Nepal through advocacy, support services, counselling, and empowerment programs (Mitini Nepal, 2023). Collectively, these initiatives provided the foundation for the public visibility and legal recognition of LGBTQIA+ communities in Nepal. The legal recognition of queer rights in Nepal emerged through a series of significant judicial and political developments during the late 2000s and early 2010s.

In 2007, the Supreme Court of Nepal issued a landmark decision in *Sunil Babu Pant and Others v. Government of Nepal*, recognizing gender and sexual diversity as fundamental human rights. The ruling affirmed that same-sex relations could not be treated as criminal and directed the state to amend discriminatory laws and consider legalizing same-sex marriage. By asserting that no individual has the authority to question the private lives or relationships of consenting adults, the Court reinforced the rights to privacy, dignity, and self-determination as core rights (NJA Law Journal, 2008: 261-286).

These judicial developments coincided with broader political transformations within the Nepali state. In 2008, Nepal abolished its monarchy and became a federal democratic republic (Hutt and Onta, 2017: 3). That same year, Sunil Babu Pant joined the first Constituent Assembly as Asia's first openly gay parliamentarian. His participation contributed to the explicit prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the 2015 Constitution (Pant, 2023), as guaranteed in Articles 12, 18 and 42 (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). Collectively, these developments transformed queer rights from a plea for recognition into a constitutional mandate for equality. Subsequent court rulings extended these protections into everyday areas of life. For example, in *Suman Panta v. Ministry of Home Affairs* (2017), the Supreme Court ordered the government to grant non-tourist visas to same-sex spouses of foreign nationals (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The expansion of legal recognition extended into the 2020s. On June 28, 2023, the Supreme Court issued an interim order in *Pinky Gurung v. Government of Nepal*, directing authorities to temporarily register same-sex marriages, including couples with "other" gender markers (ILGA Asia, 2024). Following the ruling, Nepal registered its first same-sex marriage in November 2023, becoming the first country in South Asia to do so (Gurung, 2023). On June 18, 2026, the Supreme Court delivered its final verdict in *Pinky Gurung v. Government of Nepal*, ordering the government to grant same-sex couples full and equal

marriage rights (ILGA Asia, 2026). The government is still implementing the ruling, including the required legislative and administrative actions.

Despite ongoing activism, significant disparities remain. As Santosh Sharma Poudel (2023) notes, Nepal “still has a long way to go,” which echoes Birat Bijay Ojha’s (2024) concern over whether recent gains are genuine “landmarks or loopholes.” Although constitutional protections exist, inconsistent implementation continues to require judicial clarification in individual cases seeking recognition of their rights. While the Supreme Court recognised certain rights for same-sex spouses in 2017, including provisions related to visa entitlements, subsequent legal cases in 2022 indicate that similar claims by other applicants continued to require further judicial and administrative clarification (Fang, 2023). This gap became evident following the Supreme Court’s 2023 interim order on same-sex marriage, when local authorities initially refused to register the marriage of Maya Gurung and Surendra Pandey despite the Court’s directive. Although the couple ultimately became the first same-sex couple to successfully register their marriage in Nepal, the delays and administrative resistance highlighted the continuing disconnect between legal recognition and its implementation in practice (Yong and BBC Nepali, 2023).

Kyle Knight (2024) highlights a similar challenge through the case of Rukshana Kapali, who has challenged the Nepali government in court over fifty times since 2021. In 2024, the Supreme Court recognised her as a woman without requiring medical evidence. However, in the absence of a comprehensive national policy, many transgender individuals continue to face uncertainty and must pursue recognition through individual court cases. The Yogyakarta Principles, adopted in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 2006, constitute an international framework affirming that sexual orientation and gender identity are integral to human dignity and that individuals are entitled to legal recognition without medical prerequisites (Yogyakarta Principles, 2007). According to Knight (2024), these principles were endorsed by Nepali activist Sunil Babu Pant and informed the Supreme Court’s landmark 2007 ruling, continuing to shape subsequent cases, including Kapali’s.

The persistence of these implementation gaps is also evident in the everyday experiences of sexual and gender minorities. Anjali Lama, the first transgender model to walk at Lakmé Fashion Week, Mumbai, in 2017, has recounted experiences of bullying, family pressure, and employment discrimination prior to achieving professional recognition, illustrating the social obstacles that shaped her path to visibility (Jamshed & Arora, 2017). More broadly, continued exclusion within families, workplaces, and healthcare settings highlights the persistent disparity between legal recognition and lived experience (Pokhrel, 2024). Such inconsistencies

demonstrate that legal reforms have not been fully realised in practice and that societal awareness continues to lag behind legal change. As public understandings of gender and sexual diversity are shaped not only through law but also through cultural representation, media and cinema serve as important sites through which visibility is produced and stereotypes are reinforced, challenged, or transformed.

Mainstream Nepali Cinema and Industrial Influence

Despite significant sociopolitical transformations in Nepal during the 1990s and early 2000s, mainstream Nepali cinema continued to adhere to commercially driven conventions rooted in decades of Hindi cinema influences. The commercial success of several films during the 1980s established *Kollywood* as a prominent film industry and contributed to the development of a mainstream cinematic culture closely aligned with Bollywood aesthetics and narrative conventions. Mainstream productions frequently borrowed archetypal characters, romantic ballads, and *item numbers*, relying on exaggerated violence, melodramatic depictions of social issues, and formulaic storytelling that prioritised entertainment over originality or critical engagement (Karki, 2023). The *masala* genre, popularised in 1970s Hindi cinema through its combination of romance, action, comedy, and melodrama (Ganti, 2004: 131), together with the “age of violence” associated with Indian films of the 1980s and early 1990s (Biswal, 2023), shaped mainstream cinematic conventions in Nepal. These conventions not only shaped narrative and aesthetic practices but also reinforced normative gender roles and social hierarchies that would continue to structure representation in later decades.

Gender representation in mainstream Nepali cinema during the 1980s and 1990s largely replicated Bollywood conventions, reinforcing hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity. Male protagonists were commonly portrayed as romantic heroes whose virtue was defined through the pursuit of idealised love (Karki, 2023: 34). During the 1990s, representations of masculinity shifted toward the figure of the “angry young man,” inspired by Amitabh Bachchan’s iconic 1970s Bollywood screen persona (Ahmed, 1985: 56). In Nepal, this archetype became closely associated with Rajesh Hamal, who emerged as the defining “angry young man” of mainstream Nepali cinema from the 1990s into the late 2010s (Karki, 2023: 60-62). In contrast, female characters were largely relegated to supporting roles such as love interests, wives, or mothers, and were primarily defined through sacrifice and moral virtue. Representations of women frequently relied on rigid archetypes, including the “modern” woman portrayed as rebellious or immoral and the

“traditional” woman idealised as virtuous and devoted (Karki, 2023: 39). Gopalan (1997) identifies the figure of the “avenging woman” in Hindi cinema’s revenge narratives, arguing that female empowerment within such films often remains constrained by patriarchal norms and is frequently framed through trauma and victimhood. This archetype also appeared in Nepali films during the late 1980s (Karki, 2023: 42). During this period, films increasingly featured the hypersexualised figure of the “item girl” (Karki, 2023: 50), a female performer typically presented in highly stylised song-and-dance sequences focused on spectacle, sexualisation, and audience appeal (Nijhawan, 2016: 137). From the mid-2000s to mid-2010s, this figure developed into the dual persona of the “angry young woman,” most notably represented by Rekha Thapa, who combined physical aggression and masculine-coded defiance with glamour and sexualisation (Karki, 2023: 82-85). Although this archetype was framed as empowered, it ultimately continued to function within patriarchal structures by equating female strength with traditionally masculine forms of power and simultaneously maintaining the objectification of women in commercial cinema. These recurring archetypes, perpetuated through formulaic storytelling, reinforced conventional gender hierarchies and patriarchal values while limiting the representation of gender fluidity and queer subjectivity within mainstream Nepali cinema (Karki, 2023: 89-90).

From Invisibility to Stereotyped Visibility

Since the inception of mainstream Nepali cinema, queer and gender-nonconforming identities have largely remained invisible, marginalised, or framed through comic disguise and stereotypical representation. Although queer visibility has increased over time, mainstream portrayals continue to be shaped by humour, pity, melodrama, violence, and familiar commercial conventions. The following analysis traces this transition from invisibility to visibility, examining how different forms of queer representation have emerged within mainstream cinema while often remaining constrained by stereotypes that simultaneously enable recognition and reinforce marginalisation.

Cross-Dressing and Comic Disguise

An early example of gender disguise in mainstream Nepali cinema appears in *Buhari* (2001), a romantic comedy in which the male protagonist disguises himself as a maid to enter the household of the woman he loves and gain her affection. His father also adopts female attire to support

the deception, creating a comic spectacle in which both characters perform exaggerated forms of femininity. The sequences echo cross-dressing comedies in Hindi cinema such as *Chachi 420* (1997), a remake of *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) (Bose and Bhattacharyya, 2007: 130) and *Aunty No. 1* (1998). Although framed primarily as comedy, these scenes can be read as revealing the performative nature of gender. Drawing on Judith Butler's argument that "the parodic repetition of gender exposes the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance" (1990: 200), the film exaggerates gestures, costumes, and even employs a dubbed female voice, presenting femininity not as an innate quality but as a set of repeated and recognizable performances. Similarly, Annette Kuhn argues that cross-dressing narratives destabilise culturally fixed distinctions between masculine and feminine identities, describing sexual disguise as "a play upon the fixity and the fluidity of gender identity" (Kuhn, 1985: 53-54). In *Buhari*, however, the comedy depends upon the audience's continuous awareness that the protagonists are "really" men beneath their exaggerated performances of femininity. As Kuhn further suggests, the humour of cross-dressing films relies upon the spectator's privileged knowledge of the disguised character's "true" gender identity (Kuhn, 1985: 64).

A comparable use of gender disguise appears in *Saavadhan* (2006), an action-comedy that combines political commentary with commercial spectacle. The film addresses social unrest in post-1990 Nepal, including corruption, labour migration, and the killing of twelve Nepali workers in Iraq (BBC News, 2004), yet presents these issues through melodrama and humour. In one scene, the male protagonist adopts a female disguise to conceal his identity while confronting a group of goons, assisted by a female police officer who assumes an active role in the action sequence, challenging conventional gender expectations associated with female characters in mainstream Nepali cinema. Like *Buhari*, cross-dressing functions primarily as a narrative device, remaining detached from any exploration of gender nonconformity or queer identity.

A similar pattern emerges in *Dal Bhat Tarkari* (2019), a comedy-drama centred on the Diversity Visa (DV) lottery and aspirations of migration to America, where cross-dressing once again serves as a source of humiliation and comic relief rather than an exploration of gender identity. **Nearly two decades after *Buhari* (2001), little appears to have changed in the cinematic use of cross-dressing as a source of comedy and spectacle.** In one scene, a male character cross-dresses to evade the police, leading to comic chaos as the disguise is exposed, he is beaten, and his clothes are torn apart. Before the reveal, the feminised body is presented as an object of visual attention and comic spectacle, illustrating Laura Mulvey's notion of *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey, 1999:837). The

exposure of the disguise subsequently transforms this performance into a moment of humiliation. His artificial breasts, represented by apples, fall to the ground, echoing a recurring comedic gag in *Buhari*. Both characters then cover their bodies and perform exaggeratedly feminine gestures of “shyness.”

As a result, these films briefly challenge traditional gender norms but ultimately reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative expectations by presenting femininity as comedy, spectacle, and disguise.

Trans Women Representation: Humour, Violence, and Pity



As mainstream Nepali cinema gradually moved beyond cross-dressing narratives to include visibly trans women on screen, albeit rarely, one of the earliest mainstream examples appeared in *Sano Sansar* (2008). Nepal’s transition towards digital filmmaking in the late 2000s introduced new urban aesthetics and cinematic styles influenced by the cosmopolitan youth culture of early-2000s Bollywood cinema. Released during this period, *Sano Sansar* (2008) exemplifies this shift through its youthful urban sensibility, recalling films such as *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), which Asha Kasbekar (2006: 203) identifies as central to the emergence of “New Bollywood”, characterised by urban middle-class narratives, innovations in colour grading and editing, greater emotional nuance, (Viswamohan and John, 2017: 49), and deeper explorations of character relationships (Dwyer in Wright, 2015: 169).

The film’s only queer representation occurs in a brief comic sequence, in which a transgender character pursues the male protagonist, with her exaggerated gestures played for slapstick humour. While this character constitutes one of the earliest visible trans woman representations in mainstream Nepali cinema beyond cross-dressing disguises, her role remains limited to comic excess and ridicule. As José Esteban Muñoz argues, dominant cultural forms often impose restrictive identities on marginalized subjects, while simultaneously reinforcing broader social hierarchies and norms (Muñoz, 1999: 168-169). In this sense, the film’s comic framing contains queer visibility within ridicule rather than allowing the character fuller subjectivity or narrative agency. The film reflects a transitional moment in queer representation, shaped by the continued influence of Bollywood conventions from the 1990s and 2000s, where transgender characters were frequently portrayed as comic caricatures, horrifying villains, sexually predatory figures, or objects of spectacle (Nigam, 2021; Anandu, 2021: 11). Within mainstream Nepali cinema, however, queer characters were more commonly framed through ridicule,

marginalisation, pity, and melodramatic vulnerability rather than explicit villainy.

By the early 2010s, mainstream Nepali cinema increasingly adopted darker urban narratives characterised by violence, colloquial realism, and hypermasculine spectacle. The commercial success of *Loot* (2012) catalysed the emergence of “New Kollywood,” prompting many subsequent mainstream productions to employ similar urban-crime formulas, crude humour, and spectacle-driven storytelling influenced by modern masala¹ and Mumbai noir² cinema. Within these narratives, masculine characters occupied positions of agency, violence, and narrative centrality, while female characters were largely confined to emotional, domestic, or sexualised roles (Karki, 2023: 95-98). While this transition introduced innovative cinematic styles and urban sensibilities, mainstream films continued to depend on stereotypical gender portrayals, sexualised humour, and sensationalised depictions of violence and sexuality. Instead of challenging the patriarchal structures that persist within Nepali society, such representations frequently reinforce the limited visibility and heightened vulnerability of women and sexual and gender minorities (Karki, 2023; UNDP/USAID, 2014: 20-21).

Illustrating this trend, *Sadanga* (2015) introduces one of the few transwomen characters in mainstream Nepali cinema, portraying her primarily through violence, humiliation, and fear. Kalu Yadav, a hypermasculine character, whose interaction with a trans woman sex worker occurs within a confined interior setting as he attempts to extract information through intimidation and threat. Across an extended sequence lasting nearly nine minutes, the camera lingers on her fear and discomfort as flirtation gradually escalates into psychological violence. The use of tight, enclosed framing visually reinforces the character’s vulnerability and social marginalisation. This representation reproduces broader patterns of violence and social precarity experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals within marginalising social and institutional structures (Kanak and Bhusal, 2025: 154). Such vulnerability is further intensified for sex workers in Nepal, who remain among the most stigmatised and legally vulnerable groups, with limited institutional protections (Adhikari, 2019: 15). Framed through a rhetoric of “realism,” the sequence perpetuates violence without critically examining the social structures that expose trans women and sex workers to harm. The film reduces the trans woman to a spectacle of humiliation and danger, denying her the depth and complexity of a fully realised subject. In this sense, the sequence reflects what Judith Butler, drawing on

1. “Modern masala,” epitomised by *Dabangg* (2010), combines action, comedy, and romance with heightened style and the staple item number (Blaxell, 2012: 10-11).
2. “Mumbai noir,” inaugurated by Ram Gopal Varma’s *Satya* (1998), introduced urban grit, criminal underworlds, and moral ambiguity into mainstream Indian cinema (Ahmed, 2015: 9).

Monique Wittig, identifies as the positioning of feminised and marginalised genders as subordinate and “particular” rather than fully recognised social subjects (Butler, 1990: 158-159).

While *Sadanga* frames trans woman visibility through violence, humiliation, and fear, *Maruni* (2019) marks a partial shift toward emotional centrality and narrative focus. A romantic drama with psychological and thriller elements, the film is among the first mainstream Nepali productions to depict gender transition and centre a trans woman protagonist. The film features a cisgender woman portraying a trans woman, and the character’s transition is presented as a sudden narrative twist rather than a nuanced process.

The title derives from the traditional Nepali folk dance *maruni*, associated with the Magar community, in which male performers dress in feminine attire and perform stylised, graceful movements. Literally meaning “a person who dances and sings in the disguise of a woman,” the term reflects a long-standing performative tradition practiced across the hill regions of Nepal (Ojha, 2025; Dixit, 2019). Abhimanyu Dixit (2019) argues that despite its potentially powerful subject matter, the film frames its trans character through pity rather than empowerment, repeatedly reinforcing the idea that she will “never be enough”. Dixit further argues that the film associates trans identity with emotional instability and fear through melodramatic and horror-inflected cinematic choices while offering little social or psychological insight into trans lived experience.

This association is further reinforced by the film’s portrayal of childhood gender nonconformity. *Maruni* (2019) presents gender-nonconforming children as visual symbols of future suffering rather than as individuals with distinct experiences and perspectives. Both the opening and closing scenes briefly depict a young boy applying makeup, prompting a reaction of shock from the mother. Accompanied by dramatic and suspenseful background music, these scenes encourage the audience to interpret the child’s gender expression as troubling and ominous rather than as an ordinary form of self-expression. The mother’s response functions as a form of social regulation, signalling the boundaries of acceptable gender expression within the family and reinforcing normative expectations surrounding gendered behaviour (Butler, 1990). The absence of dialogue between parent and child in these scenes leaves little room for understanding or acceptance. The opening scene positions the child’s behaviour as an early indication of the protagonist’s later transition, thereby linking childhood gender expression to a life marked by hardship and suffering. The final scene returns to this imagery through the child of a heterosexual couple connected to the protagonist’s past, establishing a circular narrative that suggests a recurrence of the protagonist’s experience. Since

opening and closing scenes are instrumental in shaping audience interpretation, their use in *Maruni* positions gender nonconformity as a source of social discomfort. As Dixit (2019) observes, although *Maruni* departs from the ridicule and comic stereotyping that have long characterised LGBTQIA+ representation in Nepali cinema, its portrayal remains shaped by pity, tragedy, and constrained subjectivity, reflecting the persistent limitations of queer visibility in mainstream Nepali cinema.

Collectively, *Sano Sansar* (2008), *Sadanga* (2015), and *Maruni* (2019) demonstrate that increased trans women visibility in mainstream Nepali cinema has not been accompanied by narrative agency or representational complexity. Despite their generic differences, these films repeatedly frame trans women identities through ridicule, vulnerability, fear, or pity.

Third Gender Representation and Cultural Identity

By the mid-2010s, queer and gender-nonconforming characters began to appear more visibly in mainstream Nepali cinema, although such representations remained rare and were often shaped by contradictory forms of recognition and marginalisation. Released in 2016, *Shakuntala* marked a significant development by centring a third gender protagonist within a mainstream commercial action-drama. Upon *Shakuntala*'s introduction, the film's public dialogue frames the character through visual ambiguity and social categorisation: "Who is this woman? She looks like a man," one-character remarks, followed by, "Yes, it is a man, you know, third gender... she is a very popular social worker." This exchange indicates that the film conceptualises third-gender identity primarily through external appearance and public perception.

Nepal has often been internationally recognised for its acknowledgment of a "third gender" category; historically, this term has described individuals whose gender identity or expression diverges from cisnormativity expectations associated with male and female identities (Lesnikowski cited in Knight and Bochenek, 2012: 13). However, transgender activist and lawyer Rukshana Kapali contends that the widespread assumption equating "transgenders" with "third genders" collapses distinct gender identities into a single category, thereby reinforcing the notion that all transgender individuals exist outside the male/female binary (Kapali, 2024). In response, Kapali and fellow activists have developed Nepali lexicons, semantics, and gender-related terminology, introducing the term *paralaingik* ("transgender") to distinguish transgender identities from the broader *tesrolingi* ("third gender") category. This linguistic intervention has facilitated more precise discussions of gender identity and legal

recognition, particularly for trans men and trans women who identify within the gender binary (Kapali, 2024).

Such conceptual distinctions remain largely absent in *Shakuntala*, as the film constructs third gender identity primarily through themes of trauma, revenge, and moral sacrifice. The character is portrayed by Nepal's megastar (*Maha Nayak*) Rajesh Hamal, whose established "angry young man" screen persona significantly influences the film's representation of third gender identity (Karki, 2023: 90). In the film's climactic flashback, the character's transformation is precipitated by sexual violence and forced emasculation, after which Shakuntala pledges to dedicate "his" life to protecting women by adopting a female identity. In this way, the film adapts the familiar "avenging woman" narrative from Hindi cinema, where empowerment often arises from trauma and victimhood (Gopalan, 1997). Although the film introduces a gender-nonconforming protagonist, the character ultimately continues to embody conventional forms of masculine heroism and authority.

Rajesh Hamal's performance constitutes a rare example of star-driven experimentation within mainstream Nepali cinema. Publicity for the film emphasized the novelty of Hamal performing femininity, as reflected in headlines such as "Shakuntala trailer out, Rajesh Hamal as feminist!" (Nepalimoviesweb, 2016). His restrained gestures and deliberate body language indicate an effort to portray the character with seriousness and empathy. In this context, the performance can be read as briefly gesturing toward what José Esteban Muñoz describes as disidentificatory performance, insofar as it momentarily reworks Hamal's established masculine star persona through an alternative mode of gendered embodiment (Muñoz, 1999: 196). However, the potential for a more nuanced representation is constrained by the film's commercial framework, which prioritises spectacle, action, and melodrama.

Later in the decade, *Ek Bhagavad ra Ek Gita* (2023), a romantic action-drama set in Nepal's Madhesh-Terai region, marked another significant moment in mainstream Nepali cinema through its engagement with *hijra* identity and forms of cultural specificity largely absent from earlier commercial representations. Nevertheless, despite foregrounding a traditional hijra community, the film continues to rely on familiar mainstream conventions like those seen in *Shakuntala* (2016), particularly through its use of a cisgender actor performing within the masculinised trope of the "angry young man". In doing so, the film largely bypasses the lived realities of hijra communities, relying instead on what Urza Acharya (2023) identifies as action-driven resolutions and heteronormative hero-villain conventions.

Nepali understandings of hijra identity in the Madhesh-Tarai region draw on long-standing South Asian traditions. Within this framework, hijras are culturally recognised as neither fully male nor fully female; instead, their identities are shaped through ritual roles, community affiliation, kinship systems, religious symbolism, and class relations rather than solely through sexuality or a fixed “third gender” label (Nanda and Reddy, as cited in UNDP and Williams Institute, 2014: 32).

In her analysis of hijra communities in Janakpur, Aarati Ray (2024) explains hijra *gharanas* are sustained through the traditional guru-disciple kinship system, a bond that extends across caste and religious differences and often proves deeper than biological family ties. Their main sources of income include *badhai* (ritual blessings), *challa maga* (begging), and *natuwa* (performances). Ray critically observes that society offers them “respect” only during ritual occasions, while routinely subjecting them to humiliation in hospitals, harassment by police, and everyday violence. Although the gharana provides emotional and economic support, it cannot fully protect its members from discrimination or economic marginalisation.

The film portrays the protagonist as the head of a hijra gharana, yet it does not clarify how such authority is established or how kinship, ritual obligation, and communal leadership function within these social structures. Practices such as *badhai* and *challa maga* are introduced but are subsequently overshadowed by melodramatic elements or are aestheticised through choreography and spectacle. The stylised representation is further reinforced by the use of religious architecture and cultural iconography from Janakpur and the broader Madhesh region, resulting in a visual spectacle reminiscent of Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s cinema (Shrivastava and Ghauraiya, 2025: 58). This emphasis on visual spectacle occurs at the expense of substantive engagement with the everyday experiences of hijra individuals.

The representational limitation becomes most apparent in the film’s closing monologue, where the protagonist directly addresses the camera, positioning the audience as representatives of a society asked to either “pity or accept” them. By framing hijra identity as a binary moral issue, the film substitutes nuanced cultural analysis with sentimentality and ultimately perpetuates, rather than interrogates, the social conditions described by Ray (2024).

Across *Shakuntala* (2016) and *Ek Bhagavad ra Ek Gita* (2023), the increased visibility of third gender and hijra identities remains shaped by commercial conventions, star-centred performances, and narratives of trauma, sacrifice, and moral recognition. While both films expand the

range of queer identities represented on screen, they offer limited engagement with the lived realities and cultural complexities of the communities they depict.

Gay Male Representation and Relationships

The increased visibility of queer identities in mainstream Nepali cinema has also encompassed portrayals of gay male characters. However, as with earlier representations of gender and sexual diversity, these characters frequently remain constrained by stereotypes, limited narrative agency, and commercially familiar modes of representation.

A Mero Hajur 2 (2017), a romantic comedy, introduces its sole queer character, Dada, the female protagonist's brother, through a pun in which another character's name, "Jay," is misheard as "gay," prompting a camera cut toward Dada and immediately reducing his sexuality to a visual joke. Although Dada appears more frequently than many queer characters in mainstream Nepali cinema, his representation remains confined to flamboyant excess and emotional self-pity. The film repeatedly frames Dada through loneliness and social isolation, as the female protagonist expresses concern over his lack of companionship, while Dada himself remarks that "people like us" have no friends. Constructed largely as a caricature, the character is associated with a pink, soft-toy-filled bedroom, exaggerated mannerisms, and unsolicited flirtation with a straight man. As Ankit Manandhar Khadgi (2019) observes, representations of gay men in Nepali media frequently rely on stereotypes that portray queer men as emotionally excessive figures whose attraction toward straight men becomes a source of humour and ridicule.

The film briefly imagines queer intimacy through a staged relationship between Dada and a heterosexual male character presented as his romantic partner. However, this relationship remains rooted in pretence and misunderstanding rather than mutual queer desire. This superficial engagement with sexuality becomes particularly evident in a cross-dressing fantasy sequence, in which the female protagonist imagines the supposed boyfriend dressed as a woman. The scene reduces queerness to costume and comedy rather than portraying a meaningful emotional relationship. Later, Dada's heartbreak is depicted through melodramatic self-pity, appearing more pitiable than empathetic. Existing primarily through loneliness and the pursuit of male attention, Dada is denied narrative depth, professional identity, and emotional reciprocity, reducing queer visibility to spectacle without dignity, complexity, or meaningful subjectivity.

Five years later, *A Mero Hajur 4* (2022), a romantic comedy, reproduces stereotypical queer representation through a flamboyant gay male character whose exaggerated gestures and interactions with heterosexual men function primarily as comic relief. As Dixit (2022) observes, the film recycles conventions from earlier Bollywood and Nepali commercial cinema, as well as previous instalments within the franchise itself, continuing to rely on clichéd and problematic representations. Between *A Mero Hajur 2* and *A Mero Hajur 4*, the series demonstrates little development in its approach to queer representation, instead reproducing commercially formulaic characterisations.

Like *A Mero Hajur 2*, *Feri Resham Firiri* (2025) integrates same-sex male intimacy within a broader commercial narrative. This comedy-drama revisits the Diversity Visa (DV)-to-America storyline previously depicted in *Dal Bhat Tarkari*. As with its predecessor, the film utilizes ensemble comedy, rapid scene transitions, and orchestrated confusion, presenting migration primarily as a comedic device rather than engaging in substantive social commentary. Nevertheless, the film's continued focus on DV migration contrasts sharply with the current realities of Nepali labour migration, which are increasingly defined by precarity, exploitation, and migrant deaths abroad (Kafle, 2024). Beyond the comedic framing, Colin Stewart (2025) observes that queer and transgender migrants encounter heightened risks abroad, including unsafe labour conditions, criminalisation, sexual violence, and limited state protection. Drawing on the insights of activist Sunil Babu Pant, Stewart further contends that LGBTQIA+ migrants are frequently subjected to imprisonment, assault, and legal vulnerability due to hostile laws and the Nepali state's failure to provide adequate protection, information, or institutional support. Consequently, queer migrants are often compelled to navigate transnational forms of precarity and violence without meaningful assistance.

Feri Resham Firiri builds its queer storyline around a father's fear of dishonour after discovering, through an intimate video, that his son is in a relationship with another man. The father seeks to separate the couple and protect the family's reputation. He follows the advice of others and arranges for his son to travel with the film's male protagonist, who has won the DV lottery. In a patriarchal society, where the father's authority and honour structure family dynamics, this moment could have fostered understanding between parents and queer children, a pressing need in a context where sexual and gender minorities are still commonly viewed as *vikriti*, a form of social deterioration associated with abnormality and degeneracy (Green, 2013: 6-7). Although the film is among the first in mainstream Nepali cinema to depict a queer couple, their relationship remains largely defined by exposure, shame, and separation rather than by the development of a shared emotional life. Despite a brief statement

that “everyone should have the right to love whoever they want,” the narrative devotes little attention to the couple beyond the circumstances of their discovery.

The film avoids explicitly naming queerness, relying instead on vague phrases such as “he is that way” or “that kind.” For instance, those advising the father to suggest that a visa to America will be granted easily “for people like your son” and add that “even Nepal has recognised it,” without ever articulating what “it” refers to. These evasive expressions appear almost exclusively within comedic sequences, turning queerness itself into part of the confusion that fuels the film’s humour.

This slapstick persists in a chase where the son’s boyfriend collides with a woman, entangling her saree in his clothing. The ensuing joke strips the woman of her saree, turning her into a visual punchline, while the boyfriend ends up wrapped in it. The scene relies on humiliating both: it feminises the boyfriend for comedic effect and treats the woman’s partial undressing as a source of humour. Collectively, the gag suggests that both queer and women’s bodies are positioned as objects of ridicule. Following the chaotic efforts to depart for the United States, the narrative abruptly shifts from the unresolved queer storyline to a sudden expression of patriotism. The male protagonist’s final voiceover announces his decision to remain in Nepal and “contribute to the country,” accompanied by the instrumental version of the patriotic song *Rato ra Chandra*³. By abruptly pivoting from its queer storyline to contemporary nationalist sentiment, the film subsumes its queer narrative into a broader national framework, ultimately reinforcing the silence surrounding queer experience.

Collectively, *A Mero Hajur 2* (2017), *A Mero Hajur 4* (2022), and *Feri Resham Firiri* (2025) demonstrate that increased gay male visibility in mainstream Nepali cinema remains largely structured through flamboyance, comic misunderstanding, and emotional excess. While same-sex desire becomes more visible, queer male characters are rarely afforded sustained intimacy, narrative depth, or fully realised subjectivity.

This conclusion illustrates a broader pattern observed across the films analysed. Queer-coded characters are routinely depicted as caricatures, spectacles, or objects of pity, suggesting a systemic representational tendency rather than isolated creative choices. Queer visibility is permitted only within familiar and socially sanctioned frameworks, such as comedy, trauma, flamboyance, or moral sacrifice, none of which fundamentally challenge prevailing gender and sexual norms. The repeated casting of cisgender actors in queer and gender-variant roles further underscores

3. *Rato ra Chandra*, one of the national songs that later become emblematic of the Gen-Z anti-corruption protests of September 2025 (Post Report, 2025).

the commercialisation of queer visibility, presenting difference as a marketable commodity rather than lived experience. These representational strategies exemplify what José Esteban Muñoz (1999) describes as “dominant publicity,” whereby dominant cultural formations regulate the terms under which marginalised identities become visible. Drawing on Fraser’s critique of the public/private divide, Muñoz argues that visibility is often structured in ways that maintain existing social hierarchies (Muñoz, 1999: 169). Rather than a linear progression from exclusion to inclusion, the films examined here reveal a movement from invisibility to stereotyped visibility, in which queer identities become increasingly present on screen while remaining constrained by commercial conventions and heteronormative representational logics.

Comparing mainstream Nepali cinema with Hindi cinema reveals how persistent these representational patterns have remained. During the 2010s, Bollywood cinema experienced a marked increase in women-centred films that depicted female characters with enhanced narrative significance and complexity (Zaidi, 2020). These broader shifts in representation also facilitated more empathetic portrayals of queer identities, as seen in films such as *Kapoor & Sons* (2016), which depicted gay protagonists with emotional depth and dignity, providing relatively rare instances of empathy within mainstream Hindi cinema (Anandu, 2021: 13). Following decades of queer activism and the Indian Supreme Court’s 2018 decriminalisation of Section 377, new forms of queer representation emerged within commercial cinema (Arora and Sylvia, 2023). In the years following the ruling, films such as *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020) brought same-sex relationships into the commercial mainstream, leading critics to describe these films as “trailblazing,” “pioneering,” and historically significant (Chopra, 2020; Roy, 2020, as cited in Arora and Sylvia, 2023). More recent films such as *Badhai Do* (2022) further expanded queer representation by portraying queer kinship and what Kath Weston (1997) describes as “families we choose” as emotionally ordinary and socially integrated rather than tragic or exceptional.

While mainstream Nepali cinema has historically drawn extensively from Bollywood conventions, the representational trajectories of the two industries have diverged. Although mainstream films have continued to rely heavily on stereotypical frameworks of queer representation, these limitations should not be regarded as representative of Nepali cinema in its entirety. The digital era has seen the rise of independent and non-mainstream films that engage more directly with queer lives, identities, and experiences. Although such productions remain relatively few, they have increasingly expanded the scope of queer representation since the early 2010s, portraying queer characters with greater complexity, agency, and

social realism than is typically found in mainstream commercial cinema. Documentary filmmaking had already addressed queer and third-gender rights at an earlier stage. Nani Sahra Walker's *Other Nature* (2009), for example, documents the struggles of queer and third-gender activists for legal recognition and equal rights in Nepal, including citizenship, voting rights, and protection from discrimination (Frameline, 2009). In fictional narrative cinema, *Highway* (2012) features one of the earliest same-sex male relationships in contemporary Nepali cinema and includes an appearance by transgender activist Bhumika Shrestha. In the same year, *Soongava: Dance of the Orchids* (2012) became the first Nepali film to centre a romantic relationship between two women in Kathmandu (Karki, 2023: 108). More recently, *Pooja, Sir* (2024) portrays its queer protagonist as a competent police officer in a position of professional authority (Karki, 2025), while *Elephants in the Fog* (2026) foregrounds queer and minority experiences, particularly those of the Kinnar community, through its narrative and inclusive casting practices. The film's recognition at Cannes marks an important moment for the international visibility of queer narratives from Nepal (The Kathmandu Post, 2026). Beyond cinema, the television series *Singha Durbar* (2015-16) featured an openly gay advisor to Nepal's first fictional female prime minister, contributing to the normalisation of queer visibility on national television (Khadgi, 2019).

Taken together, these examples indicate that more nuanced representations of queer identities are increasingly emerging outside the conventions of mainstream commercial cinema. As Moranta Alorda (2013:4-5) argues, cinema plays a significant role in constructing meanings related to gender, sexuality, and identity. In this context, these representations offer possibilities for understanding queer lives beyond the stereotypes that have long characterised mainstream Nepali screen culture.

Conclusion

This article has examined the representation of queer and gender-nonconforming identities in mainstream Nepali cinema within the context of Nepal's broader legal, social, and cultural transformations. The analysis demonstrates that the trajectory of queer representation in mainstream Nepali cinema is marked by a complex interplay of progress and stagnation. Over the past two decades, progress is evident in the increasing visibility of queer identities, shifting from the near absence of explicit representation in earlier films to the inclusion of trans women, third gender protagonists, hijra communities, and same-sex relationships within mainstream narratives. However, this increased visibility has not

necessarily resulted in a corresponding transformation of representational frameworks.

The films analysed in this study reveal a persistent reliance on established commercial conventions and recurring representational tropes. Although queer characters have become more visible, they are often depicted through comic disguise, ridicule, melodrama, violence, pity, trauma, and spectacle. Instead of fostering more complex forms of subjectivity, mainstream cinema frequently adapts existing stereotypes to new queer subjects, allowing for visibility while restricting the frameworks through which queer identities are interpreted. As a result, representation often operates through contradictory processes of recognition and marginalisation, simultaneously enabling inclusion and reinforcing dominant heteronormative and gendered hierarchies.

The findings further suggest that legal recognition does not automatically translate into more nuanced representations of queer identities in mainstream cinema. Although Nepal has become one of South Asia's most progressive countries regarding the legal rights of sexual and gender minorities, mainstream cinematic representation has evolved more slowly and inconsistently than these broader legal and social developments. This disparity is significant because mainstream cinema remains an influential site of cultural meaning-making, helping to shape public understandings of gender and sexual diversity. At the same time, independent films, television productions, and alternative media have demonstrated the potential for more nuanced and humanising portrayals of queer lives and identities. These observations suggest that the limitations identified in this article are not inherent to Nepali screen culture as a whole, rather reflect the persistent influence of commercial conventions within mainstream cinema.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that increased visibility alone is insufficient to transform the conditions under which queer identities are represented. Rather than a linear progression from exclusion to inclusion, mainstream Nepali cinema reveals a movement from invisibility to stereotyped visibility, in which queer identities become increasingly present on screen while remaining shaped by commercial, gendered, and heteronormative conventions that constrain the possibilities of queer subjectivity, belonging, and recognition.

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Filmography



Mainstream Nepali Films

- A Mero Hajur 2* (2017), dir. Jharana Thapa.
A Mero Hajur 4 (2022), dir. Jharana Thapa.
Buhari (2001), dir. Kishore Dhakal

Dal Bhat Tarkari (2019), dir. Sudan K.C.
Ek Bhagavad Ra Ek Gita (2023), dir. Jharana Thapa.
Feri Resham Firiri (2025), dir. Niroj Maharjan.
Maruni (2019), dir. Nawal Nepal.
Saavadhan (2006), dir. Dinesh D.C.
Sandanga (2015), dir. Suraj Sunuwar.
Sano Sansar (2008), dir. Alok Nembang.
Shakuntala (2017), dir. Dinesh Shrestha.

Non-mainstream/Independent Nepali Films

Elephants in the Fog (2026), dir. Abhinash Bikram Shah
Highway (2012), dir. Deepak Rauniyar.
Other Nature (2009), dir. Nani Sahra Walker
Pooja Sir (2024), dir. Deepak Rauniyar.
Singhadurbar (2015-2016), dir. Tsering Rhitar Sherpa.
Soongava: : Dance of the Orchids (2012), dir. Subarna Thapa.

Hindi Films

Aunty No. 1 (1998), dir. Kirti Kumar.
Badhaai Do (2022), dir. Harshavardhan Kulkarni.
Chachi 420 (1997), dir. Kamal Haasan.

From the Visibility of Action to the Visibility of Actors Shifts in Modes of Appearance in the Tunisian Revolution



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Abstract: This article examines the Tunisian revolution through modes of appearance in protest practices, drawing on interviews with participants involved between December 7, 2010 and January 14, 2011. Modes of appearance are understood as the different forms through which protest becomes publicly visible. It argues that January 14 marks not only the collapse of the regime, but also a turning point in protest appearance. Under the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, protest tended to produce visibility through collective action, such as confrontations, gatherings, and hit-and-run dynamics, while the public visibility of identifiable individuals remained limited. Appearance was thus tied less to self-representation than to the capacity of action to render power and violence perceptible, in line with what Butler describes as a politically conditioned process. January 14 signals a shift. As repression receded, possibilities of appearance expanded, bringing faces, names, and trajectories to the fore. Appearance was no longer mediated through action, but increasingly linked to actors' capacity to represent themselves. This transformation remained uneven. Interviews show that some participants struggled to position themselves within this emerging regime, where individual visibility became more central. The revolution can thus be read as a shift from a visibility grounded in actions to one that foregrounds actors. The article concludes that the revolution not only reconfigured the political field, but also reorganized the conditions of appearance, producing uneven forms of visibility, raising questions about how actors recognize themselves within them.

Keywords: Modes of Appearance; Protest Practices; Visibility; Tunisian Revolution; Political Embodiment

Résumé : Cet article analyse la révolution tunisienne à travers les formes de visibilité produites par les pratiques protestataires, à partir d'entretiens réalisés avec des participants ayant pris part au mouvement entre le 17 décembre 2010 et le 14 janvier 2011. Les « modes d'apparition » sont ici entendus comme les différentes manières dont la contestation accède à l'espace public et devient visible. L'article soutient que le 14 janvier ne marque pas seulement la chute du régime, mais constitue également un moment charnière dans la manière dont les acteurs de la protestation apparaissent publiquement. Sous le régime autoritaire de Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, la visibilité de la contestation reposait essentiellement sur l'action collective, qu'il s'agisse d'affrontements avec les forces de l'ordre, de rassemblements ou de mobilisations éclairs. Dans ce contexte, la mise en visibilité d'individus clairement identifiables demeurait limitée. L'apparition publique relevant ainsi moins de l'auto-représentation que de la capacité des actions collectives à rendre perceptibles les rapports de pouvoir et les violences du régime, conformément à ce que Judith Butler décrit comme un processus politiquement conditionné. Le 14 janvier marque une rupture. À mesure que la répression s'atténue, les possibilités d'apparaître dans l'espace public se multiplient, faisant émerger au premier plan des visages, des noms et des trajectoires individuelles. L'accès à la visibilité n'est alors plus principalement médiatisé par l'action protestataire elle-même, mais de plus en plus lié à la capacité des acteurs à se présenter et à se représenter publiquement. Cette transformation ne s'opère toutefois pas de manière uniforme. Les entretiens montrent que certains participants ont éprouvé des difficultés à trouver leur place dans ce nouveau régime de visibilité, au sein duquel l'exposition individuelle acquiert une importance croissante. La révolution peut ainsi être comprise comme le passage d'une visibilité fondée avant tout sur les actions collectives à une visibilité davantage centrée sur les acteurs eux-mêmes. L'article conclut que la révolution tunisienne n'a pas seulement reconfiguré le champ politique : elle a également transformé les conditions mêmes de l'apparition publique et de la reconnaissance sociale. Ce processus a produit des formes de visibilité inégale, soulevant la question de la manière dont les acteurs se reconnaissent, ou non, dans les nouveaux cadres de visibilité issus de la révolution.

Mots clés : modes d'apparition ; pratiques de protestation ; visibilité ; révolution tunisienne ; incarnation politique

Introduction

During the Kasbah 2 sit-in,¹ a young man filming the protest with his phone approached a journalist preparing a report on the protest and challenged the coverage of “official” media, accusing them of failing to represent the real demands of protesters (Souabni, 2011). In contrast, he presented himself as someone active on social media who is closer to what is happening on the ground (Souabni, 2011). This moment may appear

1. The Kasbah 1 and Kasbah 2 sit-ins were protest movements organized by various political actors and civil society organizations following the fall of former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime in January 2011.

anecdotal, yet it raises a central question: who has the right to make the revolution visible, to narrate it, and to speak on its behalf? It also shows that appearance in public space cannot be reduced to mere presence, but is shaped by complex conditions of legitimacy, representation, and the capacity to be seen and heard.

Starting from these questions, this article approaches the Tunisian revolution through modes of appearance within protest action, which can be viewed as a moment that reshaped the ways in which bodies, actions, and actors make an appearance in the public space. It argues that January 14, 2011, should not be seen only as the moment of the regime's fall, but also as a turning point in the conditions of protest appearance.

Interviews show that, under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, protest practices tended to produce visibility grounded primarily in collective action—such as clashes, gatherings, and dynamics of advance and retreat—while the public visibility of identifiable individuals remained limited. This was not due to their reluctance to appear in public, but to the fact that appearing through action was preferable, as the action itself becomes the bearer of visibility and renders relations of power and violence perceptible.

The article therefore draws on Judith Butler's work (2016), which understands protest as linked to forms of appearance, where bodies are not merely present but act through their presence. Yet this appearance is not limited to immediate visual presence. Butler (2016: 213) shows that certain acts—such as hunger strikes—can produce visibility, so that the body becomes perceptible through what it does rather than through its visual display. In this sense, she does not oppose presence to absence but expands the notion of appearance to include silent acts or acts that are not directly visible yet are prominent in the public sphere through political claims. This allows bodies to “appear” through their actions and their effects (Butler, 2016: 205). As Juris (2014) likewise argues, protest performances treat the body as the medium through which political meanings are embodied and communicated in public. At the same time, the meanings attached to these embodied forms of appearance are not inherent in the acts themselves but emerge through framing processes, as movements, media, and other actors actively organize and interpret events in particular ways (Snow, 2004: 384).

Taken together, these perspectives allow the article to distinguish between two levels of visibility: the “visibility of actors,” where bodies appear as identifiable subjects, and the “visibility of actions,” where the act itself becomes the bearer of appearance even in the absence of clearly defined actors. This distinction does not separate two discrete modes but

highlights a tension between overlapping forms of appearance whose relative prominence varies across contexts.

This framework helps make sense of the Tunisian case prior to January 14, when individual visibility was risky, leading protest practices to privilege action-based visibility. January 14 marks a shift in these terms: as repression receded, the possibilities of appearance expanded, allowing faces, names, and individual identities to emerge, while reconfiguring the conditions of representation and legitimacy in the post-revolutionary public space.

Accordingly, the analysis focuses on protest practices as spaces of appearance. It examines how visibility is produced within protest itself—through gatherings, clashes, bodily actions, and other forms of collective action—and how these modes of appearance shape the ways protest becomes publicly visible. While these dynamics may illuminate broader questions of political appearance, the article’s analytical focus will be appearance generated through protest practices.

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork based on in-depth interviews with several protestors conducted between 2020 and 2022, as part of a broader research project on protest, the body, and the revolution in Tunisia (2010–2013). These narratives are used both to reconstruct lived experiences and to understand how they are later reinterpreted. Participants were given the option to be identified or remain anonymous, and most waived anonymity.

While the temporal distance between the events and the interviews raises methodological challenges, especially regarding retrospective reinterpretation, it is treated here as an analytical resource. Some actors’ critiques of modes of appearance are tied to processes of rethinking the event and its trajectories.

From this perspective, the article examines the Tunisian revolution as a reconfiguration of the conditions through which protest became publicly visible. The Tunisian case is particularly significant because it allows us to follow, within a single sequence of mobilization—from the street protests of 17 December 2010 to the demonstration of 14 January 2011—a rapid transformation in the forms that protest took in the public sphere. As Debouzy (2003) argues, the meanings and functions of protest repertoires vary across historical and political contexts, while Snow (2004: 385) similarly shows that interpretive frames are historically contingent and become open to reinterpretation during periods of contention.

This transformation also acquired a particular significance in Tunisia because, in retrospect, many activists came to blame the limited resonance of the 2008 Gafsa mining basin mobilizations on the scarcity of circulating images under media censorship (Riboni, 2015). Rather than confirming this explanation, the article treats it as evidence of the political significance retrospectively attributed to visual documentation during the 2010–2011 uprising. Building on this insight, it follows the transformation of protest from the uprising of 17 December to the demonstration of 14 January to examine how changing conditions of visibility reshaped the forms through which protest was represented and recognized, and how they redefined which actors, practices, and images gained public recognition while others remained less visible within the revolutionary narrative.

Bouazizi: When the Act Appeared and the Individual Receded

In light of the distinction proposed in this article between the “visibility of actions” and the “visibility of actors,” Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation stands as a pivotal moment for understanding how political appearance can be constituted through actions rather than persons. Although the act was motivated by individual reasons, it quickly turned into a public event that shook the image of a regime presenting itself as a sponsor of stability and security (El-Jorshi, 2010), and opened up new horizons for protest, where denouncing the regime no longer operated primarily through discourse, but through acts that challenge dominant discourses. This marked a shift from protest grounded in speech to one that produces its visibility through the act itself.

What is striking in Bouazizi’s case is that the act was more visible than the person that carried it. His biography was largely constructed through narratives produced about him, rather than through his own voice or self-representation. His visual presence also remained limited: only a single image of him circulates in the media, along with another showing Ben Ali visiting him in hospital, where his body and face are almost entirely obscured by bandages and displaced from the center of the frame (Tantawi, 2010). The event thus does not emerge from a clearly identifiable individual presence, but from an act—self-immolation—as a foundational moment of visibility upon which multiple narratives are later built.

Field material shows how these narratives are constructed in contexts marked by economic precarity and marginalization, where the event

is reshaped to carry broader mobilizing meanings. In the testimony of Mohamed², this process appears clearly:

On December 17, 2010, in Menzel Bouzaiane, I received the news that Bouazizi had set himself on fire. At that moment, I decided to lie and make up the story that he had a university degree [...]. Why did I do that? It goes back to April 2010, when my brother was expelled from home by my father and asked to rely on himself and find work after leaving school. He came to me asking for help. Back then, I was involved in union movements and organizing sit-ins in Sidi Bouzid, a governorate that faces major [economic and development] difficulties. I remember telling him: 'stage a sit-in and demand a job. What is the point of the state if it leaves you with nothing?' I thought this might improve our situation, especially since I was the sole provider for a family of five. My brother then began a hunger strike in the main street, and because of that I was contacted by media outlets such as Kalima, Al-Mawkif, as well as Al Jazeera to report on what was happening (Fadhel, 2020).

Fadhel's reference to his brother is significant because it situates the "lie" within an earlier experience of protest around unemployment, linking Bouazizi's story to forms of mobilization in which narratives were strategically shaped to generate public support. Its effectiveness lay less in its factual accuracy than in its capacity to resonate with a widely shared social experience. Presenting Bouazizi as a university graduate linked his self-immolation to widely shared experiences of unemployment, blocked social mobility, and economic precarity among young Tunisians. In this sense, the story functioned as a collective action frame as Benford and Snow (2000) argue, gaining momentum by connecting with widely shared lived experience while simultaneously transforming the meaning of a personal act into a broader collective grievance (Snow, 2004: 384).

This "lie" does not reflect a deviation from truth so much as a mechanism of mobilization, through which the event is reshaped to generate sympathy, especially among educated unemployed youths. What circulates, then, is not "Bouazizi as a person," but "Bouazizi as a cause"—a protest act invested with collective meanings. Media platforms play a decisive role in expanding these narratives and transforming them into public visibility (Touati, 2012).

2. Mohamed Fadhel, a teacher in Menzel Bouzaiane during the 2010-2011 Tunisian Revolution, a leftist revolutionary activist, and currently a refugee in France for the past six years, was interviewed on Zoom on December 17, 2020. Fadhel describes himself as "a bit radical" and was involved in union actions before the revolution.

Bouazizi's self-immolation can thus be understood as an act that produced collective visibility through its effects rather than through the presence of the body itself. Joseph Pugliese reads it as an "ethical scream" resulting from accumulated violence and humiliation, where the body becomes a site of public accusation against the regime, turning the act into a tool that exposes that which power seeks to conceal (Pugliese, 2014). The act thus exceeds individual expression, becoming a collective outcry through which social anger is reformulated in a shareable form.

Field testimonies confirm this collective dimension, where self-immolation is not understood as an isolated case but as part of a broader atmosphere in which the boundaries of fear recede and the body is redefined as a medium of protest. As Béchir (Al-Hamdi, 2020) puts it: "We lived for a long time under Ben Ali's regime. And as you study the body, fear disappears. People burned their bodies. It was that simple."³ He adds elsewhere:

People were willing to sacrifice even their bodies. In 2010, there were 40 cases of suicide. Suicide was a protest against the situation in the country, not the result of psychological or individual crises (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

A symbolic dimension also emerges: "We moved beyond a philosophy of propriety [...]. We embraced a philosophy of sacrifice, with a religious resonance to this act" (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

These testimonies show that the body does not appear as an individual identity, but as a medium of protest situated within a collective horizon, where practice becomes a shared language for expressing anger, resonating with the role of emotions—particularly anger—in shaping collective action (Goodwin & Jasper, 2006: 617).

Thus, the importance of this event lies not only in its shocking character, but in the way it establishes a specific mode of visibility: one grounded in the act rather than the actor. Protesters appear less as individuals than through their actions and their collective effects, in the near absence of stable individual images or identifiable faces. This mode of visibility finds its most intense extension in forms of protest where direct action is foregrounded, particularly in nighttime protests.

3. Interview with Béchir al-Hamdi, 62 years old, teacher, trade union and political activist since 1981. Al-Hamdi is a former activist of the 1980s and 1990s in the Tunisian organization Al-Shuyu'iyun al-Thawriyyun (Revolutionary Communists), composed of Trotskyist members. After leaving the organization, he continued his activism independently. He then became part of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), although he later encountered difficulties, including exclusion from the union. Al-Hamdi resides in Kabarià, in the Greater Tunis region. The interview was conducted via Zoom on November 8, 2020. This is the first in a series of six interviews conducted with him.

Nighttime Protests: Stone-Throwing, Shouting, and Going Faceless



If Bouazizi's act revealed the possibility of producing collective visibility through action, nighttime protests represent its most intensified form, where appearance is enacted through direct acts alongside the near disappearance of faces and individual identities. Protesters did not deploy their bodies as carriers of these identities, but as channels through which visibility is produced by using performative confrontation to expose violence. The issue was no longer simply expressing a position, but producing situations—confrontations, injuries, fires, gatherings—that render the regime's violence visible in public space, in order to reach a wider audience under media blackout and exert pressure on power. What was at stake was not the visibility of individuals, but that of the regime itself through its practices.

Field data confirm that protesters' actions did not rest on their individual capacities, but on collective presence and the ability to occupy the public space despite repression. Bodies in congregation appear not as separate subjects, but as a collective density deriving its force from numbers, continuity, and shared exposure to danger. This density becomes a protest resource: a means of appearing, a tool of resistance, and a way of forcing a response from the authorities.

This dynamic unfolds through continuous movements of advance and retreat, attack and withdrawal, where public space is temporarily occupied before being abandoned. Alleys and street corners become strategic sites between the visible and the invisible, enabling appearance through action while avoiding identification, which Michel de Certeau identifies as "tactics" (1990). Within this framework, nighttime protests differ markedly from daytime protests. As one protestor, Khaled⁴, explains:

Nighttime protests, even in cities like Sidi Bouzid or Kasserine, are very different from daytime gatherings. During the day, unionists gather, march, and chant slogans, whereas at night, physical confrontations, violence, and stone-throwing become the norm. There are no political slogans or banners, only physical clashes. The so-called elite uses slogans, but this does not apply to nighttime protests, where people use stones (Haddeji, 2020).

4. Interview with Khaled Haddeji, a 42-year-old professor of cultural animation at the Ministry of Culture, trade unionist, and former activist of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party. Before the revolution, he was an unemployed university graduate. The interview was conducted via Zoom on October 18, 2020.

This testimony shows that nighttime visibility is not constructed through discourse, but through direct bodily action, where stone-throwing, confrontation, and sound become primary means through which protest appears in public. Confrontation thus operates not simply as physical force but also as a mode of political communication. In this sense, Juris's (2005) notion of "performative violence" helps explain how such acts function as symbolic performances through which protesters communicate political claims rather than merely inflicting damage. As Choukri Hmed notes, these confrontations occur mainly in working-class neighborhoods, where young people's knowledge of the terrain gives them a tactical advantage (Hmed, 2012: 802).

These actions reflect a direct link between repression and protest, emerging as immediate reactions while drawing on accumulated experience that blurs "spontaneity" and "tactics." This visibility takes dense sensory and sonic forms, as Khaled notes:

We only go out at night [...]. We go out around seven or eight, we gather, burn tires, block the road, then the confrontation with stones begins [...]. This goes on every night until two or three in the morning [...] and in the morning, there is nothing left (Haddeji, 2020).
Here, confrontation itself becomes the measure of success: "What is the indicator of a successful protest? Not filming oneself [...] but intensifying confrontations with the police [...]. If tear gas is not used, the protest is considered a failure"⁵ (Badrawi: 2020).

These testimonies show that visibility is not measured by the appearance of individuals, but by the capacity of action to provoke a response from the authorities, that is, to render violence visible. Some actions take more radical forms, such as setting police stations on fire: "In Mornag [...] they said: we have to go burn the police station [...]. It wasn't political [...]. Like in any working-class neighborhood, we burn the police station" (Anonymous 5, 2021).⁶ Despite later reservations, these actions were part of a broader protest dynamic (Badrawi, 2020) reflecting the gap between lived experience and later reinterpretation. At the same time, protesters' refusal of individual visibility reveals a sharp awareness of the

5. Maher Badrawi, interview by the author via Zoom on October 31, 2020. Born in 1978, Badrawi is a graduate of the University of Manar (Tunis). Unemployed at the time of the revolution, he described himself as "an unemployed graduate before the revolution and up to the present." A political activist, he was active in the General Union of Tunisian Students and the al-Watad party, and was working as a freelancer at the time of the interview.
6. Anonymous 5, 30 years old, computer engineer residing in France, born in Zaghuan (Tunisia). He lived in Tunisia until 2019. A university graduate in 2011, he was in his final year of studies during the revolution and an active student union activist. Growing up in a Marxist family, he was sanctioned for his activism and temporarily expelled from the university before 2011. After the revolution, he joined the Ennahdha party and resumed his studies, beginning a master's degree. The interview was conducted via Zoom on February 19, 2021.

risks of exposure: “These young people are very cautious [...]; they don’t like photos or videos [...], they cover their faces [...] and if someone’s face is recognized, they abort the protest” (Badrawi, 2020).

Here, the absence of faces does not signal a lack of visibility, but one of its conditions. Protest is grounded in making actions rather than individuals visible, and concealing identity becomes a form of resistance to surveillance. Nighttime protests thus produce a visibility in which the act is present while the actor remains indeterminate. Yet these practices, despite their non-discursive form, are not reducible to eruptions of violence; they constitute forms of political action mobilized through the body itself. As Moira Lloyd suggests, the body becomes a means of re-inscribing actors within the political community through its vulnerability and exposure to risk (Lloyd, 2024).

From this perspective, nighttime protests do not signal an absence of political language, but its reconfiguration in a bodily and sensory form, where exposure to danger, confrontation, and sound produces political presence regardless of individual identity. The absence of individual visibility is thus not a lack, but a reorganization of presence: appearing through actions rather than faces. Building on Juris’s (2005) notion of performative violence, this gives rise to what may be termed the visibility of performative violence, whereby confrontation itself becomes the medium through which protest appears publicly. This mode of visibility, despite its intensity, does not exclude other forms, but intersects with them—as evidenced by daytime protests within more regulated spaces.

Daytime inside the “Parloir”: Collective Bodies Under Surveillance

If nighttime protests highlighted a mode of appearance grounded in direct action and the erasure of faces, daytime protests reveal another form of the visibility of actions, but within more regulated and closely monitored spaces. Before January 14, avoiding individual visibility was not situational, but a structural condition of protest, especially in daytime settings more exposed to surveillance. Individual visibility posed a direct risk: revealing one’s name or face could lead to tracking and punishment, even though protesters’ identities were often known to security forces. This tension between state knowledge and absence from public visibility does not simply reflect a paradox; it defines the conditions of appearance itself. Appearance was possible, but not as individual exposure, rather within collective and constrained forms.

Within this framework, this mode of appearance can be understood through Butler's conception—reworked by Lilja—of the embodied character of protest, where appearance is not tied to discourse or self-definition, but to the capacity of bodies to “speak” politically through their presence, especially when they occupy public space without protection and expose themselves to violence (Lilja, 2017). Yet this capacity remains conditioned by the material structure of space and the mechanisms that regulate it: bodies move within spatial and security arrangements that enable or constrain action itself (Lilja, 2017). The absence of faces and names thus does not signal withdrawal from appearance, but its reconfiguration under specific conditions, where the body—through collective presence and exposure to risk—becomes the primary medium of visibility.

These protests often took place in semi-controlled spaces, such as the headquarters of the Tunisian General Labour Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT), the country's main trade union federation, or in universities, where security forces sought to contain gatherings and restrict movement. In this context, Béchir al-Hamdi's description of the square as a “parloir” is particularly noteworthy. Although the French term commonly refers to a prison visiting room, Béchir explains that he uses it to refer to a corridor-like space inside a prison where inmates are allowed to walk briefly within a confined area. In this sense, the metaphor captures not only physical closure, but also a mode of organizing appearance: “We were moving within an almost closed space [...] like a ‘parloir’ [...]; we could gather, but we could not leave.” (Al-Hamdi, 2020)

The metaphor thus turns the protest space into a political “parloir”: a space where presence is accessible but tightly controlled, where bodies are contained rather than allowed to move. Here, the appearance of actions does not result from openness, but from tactical engagement within constraint—echoing Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics as practices operating within imposed conditions. The “parloir” can also be understood through what Xavier Marquez calls the intersection of “spaces of appearance” and “spaces of surveillance”: bodies that appear to one another, enabling collective action, while remaining subject to unequal power relations that regulate movement and prevent expansion (Marquez, 2012). It is therefore not the opposite of appearance, but a form of regulated appearance.

Testimonies show that this restriction did not prevent, but reshaped action. Protesters, especially trade unionists, did not treat their bodies as carriers of individual identities, but as part of a collective capable of endurance and resistance. As Béchir explains:

I don't like speaking in the first person. We were a group of unionists used to protesting together, and we knew each other well. That day, we decided to go to the Ministry of Interior. It was a collective decision made without negotiation, despite the risks and the ongoing killings. At that moment, we didn't really know what was happening, or whether there were other arrangements. We didn't have precise information. We expected severe repression, maybe even gunfire. And I was among those who no longer paid much attention to repression. I believed the regime could not stop or imprison everyone (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

This testimony shows that strength was not understood in terms of individual heroism, but of numbers, continuity, and the capacity to push repression to its limits. This logic is also visible in the bodily organization of protest:

In the front row, there were unionists, students, and young people [...]; people you didn't know you, but who would hold your hand [...]. We formed two rows, arms interlocked [...], you may not know the person next to you [...] but there were 'figures' whom we recognized on sight (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

Appearance here operates through the collective body, whose meaning lies in cohesion and endurance. Even when certain "figures" emerge, they remain embedded within the mass. The dominance of "we" over "I" thus reflects not only security concerns, but a collective conception of action: "I was not alone [...], there were many people [...]. I hate using 'I'" (Al-Hamdi, 2020). Such embodied practices generated not only collective visibility but also what Juris (2008:66) calls "affective solidarity," whereby shared exposure, physical proximity, and collective movement transformed fear and anger into a sense of common commitment that sustained protest.

Daytime protests were therefore not reducible to slogans; they also exposed the contradictions of the regime's self-image as "safe Tunisia." A system claiming "zero bad images" became the target of practices aimed at producing scandal—making visible what it sought to conceal. By exposing their bodies to danger, protesters destabilized this narrative, echoing Baudrillard's idea of the event that disrupts a system seeking to appear without fracture (Baudrillard, 2007).

In this context, injured bodies, confrontations, and police violence rendered repression visible. The body was not displayed to affirm identity, but to expose the regime in the act of violence. This includes instances where lawyers or activists displayed injuries after demonstrations to

denounce repression (Ben Sedrine, 2011), as well as video footage of shootings or the fall of unarmed civilians that became visual evidence challenging official narratives (Breuer, 2012). Yet this visibility remained subject to containment: “We wanted to leave Mohamed Ali Square⁷ but they blocked the exits [...]. They started beating us with batons, even targeting our faces” (Al-Hamdi, 2020). This reveals not only state violence, but the logic of the “parloir” itself: a space governed to prevent expansion. Even when daytime protests appeared more organized, they remained tied to confrontation: “It wasn’t just demonstrations, it was a fight” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The difference between daytime and nighttime protest, then, lies not in whether actions or individuals are visible, but in the degree of framing and control. If nighttime protests show action in its most dispersed form, daytime protests represent a contained version within a space that allows presence while regulating its limits. This is where January 14 becomes decisive: the moment when bodies are no longer confined within a monitored “parloir,” but begin to break its material and symbolic boundaries.

Jumping over Barbed Wire: January 14 as a Moment of Rupture

If the previous sections argued that, prior to January 14, appearance operated mainly through action performed within regulated and monitored spaces, this date marks a shift in these conditions. From December 17, 2010 onward, protests—despite their expansion—remained largely confined to interior towns or to minor streets in the capital, away from central spaces under strict surveillance. Access to Avenue Habib Bourguiba—the capital’s main avenue, where the Ministry of Interior is located and long a symbolic façade of state authority—was effectively blocked. Security forces prevented protesters from reaching it, redirecting them into side streets and preserving the avenue as a tightly controlled space of official visibility.

In this context, January 14 constitutes a turning point: for the first time, protests reached this central thoroughfare, alongside decisive political and media shifts, particularly following Ben Ali’s speech on the evening of January 13, in which he announced concessions and a partial opening of the media sphere. This enabled the presence of international media and live broadcasting. Protest was no longer confined to marginal spaces, but became visible at the center of a space meant to embody state control, thereby redefining the conditions of appearance. As Snow (2004:

7. A square located in front of the UGTT headquarters in central Tunis and a key gathering point where daytime demonstrations were often contained by security forces.

385) suggests, such moments of contention unsettle established interpretive frames and open new possibilities for understanding collective action.

With this shift, bodies were no longer confined within a monitored “parloir,” but moved to occupy the street directly. This was not only a spatial shift, but a transformation in the conditions of appearance: what had appeared indirectly through action became denser, more visible, and took the form of exposed bodily presence. January 14 can thus be understood as a rupture in “regulated appearance,” where presence was no longer contained within a space managed by the authorities, but began to produce its own space—echoing Butler’s conception of political space as emerging from the gathering of bodies in action (Butler, 2016). Interviews reveal a gap between lived experience and its later representation. Béchir describes the moment of breaching the contained space:

When we entered, we were ten or fifteen people—I don’t know exactly, I wasn’t counting—but I was among those who jumped over the barbed wire. Others did the same. I was among the first to be there, then others started following us. This is the real version of January 14 [...], this is the image that remained. The image of open space does not reflect the forces of repression. Here, everyone could get through, and anyone could be there. I met people I hadn’t seen in years [...]; I met them on January 14 [...]. I didn’t stay at the entrance (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

This testimony shows that crossing the barbed wire was not simply a field incident, but a rupture of previously imposed limits of appearance, and a passage from containment to openness. Yet this “open image,” in Béchir’s view, captures only one version of the experience. He adds:

What remains of our history is simply what we kept of it. There were only three real images among the thousands that circulated around the world [...]; there is one real image I cannot forget [...], but in the end, reality is something else, a big lie (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

Béchir does not explain what these few “real” images were. Rather, elsewhere in the interview, he repeatedly contrasts them with the scenes that later came to symbolize January 14, such as the young man carrying a birdcage, lawyers at the forefront of the demonstration, a political activist being carried on protesters’ shoulders, and other widely circulated images. For him, these iconic scenes came to dominate public memory, while the earlier moments of confrontation and breaching police barriers remained largely absent from the visual record (Al-Hamdi, 2020). As Snow (2004: 384) suggests, such selective images do not simply survive; they organize

the interpretive frame through which the revolution itself comes to be understood.

The shift in appearance does not amount to full disclosure, but remains shaped by what is later selected and preserved. Images do not simply transmit events; they reorder them. This helps explain why some actors feel that their experience—grounded in action and confrontation—was not fully translated into the visual record that later stabilized. Béchir also notes that the intensity of repression peaked later in the day, making the dominant image of January 14 as a moment of “opening” only partial. At the same time, testimonies show that this day did not erase differences between actors, but reconfigured them. As one participant explains, even political actors were drawn into the logic of the crowd:

After Ben Ali’s speech on the evening of January 13, the political class stepped back. But on January 14, when Avenue Habib Bourguiba filled with protesters, they began chanting ‘Dégage.’ Even those who had been negotiating with him the day before found themselves repeating the same slogan with everyone else, carried along by the logic of the crowd (Haddeji, 2020).

This shows that appearance in public space was no longer tied only to prior trajectories, but could be produced within the event itself. Here begins one of the central shifts traced in this article: whereas visibility had been grounded in collective action, faces, names, and individual trajectories begin to emerge as carriers of political meaning. Yet this does not signal an equal opening, but a redistribution of the conditions of appearance, where the capacity to appear as an individual becomes an uneven resource shaped by media logics and recognition. In his interview, Wassim Bouthouri⁸ (2020) describes this transformation by noting that, whereas the front row of demonstrations had previously been occupied primarily by militants, after the revolution it increasingly became associated with what he calls the ceremonial figures, to refer to famous public figures occupying the forefront of protest. The question thus shifts: who appears in this open space, and how are they required to define themselves within it?

8. Wassim Bouthouri was interviewed by the author via Zoom on December 28, 2020. A 33-year-old from Kasserine, Bouthouri was a student active in the UGTT during the January 14, 2011 revolution, a protestor at the Kasbah sit-in, and a member of the Republican Party (formerly the Progressive Democratic Party). At the time of the interview, he was an administrator at the Ministry of Education, living in Tunis.

“Real History” and “Embellished History”



If January 14 opened new possibilities of appearance, it did not generalize them but reorganized them. Following Ben Ali’s televised speech on the evening of January 13, which announced a series of concessions including the cessation of live ammunition use against protesters and a partial reopening of the media sphere, international journalists were able to report from Tunisia. Although demonstrations that took place on January 14 continued to face police violence, these changes altered the political and media conditions under which protest became publicly visible. As Juris (2014) argues, embodied protest performances are inseparable from the political and cultural contexts in which they unfold. As media coverage expanded, visibility became uneven, producing new hierarchies of who is seen and who is represented. The shift was thus not simply an increase in visibility, but its redistribution—an “economy of visibility” in which the capacity to appear as a legitimate political actor became unevenly distributed.

In this context, the image is no longer merely a trace of events as in earlier phases, when actions (confrontations, burning, advance and retreat) produced visibility without fixing actors—but becomes an active force in shaping it. It does not simply record events; it defines what is seen, what is forgotten, and who comes to represent them. If a “visibility of actions” prevailed before January 14—from Bouazizi to nighttime protests—what follows is a visibility that reconnects action to identifiable actors through images. This tension is sharply expressed in Béchir’s distinction between a “real” and an “embellished” history: “The real image was made two or three hours earlier [...] when people were protesting under repression [...], but that is not what remained” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

Here, the “real image” does not refer to a particular photograph, but to unmediated moments of action, such as direct confrontations and jumping over barbed wire, which are extensions of the visibility of actions discussed earlier. Yet these moments do not become the dominant visual reference. What endures as “history” is not what was most intense, but what was most translatable into image. As Juris (2008: 66-67) similarly argues, embodied protest experiences often exceed what later becomes visually recognizable, while different forms of protest generate different forms of visibility and media attention, creating tensions between the experiences valued by participants and the images that ultimately come to represent them publicly.

Béchir’s critique points to more than selection; it reveals a reformatting of the event according to visual logic: “January 14 is now about

cameras [...], about the bird and the cage [...]. That is the power of the image” (Al-Hamdi, 2020). Throughout the interview, Béchir repeatedly returned to the now-iconic image of a young man carrying a bird and a cage. Drawing on his experience of protest under Ben Ali’s regime marked by confrontations, police violence, and breaching barriers, he repeatedly wondered how a bird and a cage had come to symbolize the revolution, and where such an image had come from in the first place. This recurring example reflects his unease with a broader transformation in the conditions of appearance, through which certain images and the actors associated with them came to embody the revolution and to be recognized as its spokespersons. As Riboni (2015) notes, such processes of visual iconization are highly contingent: iconic images rarely emerge through deliberate design but stabilize retrospectively through circulation, repetition, and collective recognition. As Béchir further recalls: “There was a woman they lifted onto shoulders so she could be filmed [...]. I made her go down [...], but she became an activist” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The image no longer captures action; it produces scenes for circulation. Bodies are framed into condensed, symbolic forms, such as figures carried on shoulders and other staged moments that make the event legible and shareable. As actors are called to define themselves, the event itself must also take form as image. This shift extends to how the event is understood: “There is a difference between making a revolution and producing a show” (Al-Hamdi, 2020). This signals a transformation in the logic of visibility: from action marked by risk and confrontation to scenes reorganized for display. The tension between appearance as action and appearance as representation discussed throughout the article becomes explicit here. It is also tied to expanded, yet unequal, possibilities of representation: “Anyone could pretend to be a representative of the revolution” (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

This reflects not only an opening, but a redistribution of legitimacy, where appearing in the image—rather than acting—becomes a condition of recognition. The struggle is no longer only over appearing, but over who defines and represents that appearance. From this perspective, the distinction between “real” and “embellished” history reveals not a simple gap between experience and image, but a reorganization of the relation between action and visibility. Before January 14, collective appearance emerged without fixed actors; afterward, visibility became recognizable through images and tied to identifiable figures and turned into a resource of representation. The shift to the visibility of actors thus transforms appearance itself into a field of struggle over who can narrate the revolution and define its “real history.” The Tunisian case suggests that the revolution reconfigured rather than democratized visibility. While some actors, images, and voices came to embody the revolution, others remained only partially visible or disappeared from its dominant visual narrative. Politics thus lies

not only in what is visible, but also in the unequal conditions through which appearance is produced, recognized, and incorporated into public memory.

Conclusion

The transformations that resulted from the Tunisian revolution cannot be reduced to political or institutional change; they also involved a reconfiguration of the conditions of appearance in public space. Before January 14, protest operated through a form of “strategic non-appearance,” where collective actions like confrontations, gatherings, and movements of advance and retreat produced visibility without foregrounding identifiable actors. This date marks a shift, as faces, names, and trajectories begin to emerge as carriers of political meaning.

This shift, however, is not a linear expansion but a reorganization of visibility. While the opening of public space enabled new forms of presence, it also restructured them: appearance no longer follows directly from participation, but is mediated by images, media, and regimes of recognition. Images do not simply reflect the revolution; they help produce it by selecting moments and amplifying certain figures. Testimonies reveal a persistent gap between lived experience, particularly moments of confrontation preceding cameras, and what later stabilizes as the visual memory of the “event.” The struggle, then, is not only over appearing, but over defining appearance itself: which images count, and who speaks through them.

These findings also invite broader reflection on forms of visibility that extend beyond the protest gathering itself. Before January 14, the circulation of protest images remained constrained not only by repression but also by the limited reach of digital communication, where politically engaged bloggers and alternative media networks primarily documented censorship and state violence rather than mobilizing broad publics (Kallander, 2013). As Riboni (2015) likewise suggests, the visual practices surrounding the uprising evolved from documentary forms centered on witnessing repression toward increasingly circulated and iconic images capable of organizing wider public recognition. Exploring how these different visual regimes intersected with the transformations analyzed here offers an important avenue for future research.

From this perspective, the revolution can be read as a shift from a visibility grounded in actions to one that foregrounds actors—not as a rupture, but as an ongoing overlap between the two. This points to an

“economy of visibility,” where appearance becomes a scarce and contested resource through which recognition is distributed. Appearance, then, is not a given but a conditioned process shaped by power relations, media dynamics, and the actors’ own practices, which raises a broader question: has the expansion of image production democratized visibility, or reconfigured it through new forms of inequality?

The Tunisian case suggests that while the revolution rendered certain bodies and voices visible, it also exposed the limits that structure this visibility. Politics thus lies not only in what appears, but also in what remains excluded in the ongoing tension between presence and erasure through which political action continues to unfold. These questions become even more pressing in contemporary media environments, where the multiplication of cameras, digital platforms, and forms of circulation expands the possibilities of appearance while simultaneously intensifying struggles over recognition, representation, and the authority to define collective events.

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