

Metareference as a Public Service

Performed by Contemporary Narrative Media

INAUGURAL-DISSERTATION

zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde

der Philosophischen Fakultät

der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn

vorgelegt von

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Bonn, 2019

Gedruckt mit der Genehmigung der Philosophischen Fakultät
der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn

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Tag der mündlichen Prüfung: 05. Dezember 2018

Table of Contents

1. Introduction to the Study of Metareference	1
1.1 Beginnings and Early Terminology.....	1
1.2 Current Terminology.....	5
1.2.1 Metareference vs. Other Types of References.....	6
1.2.2 Types of Metareference: Macro-Level Distinctions	9
1.2.3 Types of Metareference: Micro-Level Distinctions.....	10
1.3 Functions and Effects of Metareference.....	13
1.3.1 Aiding as well as Breaking the Narrative Illusion.....	14
1.3.2 Intellectual Stimulus as well as Pop-Cultural Game.....	17
1.3.3 Descriptive as well as Prescriptive Medium Commentary	19
1.4 (Potentially) Metareferential Devices, e.g. the Metalepsis.....	21
2. So Why (this) Study (of) Metareference?.....	25
3. Metareference in Contemporary Literature.....	32
3.1 Metareference in <i>Atonement</i>	38
3.1.1 Literary Traditions, Preferences and Internalised Tropes.....	38
3.1.2 The Power and Limits of Language.....	42
3.1.3 The Roles and Functions of Different Narratives and Styles	44
3.1.3.1 Romantic Beginnings	44
3.1.3.2 War and Impressionism.....	51
3.1.3.3 Growth beyond Modernism	57
3.1.3.4 (Post-)Postmodernist Finishing Touches	65
3.1.4 The Role of the Author	68
3.1.5 Memory, Self-Stylisation and the Construction of Our Autobiographies	69
3.1.6 Flourish and Detail through Implicit Metareferences.....	74
3.1.7 Conclusion: <i>Atonement</i> 's Use of Metareference.....	76

3.2 Metareference in <i>The Book Thief</i>	78
3.2.1 Tropes, Traditions and Self-Aware Narration	78
3.2.2 Human Languages versus a Human “Language”	80
3.2.3 Language and Communication Skills in Relation to Personal Identity	82
3.2.4 The Power of Words, Names, Labels and Poetic Language.....	85
3.2.5 ... and the Difficulty and Importance of Finding the Right Ones	93
3.2.6 The Roles and Functions of Books	97
3.2.7 Writing as Story-(Re-)Telling as Communal Experience.....	108
3.2.8 Conclusion: <i>The Book Thief</i> ’s Metareferential Focus.....	114
4. Metareference in Contemporary Film	117
4.1 Metareference in <i>Shadow of the Vampire</i>	122
4.1.1 The Self-Referential Use of Gothic Tropes	122
4.1.2 The Gothic Nature of Cinema.....	131
4.1.3 Conclusion: <i>Shadow of the Vampire</i> ’s Metareferential Message	136
4.2 Metareference in <i>Hugo</i>	137
4.2.1 The Metareferential Portrayal of the Early History of Cinema	138
4.2.2 The Wonders of Cinema’s Mechanical Magic and Its Limitations	142
4.2.3 The Importance of the Preservation of Our Personal and Cultural Heritage.....	146
4.2.4 Conclusion: <i>Hugo</i> ’s Ultimate Metareferential Message.....	148
5. Metareference in Contemporary Television Series.....	151
5.1 Metareference in <i>Sports Night</i> , <i>Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip</i> and <i>The Newsroom</i>	158
5.1.1 Honouring Television’s History and Traditions	158
5.1.2 The Steps and Elements Involved in the Production of Live Television.....	160
5.1.3 Television as an Industry	167
5.1.4 Television’s (Ideal) Role in Society... ..	180
5.1.5 ...and How It Can Be Achieved	185
5.1.6 Conclusion: The Metareferential Functions of Sorkin’s Metatelevision Triad	192

6. Metareference in Contemporary Computer Games	198
6.1 Metareference in <i>BioShock</i>	208
6.1.1 Linearity, Choice and (Presumed) Ludonarrative Dissonance	208
6.1.2 The Illusion of (Player) Agency	211
6.1.3 Conclusion: <i>BioShock</i> 's Metareferential Function	215
6.2 Metareference in <i>Spec Ops: The Line</i>	216
6.2.1 Subverting the Heroic Power-Fantasy and the Trope of the 'Other'	217
6.2.2 Choice, Agency and Accountability	235
6.2.3 Conclusion: <i>Spec Ops: The Line</i> 's Metareferential Message	238
6.3 Metareference in <i>The Stanley Parable</i>	241
6.3.1 The Metareferential Message of the Narrator-Led Plotline	242
6.3.2 The Metareferential Contributions of the Divergent Plotlines	247
6.3.2.1 Agency, Choice and the Role of Consequences.....	247
6.3.2.2 Metareferential Identity Crises and the Question of Who Is in Control	254
6.3.2.3 Metareferential Easter Eggs and "Glitches"	262
6.3.2.4 The Art of Making Good Video Games.....	265
6.3.3 Conclusion: Metareferences in <i>The Stanley Parable</i> 's True Ending.....	271
7. Metareference in Contemporary Narrative Online Video	275
7.1 Metareference in <i>The Lizzie Bennet Diaries</i>	277
7.1.1 The Medial Features of Web-Video	279
7.1.2 The Social Significance of New Media	281
7.1.3 The Business versus the Art of Online Content Creation	288
7.1.4 Conclusion: <i>The Lizzie Bennet Diaries</i> , a Fully Metareferential Adaptation	290
8. Comparative Analysis and Resulting Conclusions.....	292
8.1 Types of Metareferences Used in Contemporary Narrative Media.....	293
8.2 Topics Discussed through Metareferences in Contemporary Narrative Media	298
8.3 The Functions and Effects of Metareferences in Contemporary Narrative Media.....	306

9. Bibliography 311

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Marion Gymnich, without whose infinite patience, support and trust in my abilities – both during my graduate years at the University of Bonn and throughout the completion of this thesis – I would never have made it this far.

I would also like to thank my second reader Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, who volunteered her time and expertise to provide valuable feedback as well as consistently constructive criticism on all three-hundred-plus pages of this paper, thus helping it reach its full potential.

I am further indebted to the relentless research librarians of the Bonn University Library and of the Zentralbibliothek Zurich, all of who demonstrated remarkable persistence and skill in the acquisition of any and all texts I requested. Without these often-unsung heroes, both the bibliography at the end of this thesis and the scope of my personal knowledge in general would be markedly more limited.

Particular gratitude goes furthermore to Gabriel Renggli, who, over the years, provided me with hundreds of conversations' worth of intellectual and philosophical stimuli on topics crucially unrelated to the contents of this work, thus making sure I was never fully consumed by the maelstrom of metareference.

Penultimately, I would like to extend this gratitude to every single friend, book store colleague, book store client, teacher trainer and fellow teacher trainee who crossed paths with me along this journey and who took the time to encourage me, each in their own way, to see it through.

Finally, as always, my ultimate gratitude goes to my dad, who taught me to think, and to my girlfriend, who taught me to grow. Thank you for your love.

1. Introduction to the Study of Metareference

1.1 Beginnings and Early Terminology¹

Metareferences, especially in the narrative arts, have been around for centuries. Literary pre-forms can be traced as far back as Homer's *Odyssey* (cf. Scheffel 159-161) or, within Anglophone literature, as far back as Geoffrey Chaucer's elaborate framing of *The Canterbury Tales* (1476) or William Shakespeare's plays-within-plays (cf. Currie, "Introduction" 5). Furthermore, metanarrative comments by narrators on (their own) narration have been a constitutive element of the rhetoric of the novel from its very conception (cf. Blackwell 231; Nünning, "Metanarration als Lakune" 126). Still, the phenomenon only became a significant scholarly topic with the rise of Postmodernism (cf. Wolf, "Preface" vi). The period saw a peak in the use of metareference, which eventually led to the introduction of the concept of 'metafiction'. The term was coined by William H. Gass and established by Robert Scholes in 1970 (cf. e.g. Currie, *Metafiction* 21; Herman et al. 301, Lodge "Mimesis" 107, Scholes 21-38) yet its exact meaning would be contested and expanded upon for the next thirty years.²

Linda Hutcheon described the most common Postmodernist type of metareference as "a kind of fiction which began to run rampant in the 1960s" (1). She further elaborated that "[m]etafiction", as it has [...] been named, is fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (Hutcheon 1). Because of this quality, 'self-reflexive fiction' was another term used by scholars of the time to refer to this type of texts, including both the idea of literature reflecting or mirroring itself, and that of literature reflecting *upon* itself (cf. Scheffel 162).

Not only did two separate terms denoting metareferential works emerge but over time different scholars saw a different scope of aspects encompassed by these terms. In the early 1980s, for example, Patricia Waugh, in addition to Hutcheon's criterion of commentary on the self, listed all the following features as typical of metafiction: "a celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality" (2). In other words, for

¹ The following examples are only a small sampling of early scholarly approaches since a full summary would go beyond the scope of this dissertation. For a more detailed analysis of the terminological diversity cf. e.g. Wolf, "Metareference across Media" 4-5, 15.

² For examples of the concept being discussed in scholarly works before Scholes gave it its name cf. Neumann and Nünning 205-206.

Waugh, discussions of imagination, language, literature, writing, reality and subjectivity were *all* central to a metafictional text – just as they were to the Postmodernist discourse in general. In fact, according to definitions such as Waugh's, 'metafiction' was the quintessential realisation of Postmodernist thought. The reasoning behind this theory is easy to comprehend if one takes a closer look at the period's central beliefs.

It was one of the defining features of Postmodernism that the movement considered (mimetic) representation to be in crisis (cf. e.g. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 683-684). Scholars have suggested a large variety of origins for this opinion, from it being the result of post-(Cold-)war beliefs in the exhaustedness and futility of traditional narratives (cf. e.g. Adorno 61-72; Hutcheon 19; Kümmel 223-224) to it being a consequence of the birth of new media technologies and Media Studies (cf. Irmer 19). Whatever the reason, an increased disbelief in objective truths as well as a disbelief in an objective and coherent reality are observable in most Postmodernist works, as is the increased acknowledgement of what Hilary Lawson building upon Linda Hutcheon has termed the "irreducibly textual character" (24) of Postmodern ideology.

Lawson, like many other Postmodernists, propagated the idea that any and all beliefs, just as any and all perceptions, are mediated and constructed through the thoughts, words and discourses of the people holding them, similarly to how any and all narratives are mediated and constructed through language and the process of narration (cf. e.g. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 164). Metafiction – a genre self-reflexively exposing the constructions and conventions behind narratives – was consequently seen by many writers and scholars as the perfect tool with which to discuss and analyse these same constructions and conventions at work in culture and society in general (cf. e.g. Herman et al. 301). Mark Currie has written of "Postmodernist fictional texts" that they "like to thematise their own artificiality, often by constructing an internal boundary between fiction and reality, which allows for reflection on the relation between fiction and reality, as well as the irony that both the fiction and the reality are, in the end, fictional" ("Postmodern Narrative Theory" 2). While Currie never mentions the word 'metafiction', if one compares his definition to that of Hutcheon's or Waugh's, clearly the ideas are essentially the same.

The terminology surrounding the concept of 'metafiction' did not become any clearer over the following years. In the late 1980s and in the 1990s the field of study expanded further with the topic of history and its representation becoming more and more central. In fact, in 1995, "for the purposes of contextualising metafiction", Mark Currie named "the writing of history" as one of "the two most relevant domains of theoretical writing [on the

subject]” (“Introduction” 11), the other being language. The central thesis of Currie and other prominent scholars such as Thomas Irmer was that history could also only be perceived through (re)construction rather than be accessed directly and “truthfully” (cf. e.g. Irmer 47). Consequently, the writing down of history was viewed by these scholars to be closer to the construction of fiction than to the mere depiction of actual truth (cf. e.g. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 96). With this view of history being so similar to (and most likely the result of) the Postmodernist view of reality in general described before, it is unsurprising that ‘metafiction’ was once again deemed the best tool for the portrayal of these new ideas (cf. e.g. Elias, “Postmodern Metafiction” and “Historiographic Metafiction”). Therefore, the genre definition was extended to include not only fiction discussing the writing of texts and the writing of realities but the writing of history as well.

Over the next decade, the scope of the term ‘metafiction’ was stretched even further as scholars published more and more essays on – to name only a few – “ethnographic metafiction” (Ingram), “bibliographic metafiction” (King and Lee), “cosmological metafiction” (Herren), “performative metafiction” (Austin), “scientific metafiction” (Engelhardt), “technological metafiction” (Andersson), “cosmographic metafiction” (Pöhlmann) and adjacent subjects such as “metafictive geography” (Ridanpää) or “metafiction and general ecology” (Burton). With every article, the existing terminology became increasingly vague and unwieldy. And once it became clear that in the 2000s the number of metareferential elements in texts only kept growing and even reached a new peak³ which caused Werner Wolf to declare a “metafictional turn” in contemporary media (“Metareference across Media” 73; cf. “Preface” v-vii), more and more scholars began to advocate for a more narrow, precise and differentiated terminology.

Ansgar Nünning, for example, called for a subdivision of the field into ‘metanarration’, which discusses narrative practices, ‘(historical) metafiction’, which discusses the fictionality of truths and narratives and ‘metalinguistics’, which discuss language (cf. “Metanarration als Lakune” 132-133; “Mimesis des Erzählens” 32, 34; “On Metanarrative” 11-16, 19; Neumann and Nünning 204-205)⁴. Werner Wolf, meanwhile, advocated for a clearer and more universally applicable terminology, arguing that the current one unnecessarily restricted the

³ Any attempt at an explanation for this new peak would unfortunately vastly exceed the scope of this dissertation. For ideas on the topic cf. e.g. Butler 313-314; Wolf, “Ästhetische Illusion” 699-700, 704-706, 724-725; Wolf, “Metareferential Turn” 25-34.

⁴ A distinction similar to Nünning’s ‘metanarration’ vs. ‘metalinguistics’ can technically already be found in Linda Hutcheon’s work. She does, however, consider it a differentiation between what she calls a “diegetic” and a “linguistic” mode of metareference, rather than two entirely separately categories (cf. 7, 22-23, 28-29).

applicability of the concept(s) by using such exclusively literary terms as ‘fiction’. As a solution Wolf suggested adopting ‘metareference’ as an umbrella term usable across all media (cf. e.g. “Metareference across Media” 8). Consequently, he defined ‘metareferentiality’ as an at its core ‘*transmedial*’⁵ phenomenon denoting “references to, or comments on, aspects of a medial artefact, a medium or the media in general that issue from a logically higher ‘meta-level’ within a given artefact and elicit corresponding self-referential reflections in the recipient” (“Preface” v). Finally, a further important differentiation was proposed by Werner Wolf as well as by Wolfgang Funk and Martin Butler, all proponents of a terminological distinction between ‘metareference’ as a concept, fully metareferential works of ‘total metafiction’, and individual ‘metareferential elements’ which can be so few and interspersed within a text as to not make the entire work automatically metareferential but rather make it ‘partial metafiction’ (cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 240-250; Butler 299-316; Funk 128-129).

Building upon all these demands for conceptual specification, over the last decade a lot of scholarly work has gone into developing a more precise terminology. Much of the work has been done by Werner Wolf over the course of several seminal studies but a variety of other scholars have also made important contributions. An attempt at compiling these studies into one core definition will constitute the content of my next chapter.

⁵ For a brief introduction to the term and its relationship to intermediality cf. e.g. Wolf, “Metareference across Media.” 13-14.

1.2 Current Terminology

At the core of ‘metareference’ as it is understood today lies a movement from the usual “first cognitive or communicative level” (Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 3) or “object level” (Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 22) to a “higher ‘meta-level’” (Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 3). Werner Wolf, in accordance with Klaus W. Hempfer, refers to this movement as ‘metaization’. Through the process of ‘metaization’, the contents of the initial level, the “thoughts and utterances, and above all the means and media used for such utterances, self-reflexively become objects of reflection and communication in their own right” (Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 3), and are then discussed on the higher level. The result is ‘metareference’ which elicits “corresponding self-referential reflections” (Wolf, “Preface” v) from the recipient.

Once it has thus been established what ‘metareference’ is, questions of sub-categories, differentiations and of the phenomenon’s place in relation to other terminological fields arise. In his essay “Metareference across Media”, Werner Wolf structures his answers to these questions into a highly systematic and hierarchical typology of reference, basing his differentiations on (1) what exactly is being referred to and (2) where that object of reference is located in relation to the sign system used to refer to it. Wolf depicts his findings in the form of several tree-diagrams (cf. “Metareference across Media” 17-22 for metareference as a subcategory of reference, 33-35 for the macro-level distinctions, 38-47 for the micro-level distinctions) which can be merged into the following schematic:

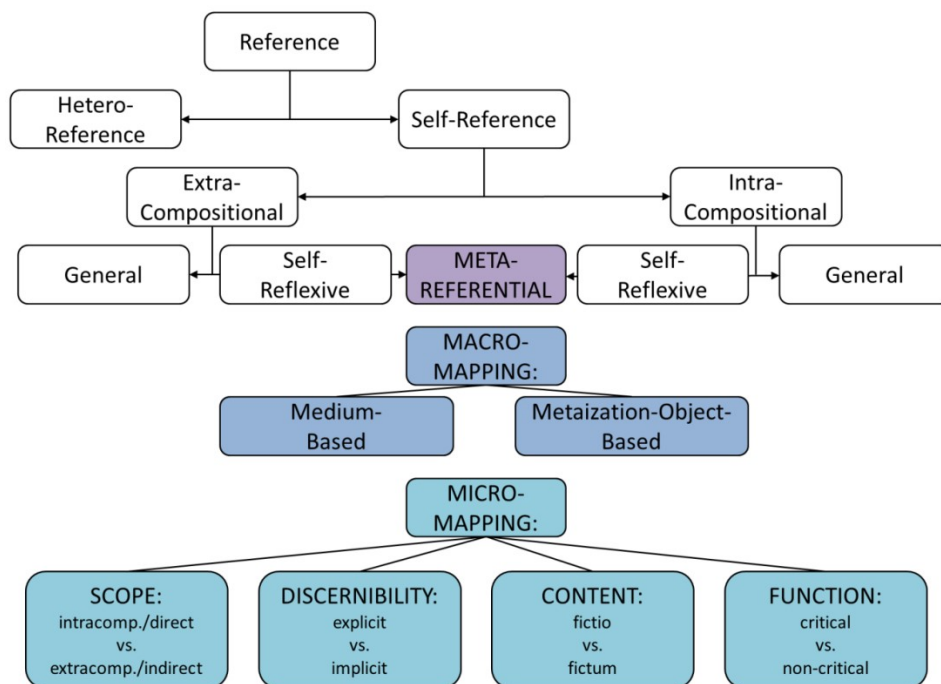


Fig. 1: Wolf's Typology of (Meta)Reference

In his own works, Wolf's terms are usually visualized as separate branches of a tree or as binary oppositions. Yet in his writings Wolf specifically points out that they are in fact better understood as the two ends of a spectrum with hundreds of actual realisations of referentiality situated in between (cf. e.g. "Metareference across Media" 24). I have therefore tried to include this idea into my diagram by transforming Wolf's branches into axes, to better visualize the gradual nature of the transitions between the respective terms.

1.2.1 Metareference vs. Other Types of References

At the top of Wolf's diagram stands the broadest term, namely that of 'reference', of which 'metareference' is merely a sub-form. 'Reference', according to Wolf, is *any* relation between a sign (be it a verbal, iconic, or indexical one) and a referent. This basic concept can then be subdivided into 'heteroreference', which denotes the traditional idea of signs pointing to a conceived reality outside the semiotic system⁶, and into 'self-reference', which encompasses signs referring to themselves and/or to their system. 'System' here can refer both to the particular work in which the reference appears and to the much broader field of type of medium to which the work in question belongs. Therefore, in a next step, Wolf further distinguishes between 'intra-compositional' and 'extra-compositional' self-references⁷.

Each of these two categories of reference can be further subdivided into three types: Wolf describes a 'general' self-reference as a simple formal connection between signs (e.g. one created through the mere repetition present in alliterations, rhymes, quoting mirroring, etc.) which does not demand a discursive reflection on the system as such. Slightly more complex than 'general' self-reference, a 'self-reflexive' self-reference is one in which the signs refer to the world depicted in the work while still suggesting a non-mediated reality (an example would be that of a narrator addressing the readership and discussing the qualities of a character as if he or she was a "real" person in the narrator's "real" world). Finally, a 'meta-referential' self-reference or a "self-reference or self-reflection with a metadimension" deals with the signifying system itself. According to Wolf, this metadimension "establishes a secondary reference to texts and media (and related issues) as such by, as it were, viewing

⁶ Many Poststructuralists would of course object to this idea of a reality outside of language and discourse. However, to discuss this potential problem of Wolf's 'heteroreference'-definition in a study concerned with merely a sub-form of what Wolf subsumes under the opposing term of 'self-reference' would go far beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁷ This terminology seems to replace similar categories found in Wolf's earlier work, e.g. the distinction between 'Eigen-', 'Allgemein-' and 'Fremd-Metafiktion' in *Ästhetische Illusion* 250-254 or the distinction between 'Einzel-' and 'System-Referenz' in "Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz" 72.

them ‘from the outside’ of a meta-level from whose perspective they are consequently seen as different from unmediated reality and the content of represented worlds” (“Metareference across Media” 37-38).

Wolf’s distinction between ‘general’, ‘self-reflexive’ and ‘meta-referential’ self-reference has not remained uncontested. Already Linda Hutcheon, for example, argued for the inclusion of puns and anagrams into the category of what she calls ‘covert linguistic metafiction’ (cf. 34) if “the linguistic structures employed [are] immanent and functional within the text” (118) – or, in other words, if they are neither so subtle as to be invisible, nor so obvious that the reader is not required to work with the language but merely asked to appreciate the author’s verbal cleverness (cf. Hutcheon 118). Similarly, more recently Winfried Nöth, building upon the work of Walter A. Koch, has also objected that *any* poetic language can be seen as concrete metalanguage full of at the very least potential metasigns, it being after all “a language that draws attention to the structure of language itself” (“Metareference” 105) and thus in its essence “enhances language awareness” (“Metareference” 106).⁸ Both these views thus at first glance contradict Wolf’s definition of ‘general’ versus ‘meta-referential’ self-reference yet I would argue that they exactly do so only at first glance.

I agree with Hutcheon and Nöth that in the examples they have provided – all examples in which the recipients’ awareness of the metareferential nature of poetic language is very likely to be high due to the textual context – it would definitely be appropriate to consider repetitions etc. not mere general but metareferential self-references. However, I also believe that Wolf himself would agree with this assessment. The crux of the matter lies in Wolf’s definition of ‘general’ self-reference as *not demanding* reflection. Nöth and Hutcheon’s examples are all cases in which the use of poetic language is salient enough to *do* demand reflection. After all, as both scholars have pointed out, the language they refer to is not as subtle as to be overlooked and that is exactly why it has the potential to actively raise awareness. Consequently, Nöth’s and Hutcheon’s examples do not actually fall into Wolf’s category of ‘general’ self-reference in the first place despite formally and linguistically fitting the label. Still, it is important to acknowledge that Nöth and Hutcheon’s (seeming) objections expose a flaw in Wolf’s typology: namely the uncertainty which results from having a terminological criterion based on something as unreliable as the presumed effect on the audience (raising awareness, triggering reflection, etc.) or as difficult to prove as the intended demands made by a text (or even worse of an author).

⁸ I will cover the topics of awareness and potentiality in more detail in the following chapter.

In an attempt to overcome this potential weakness of his system, across his works Wolf presents a series of criteria which could help to narrow down the intent of a work. He argues that a metareference can be assumed to be intentional whenever the “deciphering [of a reference as a metareference] is not merely a bonus in a work’s reception” but is “essential to its understanding” (“Metareference across Media” 48) and thus is of functional relevance (cf. “Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz” 73-75). This quality in turn, according to Wolf, can be determined by analysing contextual factors within the work as well as factors surrounding it.

Within the work, such criteria can be the metareference’s location within the text, the overall frequency of metareferences within the text, and how fluently these metareferences interconnect with the rest of the text. Specifically, Wolf distinguishes between metareferences in central (e.g. located in the middle of a text or chapter) and metareferences in marginal positions (e.g. located at the beginning or end), between isolated (“punktuell”) and extensive metareferences (depending on the number of metareferential instances within one work), and last but not least, between connected and unconnected metareferences (depending on whether or not there are clear and drastic breaks or jumps between the metareferential and non-metareferential parts) (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 240-250).⁹

Contextual criteria *surrounding* the work can equally be threefold. Firstly, Wolf suggests an analysis of the cultural and historical context of the work in question, especially as to how common debates on meta-phenomena were during the period of its creation. A second criterion is that of whether the medium – or even the genre (cf. Limoges, “Gradable Effects” 399-340) itself – facilitate or restrict the transmission of metareferences (e.g. Wolf suggests that musical metareference is much harder to achieve than a narrative one). Finally, Wolf proposes that the (target-) recipients’ level of medium-awareness, of ‘meta-awareness’ – “the at least passive or latent knowledge that a given phenomenon is not ‘reality’ as such but something thought, felt or represented by someone else, in short that this is a phenomenon or a ‘reality’ processed through a medium” (Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 27) – and their willingness to engage with and participate in both also need to be considered.

Returning to the distinction between demanding and not demanding reflection, between ‘meta-referential’ and ‘general’ self-reference which these factors can help illuminate, a further observation needs to be made. In his earlier work on aesthetic illusion and illusion

⁹ Similar distinctions have also been made by Ansgar Nünning, who, building upon Susan Sniader Lanser, differentiates between ‘integrated’ and ‘isolated’ metanarration, ‘non-digressive’ and ‘digressive’ metanarration and ‘motivated/functional’ and ‘unmotivated/ornamental’ metanarration (cf. “Metanarration als Lakune” 135-150; “Mimesis des Erzählens” 36-37; “On Metanarrative” 35-38). I, however, find Wolf’s choice of wording more straightforward and intuitive, which is why I have adopted it for my work.

breaking, Wolf used to differentiate between ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ metareferences, the latter of which he specifically defined as referring to “double-coded” utterances which also make sense as fully intra-diegetic references and thus can be more difficult to recognise as meta-references (a possible example being a character describing a scene as a “pleasing tableau”) (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 240-250). These categories have mostly been incorporated into the ‘explicit’ versus ‘implicit’ distinction of Wolf’s current typology and will as such be discussed later in this chapter. What I want to draw attention to at this point, however, is the concept of double-coding. If we adopt this idea, poetic language does not actually have to be a type of *either* ‘general’ *or* ‘meta-referential’ self-reference but can, in fact, be *both* at the same time. After all, as mentioned before, the two categories are conceived by Wolf as the extreme ends of a spectrum rather than as clear opposites. Poetic language can thus best be thought of as being located somewhere on the spectrum between ‘general’ and ‘meta-referential’ self-reference, its exact position varying depending on the contextual criteria.

1.2.2 Types of Metareference: Macro-Level Distinctions

With this I would like to return to my analysis of Wolf’s overall typology. Once he has reached the level of ‘metareference’, Wolf subdivides the field further, first on a macro- and then on a micro-level. On the macro-level, Ansgar Nünning has suggested a metaization-object-based classification (cf. “Metanarration als Lakune” 135-150; “Mimesis des Erzählens” 36-37; “On Metanarrative” 35-38), Janine Hauthal has argued that even a function-based differentiation could be possible (cf. Hauthal et al. 5), and Werner Wolf recommends a distinction based on the medium in which the metaization occurs. Wolf explains his decision by demonstrating that concepts such as ‘metanarration’ or ‘metalinguistics’ (two of Nünning’s examples of object-based classification) apply only to certain media, while a category such as ‘metafilm’ or ‘metapainting’ can be coined for any medium. He therefore suggests to use the medium-based terminology for a main division, and the object-based or function-based distinctions as means for further differentiation. I, however, see validity in the respective proposals of all three scholars and think that the choice of hierarchical order (if there needs to be a hierarchy at all) should be dependent on the framework and goals of the analysis that is being conducted.

If different realisations of metareference within one medium are to be examined, it would be only sensible to use the distinction of medium first to delineate one’s field of study. If, however, only narration-related metareferences across genres and media are to be analysed,

then an initial division into subjects as suggested by Nünning becomes more practical. Finally, for a study such as mine, in which metareferences to different subjects as well as to/within different media are to be examined, I find the hierarchical subdivision generally unwieldy. Instead, I prefer to think of subject and medium as simply two separate categories to be looked at on the same level and in whatever order – a concept which Wolf himself applies to his four micro-level categories.

1.2.3 Types of Metareference: Micro-Level Distinctions

On the micro-level, Wolf again addresses different previous approaches to subdivision: for example, he mentions Marion Gymnich's function-based breakdown of metapoetry (cf. e.g. Gymnich and Müller-Zettelmann 65-91) or Gloria Withalm's distinction between filmic meta-forms dealing with production versus consumption versus distribution (cf. e.g. 129-130) – an approach similar to Kay Kirchmann's content-based differentiation between metareferences discussing film as art with its own aesthetic (containing questions of reality versus fiction as well as discussions of the language and toolset of film), versus metareferences discussing film and perception (from viewing experiences to voyeurism in general), versus metareferences depicting film as part of an industry, versus metareferences focusing on film and its relations to and effects on society and politics, versus metareferences to film as part of a more often than not nostalgically presented filmic tradition, versus metareferences discussing film in relation to TV and/or New Media (cf. 68-73). Unsurprisingly, Wolf once again dismisses these categories for being potentially too open – a certainly convincing argument when one looks at the length of even just Kirchmann's list¹⁰ – and/or too medium-specific. Instead, for his own terminology, Wolf chooses effect- and recipient-orientated criteria, eventually ending up with the four major distinctions illustrated at the bottom line of fig.1.

Firstly, Wolf distinguishes between 'intracompositional/direct metareference' and 'extracompositional/indirect metareference'. Technically, since 'intracompositional' and 'extracompositional' refer to the same concepts already discussed on the higher level of self-reference, this introduces a redundancy into Wolf's system. For studies such as mine, however, which deal exclusively with metareference and for which it therefore makes sense to

¹⁰ This is not to say that the core metareferential topics identified by Withalm and Kirchmann, or the functions identified by Gymnich are of no analytical use. In fact, this study will repeatedly draw on them. Thinking of all these elements as separate categories, however, in this I agree with Wolf, would open the micro-level to an infinity of further possibilities, making it unmanageable.

put aside all higher-level distinctions, the possibility of discussing intracompositional and extracompositional aspects on the micro-level is actually very useful.

The next major distinction Wolf makes is that between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ metareference. Within the first category, “a metacomment is clearly made by the conventional, denotational meaning of a sign” (“Metareference across Media” 39), e.g. by explicit verbal references to ‘reader’, ‘pen’ or ‘good book’ in a metanovel or by the use of (quasi-)denotational iconic and/or indexical signs in non-verbal media. Within the second category, on the other hand, more “covert” devices are used to express a metacomment, such as the “salient foregrounding of the medium” through “salient deviations from conventions” (“Metareference across Media” 40). Therefore, within the second category, the contextual frame and knowledge of the medium and/or genre etc. is of particular importance since it is a prerequisite to the recognition of conventions in the first place.

Another possible way of approaching these two categories would be to think of them as metareference through ‘telling’ versus through ‘showing’ (cf. Gymnich 127; Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 234 and “Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz” 54, 56). However, one should then be careful so as not to equate these two terms with Irina O. Rajewsky’s highly useful further distinction between ‘story-based’ (also called ‘content-based’ to avoid the otherwise present narrative media restriction) and ‘discourse-based’ (or ‘form-based’) types of metareference (cf. e.g. “Beyond ‘Metanarration’” 137)¹¹. For as Rajewsky points out, following Wolf’s terminology, the bending of narratological conventions would be considered implicit metareference while actual metanarrative comments would be considered explicit. Both references, however, take place on the level of ‘(re)presenting’, rather than the level of the ‘(re)presented’ and as such fall both into Rajewsky’s form-based category (cf. “Beyond ‘Metanarration’” 158).

Finally, before moving on to the next micro-category, there is one last aspect of Wolf’s distinction to which I want to draw attention. Irina O. Rajewsky has pointed out that she finds Wolf’s particular choice of terminology, that of ‘explicit’ vs. ‘implicit’, rather problematic since it suggests not only a difference in devices used to transport the metareference but also a difference in the *notability* of the metareference (cf. “Beyond ‘Metanarration’” 154 footnote 40). With this, I certainly have to agree. Especially when Wolf uses descriptors such as “weak” to further elaborate upon his idea of ‘implicit’ metareference and its effects on the

¹¹ This distinction can in turn be seen as a variation on Ansgar Nünning’s equally narrative-level-based differentiation between ‘diegetic’, ‘extradiegetic’, ‘paratextual’ and ‘hypodiegetic’ metanarration (cf. “Metanarration als Lakune” 135-150; “Mimesis des Erzählens” 36-37; “On Metanarrative” 35-38).

recipients (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 44), Wolf's choice of terminology definitely does suggest that 'implicit' metareference is inherently less impactful. This, however, does not need to be the case. As Winfried Nöth has pointed out, implicit metasigns "can lead to as much or even more reflection on the nature of signs as an explicit metasign can" ("Metareference" 89). After all, a potentially double-coded, implicit metareference can certainly cause recipients to reflect even more on how exactly the reference is meant than the mere straightforward explicit mentioning of the respective idea would. Finding more precise terminology would therefore definitely be an important future goal for this field of study.

Wolf's third type of micro-level categories deals with the content of the metareflection, namely with whether a work merely foregrounds the mediality of a text, in which case Wolf refers to it as 'fictio-metareference' (a quality inherent to all metatexts), or whether the work additionally and possibly mainly discusses its truth-value or fictionality, thus making it a 'truth or fiction-' rather than 'mediality-centred' metareference, or what Wolf calls a 'fictum-metareference'. The Withelm and Kirchmann categories previously rejected by Wolf could thus be seen as medium-based subtypes of 'fictio-metareference' since they all elaborate on the mediality of a work and/or medium by detailing how a work within that medium is created. Equivalent and/or comparable criteria to Withelm and Kirchmann's film-related ones could then be worked out for every medium individually. By contrast, the typical Postmodernist questions about the relationship between discourse and reality mentioned in the previous chapter would be examples of 'fictum-metareferences'.

Finally, the last pair of categories Wolf establishes on the micro-level is that of 'critical' vs. 'non-critical metareference'. As an example, he points out that narrators commenting e.g. on their own powers were a dominant feature of nineteenth-century realist novels but that they were in no way intended to bring about a critical debate on mediality¹². Thus metareferences can also be non-critical, and not just of the predominantly critical variety represented by the Postmodernist approaches discussed before. Furthermore, the functional distinctions suggested before by scholars such as Marion Gymnich or Janine Hauthal can be seen as sub-categories of or further categories within this particular subdivision of Wolf's since they also relate to potential goals and intents of the creators of the works in question. In the following chapter I would like to have a more detailed look at some of these main possible functions of metareference and at the possible sub-categories that can be derived from them.

¹² Instead, those types of narrator comments were often used to actually create/imitate "authenticity" (cf. e.g. Wolf, "Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz" 72 and "Metareference across Media" 35-43).

1.3 Functions and Effects of Metareference

Postulating the functions of a specific work is always a difficult matter. In the case of metareference the issue is further amplified by the fact that, as suggested before, any discussion of function and effect is closely linked to not easily answerable questions of author/text intent and recipient response.

As pointed out by Werner Wolf, for metareference to be functional it needs to activate a very specific cognitive frame in the recipient's mind before the meta-potential of a sign or text can be properly realised and/or actualised (cf. "Metareference across Media" 31). To make matters even more complicated, the activation of the cognitive frame does not only depend on the author's skill and work but also on the capabilities of the recipients. And Wolf is not the only scholar to point this out. Hans Ulrich Seeber correctly draws attention to the fact that for a recipient to be able to recognise many types of metareference, he or she requires a certain pre-knowledge of e.g. medium and/or genre conventions (cf. 438). Similarly, Andreas Böhn, whilst describing the criteria necessary for the successful recognition of a quotation, has argued that "[k]nowledge of the quoted text (primary context) and the perception of its alteration in the quoting text (secondary context) are necessary conditions for the reader in order to perceive a quotation as quotation" (592). Irina O. Rajewsky has also repeatedly stressed the importance of reader competence (cf. e.g. "Beyond 'Metanarration'" 147), Patricia Waugh has explained that "[t]o be successfully decoded [...] experimental fiction of any variety requires an audience which is itself self-conscious about its linguistic practices" (64) and Linda Hutcheon has even argued that in (Postmodern) metafiction, there is a "near equation of the acts of reading and writing", for as "the novelist actualizes the world of his imagination through words, so the reader – from those same words – manufactures in reverse a literary universe that is as much his creation as it is the novelist's" (27).

In short, the demands posed by metareferential works upon their readers and audiences are arguably even higher than those posed by merely heteroreferential ones. As a result, as scholars such as Jean-Marc Limoges, Winfried Nöth and Hans Ulrich Seeber have pointed out, no matter what the author's intentions might have been, recipients of these types of works can easily still be differently aware, either missing metareferences completely or reading metareferences into signs which were not intended to be read as such (cf. Limoges "Gradable Effects" 397-398; Nöth "Metareference" 96-100; Seeber 438). Therefore, all statements made henceforth about possible functions of metareferential works are always to be understood as hypotheses on the topic formed by a member of the audience during the reception process.

Building upon the particular audience member's – or researcher's – interests and perspectives, the hypotheses are then enriched with plausible arguments which refer back to the work as well as to its external context (cf. Gymnich and Nünning 6-10, Sommer 330-337).

1.3.1 Aiding as well as Breaking the Narrative Illusion

Based on the many different fields of study affected by metareferences, it is not surprising that the number of hypotheses postulated about their functions is vast as well as diverse. According to scholars, metareferences have been used for a variety of purposes over the last few centuries. Initially, metareferences were mainly utilised to tie up story lines, to create coherence, to communicate moral values and, already introducing Wolf's *fictum*-category, to suggest "authenticity" (either by simulating orality or by having fictional narrators, editors and publishers present themselves and their work as a 'true story'). In the second half of the twentieth century, however, at the height of Postmodernism, the *fictum*-aspect kept gaining prominence and shifted the functional focus almost entirely to increasingly illusion-breaking metafiction which aimed to *create* rather than reduce the distance between stories and their audiences (cf. e.g. Hauthal et al. 4-10; Nünning, "Metanarration als Lakune 135-150, "Mimesis des Erzählens" 36-37, "On Metanarrative" 35-38; Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 117-130, 217-219, 643-644).

The scope, impact and achievement of the illusion-breaking effect has been continuously debated over the last few decades. Ansgar Nünning, for example, has pointed out that the strength of the effect differs drastically depending on the overall function of the metareferences present in a text: when used to create a sense of authenticity, metareferences obviously not only do not break but actually contribute to a work's illusion (cf. also Fludernik, "Scene Shift" 383); meanwhile, comical and/or parodistic metareferences are situated somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, their position in-between illusion-strengthening and illusion-breaking forming the whole basis for their depiction of the absurd; finally, metareferences used for poetological discussions are frequently the most destructive towards diegetic illusion (cf. Nünning "Metanarration als Lakune" 133-150, 152-153 and "On Metanarrative" 40).

In addition to the overall functions, Jean-Marc Limoges has suggested that the mere context of a work's reception already has an impact on its illusion-breaking potential: for example, a person watching a film "for fun" at home would arguably be less predisposed to recognize potential metareferences and let them break his or her illusion than a scholar

watching a film in the context of a conference on metareference (cf. “Gradable Effects” 398). Furthermore, Limoges has pointed out that the level of harshness of a possible illusion-break is also influenced by how far a potentially illusion-breaking element is motivated within the work and world presented – Limoges’ argument being that in a film such as *EDtv* (1999), for example, Matthew McConaughey’s character addressing the camera is less illusion-breaking than the same action would have been in a more traditional film in the world of which no camera is supposed to be present (cf. “Gradable Effects” 402). For if a device is perceived by the audience as “diegetically, symbolically or even dramatically motivated, it will be ‘naturalized’ and will somewhat lose its anti-illusionist effect” (Limoges, “Gradable Effects” 402). Finally, Limoges has suggested that the modalities of potentially illusion-breaking metareferences should be examined as well since the illusion-breaking effect of a metareference can depend on how frequently such elements appear in a text as well as on where exactly in the text the metareference is located. In other words, Limoges suggests an analysis of the same concepts of ‘central’ versus ‘marginal’, ‘isolated’ versus ‘extensive’ and ‘connected’ versus ‘unconnected metareferences’ introduced by Wolf. Yet as to the precise effect of these modalities on a metareference’s illusion-breaking capabilities, Limoges and Wolf come to different conclusions.

As to the effect of the frequency of potentially illusion-breaking elements, Limoges has argued that rare metareferences are more unexpected and thus can more easily startle recipients out of the narrative illusion (cf. “Gradable Effects” 401). In contrast, Wolf has voiced the view that the more metareferential instances there are within one work, the more difficult they become to ignore, hence their illusion-breaking potential is in fact higher (*Ästhetische Illusion* 242). Similarly, as to the positioning of the metareferences, Limoges has suggested that the later a potentially illusion-breaking element appears in a work for the first time, the more unexpected it is and, thus again, the stronger the break is (cf. “Gradable Effects” 401). In contrast, Wolf has argued that metareferences in marginal positions such as right at the end or beginning of a text (or even just of a chapter), are in fact *less* illusion-breaking since the reader would either be not fully immersed yet (in the case of a text/chapter beginning) or would be already on the way out of immersion (in the case of a text/chapter ending) (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 242).

Looking at these two very different positions it soon becomes clear that while Limoges generally sees the cause of illusion-breaking in the sharp and sudden onset of certain illusion-breaking elements, Wolf bases his approach on the idea of when immersion (or for that matter illusion) is at its weakest to begin with, as well as on the question of at what point no amount

of immersion will be enough to drown out the illusion-breaking elements. In other words, Wolf's and Limoges' suggestions are not as much a contradiction as they are two approaches with entirely different perspectives and starting points. Therefore, in accordance with the belief postulated at the beginning of this chapter that all function-theories can only be hypotheses, rather than trying to decide whether Limoges or Wolf is in the right, I find it more productive to simply always analyse potentially illusion-breaking metareferences with both functional hypotheses in mind, and to see if and/or how the hypotheses hold-up in regards to particular works.

In addition to his thoughts on the relationship between frequency and positioning of metareferences and illusion-breaking, Werner Wolf has also discussed the illusion-breaking potential of several of his other metareferential categories. For example, he has argued in relation to his 'connected' versus 'unconnected' distinction that the less clear the break is between the mimetic and illusionist rest of a text and the metareferential element (e.g. the metareference appears without warning, from one sentence to the next, in the middle of a paragraph) the stronger its illusion-breaking effect will be (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 241-242). Wolf has furthermore analysed the illusion-breaking potential of 'overt' versus 'covert' metareferences, coming to the conclusion that the latter – since it is double-coded and thus would also make sense as a fully intra-diegetic reference – is far less illusion-breaking (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 245-247). Finally, Wolf has also discussed the effect on illusion had by 'intracompositional' and 'extracompositional' metareferences, the first type in this case being the more illusion-breaking one. This is not to say, however, that extracompositional metareferences have no illusion-breaking potential at all – after all, comments made about another text or about one's medium can already trigger enough meta-awareness in the recipient for him or her to leave his or her immersion behind and to instead begin to consider the metareferential parallels drawn by the text in a more analytical fashion (cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 250-254).

Coincidentally, this observation also serves as a great reminder that, as mentioned before, the intensity of the metareferential effect is of course also always dependent on the audience's willingness and/or capability to participate in the illusion-breaking, which can differ strongly from recipient to recipient. In fact, it has been argued by scholars such as Sonja Klimek that the increase of metareference over the last few (Post-Postmodernist) decades, in 'high' as well as in 'pop'-art has taught recipients to "combine media-awareness with the appreciation of aesthetic illusion" ("Fantasy" 90) to the point where they have started to develop what Werner Wolf has referred to as a heightened 'meta tolerance' (cf. "Metareference across Media" 74).

As a result, according to these scholars, contemporary recipients are actually increasingly less startled by metareferential elements and are therefore increasingly less likely to be thrown out of their immersion by them.

This idea that today's omnipresence of metareferential elements has changed the effect of metareference on something such as illusion naturally poses the question of what effect it has had on other functions of metareference. Furthermore, if illusion-breaking has lost its impact, what are the most common functions of metareference actually still observable today?

1.3.2 Intellectual Stimulus as well as Pop-Cultural Game

According to Werner Wolf, one set of functions centres around the idea of metareference as something particularly intellect-engaging. According to Wolf, from the perspective of the recipient, the presence of metareference in a work provides him or her with an additional intellectual stimulus (cf. "Metareference across Media" 67-68); from the perspective of the author, metareferences can be used to make one's work more intellectually challenging (cf. "Metareference across Media" 65-66) as well as to present the author him- or herself as "particularly self-conscious and hence intellectual" ("Metareference across Media" 66).

This concept of Wolf's is clearly rooted in the fact that especially during the phenomenon's previous peak during Postmodernism, metareferences were still almost exclusively a feature of 'high'-art, or often, especially initially, of *experimental* art. Yet today, metareferences can be found in even the most mainstream popular works. In fact, the presence of metareferential elements therein is so dominant that Michael Dunne has suggested that 'metapop' should be considered its own subgenre (cf. 11; cf. also Wolf, "Metareference across Media" 11 and "Metareferential Turn" 9, 15). As a result, the question emerges of how older theories about the intellectual nature of metareference are to be reconciled with this new development.

Different scholars have voiced different opinions on the topic. Some, such as Marion Gymnich, Eva Müller-Zettelmann, Marie-Laure Ryan or Werner Wolf, have pointed out that due to their paradoxical, boundary-breaking, absurdity-creating, playful and distancing nature, metareferences have always been particularly well fitted to be employed for comic or ironic effect (cf. Gymnich and Müller-Zettelmann 88-89; Ryan, "Metaleptic Machines" 445; Wolf, "Metalepsis as Transgeneric" 445 and "Metareference across Media" 71-72). Agreeing with his colleagues, Wolf in particular has suggested that metareference can be used to increase the entertainment value of a work (cf. "Metareference across Media" 65-68). Taking this into

consideration, one solution to the seeming ‘high’- versus ‘pop’-art discrepancy could thus be to suggest that while ‘high’-art focuses on the intellectual aspects of the phenomenon, ‘pop’-art is most likely trying to utilize the entertainment value of metareferential elements. In fact, Marion Gymnich, Karin Kukkonen and Jeff Thoss have all voiced this suggestion in the past (cf. Gymnich 130; Kukkonen, “Textworlds” 499; Thoss, *When Story Worlds Collide* 6, 42-43). It is, however, also possible to see ‘pop’-art’s use of metareference not as opposing its use in ‘high’-art but as an emulation of that use.

From that perspective, scholars such as Kay Kirchmann and Werner Wolf have argued that ‘pop’-art could be seen as employing metareference to elevate itself, to point out that it can also be an aesthetically ambitious, intellectual, “proper” art worthy of the same respect as ‘high’-art (cf. Kirchmann 67; Wolf, “Metareferential Turn” 35). Naturally, it is always dangerous to propose such a ‘prelocator model’-based hypothesis and to suggest that ‘pop’-art is merely following in its more ambitious predecessor’s footsteps, picking up trivialized versions of the latter’s repertoire¹³. After all, ‘high’- and ‘pop’-art both have their value and influences from one to the other go both ways. Still, in the context of the use of metareference, it is undisputable that the phenomenon was embraced by ‘high’-art first. Therefore, the question if – and if, then how – ‘pop’-metareferences differ and/or are inspired by their ‘high’-art predecessors, remains valid. Hopefully, the examples of ‘pop’-art analysed in this case study will bring us closer to finding answers.

Yet first, in conclusion, one final aspect of this set of functions needs to be discussed. As mentioned multiple times before, metareferences can only realise their full potential if their audience is aware enough to notice them. This fact is particularly easy to acknowledge in the context of intellect-engaging metareferences (be they present in ‘high’-art, ‘high’-art-imitating ‘pop’-art or simply in ‘pop’-art) for their demanding nature is their whole *raison d’être*. It is, however, important to note that the same concept applies to the comical type of metareferences as well: similar to an inside joke, these metareferential elements require their audience to be highly aware of many, often extracompositional items that are being referred to. Therefore, one can argue that a final recipient-centric function of metareferences in this context is that to not only potentially elevate individual ‘pop’-cultural works but to elevate the *recipients* of those works by providing them with an opportunity to demonstrate their media-savviness and to prove themselves to be ‘superior’ by belonging to a small elite of people who

¹³ For more on the topic cf. e.g. Jannidis.

“get” the references and recognise the structures (cf. Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 67-68 and “Metareferential Turn” 31).

1.3.3 Descriptive as well as Prescriptive Medium Commentary

The final commonly discussed set of metareferential functions is the one most central to all types of metareferences: it is the one which relates to the medium commentary provided by the metareferences as well as to that commentary’s purpose. One of the most salient effects of metareference in this regard is of course the fact that it draws attention to a work’s, a genre’s, a medium’s or possibly even to art’s conventions as a whole, be they compositional, production- or even reception-related (cf. Butler 305-309). The exact function of such a use of metareference, however, can vary.

Firstly, by paying homage to and/or by presenting a parody of certain conventions – as Martin Butler has pointed out, metareferences are often located somewhere in between (cf. 302) – a creator can not only experiment with the limits and possibilities of his or her medium of choice (cf. Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 66-67), but he or she can also present his or her own work as part of this medium, as part of an artistic history and tradition (cf. Butler 302; Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 66-67), and thus can help “write” his or her own work as well as its most significant predecessors into cultural memory (cf. Gymnich and Müller-Zettelmann 87). Furthermore, the creator can then either celebrate the achievements of art, of an artform, or even of imagination, creativity (cf. e.g. Gymnich and Müller-Zettelmann 86; Irmer 22-23; Wolf, “Metalepsis as Transgeneric” 102) and language (cf. Gymnich and Müller-Zettelmann 87-88; Hutcheon 29) or he or she can choose to expose their respective weaknesses and deficiencies (cf. e.g. Gymnich and Müller-Zettelmann 87; Irmer 22-23; Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 65-66).

In addition to thus discussing what an artform is or is not capable of doing, has or has not been able to do, metareferences can also be used to postulate what works of a certain type can or should do in the future. As Ansgar Nünning has argued, for centuries now authors such as Henry Fielding have used metareferential elements to formulate and express their poetological ideologies (cf. “Metanarration als Lakune” 153; see also Gymnich and Müller-Zettelmann 87). It can therefore be argued, as scholars such as Mark Currie, David Lodge and Robert Scholes have done in the past, that metareference in this context is located on the border between fiction and criticism, between creative and critical discourse (cf. Currie, “Introduction” 2; Lodge, “Novel Now” 146; Scholes 29). And this once again in-between

position is highly important. As Werner Wolf has made sure to point out, unlike critical or scholarly texts which simply participate in a theoretical metadiscourse, actual metatexts “enable recipients to *experience* metareferences [e.g. by letting them experience “conventions ex negative in an amusing way” in a parody], so that metaization in the media becomes ‘*applied* metareference” (“Metareference across Media” 33, my emphasis). This ‘applied metareference’ in turn has, as Debra Malina has put it, “not only a rhetorical [...] but even a transformative effect on audiences” (9, italics in original). In other words, poetological explorations through metareference can not only help works themselves evolve beyond a potentially stale conventionalized state (cf. e.g. Hauthal et al. 11; Reinecke 14; Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 69-70) but they also have a strong effect on the texts’ recipients. They can “activate” (Wolf, “Metalepsis as Transgeneric” 103) them and even help *them* evolve by providing interpretational clues and work- and/or medium-specific information which helps increase the recipients’ media-and cultural literacy (cf. Schwanecke 160; Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 66-67).

1.4 (Potentially) Metareferential Devices, e.g. the Metalepsis

Before further elaborating upon my exact focus for this thesis there is one last theoretical aspect that needs attention, namely the question of metareferential devices. As seen already during the typological discussion there are many elements within a work which have the potential to become metareferential devices. The variety of such elements only grows in the context of a study of multiple media. For, as Marion Gymnich has pointed out, in addition to transmedial structures such as the ‘mise-en-abyme’, there are also medium-specific devices which need to be taken into consideration (cf. 130-131) as well as devices which are of different significance within different media. Salient breaks of conventions, for example, can be observed in every medium. Yet they are particularly important for non-narrative media such as music, architecture or dance which do not have the additional explicit devices of narrative media at their disposal (cf. the part on music in Wolf, *Metareference across Media* 190-316; Keazor “L’architecture” 319-353; Pfandl-Buchegger and Rottensteiner 490; Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 63). Furthermore, different devices can be used to a different degree to address different objects of metaization. To stay with the previous example, a structure such as the mise-en-abyme could be used to discuss a variety of mediality-related topics, while self-reflective narrator comments are most likely to draw attention to features of narration (cf. Nünning, “Metanarration als Lakune” 132).

Due to this wide variety of possible devices, expanded even further by the previously mentioned ability of not per se metareferential signs to still realise a metareferential potential, any attempt to list and cover all of them in one chapter would be futile. To still be able to briefly demonstrate the questions involved, however, I have included the following short introduction to the arguably most striking as well as most representative of all metareferential devices¹⁴, the ‘metalepsis’.¹⁵

As Karin Kukkonen has pointed out, ‘metalepsis’ literally means ‘a jump across’, and within metareferential terminology is used to refer to jumps, or transgressions, made across the borders between fictional worlds and/or the borders between narrative levels (cf. “Metalepsis in Pop” 1-2). The origins of the phenomenon can be traced back to the thirteenth century during which many texts contained what were at the time presumably “ordinary and

¹⁴ Ansgar Nünning even uses the presence or lack of metaleptic elements as subdivision-category within his metanarrative typology (cf. “Metanarration als Lakune” 135-150; “Mimesis des Erzählens” 36-37; “On Metanarrative” 35-38)

¹⁵ For two much more extensive and in-depth studies on this device in its present form, its functions and effects, as well as on the related theoretical framework cf. Hanebeck as well as Thoss, *Storyworlds*.

innocent” (Genette 235) rather than illusion-breaking and metanarrative (cf. Genette 234-235) *entrelacement*-formulas: remarks by narrators through which they would explain how they would drop the current story line (for example because a character would not leave an inn or had gone to sleep) and move their attention to another (for example to fill the time while the first character’s story was not progressing) (cf. Fludernik “Metanarrative” 1-39; Genette 234-235; Häsner “Preface” to *Metalepsen* 4 and *Metalepsen* 32-34, 52). These formulas, while not yet containing actual transgressions between levels, already portrayed an image of the narrator as moving from character to character, from location to location within a story world in which either (1) he or she, the extradiegetic narrator, did not actually belong or (2) within which he or she, the intradiegetic narrator, would actually not have had the ability to jump back and forth, resulting in a narrative paradox.

Building upon these beginnings, metalepses today in their fully realised form are defined as follows, for example by Werner Wolf:

[T]he prototypical case of metalepsis can be defined as [...] a usually non-accidental and paradoxical transgression of the border between levels or (sub)worlds¹⁶ that are ontologically (in particular concerning the opposition reality vs. fiction) or logically differentiated (logically in a wide, not only formal sense, including e.g., temporal or spatial differences). The paradoxical ‘impossibility’ of metaleptic transgressions seems to lay bare the fictionality of the work in which they occur and thus implies a meta-statement on its medial nature as an artefact (“Metareference across Media” 50; cf. “Metalepsis as Transgeneric” 91).

While Wolf’s words certainly include all major points necessary for a definition, there is one complaint I would like to raise about his choice of language: Like most basic definitions of the term, Wolf simply speaks of a “transgression” of borders – yet this term does not fully capture the complex nature of the phenomenon. In contrast, Debra Malina in her seminal work on the topic defines metalepses as something “*toy[ing]* with the borders between the theoretically mutually exclusive zones of (extra-textual) reality, the fictional frame (extradiegetic level), the main story (diegesis), and the story-within-the-story (hypodiegesis)” (1, my emphasis). I find this description much more on-point, for metalepses rarely just “transgress” a border once and move on. Instead, they usually linger at the border and make its crossing (often repeatedly back and forth) their actual subject, playfully¹⁷ deconstructing any and all borders in the process.

¹⁶ This idea of metalepses as dealing with multiple worlds and the borders between them has brought the device to the attention of scholars of (Im)Possible World Theory and Unnatural Narratology. For a variety of stimulating studies which would unfortunately exceed the scope of this chapter cf. Bell (and Alber); Biwu; Martín Jiménez; Ryan, “Machines” and “Impossible Worlds”; and the exchange between Alber, Iversen, Nielsen and Richardson and Fludernik.

¹⁷ Similarly to Malina’s idea of “toying”, Gérard Genette in his seminal works on metareference also refers to metalepses as “games” (236).

Starting from this general definition, several subcategories of metalepses can be identified. Firstly, a whole variety of scholars have argued for a differentiation between ‘ontological metalepsis’, which depicts an actual “physical” crossing of narrative levels and boundaries within a work, and ‘rhetorical metalepsis’, which resembles the original *entrelacement*-formulas and in which characters or narrators glance at and comment on each other across levels but in which there is no actual crossing of boundaries. Instead, in these ‘rhetorical metalepses’ there is merely a temporary window between the levels which soon closes again (cf. e.g. Kukkonen, “Metalepsis in Pop” 2-3; Ryan, “Metaleptic Machines” 441; Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 53-54). To these two categories, Werner Wolf has added the concept of an ‘epistemological metalepsis’, which he describes as merely dealing with “impossible” knowledge (e.g. characters being aware of their own fictionality) (cf. “Metalepsis across Media” 52-53). According to Wolf, ‘ontological’ metalepses are the most metareferential ones due to their highly paradoxical nature, which usually is particularly inducive to the activation of the recipients’ reflection processes (cf. “Metareference across Media” 54-55). In contrast, ‘epistemological’ and ‘rhetorical’ metalepses have increasingly less metareferential potential since they are not fully realised transgressions and/or impossibilities (cf. “Metareference across Media” 54-55). All three sub-categories, however, do have some metareferential potential.¹⁸

An entirely different pair of classificational distinctions deals with the directionality of the transgression: in the case of ‘ascending metalepses’ a character moves from a lower, supposedly fictional level to the higher level of the seemingly real world of the narrator; conversely, within a ‘descending metalepsis’, the movement takes place in the opposite direction, e.g. a narrator intrudes into his narrated world (cf. e.g. Klimek, “Metalepsis” 170; Kukkonen, “Metalepsis in Pop” 3); finally, ‘lateral metalepses’ remain on the same level and as such often traverse narrative boundaries which are much more difficult to grasp (cf. Thoss, *Storyworlds* 11). Naturally, one and the same work can include examples of all three of these types of metalepses, for which case Sonja Klimek has suggested the term ‘tangled heterarchy’ (cf. “Metalepsis” 33-37).

A final possible classification would be to distinguish what Kukkonen refers to as ‘heterometalepses’ or ‘intertextual metalepses’ and what Limoges calls ‘interdiegetic

¹⁸ In his in-depth study which focuses on matters of hermeneutics, Hanebeck introduces additional terminology which both (re)groups and further subdivides these categories in an attempt to account for complexities overlooked by Genette’s “deceptively simple” (Hanebeck 26) structuralist notion of diegetic levels. Whilst Hanebeck’s framework offers a lot of valuable food for thought, for the purposes of this very short introduction, I consider the basic terms sufficient to provide a preliminary overview.

metalepses' from cases of 'intradiegetic metalepses', thus differentiating whether the crossed boundary is one located between two entirely separate fictional worlds and/or works (as in the case of cross-overs) or whether it is a boundary within one work, the latter being the much more common variety (cf. Kukkonen, "Metalepsis" 8; Limoges, "Metalepsis" 200-202; Thoss, *Storyworlds* 4-5). Similarly, but on a smaller scale, Limoges has further advocated a distinction between 'internal metalepses' within the hierarchically same level of a story (in other words between a primary and secondary story) and 'external metalepses' in which the transgression is located between the extradiegetic and the diegetic level (cf. "Metalepsis" 200-202; Thoss, *Storyworlds* 4-5).

In addition to these typological considerations, there is one final issue relevant to an intermedial study such as mine, namely the question of whether all types of metalepses can appear in all media. The answer is contested. Some scholars, such as Klimek, have suggested that "proper" metalepsis can only be achieved in drama where an actor is simultaneously present as himself and as his role (cf. "Metalepsis" 172; also Hauthal 585-586). Even film, in keeping with this theory, while similar, is not quite the same since the audience is not actually on-site during the recording process (cf. Hauthal 585-586). As for the non-performative arts, there, according to Klimek, "metalepses can only appear within artefacts" and in the process merely create "the *impression* of a transgression between a fictitious and a real world [while] hiding the fact that also the level of what seems to be 'real' is merely a part of the artefact, not of the reality outside the artefact" ("Metalepsis" 172, my emphasis).

While I am willing to agree with the reasoning behind the first of Klimek's two statements, namely her postulation about the special status of drama, I consider Klimek's second thesis an untenably limited view of the effect even a mere "impression of a transgression" can have on an audience. I would argue that far from "hiding" the fact that the diegetic 'real' world is still a fictional one, metalepses, through their portrayal of the dissolution of borders between fiction and 'reality', prompt the work's recipients to reflect on the idea of possible dissolutions of *all* borders between fiction and reality, including the one between the artefact and the real world and/or the one between the real world and fiction in general. Sure, the actual physical duality which drama can provide is not there within a non-performative art form, yet that does not automatically diminish the mental, intellectual and interpretational effectiveness of the metareferential device. Analysing how specific individual works and/or media can achieve this desired metaleptic effect is therefore, in my opinion, a much more interesting and fruitful endeavour than just postulating a lack of effect based on a pedantically abstract, theoretical distinction.

2. So Why (this) Study (of) Metareference?

The answer to this question might seem simple in the face of the seemingly endless amount of metareferences present in today's media. Yet in contrast to the affinity of writers and artists towards metafiction, the initial critical and scholarly reception of the phenomenon was rather derogative, thus making my question anything but rhetorical.

Already before the Postmodern peak but also well into and after it, self-reference was often described in negative terms: From Søren Kierkegaard's critique of 'romantic irony' as destructive, threatening to the integrity of the subject and dissolving meaningful causality, to Friedrich Nietzsche's more positive approach towards these in his view equally destructive qualities, to Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author', to Jean Baudrillard's elaborations on simulacra and simulations – the metareferential dissolution of what was traditionally considered to be an independent, unshakeable, normative reality was often received with hostility (cf. Quendler 104-119).

Even within the field of metareferential studies the subject was often associated with negative connotations: In the 1980s, Linda Hutcheon, for instance, considered *Narcissistic Narrative* a fitting title for her seminal work on the topic. And although she explains in her introduction that the text was "conceived as a *defence*" (1, my emphasis) and that "'Narcissistic' – the figurative adjective chosen here to designate this textual self-awareness – is not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive" (1), the traditionally negative connotation of the word is still of significance. For even if Sigmund Freud, as Hutcheon argues, is often misunderstood in the context of narcissism – having in fact described it as a "universal original condition" rather than "just pathological behavior" (Hutcheon 1) – and even if Hutcheon explains that "[o]ther potentially pejorative terms, such as introspective, introverted, and self-conscious, are likewise meant to be critically neutral" (1), the fact that those defensive elaborations are needed already demonstrates the moral pitfalls metareferential works and their scholars used to face and sometimes still do.

As a result, Hutcheon was not the only scholar feeling the need to explain herself. Further examples of such a defensive approach to the topic can be found both in Brian McHale's work *Postmodernist Fiction*, the final part of which is titled "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Postmodernism" (217-221), and in Patricia Waugh's seminal work on the subject, the introductory part of which is tellingly named "What is metafiction and why are they saying such awful things about it?". As Waugh then moves on to demonstrate, critics well into Postmodernity could often be seen discussing metafiction in the context of a 'crisis

of the novel' or even 'death of the novel'. In Waugh's own words: "Instead of recognizing the *positive* aspects of fictional self-consciousness, they have tended to see such literary behaviour as a form of the self-indulgence and decadence characteristic of the exhaustion of any artistic form or genre" (9).

Till the present day, metareferential texts have unfortunately not been able to fully rid themselves of these accusations and studies proclaiming their "virtuous" nature (Karbalaei) are still the exception. In an essay published in 2001, for example, Werner Wolf still felt the obligation to defend self-reference in general and Postmodern metareference in particular against accusations of it being sterile, disconnected from reality and aesthetically irrelevant. Wolf argued that today neither the works nor their study should need justification (cf. "Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz" 80) – and yet, the fact that he still felt the need to include these sentences into his essay shows quite strikingly that the negative viewpoint on the field had (and possibly has) not yet been overcome. In fact, even critics and scholars deeming the subject worthy of exploration still seem to often get caught up – to different degrees – in strikingly negative language when describing it.

Sometimes, it is just a case of one or two singular conspicuous phrases: Michael Scheffel, for example, when speaking of the metareferential device of a narrator drawing attention to the process of narration, describes it as happening "auf Kosten des erzählten Vorgangs" (167), so "at the expense" of what is being narrated – not exactly a neutral expression. Much more striking, however, is the number of violence- and confusion-related adjectives used on a regular basis to describe metareferential features and effects. Brian McHale serves as a particularly great example. In *Postmodernist Fiction* he repeatedly uses words such as "destabilizing" (101), "disquieting" (125), "dizzying" (198), "jarring" (90), "strange[]" and "disorienting" (119), and continuously describes metareferential texts as "transgressions" (114) and as "deliberately misleading" (115), "disquieting puzzles" (114) which "violate linear sequentiality" (103, my emphasis), "dupe the reader" (114, my emphasis), "court confusion" (115), and "cause disruption" (125). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon describes the new Postmodernist reading experience as follows: "*Disturbed, defied, forced* out of his complacency, [the reader] must self-consciously establish new codes in order to come to terms with new literary phenomena" (39, my emphasis). "Reading was no longer easy, no longer a comfortable controlled experience; the [*unsettled*" (139, my emphasis)] reader was now *forced* to control, to organize, to interpret" (25-26, my emphasis).

This violent imagery gets even more dramatic when it comes to scholarly descriptions of the effects of metalepses. Suddenly, even the most basic definitions draw parallels to violent

acts, starting with the core idea of “frame-breaking” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 197, my emphasis). Add to that statements such as this from William Nelles describing vertical embedding as being “violated by the use of the trope of metalepsis” (92, my emphasis), add the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory* defining ‘metalepsis’ as “the contamination of levels in a hierarchical structure as it occurs in narrative” (303, my emphasis), as “uprooting” (303) boundaries, and again as “violati[ng]” (304) levels, add Werner Wolf calling the device a “violation” (“Metalepsis as Transgeneric” 90-91) with a “startling” effect (“Metalepsis as Transgeneric” 91), add Marie-Laure Ryan comparing a particularly extreme sub-form of metalepsis “to an *invasive* growth that *destroys* the structure of [...] tissues” (“Metaleptic Machines” 442, my emphasis), add Debra Malina describing the effects of metalepses as ranging “from *startling* diversion through *destabilization* and *disorientation* to outright *violation*” (3, my emphasis) and even self-consciously explaining “If I emphasize a violent streak underlying this persistent breaching of constitutive boundaries, it is because I detect, even in the metaleptic joke or game, a certain *aggression* toward the subject, whether internal or external to the text.” (3, my emphasis) – the pattern is clear.

Finally, it is not only academic circles in which unfavourable commentary on metareference can still be found. *The Guardian*, for example, only a few years ago published an article which commented spitefully on the fact that “[t]elevision is becoming meta television, existing primarily to be self-referential and *a bit pleased with itself*” (Crace online, my emphasis). Similarly, in a different article bearing the title “Enough with the Found Footage Movies” another writer for *The Guardian* referred to the genre’s defining characteristic as a “conceit” and a “gimmick”, before concluding the article by voicing his utter incomprehension for why we would suddenly “feel the need to have the very mechanics of cinema explained to us” (Lyne online). In my opinion, the answer to this question is closely linked to the title question of this chapter. Why do we suddenly feel the need to discuss media mechanics? For the same reasons for which I believe that the artistic discussion of media through metareference is worth studying.

First of all, self-reference is much more than a narratological “gimmick”. As Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara and Britta Neitzel have demonstrated within their semiotic approach to the topic, *no* communication is *ever* purely referential and without self-reference. In their words, “no speaker can hide his or her self in his or her message entirely” (Nöth et al. 32, my translation), be it through something as seemingly negligible as his or her personal presence, through the distinguishable style of a specific magazine or, as mentioned in another article by Nöth, even just through the presence of a logo (cf. Nöth, “Self-Reference” 13). As Nöth

explains in a third article discussing his concept of ‘performative metareference’, the very basic central idea of performative linguists that “each and every speech act contains an implicit sign of its purpose as a speech act and thus a sign about itself” (“Metareference” 112) means that if we “always communicate that we communicate” (“Metareference” 114), ‘performative metareference’ is “omnipresent in each and every communicative situation” (“Metareference” 114).

Yet metareference is not even “only” a natural feature of our language. In fact, in the 1970s, scholars such as Gregory Bateson went so far as to argue that the capability of discerning and producing metareference has been a crucial feature of our cognitive evolution. More specifically, Bateson’s work focused on

the drama precipitated when organisms, having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, discover that their signals are signals. Not only the characteristically human invention of language can then follow, but also all the complexities of empathy, identification, projection, and so on. And with these comes the possibility of communicating at the multiplicity of levels of abstraction. (Bateson 179)

These ideas of Bateson’s have prevailed over the last few decades and can still be found in the theories of scholars such as Dan Sperber who have continued to speak of the fundamental metarepresentational capacity of humans (cf. Sperber 4), arguing that “metarepresentational phenomena as based on a metarepresentational capacity [are] no less fundamental than [our] faculty for language” (Sperber 6-7).

The question as to how we humans actually utilise this “metarepresentational capacity” is the next aspect which makes the study of metareference important as well as rewarding. Werner Wolf, with reference to Marcel Cornis-Pope, has argued that meta-reflections often contribute to both how we conceive reality and to how we analyse our conception of reality. Building upon the previously discussed Postmodernist ideas of reality and history as constructs, Wolf eventually comes to the conclusion that an analysis of metareference can be of utmost epistemological value (cf. “Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz” 8). After all, as Ansgar Nünning has added, metareferential elements are not only an integral component of novels and narrative fictions of all kinds, but of narration in general (cf. “Metanarration als Lakune” 125-164): from everyday conversations, to anecdotes, to urban legends, to a variety of life-guiding cultural myths – every one of these narratives contains self-referential elements. Studying them, therefore, contributes towards an analysis of how we perceive the world.

It seems therefore, in the words of Patricia Waugh, that despite the doomsday prophecies voiced by critics of Postmodernism proclaiming the ‘death of the novel’, in metareference,

“far from ‘dying’, the novel has reached a mature recognition of its existence as *writing*, which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized” (19, italics in original). Furthermore,

[i]f, as individuals [of Postmodernity], we now occupy ‘roles’ rather than ‘selves’, then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself. (Waugh 3)

Seeing how our society has only become more “media-saturated” (Van Dreunen 8) in the thirty years since Waugh’s study was published, learning about this constructedness has only become more important.

Of course, our current media-saturation is not the first cultural and/or technological change to make an according narrative analysis valuable. As Max Nänny with reference to Walter Allen and John Foster has argued, the “impact of something *external* to narrative on its *internal* structure” (51, italics in original) is something that can be observed all over literary history, the impactful external influences ranging from changes in technology (e.g. the introduction of the railway or the invention of the printing press) to changes in social habits (e.g. the increased social value and popularity of familial letter writing during certain times in history) (cf. Nänny 51-62). Consequently, it is barely surprising that changes in something as closely related to narratives as the media which convey them would have a particularly strong impact on all narratives and their cultural role (cf. Ryan, *Avatars* 24, 30). Examining the specific changes to the media landscape over the last few decades more closely, the most significant ones are arguably the advent of computers and the rise of the internet, both of which have changed everything from the amount and scope of narratives accessible to us at any given time (cf. e.g. Murray, Janet H. 85), to our communication, to our social relationships (cf. e.g. Krotz 32). Increasingly, our society is one in which communal affiliation as well as personal identities are negotiated, acquired and shared through media (cf. Ganz-Blättler 292; Klaus and Lünenborg 193).

This increasingly close connection between our fictional narratives, our cultural narratives and our social life has naturally had a strong impact on the relationship between our media and our world. In the process, as Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara and Britta Neitzel have pointed out, certain perceptions on that topic have clearly become outdated to a point where it is, for example, near impossible to think of media and narratives as semiotically separate from the world. Instead, today, they are a part of the world themselves, connected to it through

multiple circularities and self-references (cf. Nöth et al. 49). As Linda Hutcheon had already correctly observed, “[i]n this light metafiction is less a departure from the mimetic novelistic tradition than a reworking of it” (5). Finally, one can also argue that the sheer amount of contemporary media makes it nigh impossible for texts to not refer to their predecessors and/or to not interact with their contemporaries (cf. Colapietro 31; Nöth, “Self-Reference” 6; Santaella 208-209). Instead, they form webs of intermedial as well as self-citation, the workings and minutiae of which can be analysed through the study of metareference.

I began this chapter by drawing attention to the fact that metareferential works have often been accused of being self-absorbed to the point of narcissism. As I have just shown, however, raising media-literacy in an age as media-saturated as ours is anything but that. Werner Wolf has described the origin of the allegations as being located in the assumption that metareferential works, being too busy with unhealthy self-obsession, are ignoring what is traditionally considered the social and cultural function of any worthy medium or work. In Wolf’s words, from the perspective of such traditionalist critics, “[t]he principal function of the media, in particular the representational media, is, after all, not to mirror themselves, but to contribute to ‘Culture’ at large, raising questions, ‘holding the mirror up to nature’ and so forth” (“Metareference across Media” 69). Yet what an assumption such as this ignores is the fact that in an age such as ours, in a culture as hypermediated as ours, the media themselves have become such a major component of our culture, society, and reality that holding the mirror up to media *is* holding the mirror up to nature.

Already Linda Hutcheon had argued that “the unsettled reader” of metafiction, having been forced to scrutinize conventions, ‘truths’ and his or her own perception in the context of art, might very well begin to “question the very possibility of understanding”, and that in doing so, he or she “might be freed from enslavement not only to the empirical but also to his own set patterns of thought and imagination” (139). Such an effect would consequently have an impact on all of the reader’s life, way beyond his or her attitude towards the microcosm of art: in the words of Debra Malina, it would “reach through the final frontier, the boundary between fictional text and extratextual reader, to affect *our* construction as subjects, at least in some small way” (9, italics in original; cf. also Klimek, “Metalepsis” 178); in the words of Marion Gymnich and Eva Müller-Zettelmann it would trigger reflection on the nature of all socio-cultural meaning (cf. 88; also Gymnich 152); and in the words of Werner Wolf “[m]etareferentiality in medial representations thus becomes an acknowledgement of, and a sensitization towards, the impact of the media on ourselves and culture at large” (“Metareference across Media” 70). These are the ideas in which this dissertation is grounded.

The relationship between current uses of metareference, today's media landscape and the respective socio-cultural circumstances and contexts is what this case study is set to explore. Over the next five chapters, I will analyse eleven contemporary, comparatively popular works of fiction taken from five different (more or less) narrative media and containing a large variety of metareferential elements. It will be my goal to find out what kind of metareferences are used in them and to what effect, how the individual metareferences work with each other to depict the state of their respective medium, and what the depicted state implies about our culture and society in general. Furthermore, in a final chapter, I will compare the metareferences used across all eleven works in regards to their functional differences and similarities, searching for potential functional foci which make contemporary metareferences different from, for example, their Postmodernist predecessors.

3. Metareference in Contemporary Literature

Werner Wolf has described the move from early to Postmodernist metafiction as one abandoning the affirmative uses of the phenomenon (such as the celebration of artists' imaginations or the proclamation of immortality through art) for highly critical messages sent out with the almost didactic purpose of educating readers about ideas such as the (de)construction of 'truth' and 'reality' (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 695). In turn, over the last decade or two, these radical messages have been frequently toned down again as metareferences have become increasingly commonplace even in mainstream literature. This has resulted in what Wolf refers to as a "muted postmodernism" (Wolf, "*Atonement*" 292).

Wolf characterizes this development as a synthesis of tradition and innovation: while works belonging to this category contain metareferentiality, it is not employed in an attempt to fully shatter the literary illusion anymore (cf. Wolf, "*Atonement*" 292-293). In this, these "muted" texts are highly reminiscent of the way in which children's literature has been incorporating metareferences from as early as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to more recent texts such as Lauren Child's *Beware of the Storybook Wolves* (2000) and *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (2002).¹⁹ Naturally, the functions of metareference in contemporary adult fiction are still frequently more complex and multi-faceted than they are in these texts. Yet their effect is also far from the "uprooting" and "disorienting" one ascribed to Postmodernist works. For whilst contemporary fiction contains metareferences, the new muted texts also provide readers with a coherent, "readable" story and a variety of themes which encourage emotional engagement.

The possibly easiest but also most condescending and superficial way of explaining this shift would be to see it as a "dumbing down" or dilution of radical 'high-brow' ideas to make them more accessible to a wider audience. I would, however, argue that while the popularization of metareferential texts has certainly played a role, there is also a much deeper and more interesting cultural and ideological development represented in this shift. Its exploration lies at the centre of this section of my dissertation.

As mentioned before, the core beliefs of Postmodernism were focused around the idea of a "crisis" resulting from the realisation that mimetic representation is impossible, that there is no such thing as an objective truth, that reality is a construct and that all perception and experience are mediated. Yet over the last few decades, as all these realisations have had time to sink in and to be processed, the initial shock and therefore the "crisis" itself seem to have

¹⁹ For recent ideas on the specific use of metareference in children's literature cf. e.g. Austin or Sanders.

begun to be overcome. Today, instead of conveying these Postmodernist concepts through the violent depiction of fractured realities, more and more literary texts approach the set of issues from a more positive – one could even say once again affirmative – perspective. Instead of simply decrying the constructed and mediated nature of our lives, contemporary works set out to depict and analyse *how* exactly this constructed and mediated nature comes to be. For once we know that, so these new texts suggest, we can start to find ways in which we can use these initially “disquieting” circumstances to our advantage.

It has by now been well established that constructed narratives play, and have always played, an essential role in our lives. Firstly, ever since the beginning of human existence, telling stories has been a central part of social interaction. On a very basic level, stories have always been the best, if not the only way, to share with others what Martin Sexl refers to as “historical or extreme experiences” which cannot be directly demonstrated (cf. 88). As Stephen John Read and Lynn Carol Miller have pointed out, stories have “enabled individuals within a group to learn from the mistakes of others – even those who [have] died generations earlier – rather than via individual trial and error” (142). In fact, Roger Schank and Robert P. Abelson have even argued that “[v]irtually *all* human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences” (1, my emphasis). Thus storytelling has always been central to human survival.

Furthermore, as Read and Miller have also argued with references to R. I. M. Dunbar, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, even narratives as seemingly trivial as gossip have played an important role in our societal development. Since the dawn of humanity, they have “enabled the group to identify particular individuals and their deeds and misdeeds” and through that have “enhanced group cohesiveness” (Read and Miller 142). Additionally, gossip has been, and arguably still is being, used as a means of establishing and communicating “group norms and values regarding cooperation and principles of social exchange” (Read and Miller 142). In other words, it has contributed and is still contributing to the foundations of our culture.

Finally, narratives are not only omnipresent in our social interactions but are central to our own, individual cognitive processes as well. Over the last few decades, a whole barrage of articles has been deployed to demonstrate that we often think in characters and plots, in expectations and consequences, or in other words that we perceive and organise our thoughts in the form of stories (cf. e.g. Bernstein quoted in McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 7; Bruner, *Making Stories*; Carrithers; Polkinghorne, “Narrative”; Read and Miller; Schank; Schank and Abelson; Vorderer). As Frank Smith has put it:

Most of the beliefs we have about the world and our place in it come in the form of stories. Most of the beliefs we have about other people, and the way we regard and treat them, are in the form of stories. Stories are the mortar that holds thought together, the grist of all our explanations, rationales and values. (144)

Or in short, in the words of Marie-Laure Ryan, “we activate the same cognitive processes to give coherence and intelligibility to imagined and real events” (“Avatars” 50).

In several studies, Roger Schank and Robert P. Abelson have explained this phenomenon by arguing that people “try to comprehend what is going on around them” by “refer[ing] to what they already know [be it from experience, or from “official stories” circulated by politicians, scientists, cultural institutions etc. (cf. Schank 32, 37)] in order to make sense of new input” (2). After all, “[u]nderstanding the world means explaining its happenings in a way that seems consonant with what you already believe” (5; cf. also Schank 59-60). As Schank has further elaborated, “[w]e take the standard stories of our culture and interpret what happens to us in terms of such stories” (149). Indeed, the complexity of each newly encountered situation would make comprehension nigh impossible if we did not employ previously established stories as guidelines to which to compare and/or contrast any new situations and experiences.

On a next cognitive level, as once again a large variety of scholars have argued (cf. e.g. Bruner, “Narrative Construction”; Neumann, *Erinnerung*; Schank; Schank and Abelson), stories and narratives are not only highly important for our understanding of (new) experiences but also for their storage in the form of memory. We humans as a species simply find the memorization of stories much easier than that of abstractions or disassociated and/or disparate facts and events (cf. Schank 10). Remembering, from this perspective, is then comparable to the internal construction of a story. An actual outward telling of the story then facilitates the remembering while the keeping of the story to oneself and avoiding its retelling makes it easier to forget (cf. Neumann, *Erinnerung* 50; Schank 115-116; Schank and Abelson 3, 36).

This storyfication of memories means that during the process of memorization we shape our experiences to fit our culture’s standard storytelling devices (cf. Schank 137; Schank and Abelson 34). As Birgit Neumann has pointed out, when trying to remember, we often reconstruct past events based on patterns and schemes derived through socialization from our cultural surroundings – the culture we were raised in influences what we consider memorable in the first place as well as how we organize our memories (cf. 49). Or in the words of Astrid Erll, “individual memory is unthinkable without *cadres sociaux*. It is the social context we live in that provides ‘frames’ – such as language or concepts of time and space – which

channel our perception and memory” (49). Therefore, what we eventually consider our memory of events is highly influenced by and reflective of our view of our world as well as of ourselves, even if we might not be consciously aware of this fact. Building upon this idea, it is further not surprising that (1) all stories we tell transport our individual as well as our cultural memories²⁰ and thus serve as vehicles for our social, cultural and personal identities; and that (2) all studies of memory-related fields including that of history are consequently required to take these cultural as well as narrative colourings and constructions into account.

The stories we tell, aloud or to ourselves, furthermore do not only *carry* our identities, but they actively contribute to their creation. Debra Malina has argued that “‘we’ are in some sense the product of cultural ‘stories’” (8), of what Jerome Bruner has referred to as “unspoken, implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be, might be – and, of course, shouldn’t be” (*Making Stories* 65; “Narrative Construction”) and of what Donald E. Polkinghorne calls “one’s cultural stock of stories and myths” (“Narrative” 144), “exemplar plots that can be used to configure the events in [people’s] own lives” (“Narrative” 147) and “honored plots [held up] for emulation” by society (“Narrative” 147). Roger Schank has even gone as far as to suggest that “[w]e *are* the stories we like to tell” (137, my emphasis), his idea being that

[w]e tell stories to describe ourselves not only so others can understand who we are but also so we can understand ourselves. Telling our stories allows us to compile our personal mythology, and the collection of stories we have compiled is to some extent who we are, what we have to say about the world. (44; cf. also Neumann, *Erinnerung* 2-3 with elaborations in later chapters)

In other words, which events we choose to include in our compilation is what defines our concept of self, our identity.

Therefore, while memory with what Christopher Henke has called “its subjective distortions, omissions, and unnoticed falsifications” (80) can be considered unreliable in its representation of past events, it is still highly reliable and revealing as a window into our concepts of identity (cf. Henke 80). It is, additionally, important to note that these story-based identities are not set in stone. Instead, as Birgit Neumann and Donald E. Polkinghorne have emphasised, identity construction has a prominent temporal, diachronic dimension (cf. Neumann, *Erinnerung* 19-20; Polkinghorne, “Narrative”): over the course of our lifespans we repeatedly re-narrate and, in the process, re-evaluate our life stories. In fact, this dimension is what makes narratives and narrative arts such as literature particularly well-equipped to depict

²⁰ For a more detailed introduction to this concept cf. e.g. Nünning, *Fictions of Memory*.

our processes of identity formation – for what else are stories at their core than a compilation of sequenced events and experiences.

Building upon all these theoretical concepts, literature – and all narrative art forms – thus both hold up a mirror to and collect processes of inherently human storytelling, and as a result become in the words of Eric Mankowski and Julian Rappaport an “indexer of collective memory and national identity stories” (212-213). Furthermore, by in turn contributing new narratives themselves, new narrative works always become part of our cultural memory themselves and introduce new storytelling devices, new ‘myths’ on which we can model our experiences (cf. Gymnich and Nünning 20, van der Bossche).

Looking at all these different ways in which narratives permeate our thoughts and behaviours, it is not surprising that a large variety of social and cultural sciences over the last few decades have turned to analysing related phenomena, resulting in what the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory* has termed a “narrative turn in the humanities” (378) and the creation of comparatively new fields of study such as ‘cognitive narratology’, ‘cultural narratology’ and ‘narrative psychology’. It is equally not surprising that many literary texts have also taken it upon themselves to explore the implications of this predominance of narratives in our lives, and that their authors have chosen the use of metareference as a particularly fruitful method of doing so. Two such texts, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) and Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (2007), shall serve as examples for the upcoming literary section of my case study.

Many other works could have been chosen for this purpose. To name only a few, Alan Bennet’s *The Uncommon Reader* (2007) as well as a vast number of Postcolonial texts would have served as great examples for a discussion of reading and writing as a means to engage with the world and to take (back) control of one’s identity. Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) would have provided a great opportunity to demonstrate connections between narrative (genre) traditions and our way of making sense of the world. Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) would have constituted great subjects for a study on the construction of narratives as a process of sense-making and remembering. Finally, a comparison between Paul Auster’s debut novel *City of Glass* (1985) and his much more recent *Man in the Dark* (2008) would have provided a great example for the general metareferential perspective shift from depicting reality and meaning as in crisis to depicting narratives as a way to move beyond such a crisis. In the end, however, I did choose McEwan’s and Zusak’s novels for the

fact that they both contain every single one of these themes and that they discuss them through a variety of different types of metareference.²¹

²¹ This list of possible works strikingly lacks any reference to (web)comics and/or graphic novels. This is due to the ultimate restrictions I had to place on this study to keep my corpus manageable. I in no way mean to suggest that metareferences cannot be found in this type of narrative works – quite the opposite. For a variety of studies which provide a much more informed and in-depth introduction as well as historical overview than I ever could provide cf. Atkinson; Dunne; Inge; Kukkonen’s “Textworlds”; Limoges’ “Metalepsis in Cartoons”; Palumbo; Polak; Szép; and Thoss.

3.1 Metareference in *Atonement*

It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value.

(*Atonement* 40)

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is one of the most densely metareferential novels of our time. Throughout the text, the use of metareferences is in fact so extensive that it makes questions of position and/or connectedness nigh impossible to answer. Furthermore, the novel is filled with both intra-compositional references to itself and extra-compositional ones to the medium of literature and story-telling in general²². Finally, through all these metareferences, McEwan engages critically both with poetological discussions on the purpose and effect of narratives, and with a variety of related socio-cultural topics.

3.1.1 Literary Traditions, Preferences and Internalised Tropes

Firstly, in full accordance with the Postmodern practice of "intertextual novels [...] highly aware of [...] their place in a tradition" (Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* 3), McEwan's text constantly refers to its literary predecessors. It does so both by a variety of form-based homages and by plenty of literary discussions held between characters within the story itself.

On the highest extra-diegetic level, right on the very first page, *Atonement* opens on a quotation from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817). The latter itself being a highly intertextual and metareferential work, *Atonement* thus immediately aligns itself with these traditions. Furthermore, the quoted passage refers specifically to the scene in which Henry Tilney reprimands Catherine Moreland for her suspicions towards his father. Therefore, the quote also instantly foreshadows the strong role misreading and misinterpretation will have in the upcoming events.

²² In fact, McEwan's novel references a lot of other art forms as well: from repeated comments about the architecture of the Tallis house and gardens (cf. e.g. 72-73), to Paul Marshall's thoughts about Lola as a "Pre-Raphaelite princess" (60), to Robbie envisioning himself calming down an angry Cecilia through cinematic tropes (cf. 80), to thoughts on Cecilia's evening gowns and the meaning of fashion design (cf. 97-99), etc. Unfortunately, it would have been impossible to discuss every single reference within the scope of this chapter. Consequently, I focused on the references which deal with the medium of literature and with narratives in the wider sense.

While this quote is a very explicitly labelled and formatted extra-compositional example, McEwan's novel is also full of many implicit and double-coded extra-compositional references to other literary works. Remaining with Austen for a moment, smaller homages to her work, especially to *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), are dispersed throughout the entirety of *Atonement*: the migraine-prone, ineffectual mother worrying about her educated daughter's marriage prospects; Cecilia's invitation from an aunt and uncle to accompany them on a trip to New York (cf. 103); the amount of misunderstandings based on hurt pride, class differences and emotional confusion, which characterise Robbie and Cecilia's early interactions; Cecilia's eventual exclamation of "how could I have been so ignorant about myself" (134) which paraphrases Elizabeth Bennet's epiphany on the matter; even the fact that we as readers are encouraged to get a wrong impression of characters by being introduced to them through someone else's misguided point-of-view first (Cecilia through Briony's (cf. 7), Robbie through Cecilia's (cf. 19, 22, 27)) can be seen as an homage to Austen's introduction of Darcy – the list of examples is seemingly endless. And Jane Austen's texts are not the only ones McEwan and Briony keep referring to.

Throughout the entire novel literary preferences are constantly used to characterize people. For example, *Atonement* introduces thirteen-year-old Briony through a description of her play and the girl's experience of herself as a playwright. Already the narrative voice's immediate use of classically romantic language and tropes such as "tempest of composition" or "cousins from the distant North" (3) aligns Briony's experience with that of her favourite literary heroines at the time. Furthermore, the summary of the contents of the freshly-written play is equally filled to the brim with homages to famous literary works the fledgling playwright has clearly been borrowing both language and ideas from (cf. 3). Throughout the passage, late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century sentimental, Gothic and moralist motifs are everywhere. They not only situate Briony's writing within a literary tradition and comment implicitly on the interconnectedness of all writing, but they also tell us a lot about Briony herself, her literary preferences and about the views and knowledge with which she as a result approaches the world.

Whenever Briony feels strong emotions her mind is shown to immediately jump to literary tropes. For example, when her cousin Lola takes over the lead role in Briony's play, the latter girl's thoughts are described to be the following:

How could her mother reject the daughter who had loved her all these years? [...] Briony knew her only reasonable choice then would be to run away, to live under hedges, eat berries and speak to no one, and be found by bearded woodsman one winter's dawn, curled up at the base of a giant oak, beautiful and dead, and barefoot. (15)

Similarly, just before the pivotal fountain scene, Briony's thoughts on the panorama before her are "that [it] could easily have accommodated, in the distance at least, a medieval castle" (38). The gardens, Robbie's posture – in Briony, they immediately trigger associations with literary motifs she has encountered in the past (cf. 38). In other words, Briony's imagination is thus shown to instinctively transform or maybe even better to *translate* her base emotions into literary tropes, even when she is not actively writing but just processing a situation for herself. In perfect accordance with the theories discussed in the introduction to this dissertation chapter, Briony is thus portrayed right from the beginning as using narratives to make sense of her experiences. The fact that the fountain scene in question unfolds in a way which transgresses all narrative norms she is familiar with is exactly what triggers a form of awakening in Briony, what lets her observe that "for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now" (39) and thus sets the course of the novel's entire story.

Briony is furthermore not the only character which *Atonement* introduces through his or her reading habits. There are several references to the books present in the mother's room (cf. 64, 70); Cecilia is introduced as someone reading Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) while procrastinating after college (cf. 21-22); and as for Robbie, the documents on his desk are in fact described over three whole pages (cf. 81-84) when he himself "survey[s] his desk as one might a life" (81). Literary texts, theoretical texts, university books and notes, maps, photographs, anatomical drawings – all these items contribute to characterising Robbie, his personality, his goals and his ideals. And because this passage is located within a highly metareferential novel, all these items are double-coded with meaning that goes well beyond their practical use. As the sentence introducing Robbie's desk-survey explicitly stresses, all these "texts" are portrayed as representations of his life.

Unsurprisingly then, Briony is also not the only character who is shown to think and feel in narrative tropes. To give only a few examples, Cecilia's enjoyment of "the familiar [being] transformed into a delicious strangeness" (20) is clearly influenced by the idea of the 'uncanny', and her thought that "[d]rowning herself would be his [Robbie's] punishment" (30) is as Shakespearean as a thought can be. Speaking of drowning, when Cecilia at one point learns that her younger sister has stormed off and not yet returned, she employs the following mind-game to ward off anything really bad happening to Briony:

This time she paused to peer out of the window at the dusk and wonder where her sister was. Drowned in the lake, ravished by gypsies, struck by a passing motor car, she thought ritually, a sound principle being that nothing was ever as one imagined it, and this was an efficient means of excluding the worst. (101)

In other words, Cecilia is portrayed to purposefully evoke the most horrific tropes to try and affect reality.

Similarly, when Robbie fantasises about how he could overcome Cecilia's anger he imagines her "pound[ing] against his lapels before yielding with a little sob to the safe enclosure of his arms and letting herself be kissed; she didn't forgive him, she simply gave up. He watched this several times before he returned to what was real" (80). Once again, tropes are thus invoked to guide a character's imagination. Finally, when Robbie is contemplating his feelings for Cecilia, the narrative voice through its focalisation describes that he himself is even conscious of the literary tropes at work:

How had it crept up on him, this advanced stage of fetishising the love object? Surely Freud had something to say about that in *Three Essays on Sexuality*. And so did Keats, Shakespeare and Petrarch, and all the rest, and it was in the *Romaunt of the Rose*. He had spent three years dryly studying the symptoms, which had seemed no more than literary conventions, and now, in solitude, like some ruffed and plumed courtier come to the edge of the forest to contemplate a discarded token, he was worshipping traces – not a handkerchief, but fingerprints! – while he languished in his lady's scorn. (84)

This passage, by showing Robbie's self- and narrative-awareness, explicitly brings the close relationship between experiences and literary conventions to the foreground. It also suggests – unlike in the case of Briony's observations during the fountain scene – that previously "dry" and theoretical conventions, under the right circumstances, *can* help make sense of a person's inner life.

What this last Robbie passage furthermore demonstrates is that in addition to being indirectly characterized through their reading habits, characters in *Atonement* are also portrayed to directly and actively deliberate upon these particular habits. Cecilia's and Robbie's literary degrees as well as the respective works they have encountered throughout their studies are repeatedly shown to be on their (and even on their relatives') minds (cf. e.g. 19, 64-5, 91-3, 152). Furthermore, reading preferences are not only *thought* about by characters but they get explicitly and verbally discussed by them as well. For example, already early on in the novel, Robbie and Cecilia are shown to debate the merits of Richardson in comparison to Fielding (cf. 25-6) – and while the conversation works as a purely literary discussion, it is clearly also double-coded and carries a lot of subtext, as Cecilia herself is shown to think: "She felt she had said something stupid. [...] He might be thinking she was talking to him in code, suggestively conveying her taste for the full-blooded and sensual. That was a mistake, of course, and she was discomfited and had no idea how to put him right" (25). Just like Briony's introductory paragraphs, this passage demonstrates beautifully the effect literary narratives can have on our thoughts and perception. Not only do

they affect our individual views of the world but by being culturally shared knowledge they tie people together and provide a common code, a means of communication, a language – even if the language in question, as shown in this passage, can be prone to misreadings and misunderstandings.

3.1.2 The Power and Limits of Language

This motif of language is the next central metareferential topic of *Atonement*. The novel as a whole places a high importance on the meaning and significance of words. Already on the very first pages, the narrative voice describes Briony’s attempts to learn new words with the help of dictionaries and thesauri, even if only to then point out that as a result the girl often uses constructions which are “inept, but hauntingly so” (6). The passage thus immediately demonstrates how nigh impossible it is to grasp the correct meaning of words without knowing the context – a highly metareferential statement, especially when presented in a novel which focuses on the misconstruction of experiences due to flawed narrative frameworks. The passage, however, also shows that the “misuse” of words, or at least their re-appropriation into new contexts, can also have a strong creative and productive component to it, which is what makes Briony’s use of language “haunting”, rather than just ridiculously wrong.

Such deliberations upon the effects of (often misused) language form a recurring pattern across the entirety of McEwan’s novel. From words such as ‘divorce’ (cf. e.g. 57), ‘cunt’ (cf. e.g. 85-86), ‘maniac’ (cf. e.g. 119), ‘Liars!’ (cf. e.g. 86) to the constant reference to the title word of ‘atonement’ itself, the book is filled with expressions the impact of which within the culture in which they are spoken (cf. Schank 149) is shown to be world-shattering and life-changing. After all, it is “mere” words which seal Robbie’s fate: whilst repeatedly asking Lola about the name of her rapist, Briony is shown to think that she “wanted [Lola] to say his name. To seal the crime, frame it with the victim’s *curse*, close his fate with the *magic of naming*” (165, my emphasis) – and this seemingly magical power Briony explicitly assigns to words is shown to be real. For her naming of Robbie, as well as her mother’s reading of *The Word* at the end of Robbie’s letter to Cecilia (cf. 179) *are* what decides the young man’s fate. And it is Briony’s words “read out loud on her behalf in the Assize Court” (325) which “convict” (325) him.

Going beyond individual words, *Atonement* also depicts characters wielding entire phrases. Trying to reproach Paul Marshall for a glib comment about her parents, Lola asks

him to “not talk about them in front of the children” – a phrase which, as the narrative voice itself points out, “she must have once overheard, and [now] had uttered in blind faith, like an apprentice mouthing the incantation of a magus” (59). This spell-like property of phrases is picked up again and again throughout McEwan’s novel, especially in the context of the ‘come back to me’ motif. As the narrative voice explains, this phrase used to be originally employed by Cecilia to calm child Briony down when the latter was plagued by bad dreams (cf. 43). At the end of the novel, however, eighteen-year-old Briony notices that Cecilia has begun to use the phrase with Robbie (cf. 349), causing the younger sister to reflect upon “[h]ow easily this unthinking family love was forgotten” (349). And yet, if one considers the fact that all these interactions between Cecilia and Robbie are eventually revealed to be a figment of old-age Briony’s imagination – the transposition of the phrase is not a sign of Cecilia changing the focus of her affection but of mature Briony acknowledging the importance of Cecilia’s affection for Robbie by gifting the couple the phrase previously reserved for her.

While *Atonement* spends a lot of time demonstrating the power of words, it also contains a plethora of examples in which words seemingly fail to achieve their function. In addition to the overarching themes of misunderstandings and of unsuccessfully trying to use words to make sense of the world (to both of which I will come back later), there are many unique and individual examples in McEwan’s novel which suggest a certain impotence of language. One particularly prominent scene depicts the moments preceding Robbie and Cecilia’s sexual intercourse. When he asks her why she is crying, the narrative voice makes the following observation: “How could she begin to tell him when so much emotion, so many emotions, simply engulfed her? [...] They stared at each other in confusion, unable to speak, sensing that something delicately established might slip from them [...] For the moment, there seemed no way out with words.” (134-135) Robbie, eventually, bridges the gap through *physical* contact – words, despite all their power and cultural encoding, seem unable to do so.

This passage is soon followed by another in which Robbie and Cecilia admit their love for each other. In the novel, their exchange is presented as follows:

She whispered his name with the deliberation of a child trying out the distinct sounds. When he replied with her name, it sounded like a new word – the syllables remained the same, the meaning was different. Finally he spoke the three simple words that no amount of bad art or bad faith can ever quite cheapen. She repeated them, with exactly the same slight emphasis on the second word, as though she were the one to say them first. He had no religious belief, but it was impossible not to think of an invisible presence or witness in the room, and that these words spoken aloud were like signatures on an unseen contract. (136)

Several things are interesting about this passage. First of all, there is the fact that the narrator never actually names the three words in question. And yet they are so inscribed in our cultural

repertoire that the reader understands immediately what is meant even without the words ever being explicitly voiced. The second interesting thing is the fact that already in this passage, only one page further than the previous one discussed, the power of words is immediately reinstated. Furthermore, their potential for childlike playfulness and for the exploration of new ideas and feelings is evoked. Consequently, according to McEwan's novel, words seem to only be impotent – or possibly even only *unnecessary* – in very specific contexts.

3.1.3 The Roles and Functions of Different Narratives and Styles

Another trope through which *Atonement* portrays the power as well as the limitations of words, phrases and language is the novel's depiction of Briony's writing. Over the course of the text, this writing fulfils a variety of functions, one of the most prominent ones being once more the attempt to create narratives which help make sense of experiences. A close look at the different writing styles Briony chooses to imitate during different stages of her life soon makes it clear that *Atonement* is structured around the depiction of a double-coded process of maturing: Briony's personal growth is mirrored in her ever-developing writing style, which in turn through its stylistic homages duplicates the gestation process of the medium of literature as a whole.

3.1.3.1 Romantic Beginnings

When Briony writes her first story at the age of eleven, she is shown to imitate folk tales full of innocent, bursting imagination but “lacking, she realised later, the vital knowingness about the way of the world which compels a reader's respect” (6). The deficiency of certain types of narratives in regards to understanding the real world is thus thematised right from the beginning. It is, however, important to note that the deficiency in this case seems to mostly result from Briony's age-based own lack of “knowingness” rather than from an inherent flaw in the folk tale genre as such.

The next and first work of Briony's *Atonement* depicts in detail is the play she writes for her brother at the age of thirteen. It represents a sentimental, melodramatic stage of development applicable both to Briony, to her writing and to literature as a whole in its early days. During this stage, narratives are portrayed as being emotion-driven and filled with mysteries. The realities of life and human interactions are always just out of Briony's grasp and understanding – just as they arguably were out of that of literature in general and fiction in particular in the early days of these media. Significantly, however, Briony's first play is

also characterised by a highly moralist goal which can be explained as the girl's desire, in an attempt to regain understanding, to force a fixed code of meaning onto a world which eludes her.

Briony's exact motivation behind her play is relayed as her writing it "for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony's services as a bridesmaid" (4). In other words, in her construction of the play's narrative, Briony is driven by a rather simplistic and naïve view of morality, as well as by her desire for the real world around her to be more static, as represented by the girl's wish for her brother to return home and settle down.

In the paragraphs which follow this initial explanation, Briony is even more and more explicitly described as a character "possessed by a desire to have the world just so" (4), as someone with a "controlling demon" (5). Both of these traits she is furthermore shown to channel into her approach to authorship, which at the beginning of the novel is all about control:

[A]n unruly world could be made just so. A crisis in a heroine's life could be made to coincide with hailstones, gales and thunder, whereas nuptials were generally blessed with good light and soft breezes. A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter reward withheld until the final page. (7)

Clearly, in her writing, Briony is shown to indulge in the simplistic, highly formulaic nature of early literary forms and genres, and to grasp at the order they seemingly bring as a way to make up for the changes taking place in her own life (her older sibling's increasingly common absence, her own growing up, etc.).

McEwan in this context particularly draws attention to the fact that the thirteen-year-old girl is on the brink of sexual awakening and of her consequent entry into adulthood: for example, describing the significance of weddings in her early stories, the narrative voice explains that

[a] good wedding was an unacknowledged *representation of the as yet unthinkable – sexual bliss*. In the aisles of country churches and grand city cathedrals, witnessed by a whole society of approving family and friends, her heroines and heroes reached their *innocent climaxes* and needed to go no further (9, *my emphasis*).

Briony's in-between existence is in fact so closely defined that even her merely two years older cousin Lola completely eludes Briony's understanding, and she does so long before the dramatic events which constitute the turning point in Briony's life. From the moment of her appearance, Lola is said to have "full two years' refinement weigh against [Briony]" (13), who "could not keep up with the older girl" (14). And it is not only the seeming maturity of

her cousin with which Briony is portrayed to be unable to “keep up”. Her three newly arrived young relatives from the North bring a whole avalanche of turmoil with them.

Firstly, there is the whole idea of their parents’ divorce which the cousins are trying to escape through their visit. Briony’s reaction to the concept is described as follows:

She vaguely knew that divorce was an *affliction*, but she did not regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought. It was a mundane *unravelling that could not be reversed*, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged in the realm of *disorder*. Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its *formal neatness* of virtue rewarded. [...] If divorce had presented itself as the dastardly antithesis of [this], it could easily have been cast onto the other pan of the scales, along with betrayal, illness, thieving, assault and mendacity. Instead it showed an unglamorous face of *dull complexity* and incessant wrangling [...] it was simply not a subject, and when [...] Briony [...] ran [...] out into the blinding light of midday, it was not insensitivity so much as a highly focused artistic ambition that caused her to shout to the dazed young visitors huddled together by the trap with their luggage, ‘I’ve got your parts, all written out. First performance tomorrow. Rehearsals start in five minutes!’ (9-10, my emphasis)

In other words, for the order-loving Briony, divorce is the manifestation of an ungraspably chaotic concept, in real life as well as in writing. The ability to make sense and the ability to narrate are depicted here as one and the same. The writing traditions with which Briony is familiar at this point do not present her with any tools to process the concept, so she ignores the subject in her works as well as in real life.

Briony’s desire for order and control is furthermore presented as one of the main reasons for her shift from the prose of folk tales to the dramatic style of plays. In the narrative voice’s words, “it was a relief [for the girl] not to be writing out the *she says*, or describing the weather or the onset of spring or her heroine’s face [...] A universe *reduced* to what was said in it was *tidiness indeed, almost to the point of nullity*” (8, my emphasis). Briony’s approach to the play’s creation is finally also described as being of an “innocent intensity” (8) – a surely fitting description since Briony’s views on drama are highly influenced by said innocence. After all, the idea of drama as something “tidy” and controlled is merely an illusion. And Briony is confronted with that fact as soon as her actors come into play.

Already her cousins’ red hair and freckles oppose Briony’s concept as well as literary sensibilities of what a heroine, hero and villain should look like (cf. 10). And once the children’s utter lack of acting potential is revealed, Briony is quickly forced to realise “the chasm that lay between an idea and its execution” (17). This realisation and her consequently ever-increasing lack of control keep troubling Briony throughout rehearsals, triggering further explicit poetological reflections as the girl re-evaluates her views on prose:

A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader – no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources. In a story you only had to wish, *you only had to write it down and you could have the world* [...] a story was a form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols on a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no one stopped to wonder at it. *Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing* [...] There was no gap during which the symbols were unravelled. You saw the word *castle*, and it was there [...]. (37, my emphasis)

This view of prose as one-to-one, immediate telepathy is of course highly innocent and naïve once more – for what an author sees when he or she writes 'castle' is very different from what reader A sees when he or she reads the word, which in turn differs from what reader B sees when he or she does the same. Still, by the time her theatre production disintegrates completely, Briony is convinced that her problem lies not just with the unsuitable cousins but with the whole genre of drama per se (cf. 45). As a result, once Briony abandons the project and leaves the house to let off steam by beating nettles with a stick, it is described that, eventually, "play writing itself became a nettle, became several in fact; the shallowness, the wasted time, the messiness of other minds, the hopelessness of pretending – in the garden of the arts, it was a weed and had to die" (74).

Additionally, Briony's authorial wish to exert control does not end with the content of her works but it is shown to influence her writing *process* as well. In fact, it is explained that only when a work is entirely finished and wrapped up fully to her liking, is she able to share its existence with the world:

[O]nce she had begun a story, no one could be told. Pretending in words was too tentative, too vulnerable, too embarrassing to let anyone know. Even writing out the *she said*s, the *and then*s, made her wince, and she felt foolish, appearing to know about the emotions of an imaginary being. Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have? *Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved, and the whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world*, could she feel immune, and ready to [...] take the finished work to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home. (6, my emphasis)

This particularly explicit metareferential passage says a lot about Briony's immature approach to writing and even about early approaches to writing in general. It is still clumsy, so characterised by insecurities and fears about presumptuousness or revealing too much about oneself that the writer is forced to resort to established norms and rules to feel safe and in control.

Before I move on to the next stage of Briony's literary development one last aspect of her youthful creativity needs to be mentioned. Interestingly enough, whilst Briony uses writing at this stage of her life to try to arrange the world to her liking, her use of her imagination for the purposes of that writing is also shown as something which provides her with secrets (cf. 6)

and indulges passions in her (cf. 5) which otherwise would have run dry as a result of the girl's highly orderly nature. At one point, Briony herself is depicted to wonder, "[w]asn't writing a kind of soaring, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imaginations?" (157). In other words, *Atonement* portrays writing as a bursting creative outlet as well as as a control mechanism.

The first signs of Briony (and the medium of literature) entering a next developmental stage can be observed during the girl's witnessing of the fountain scene. As Briony has her epiphany about the naivety of fairy-tale castles, she immediately attempts to change her approach to writing. Once again, perception, sense-making and narration are depicted as nearly congruous. Deliberating upon how she could capture the scene, cognitively as well as literarily, Briony decides that she would have to write the scene several times from different perspectives:

[H]er excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have. (40)

Thus, at this particular moment, Briony's developmental stage jumps away from a moralist to a much more modern(ist) phase of writing. For the first time, she considers the style which elderly Briony, once she has mastered it, will eventually refer to as "impartial psychological realism" (41). This realisation marks an important step in the girl's personal development for, as some scholars such as Stephen John Read and Lynn Carol Miller have argued, "the ability to take the perspective of the other, to recognize that other people are conscious, intentional actors like oneself is a fundamental part of being human. Without that awareness, one is unable to function as a social creature" (140). In fact, McEwan himself in an interview with *The Guardian* has expressed in relation to 9/11 the belief that "[i]f the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. [...] Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity" (quoted in Finney 80; cf. also Weidle 60).

Unfortunately for Robbie and Cecilia, in *Atonement*, thirteen-year-old Briony is not yet mature enough to be able to act in accordance with her epiphany. The newly discovered complexity of the world only makes her want to understand and through that to control it even more. For example, as the narrative voice explains, the whole reason why Briony soon after

the fountain scene opens Robbie's letter addressed to Cecilia is the fact that "the writer she had only that day become needed *to know*, to understand everything that came her way" (180, my emphasis). Clearly, for the young girl at this point in time, understanding is still linked to the idea of uncovering a simple, meaningful and narratable truth. Consequently, as the fateful day progresses and Briony finds herself under more and more pressure, she immediately resumes attempting to understand other people's minds and stories based on her own experiences and value systems, immediately forgetting "that other people are as real as you".

As soon as Briony reads Robbie's confounding letter, her coping mechanism of processing information through writing and through formulating narratives is triggered. As the narrator puts it, "[s]he needed to be alone to consider Robbie afresh, and *to frame the opening paragraph of a story* shot through with real life" (113, my emphasis). "At that moment", the narrative voice continues,

the urge to be writing was stronger than any notion she had of what she might write. What she wanted was to be lost to the unfolding of an irresistible idea [...] But how to do justice to the changes that had made her into a real writer at last, and to her chaotic swarm of impressions, and to the disgust and fascination she felt? Order must be imposed. (115)

In other words, (temporary) epiphany or not, young Briony at this point in the novel has still not actively abandoned her notion of writing as a means to create order. Based on this scene, *Atonement* suggests that the grasping for narratives is a reflex, an instinct – both for Briony and for all of humanity.

It needs to be noted, however, that Briony in this scene is also at least portrayed as mature enough to doubt her own responsive behaviour and to question whether it is "too childish to say there had to be a story" (115). She instantly reminds herself that she is now supposed to be "above such nursery-tale ideas as good and evil" (115). Still, as these early passages of *Atonement* show, having a realisation and being able to adapt your entire cognitive framework to it are two separate things, and young Briony is clearly still incapable of operating within her new belief system. At this moment in the story she is entirely unable to "forgive Robbie his disgusting mind" (115) – possibly because for someone whose mind is so obsessed with control, the idea of an unruly mind is particularly threatening.

Uncertain about what to do, Briony therefore just sits, pen poised, torn between the wish to write a diary entry for herself and a desire to create something bigger. Whilst doing so, she wonders how she could possibly ever put all the feelings involved onto paper. For while Briony is said to be comfortable with dialogues and descriptions, feelings in their complexity still elude her (cf. 116). Eventually, she is forced to temporarily give up, conceding that "[w]riting a story was a hopeless, puny enterprise when such powerful and chaotic forces

were turning about her, and when all day long successive events had absorbed or transformed what had gone before” (121). This focus on the mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the events of the day expresses most succinctly what it is about her experiences that is causing Briony so much trouble: while the series of events have happened consecutively, from the girl’s perspective they are so confusing that they seemingly lack causality, and thus lack the traditional structural base of sense-making narratives.

By the end of part one of the novel, with more and more chaos erupting around her, Briony eventually overcomes her feelings of hopelessness by grasping for the last narrative straw which can help her young mind make sense of events: the idea of Robbie as a villain. Despite her assertions that she is now acknowledging the complexities of adulthood, Briony thus reinstates her authorial control by reverting to the moralistic patterns of her childhood, demonstrating just how difficult it is to outgrow cultural narratives that have shaped our development. While she is roaming the grounds looking for her runaway cousins, Briony’s fancy runs wild. She not only imagines evil Robbie lurking and waiting to attack her (cf. 157), she not only fantasizes about the state in which she will find the boys (cf. 156), but she also immediately wonders how she would afterwards describe the scene in her writings. Through *Atonement’s* focalised narration, she exclaims that “[t]here was nothing she could not describe” (156), not even Robbie’s maniac behaviour, once she has had the time to find the right way of “conjuring [Robbie] safely onto paper” (157). In other words, as much as she is worried about her sister and cousins, Briony seems to almost delight in the revelation that Robbie is an evil man, for it presents her with a perfect villain for her story (cf. 158), a villain she can frame as the cause of all the chaos.

Briony’s casting of Robbie in the role of the villain once more shows that the developmental and narrative transition from traditional black-and-white morality to modern(ist) psychological complexity is a slow and multi-staged process. Rather than immediately arriving at a state free from the simplistic concepts of both good and evil, Briony is depicted as only having grown as much as to recognise that good and evil in real life are more complicated than in fairy tales. For Briony, Robbie is consequently a prime example of such a complex evil pretending to be good:

The pretence, and how she ached to expose it! Real life, her life now beginning, had sent her a villain in the form of an old family friend [...] That seemed about right – truth was strange and deceptive, it had to be struggled for [...] This was exactly what no one would have expected, and of course – villains were not announced with hisses or soliloquies, they did not come cloaked in black, with ugly expressions [...]. (158)

Thus while acknowledging certain complexities of life, the young girl still holds on to the belief that behind those complexities exists a clear-cut truth, which one merely needs to find. No traces are left at this moment in time of her initial epiphany that she should write the fountain scene from three different perspectives since they would all be equally valid. Eventually, Briony summarises her experiences of the day as follows:

Her childhood had ended [...] The fairy stories were behind her, and in the space of a few hours she had witnessed mysteries, seen an unspeakable word, interrupted brutal behaviour, and by incurring the hatred of an adult [Robbie] whom everyone had trusted, she had become a participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery. All she had to do now was *discover the stories*, not just the subjects, but *a way of unfolding* them, that would do justice to her new knowledge. (160, my emphasis)

One final time in *Atonement's* part one, the focus is thus put on the idea of growing up through the acquisition of new knowledge of the world. Yet at this stage of the novel, that knowledge is also still depicted as something which *does* exist, as something which might need to be “discovered” and “unfolded” but which is undoubtedly there.

3.1.3.2 War and Impressionism

Part two of the novel marks the first serious break in style within *Atonement* and with it the almost essayist explicitness of the metareferences nearly disappears. As the story moves on to depict the events of Robbie's last few days as a soldier in World War II (his only way of achieving an early release from prison having been to join the infantry), the narrative style moves away from long passages of poetological deliberations. Instead, it focuses on depicting events and scenery in a much more impressionistic manner, with feelings and memories interspersed on the basis of more or less random associations. Furthermore, even on the few occasions on which actual inner thought-monologues are still portrayed, their flow is much more impressionistic (cf. e.g. 202) and not comparable with the essayist nature of the ones portrayed in part one.

Another striking difference observable in part two of the novel is the fact that the clear structure of the narrative itself is dropped as the idea of chapters is left behind and as transitions between sections become more fluid. Overall, part two adopts a much more Modernist style. It even includes a two-page text block of almost stream-of-consciousness-like quality when Robbie succumbs to a wound-induced, mind-distorting fever (cf. 261-262) foreshadowed a good dozen of pages earlier when Robbie is said to notice that something is going wrong with his mind in the following manner: “Periodically, something slipped. Some everyday principle of continuity, the humdrum element that told him where he was in his own

story, faded from his use, abandoning him to a waking dream in which there were thoughts, but no sense of who was having them” (246).

The stylistic change of *Atonement*'s second part, while at first glance a strong break from the first, is in fact – once Briony's (metafictional) authorship of the whole text is revealed – the logical continuation of the personal-development-through-narrative-development motif. Over the years, Briony's fountain-scene realisations are shown to (have) slowly be(en) incorporated into her writing. The style of *Atonement*'s first part, having been proven as unsuitable for the narration of chaotic events, is abandoned by elderly Briony for a style with hopefully better potential to capture the horrific and disjointed experience of war.

Part two of *Atonement* opens with the following line: “There were horrors enough, but it was the unexpected detail that threw [Robbie] and afterwards would not let him go” (191). And it is exactly these horrific details of Robbie's retreat towards Dunkirk, such as his random discovery of a child's leg hanging from a tree (cf. 192), which mature Briony tries to capture and convey through the stylistic change. Rather than focusing on narrative as a means of chaining up events in order to uncover their causality, the fictional author this time tries to make “sense” of experiences by presenting them as “authentically” and close to Robbie's perspective as humanly possible. For even though this part of the novel abandons young Briony's views on the power of certain types of narratives, it does not abandon the idea that narratives, literacy and words in general are powerful.

No matter how big the stylistic and thematic break from the previous part of the novel, the central role of language and documents does not disappear in part two of *Atonement*. Throughout their retreat towards Dunkirk, Robbie (in this part only referred to as Turner to clearly demarcate his role as a soldier as well as his transition into adulthood) is shown to be the only member of his three-men troupe who keeps clinging on to and constantly consulting a map (cf. e.g. 191, 214-215). In the context of a different novel, this could easily be interpreted fully heteroreferentially as merely being due to the fact that he is the only soldier knowledgeable enough to read a map. In the metareferentially dense framework of *Atonement*, however, Robbie's holding on to a written document becomes something more.

Similarly to young Briony's use of texts for orientation and (regaining of) control, Robbie here refers to the map in an attempt to find a sense of direction – in the figural as much as in the literal, geographical sense of the word. Furthermore, just like Briony's writing used to at least partially isolate her from her surroundings (cf. 68, 75), Robbie is shown to think that “in their [the other two soldiers'] company the map was his only privacy” (192). Additionally, the reading of the map is not exclusively portrayed as a comforting experience for Robbie, but it

depicts troubling qualities of the terrain as well (cf. 214). It furthermore does not actually fully represent reality since it in no way contains the horrors of war which Robbie encounters in the marked places. Once again, the narrative voice thus makes sure to demonstrate that while texts can provide us with guidelines and support, they do not relay an accurate truth.

The intensity of the support that they can provide, however, is not in any way diminished by this fact. Other than the physical map, Robbie is also repeatedly portrayed as using Cecilia's letters and words as a means to keep himself going. Furthermore, he draws on his previously decried academic knowledge of lyrical metre to provide him with a point of reference: Trying to distract himself from all the death and refugees he encounters during the retreat and to instead focus on the basic goal of his journey, Robbie is shown to come up with a rhythm for his march: "He walked / across / the land / until / he came / to the sea. A hexameter. Five iambs and an anapaest was the beat he tramped to now" (219). More than just through their contents, texts are thus shown to be able to provide support even through their formal aspects by adding structure and familiarity to even the most horrific of experiences.

In addition to commenting on the power of pre-existing tropes and narratives, the second part of *Atonement* also once more engages with the supportive potential of stories we create within our minds. While in part one of the novel flights of fancy are depicted as something univocally empowering (cf. e.g. 157), Robbie's imagination during the war is shown to be a double-edged sword which causes him pain by constantly bringing up flashbacks and images of horrific scenes he is trying to forget (cf. e.g. 194, 199, 202, 204). And yet, even whilst contributing to his nightmares, Robbie's imagination is also portrayed as one of his main sources of hope: it helps him envision his future life with Cecilia to keep himself sane and helps him visualise water when he is suffering from dehydration (cf. 238). Finally, as Robbie's mind begins to deteriorate and both reality and words begin to carry less and less weight, it is his imagination which brings him peace, making his hopes and fantasies seem near-tangible: "The more he described, the more certain he was that the room [he was dreaming of] was close by. His words were bringing it into being." (259)

As well as deriving support from his literacy and imagination, Robbie is further depicted as drawing life from his knowledge of the French language, which enables him to serve as interpreter and to converse with the French locals. Thus even amidst the unspeakable horrors of war, language is shown to be still a powerful tool which makes interaction and survival amidst strangers possible and helps create a sense of a communal spirit (cf. 198-201). This last idea is portrayed at its strongest and most explicit when Robbie and his squad are shown to spend the night at a French farmhouse. Once the two middle-aged sons of the French

family learn that Robbie speaks their language, they start telling him of the destruction they have witnessed, clearly in need to vent their experience over drinks (cf. 198-199). The idea of processing trauma through storytelling is thus established in this passage²³. However, once the Frenchmen have finished their stories, Robbie is also said to “th[ink] about telling them of his own single, haunting detail [the leg]. But he didn’t want to add to the horror, and nor did he want to give life to the image while it remained at distance, held there by wine and companionship” (199). Communication and social interaction are thus depicted as a complex matter. Yes, in one way or another they provide relief for all men present – but depending on the men they do so in different ways: The French brothers they provide with an opportunity to share their experiences, Robbie they provide with a distraction from his own experiences as well as with the instinctive safe haven of camaraderie. Either way, the impact of the discovery of a common language is depicted as undeniably powerful. In fact, as *Atonement*’s description of Robbie’s journey progresses, the ever increasing failure of language and communication is specifically used to symbolise the increasing deterioration of both the retreat in general and of Robbie himself.

In addition to all these rather abstract references to language, imagination and narratives as such, the second part of *Atonement* furthermore once again employs specific intertextual references to convey its (metareferential) message. In accordance with the section’s overall motif of what type of narratives suit the depiction of war, the referenced works in part two are however very different from those mentioned in the first part of the novel. Part one’s conversations between Robbie and Cecilia about novels such as *Clarissa* are replaced in part two by exchanges the two of them have about poems they share through letters.

While Robbie’s interest in poetry is already mentioned in earlier passages of the novel, in part two of *Atonement* the intertextual references to poems go into much more detail than just namedropping classic authors: when Robbie is lying awake at night, grasping his pocket which holds Cecilia’s letters, it is one particular line of the last poem she has sent him (“In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1940) by W. H. Auden) that is shown to rise to the surface of his mind: “In the nightmare of the dark, All the dogs of Europe bark” (203); another line from the same poem appears in his head when he is imagining how after the war he will find Cecilia and his father: “In the deserts of the heart/Let the healing fountain start” (242); finally, when Robbie remembers Cecilia running after him after his arrest, it is once again a poem quotation (from the eighteenth poem of A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* (1896)) that he is reminded

²³ For more on *Atonement*’s portrayal of trauma as linked to narrative cf. also Crosthwaite as well as Letissier.

of: “Oh, when I was in love with you, Then I was clean and brave” (262). Throughout these passages, Robbie’s connection to poetry demonstrates that even if traditional narratives have their flaws, not all literary phrases are empty and meaningless. For even if they are unable to present factual, practical solutions to problems, they can still serve as an outlet for emotions, as a way to feel connected and understood, and as a general subliminal beacon of light in times of turmoil and darkness.

Another function of poetry and literature in general depicted in *Atonement*’s second part is once more that of literary tropes and motifs being able to serve as a common language between two people. During Robbie’s incarceration, he and Cecilia are portrayed as repeatedly referencing literary works to communicate their strong emotions to each other in letters without having the censoring instances of the prison system catch them:

So they wrote about literature, and used characters as codes. At Cambridge, they had passed each other by in the street. All those books, those happy or tragic couples they had never met to discuss! Tristan and Isolde, the Duke Orsino and Olivia (and Malvolio too [Robbie had performed that role once at a university staging of the play]), Troilus and Criseyde, Mr. Knightley and Emma, Venus and Adonis. Turner and Tallis. Once, in despair, he referred to Prometheus, chained to a rock, his liver devoured daily by a vulture. Sometimes she was patient Griselde. Mention of ‘a quiet corner in a library’ was a code for sexual ecstasy. (204)

As this passage alone shows, a full in-depth analysis of *every* intertextual reference in *Atonement* would go far beyond the capabilities of this single chapter²⁴. As a summary of the overall function of those references, however, it can be said that the novel’s core idea of literature as a common, multi-coded cultural framework is once more reiterated. Furthermore, by adding “Turner and Tallis” to the list of famous couples, both *Atonement*’s fictional writer Briony and its real author McEwan acknowledge Robbie and Cecilia’s relationship as being in-line with the classics, and in the process position their story within a century-spanning literary tradition.

As multiple of my last few examples show, another central topic of *Atonement*’s second part is the discussion of letters and of the complex nature of communication through this textual medium. Restricted by circumstances – first by Robbie’s incarceration, then by his being sent off to war – Robbie and Cecilia’s entire relationship is in fact depicted as evolving almost exclusively through their letters to each other. And the quality and success of these exchanges is shown to vary, especially when combined with actual in-person conversations.

Atonement’s study of epistolary communication begins with the following portrayal of Robbie and Cecilia’s writing to each other during Robbie’s time in prison:

²⁴ For more detailed analyses of McEwan’s use of intertextual references cf. e.g. Adams, Ann Marie; Alden; Bastin; Behrman; D’Angelo; Finney; Grmelová; Head; Ingersoll; Marcus; Pedot; Robinson; Wells.

He described the prison routine in every aspect, but he never told her of its stupidity. That was plain enough. He never told her that he feared he might go under. That too was clear. She never wrote that she loved him, though she would have if she thought it would get through. But he knew it. (205)

In other words, the focus of this passage is to show that communication involves much more than the words written on a page, and that it is possible for thoughts to remain unspoken without them remaining *unknown*. Once the initial connection between the characters has been established, both Robbie and Cecilia are portrayed as capable of reading between each other's lines and of understanding each other's deepest meanings. In the highly metareferential context of the rest of *Atonement*, this passage thus implicitly draws attention to the processes of reading and interpretation in general, and to the complex ways in which all signs communicate meaning.

The second striking aspect of Robbie and Cecilia's letter exchange is the fact that the narratives the couple create in their writings eventually begin to impact and even hinder their face-to-face relationship. When Robbie and Cecilia meet for the first time in person once he is released from prison and just before he departs for the war, their interaction – in stark contrast to their letter-based communication – unfolds far from smoothly. Suddenly, all the awkwardness from the first part of the novel is back and the two have to realise “how far they ha[ve] run ahead of themselves in their letters. This moment had been imagined and desired for too long, and could not measure up.” (205). Thus *Atonement* once again points out the discrepancy between reality and the narrative-based images we construct in our minds. The discrepancy is in fact portrayed as being so strong that it results in an utter loss for words which once more needs to be overcome through physical contact (cf. 206).

As a result of this experience, Robbie and Cecilia from this point onward are depicted as holding back on “wild intimacies” (207) in their letters, “[i]mpatient with living on the page, mindful of the difficulties, they were wary of getting ahead [...] they tried not to dream it away in their letters” (207). In other words, this passage reaffirms the just established idea that the relationship between reality and narratives is a precarious one for the force of one can diminish the other. And while the just mentioned quotes mostly suggest that flights of fancy can make reality seem bleak in comparison, subsequent passages in *Atonement* prove that a harsh reality can equally result in words becoming “bleached” and “colourless through overuse” (226).

Most saliently, when Robbie's war trauma begins to deteriorate his mind, this deterioration manifests as an increasing doubt in the meaning of the words which up to this point have helped keep him sane and alive. When Robbie is at his worst, even the memory of

Cecilia's whisper of "I'll wait for you. Come back." causes him to remark: "The words were not meaningless, but they didn't touch him now. [...] Waiting. Simply one person doing nothing, over time [...] She was waiting, yes, but then what? He tried to make her voice say the words, but it was his own he heard [...] He could not even form her face" (261). Only when he calms down again and manages to temporarily subdue his trauma-based despair, does Robbie acknowledge that "of course he saw how fine it really was that she was waiting. [...] *I'll wait for you* was elemental. It was the reason he had survived" (264).

3.1.3.3 Growth beyond Modernism

Soon after this scene, the novel's narrative leaves Robbie's war experience behind and moves on to the portrayal of Briony's war experience as a trainee nurse in London. This third part of *Atonement* introduces a new major stylistic change, once more mirroring Briony's personal development with a development in her writing style. Specifically, *Atonement*'s third part is characterised by a shift towards an increasingly realistic and physical approach to descriptions. Part three is as a result by far the goriest and bloodiest section of the novel. While part one is characterised by Briony's innocence and the seeming purity of the calm-before-the-storm English landscape, and while part two focuses on Robbie's psychological turmoil in France much more than on any actual violence (the brutal scenes portraying the leg in the tree or Robbie's festering wound are all painful to read because of his emotional response, not because of any actual gory details), part three of *Atonement* makes use of very detailed physical descriptions to convey the suffering of the soldiers – and by extension of Briony – in the London hospital (cf. e.g. 296-297, 301-302). These anatomically detailed depictions of mutilated bodies as well as of Briony's close bodily contact with them introduce an entirely new lexical field to the narrative and form a strong contrast to Briony's mental state in part one, where the mere mention of the word 'cunt' caused her to fall apart.

Another significant stylistic feature of part three of *Atonement* is the fact that due to the story's renewed focus on Briony's life and her growth as a writer, this section soon reintroduces the highly explicitly metareferential poetological statements so characteristic of the novel's first part. For even as Briony is shown to have left her family and previous life behind, she is also depicted as still permeated by a need for writing. As the narrative voice explains, the 'real' Briony can still only be found within her notebook: "Here, behind the name badge and uniform, was her true self, secretly hoarded, quietly accumulating. She had

never lost that childhood pleasure in seeing pages covered in her own handwriting. It almost didn't matter what she wrote" (280).

What she does write, meanwhile, are "artistic manifestos, trivial complaints, character sketches and simple accounts of her day which increasingly shade[] off into fantasy" (280) as Briony's changing of the names of people involved for the sake of protecting their identity seems to permit her conscience to unshackle her imagination from any constraints posed by veracity:

[H]aving changed the names it became easier to transform the circumstances and invent. She liked to write out what she imagined to be their rambling thoughts. She was under no obligation to truth, she had promised no one a chronicle. This was the only place she could be free. [...] At the time, the journal preserved her dignity: she might look and behave like and live the life of a trainee nurse, but she was really an important writer in disguise. And at a time when she was cut off from everything she knew [...] writing was the thread of continuity. (280)

This passage, in a highly condensed manner, exemplifies all the changes to and continuities within Briony's approach to writing at this point in her life. While she is still interested in imagining other people's inner lives, she no longer presumes to be uncovering universal truths about them in the process. She is furthermore writing mostly for herself to keep *having* a 'self', and not anymore to morally educate others or to garner their attention. Finally, while Briony still needs to imagine herself as an "important writer in disguise", she has also learned to subordinate this need in her everyday life to the practical needs of the people around her, of the hospital and soldiers. In short, young Briony's approach to authorship as a way of becoming a god-like focal point of her surroundings is gone, and the idea of using narratives to control reality is reduced to its bare minimum of providing continuity for her self.

The next lengthy passages in part three of *Atonement* which are highly and explicitly metareferential refer to Briony's first attempts at having some of her work published. These passages continue the motif of Briony's overlapping literary and personal development whilst also introducing the idea of the literary business as an industry for the first time. The text Briony tries to submit to the magazine *Horizon* is a novella portraying the events of the fountain scene from the three different perspectives of the people present, exactly as her younger self had imagined it. As the narrative voice explicitly points out, this novella is furthermore heavily influenced by Modernist literature, and specifically by the works of Virginia Woolf. These influences are what, according to the text, has helped Briony to finally let go of her search for certainties and to instead focus on "thought, perception, sensations" (281) and "the conscious mind as a river through time" (281). In other words, through the first text she endeavours to publish, Briony is shown to attempt to fully embrace her epiphany that

“[t]he age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots” (281) and to infuse it into her writing. And yet, even with this attempt at a new style, Briony’s development into a mature author and human being is nowhere near complete.

During the early days of this new stage of her personal and literary growth, Briony is still portrayed as being particularly proud of her novella’s “design, the *pure geometry* and the *defining* uncertainty [of] which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility” (281, my emphasis). That is to say, the young woman is still depicted as clinging to overly formulaic literary traditions, even if she has replaced the eighteenth-century tropes with twentieth-century ones. Unsurprisingly, *Horizon* rejects Briony’s story with encouraging words about her talent but with criticism towards her owing “a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf” (312), having “thrown the baby of fictional technique out with the folk-tale water” (313) and having written a novella which lacks “the backbone of a story” (314). The editors’ general advice is, in fact, best summed up in his following suggestion:

[R]ather than dwell for quite so long on the perceptions of each of the three figures, would it not be possible to set them before us with greater economy, still keeping some of the vivid writing about light and stone and water which you do so well – but then move on to create some tension, some light and shade within the narrative itself. Your most sophisticated readers might be well up on the latest Bergsonian theories of consciousness, but I’m sure they retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens. (314-315)

In other words, *Horizon*’s editor defends the concepts of ‘structure’ and ‘narrative’ and presents them as a basic human need, “a childlike desire” inherent to all readers, even the most medium- and psychology-savvy ones.

If one compares all the advice of the rejection letter (cf. 311-315) to the way in which the fountain scene is presented in part one of *Atonement* and thus supposedly is finally written by aged Briony, it becomes clear that, eventually, the mature writer will choose to follow many of the editor’s suggestions. This transforms the rejection letter from a mere extra-compositional metareferential comment on the topic of literary styles (or rejection letters) to a particularly self-referential intra-compositional reference to the stylistic choices made within *Atonement* itself. Before Briony matures enough to be able to perform the edit, however, her initial response to the feedback she receives is to criticise herself for writing the novella in the first place.

While generally receptive to the editors’ *stylistic* critique, Briony’s thoughts soon zero in on the personal and motivational flaws she perceives in her work. Specifically, she begins to chastise herself for having attempted to “obscure [her crime] by concocting a slight, barely

clever fiction” (320) and for trying to “satisfy her vanity by sending [the novella] off to a magazine” (320). Or as the narrative exposes her cogitations:

Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness? The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella – and was necessary to it. [...] It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone. (320)

In short, this passage suggests that the reasons for trainee-nurse Briony’s use of narrative tropes are actually quite different from the reasons which motivated her thirteen-year-old self’s use of literary formulas. The formulaic writing here is shown not only to *not* be helping her to make sense of her experiences but to be – quite the opposite – actively obfuscating events so that Briony can avoid having to engage with the deeper meaning of her own actions.

Possibly as a result of this increased self-awareness of her abuse of literary tropes, or possibly simply due to her change of life-style once she fully enters the nurse training programme, Briony’s indulgence in literary works is barely ever mentioned again for the rest of *Atonement*’s third part. Consequently, the number of intertextual references in this section declines drastically. Instead, Briony is depicted as beginning to draw more and more inspiration for her notebook writings from her everyday experiences and observations rather than from literary predecessors. Still, it is said that sometimes, just before falling asleep, “Briony contemplated a ghostly parallel life in which she was at Girton, reading Milton” (275). Passages such as this suggest that literature and Briony’s previous academic ambitions thus never entirely lose their value for her as points of reference. They are, however, clearly designated to a space outside of the realm of her reality.

In addition to introducing overall stylistic changes, part three of *Atonement* continues many of the novel’s previously established motifs and shows how they fit into Briony’s new stage of development. For example, the idea of word mantras as something a person can hold on to once again makes its appearance. Similarly to Robbie repeating Cecilia’s phrases to himself during the war, the porters at Briony’s hospital are said to constantly repeat the line “Cheer up love, it might never happen” (269) like a desperate prayer, hoping to ward off the war. And while Briony initially detests this behaviour, once the men stop saying the phrase because the war *has* happened, she misses the expression and its consoling nature, which she eventually acknowledges (cf. 269). Soon, overwhelmed by the terrible condition of one of the soldiers at the hospital, Briony herself is shown to start repeating the empty phrase of “We’ll soon have you fixed” (301, 302) to her patients as a way to keep herself from breaking down.

Part three of *Atonement* furthermore continues to emphasise how powerful words can be even when used amidst the violence and pain of war. For example, when Briony removes a shrapnel piece from a soldier's leg, he asks her to rinse the metal shard so he can take it home, after which he begins to sob. The narrative voice explains this behaviour with the words that "[i]t may have been the word home, as well as the pain" (300) that brought on the tears. Furthermore, the idea of temporary reprieve from terror through communicative venting is picked up in part three as well when "[m]en coming round from amputations seemed compelled to make terrible jokes" such as "What am I going to kick the missus with now?" (304). Finally, the potentially violent nature of words is once more depicted as well.

Leading up to the shrapnel-removing procedure, the soldier in question is portrayed as repeatedly swearing (cf. 299) due to being in pain. And whilst he initially keeps catching himself and apologizing for his bad language (cf. 299), eventually, when Briony pulls the first piece of shrapnel out of his body, he cannot help himself but scream out a loud "Fuck!" (299). The reaction on the ward is described as follows: "The escaped word *ricocheted* around the ward and seemed to repeat itself several times. *There was silence*, or at least a lowering of sound beyond the screens" (300, my emphasis). That one word, 'fuck', stemming from the same lexical field as the initial world-shattering 'cunt', is thus shown to still have the ability to shock. Through the imagery of the "ricochet" and the consequent silence the word is even compared to a bullet itself. Eventually, the scene ends in a head nurse coming over and reprimanding the soldier for his language, demanding he stop acting like a coward and treat his nurse with more respect – a reprimand which he, despite his agony, acknowledges by remaining silent for the rest of the procedure (cf. 300). Thus, even in times of war and crisis, words and their use are portrayed as still being a vehicle for cultural values and norms (e.g. in regards to what is appropriate behaviour in front of a woman). And abandoning these values, under any circumstances, is presented as worse than any pain.

Another interesting word-related motif which reappears in part three of *Atonement* is that of the significance of names. In Briony's hospital, nurses are outright forbidden by "hallowed rule" (271) to give their first name to patients to the point where they get punished and/or reassigned for doing so (cf. 271-272, 275). This circumstance picks up on the stylistic decision made in part two to refer to Robbie only ever as Turner and develops it into an explicitly discussed metareferential topic within part three of the narrative. Briony, for example, is at one point within this section of the novel shown to actively reflect on the exclusive use of last names as "above all a stripping away of identity" (275) similar to the wearing of the obligatory nurse's uniform, which, "like all uniforms, eroded identity" (276)

even further. Both these observations clearly apply to Robbie the soldier as much as to Briony the trainee nurse.

It is, however, important to note that, unlike Robbie, Briony gets involved in this process of identity-removal willingly. In fact, she almost seems to appreciate the physical hardships of the training as well as the demand for “unthinking obedience” (275) which helps her “close down [her] mental horizons” (275). As the narrative voice explains,

she had no will, no freedom to leave. She was abandoning herself to a life of strictures, rules, obedience, housework and a constant fear of disapproval. She was one of a batch of probationers [...] and she had no identity beyond her badge. There were no tutorials here, no one losing sleep over the precise course of her intellectual development. *She [...] was delivered from introspection.* [...] Mostly, she was a maid, a skivvy and, in her hours off, a crammer of simple facts. *She was happy to have little time to think of anything else.* (276-277, my emphasis)

This passage is, of course, in stark contrast to the portrayal of thirteen-year-old Briony’s character in *Atonement’s* part one. Whereas child Briony used to be almost purely a free-roaming mind, this new, slightly older version of her willingly reduces herself to menial work precisely to escape the consequences of the actions incited by her having this type of mind. In that, Briony’s approach to dealing with her war experiences strongly resembles Robbie’s feverish exclamations in Dunkirk during which he proclaims the superiority of a basic marching order over poetry: “Order would prevail. No one at Cambridge taught the benefits of good marching order. They revered the free, unruly spirits. The poets. But what did the poets know about survival? About surviving as a body of men?” (264). Knowing that these exclamations themselves are merely figments of elderly Briony’s writerly imagination, part three’s portrayal of Briony’s processing mechanisms thus once again becomes a double-coded, highly metareferential, intra-compositional commentary on part two’s narrative choices as well.

Yet the reasons for Briony’s adoption of a menial lifestyle go beyond her need for distraction from both her past and current experiences. Already one of Cecilia’s letters to Robbie in part two seems to suggest that her younger sister is taking on the nursing role as a form of “penance” (212), and passages such as the following from part three of *Atonement* only confirm Cecilia’s hypothesis:

All [Briony] wanted to do was work, then bathe and sleep until it was time to work again. But it was useless, she knew. Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, *whatever illumination in tutorial she had relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college lawn, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable.* (285, my emphasis)

This passage demonstrates very clearly that Briony entered into the nursing profession to actively ‘relinquish’ any potential for future happiness in an attempt to reach atonement through sacrifice.

Yet strikingly enough, even in her desire for penance, Briony never seems to consider sacrificing her writing – a fact which suggests that writing and the construction of narratives are actually more intrinsic to her nature, more needed for her survival than her name and/or outward identity. Similarly, part three of *Atonement* also depicts Briony as incapable of fully relinquishing her thinking in literary tropes. The novel thus once again demonstrates just how deeply this behaviour is ingrained in her – and arguably in us all. For example, whilst performing her nurse duties, Briony cannot help herself but imagine what it would be like to find Robbie amidst the soldiers in her hospital, grime-covered to the point of unrecognizability:

[S]he would dress his wounds without knowing who he was, and with cotton-wool tenderly rub his face until his familiar features emerged, and [...] he would turn to her with gratitude, realise who she was, and take her hand, and in silently squeezing it, forgive her. Then he would let her settle him down into sleep. (298)

In the romantic imagery of this fantasy, in the stylisation of herself into a saviour, the Briony of part one is still very much alive and present in this scene. And soon, *Atonement* shows us that this is a good thing.

In a scene which follows soon after Briony’s thoughts of Robbie, the trainee nurse is sent to talk to a dying soldier (cf. 305-310). Having received a fatal head-wound the young man is fantasising as well as hallucinating, and is convinced that Briony is a girl from his past. Briony initially tries to break his delusions but as soon as she realises the severity of the soldier’s condition, she begins to indulge and expand upon the happy-end narrative with which his damaged brain is presenting him to ease his passing (cf. 308-310). In the end, as the soldier takes his final breath, she even breaks the hallowed rule of nursehood and tells him her first name: “‘It’s Briony,’ she said, so only he would hear. [...] ‘It’s not Tallis. You should call me Briony’” (310). And in this moment, she really *is* Briony, the writer, and not merely Tallis, the nurse. For it is her imagination and her storytelling abilities, not her medical skills, which comfort the dying young man.

While this experience contributes greatly to Briony’s development and can be read as an affirmation of the power of narratives to – if used correctly and not like in part one – bring comfort and salvation, the biggest growth in Briony during part three can be observed in the final scenes of this section of the novel when she uninvitedly visits Cecilia and Robbie for the first time. During the entire scene, words and communication seem once again to be close to

failing as sentences such as “There was too much that couldn’t be said or asked” (332), “there was something mask-like and carved about [Cecilia’s] face, and very still. *And hard to read.*” (332, my emphasis) or “There was so much more that could have been said” (347) indicate. However, part-three Briony’s reaction towards these difficulties and information gaps is very different from that of her thirteen-year-old self and this is what makes all the difference. By being able to acknowledge the gaps without forcefully trying to fill them, part-three’s increasingly mature Briony for the first time actually demonstrates an acceptance of unknowingness and life’s complexities. Additionally, by processing the situation mostly through fact-focused observation, Briony’s internal narrative at this moment perfectly mirrors the overall stylistic concept of *Atonement*’s third part.

The more mature Briony, as a result of her nurse training, is furthermore shown to have a much better psychological insight into people’s behaviour. Consequently, she is not even terrified by Robbie’s near-violent outbursts. Recognising them for what they are, traumatic memories (cf. 343) which just “had to come out” (341), she remains calm – in stark contrast to her younger self which labelled Robbie a “maniac” for far less maniacal behaviour. This passage, in addition to showing Briony’s personal growth also comments on the source of her growth as a writer by providing a metareferential counter-image to an idea expressed in relation to Robbie earlier in the novel. While the young man, according to the narrative voice, used to believe that his literary knowledge could provide him with the human insight necessary to make him a better doctor one day (cf. 93), part three of *Atonement* suggests that the process, instead, works the other way around: it is Briony’s experience in caring for people which provides her with the human insight necessary to make her a better writer.

Finally, Briony in this interaction furthermore demonstrates that she has learned when to hold her tongue and to not impose her self and her (narrative) views on an interaction. When Robbie, reproachfully, asks her whether she has any idea what it is like to be in prison, Briony’s reaction is described as follows: “She imagined small high windows in a cliff face of brick, and thought perhaps she did, the way people imagined the different torments of hell. She shook her head faintly.” (341) In other words, even though the familiar tropes instinctively rise to the surface of Briony’s mind, she *chooses* to push the image back down, to remain silent and to let Robbie’s words have their weight.

The one thing Briony eventually does force herself to voice in this conversation is her explicit apology. Despite it sounding “so foolish and inadequate” (348) and despite Robbie and Cecilia remaining silent, Briony finally says the words which up till now have only been implied in all her other attempts at penance: “She spoke slowly. ‘I’m very very sorry. I’ve

caused you such terrible distress.’ [...] and she repeated herself. ‘I’m very sorry.’” (348). With this few lines, *Atonement* makes it very clear that while certain things can be left unspoken and while certain things do not need to be said to be understood, others do require the explicit act, even if just to acknowledge one’s (self-)awareness and responsibility by officially and publicly putting one’s acknowledgement into words.

While neither Robbie nor Cecilia accept Briony’s apology, *Atonement*’s third part ends on the idea that the younger sister might still achieve atonement, eventually, through a more detailed, written “apology”. A first clue in this direction is Robbie’s own demand for Briony to write him a long, detailed letter explaining exactly why she did what she did (cf. 345). Once the young woman leaves her sister’s apartment, however, she takes the thought one step further: “She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin.” (349). Those last words of the third part of the novel are followed by the initials “BT” as well as by a place and date, “London 1999”. Thus *Atonement* reveals that what we as readers have been reading this entire time is in fact meant to be exactly this atonement written by Briony, begun in 1940 and finished nearly sixty years later.

3.1.3.4 (Post-)Postmodernist Finishing Touches

Brian Finney has pointed out that some reviewers have criticized *Atonement* for this most illusion breaking of its metareferential choices, calling it modish and inappropriate (cf. 69-70)²⁵. Yet the ending’s revelation is much more than a mere gimmick. Firstly, the dated ending as well as the following epilogue, rather than forming a break with the preceding narrative, simply bring that narrative into the stylistic realm of contemporary (Post-)Postmodern literature and as such carry the story of Briony’s personal and literary development to its natural metareferential conclusion. Furthermore, the novel’s final “twist” draws attention to the fact that we readers are just as prone to mistaking narratives for realities or to assuming a narrative voice’s omniscience and objectivity based on tradition rather than actual facts as the novel’s characters are. In other words, rather than breaking with the text’s established themes, the ending once more simply takes them one natural step further.

Finally, in the novel’s epilogue, *Atonement* introduces one final major stylistic change: the last part of the novel is the only one presented as a first-person narrative by the at that time seventy-seven-year-old Briony herself. In the epilogue, the fictional writer once again

²⁵ For examples of studies decrying *Atonement*’s ending cf. e.g. Albers and Caeners; Phelan; Spiridon; Wood.

reminisces simultaneously about (the end of) her life and about the novel she has just finished writing, thus one final time conflating the two processes. Her focus during her ruminations lies specifically on the relationship between facts, truth and fiction, thus significantly increasing the fictum-metareference quota of the text.

Throughout the epilogue, Briony spends many paragraphs referring to the research she has had to conduct to be able to portray the details of the war experiences in her novel correctly (cf. 353, 359-360). At the same time, she stresses that she has made many changes to the facts of her story (cf. 356). In fact, she points out that if she had cared about depicting facts, she “should have written a different kind of book” (360). Still, Briony also emphasises that her novel would not have worked as a pure work of fiction, either. For *Atonement*’s purpose, according to its fictional author, is to describe the crime she, Lola and Paul Marshall have committed, “to disguise nothing” of “the names, the places [and] the exact circumstances” (369) and to “put it all there as a matter of historical record” (369) even if this meant that her work would never be published in her, Lola and Paul Marshall’s lifetime due to libel law (cf. 359, 361, 370).

This idea of making a narrative “a matter of historical record” adds a new perspective to *Atonement*’s debate on the socio-cultural role and value of stories. Up to this point, the novel’s metareferential discussions overwhelmingly focus on the impact cultural and literary narratives have on individuals, their thoughts and their perception of the world. This new statement by seventy-seven-year-old Briony, however, goes one step further and postulates that narratives have an impact on official record-keeping as well. This one sentence, barely more than an aside, is the first time the novel frames history and our associated cultural memories themselves as narratives²⁶.

While taking responsibility for her crime by testifying to its occurrence in the first place certainly constitutes a central part of Briony’s atonement, the novel’s epilogue suggests that there is also a second component to her literary penance. As Briony herself explains, she sees her ultimate work as “a final act of kindness” (372), “a stand against oblivion and despair” (372) which attempts to gift Robbie and Cecilia happiness (cf. 372) by having them “survive to love” (371) for as long as a single copy or even a single typescript of *Atonement*’s final draft exists in the world (cf. 371). For in the end, as Briony points out, once all participants are dead, the couple will “only exist as [her] inventions” (371).

²⁶ For more on this specific idea in relation to *Atonement* cf. e.g. Henke; Nünning “Editorial” 4, 6 and “Fictional Metabiographies” 208; Schmitz-Emans 225.

This idea of people living on through their narratives is one that is repeated multiple times throughout the epilogue: it is central to the depiction of the letters and correspondences stored in the war museum which serve Briony as research and which are shown to keep the memories of their writers and through those their writers themselves alive (cf. 359-360); the motif is picked up again during Briony's birthday party when her thirteen-year-old self is shown to live on in the performance of her play (cf. 367); and the motif is finally ever-present in Briony's motivation for the writing of her ultimate novel. Still, the fictional writer's choice of words when describing Cecilia and Robbie as living on "as [her] inventions" shows that this particular example of survival through narrative is more complex than the other two.

In the first two examples, the words and stories through which people live on are their own. In the case of Robbie and Cecilia, however, the words which are to carry them onward are Briony's. One could therefore question whether despite all her growth, *Atonement's* fictional author is not still trying to achieve atonement by doing what she always has, namely imposing her own views on others' experiences.²⁷ Yet what makes Briony's ultimate work ultimately different is the fact that (1) she is for the first time fully self-aware of what she is doing, and (2) that this time she does not presume to be presenting an ultimate truth but instead purposefully breaks open her narrative and transforms its ending into an open one. Specifically, in the epilogue, Briony reveals that what we have read within *Atonement* is just one possible ending to Robbie's and Cecilia's story. It is the ending she as an author has chosen. What really happened to the couple is, according to her and independent of readers' potential demands for the truth, irrelevant (cf. 370-371).²⁸ From Briony's perspective, the important thing about her work's ending is that, by outlasting the couple either way, it will make sure that "the lovers survive and flourish" (371) indefinitely.

This passage of *Atonement* shows that mature Briony's views on the function of narratives have changed dramatically from those of her thirteen-year-old self. Whilst clearly still connected to and inspired by reality, her ultimate text does not attempt to uncover the truths within this reality or to make neat sense of it. Instead, her novel is written to *transcend* reality, and even to transcend the divide between truth and fiction. All that matters for

²⁷ In fact, scholars such as Emily Holman, James Phelan (cf. 331-332), James Wood (cf. 18-19) or Kim Worthington (cf. 146) have argued just that.

²⁸ Interestingly, many scholars seem to misread this passage as a proclamation of Robbie's and Cecilia's factual deaths (cf. e.g. Albers and Caeners 713; Cormack 81-82; D'Hoker 41; Spiridon 54; Wood 3, 16-17) – a reading which Briony's (and McEwan's) chosen language simply does not support. The couple's "true" fate is purposefully left unreported and, as Martin Jacobi has pointed out in an essay devoted to this subject, by misreading this passage the scholars in question are in fact arguably the ones taking Robbie's and Cecilia's lives.

seventy-seven-year-old Briony is that the novel's message of love, survival and the power of stories is carried on to and by future generations, keeping the transcendent ideas of her experiences alive rather than any related facts.

3.1.4 The Role of the Author

The last big metareferential topic *Atonement's* epilogue elaborates upon is the question of the significance of authorial control. Young Briony, in her attempts to use narratives to make sense of the world, is often portrayed as trying to elevate herself to a god-like position through her role as a writer. And at first glance, mature Briony could be accused of the same thing since she keeps emphasising how the ending of the novel is *her* choice, in other words how she is the one in control of the narrative. This position is especially problematic considering that the novel is supposedly written as a form of atonement²⁹. But can atonement be achieved through self-elevation into a position of power?

In a typically explicit self-aware manner, mature Briony voices this very same question herself. Her answer, consequently, is as follows:

The problem these fifty-nine years [between first and final draft] has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (371)

In other words, according to Briony, being self-aware and doing your best within the limitations of your medium is all that can be achieved. It is the closest she believes she can come to atonement. She is, however, arguably wrong. For there is an instance above the writer, there is an instance outside the writer, and that is the writer's readership (cf. D'Angelo 101-103).

While an author might have god-like powers during the creation of a narrative, eventually, if published, the text will land in the hands of a reader. And as *Atonement* by this point has shown repeatedly (most explicitly in the passage describing the Tallis' fountain in comparison to its original artist's intentions (cf. 28)), an author has no control over what happens to his or her creation next, and as such is entirely at the mercy of the recipients. In the case of Briony, therefore, we readers are the ones able to pronounce judgement, and we are encouraged to do so based both on the story we have just read and on the metareferential

²⁹ For a more in-depth study of McEwan's use of the 'confession' and 'atonement' tropes in relation to their traditional use in literature cf. D'Hoker.

commentary provided in the epilogue. For Briony's belief expressed therein that she cannot ever achieve atonement is arguably her most redeeming quality.

Furthermore, as *Atonement's* epilogue demonstrates repeatedly, mature Briony, fully (self-)aware of her unavoidable authorial control, specifically does everything in her power to relinquish as much of it as she can, proving just how much she has grown over the last six decades as both a person and a writer³⁰: she does not provide herself with forgiveness within the novel (cf. 372); she leaves the ending open; she chooses to stay faithful to the exact truth of Robbie's wrongful incarceration even if that means the novel will not be published in her lifetime and she will not be able to hear her readers' response and potentially receive absolution. By making these and many other narrative choices, mature Briony comes as close as possible to making her novel about Robbie and Cecilia and not about herself. This approach constitutes an exact opposite to her initial crime and thus arguably makes her worthy of forgiveness.

3.1.5 Memory, Self-Stylisation and the Construction of Our Autobiographies

Still, by being (fictionally) highly autobiographical, *Atonement* can of course never fully avoid to be a novel about Briony as well. After all, as Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson have pointed out, “[a]ny life story, written or oral, more or less dramatically, is in one sense a personal mythology, a self-justification” (quoted in Henke 82). And in the case of Briony the narrative is most definitely both. Throughout *Atonement*, the type of self-stylisation³¹ varies – though arguably, in the end, its final effect is not very different from its initial one.

Part one of *Atonement* makes it very clear that in addition to using narratives to make sense of her experiences – both by sorting them into her memory and by using them to form her own identity (cf. Henke 94) – young Briony then shares those narratives with her relatives with the specific purpose of making herself the centre of attention³². For example, Briony's first play is described as providing her with a stage from which she can “unapologetically demand[] her family's total attention as she cast[s] her narrative spell” (6-7). In other words, despite the supposed moralist intentions behind her dramatic work, writing for Briony at this early stage is portrayed as a selfish enterprise through which she mostly wants to express

³⁰ For an interesting study on the differences in effect especially this section has in Joe Wright's film adaptation of the novel due to the added layer of directorial control cf. Bolton.

³¹ Claudia Schemberg even speaks of “self-making” (8) and “self-creation” (9).

³² These methods of creating a personal mythology can of course be utilized not only by individuals such as Briony but by entire communities or even countries in search of a national identity. For an analysis of how *Atonement* touches upon this in the context of the English Heritage movement cf. Henderson.

herself. In fact, the young girl is depicted as fully aware of this, for when one of her cousins eventually criticises the grandstanding quality of plays, Briony has to agree that “he had a point. This was precisely why she loved plays, or hers at least; everyone would adore her” (11).

Beyond sharing stories and plays to aggrandise herself in front of others, thirteen-year-old Briony is furthermore repeatedly shown to construct additional narratives in her mind which equally embellish her personality and place in the world. For example, when she is letting out her frustration by beating up nettles, she soon begins to envision her actions as a form of sport, with newspaper reports complimenting her on her skills (cf. 76). And as the strength of these images begins to fade, Briony proclaims that she will stay out in the gardens “until events, real events, not her own fantasies, r[i]se to her challenge, and dispel[...] her insignificance” (77). Thus the young girl even wills reality as a whole to conform to her image of herself.

This motif of self-stylisation can be observed on many further occasions throughout *Atonement*. From her childhood obsession with being thought of as “an author” (4) “lost to the intricacies of her art” (75, cf. 68, 158-159) to her hospital fantasies of being the one to nurse a wounded Robbie back to health, Briony continually imagines herself as the heroine of a story. And she is not the only character guilty of such behaviour. When Robbie is planning his future in part one of the novel, the narrative voice explains that “[t]here was *a story he was plotting with himself as the hero*, and already its opening had caused a little shock amongst his friends” (cf. 91, my emphasis). Similarly, when Briony’s and Cecilia’s mother is reminiscing about her own aging, she is struck by “[h]ow quickly [her] *story* was over” (151, my emphasis). Less explicitly but not less saliently, many of the literary tropes Cecilia employs also cast her in the role of a literary heroine (cf. e.g. 30). Finally, coming back to Robbie, when he is writing to Cecilia from prison the narrative voice explains that “[w]hen he wrote back, he pretended to be his old self, *he lied his way into sanity*” (204, my emphasis). In other words, *Atonement* here even suggests that by writing himself as sane within his own narrative, Robbie succeeds in transforming his real-world self to fit that image.

Once the ending of part three reveals Briony as the fictional writer of *Atonement*, these seeming similarities between characters acquire additional significance. Within this new context, the respective passages can suddenly also be interpreted as mature Briony’s superimposition of her own thoughts onto everybody else’s in a more or less conscious attempt to justify her younger self’s behaviour by suggesting that everybody functions this way. In fact, even the thoughts assigned to thirteen-year-old Briony can suddenly be seen as

mature Briony's thoughts placed into the younger girl's mind, especially considering the fact that many of the thoughts attributed to the girl are far too abstract and philosophical for someone her age (cf. e.g. 37) as even the narrative voice itself has to admit on at least one occasion:

Briony resisted because she wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally. *The definition would refine itself over the years. She was to concede that she may have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self.* At the time there may have been no precise form of words; in fact, she may have experienced nothing more than impatience to begin writing again. (40, my emphasis)

Thus part three's final twist exposes the fact that from the beginning of the novel, the Briony the readers are confronted with is not so much the "real" young girl as she is the stylised, fictional image of that girl (cf. also Waugh 123) created by *Atonement's* fictional writer, her sixty years older self. Furthermore, by having previously shown how strongly Briony's literary creations are influenced by literary and cultural tropes, *Atonement* also suggests that Briony's self-stylisation is equally indebted to these narrative formula (cf. also e.g. Eakin 4; Löschnigg 172-174; Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing* 150).

As for the reasons behind Briony's self-stylisation, *Atonement* presents multiple possible options. On the one hand, the young writer's desire for attention and the maturing writer's desire for penance alone would be strong enough psychological motivators for this type of behaviour. A further possible explanation, however, can be found in part one of the novel when the narrative voice suggests that older Briony's "self-mythologizing" (41) is the result of her constantly having been asked the same question until she "felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognisably herself" (41). In other words, this passage suggests that some degree of self-stylisation is in fact unavoidable when we as a society constantly ask each other for our life-stories, always searching for causalities and connections within our respective experiences. Furthermore, this passage consequently also points out that once we construct a functional narrative to explain our experience(s), we keep retelling and retelling the very same story (cf. 41) until "[t]he truth [...] become[s] as ghostly as invention" (41) and we eventually store the entire experience in our memory in the form of the story we have constructed. In fact, as Roger Schank and Robert P. Abelson have argued, at this point our stories and our memories become one and the same: "They end up packaged together, so that the belief indexes the story, and the story supports the belief" (13; cf. also Schank 44).

This concept – increasingly common in contemporary literature (cf. Neumann, "Der metamnemische Roman" 303) – of memory as compiled of deposited narratives can be

found through the entirety of *Atonement*³³, closely linked to the fact that many characters, especially Briony, are repeatedly shown to conflate trope-based knowledge with factual, actual knowledge, and to store both in their memory on equal terms. The previously referenced passage describing Briony as just *knowing* that she had to run away now that her mother had rejected her (cf. 15) is thus more than sarcastic flourish and exaggeration by the narrative voice. Instead, it carries a deeper meaning.

This meaning first begins to reveal itself during the description of how Briony in part one perceives the library scene she happens upon. Based on her culturally and narratively influenced interpretation of Robbie's letter as him being a raving "maniac", Briony is portrayed as absolutely certain that she has walked in on an attack. The narrative voice conveys this by presenting her mere interpretation of the situation as factual observation: "with his right [hand] he held [Cecilia's] forearm which was raised in protest, or self-defence" (123). For the readers of *Atonement*, the rest of the passage makes it abundantly clear what is really going on and that Cecilia's arm is really only raised in what Briony *believes* to be "protest, or self-defence" – yet this is not how the narrative voice describes Briony's experience: the young girl is fully unaware that she is interpreting the scene based on tropes in her mind; instead, she honestly believes that she is simply observing the tableau in front of her.

This discrepancy between *believing* to know that something is true and actually knowing comes to a first big climax in the final chapters of part one when Briony expresses her certainty that the man she saw raping Lola was Robbie. The actual description of the rape scene makes it very clear that she cannot possibly have recognised the man in the dark (cf. 164), and the fact that Briony initially keeps asking Lola who it was further proves her uncertainty (cf. 165). Still, unintentionally bending reality to fit her own narrative-based event-processing framework, Briony soon begins to see all events of the day merge into a "story [...] that was writing itself around her" (166), a story in which "[e]verything connected" (166), "everything fitted" (167) until she finally speaks the first accusatory "It was Robbie, wasn't it" (166). From there on, Briony keeps repeating his name like a mantra even though Lola never confirms it – until finally, when her cousin asks whether she actually saw him, Briony responds: "Of course I did. Plain as day. It was him. [...] I saw him." (167)

Admittedly, Briony's utter conviction does not last for long (cf. 168) and already a week later, self-awareness begins to arise:

³³ For a more detailed exploration than this chapter permits cf. e.g. Hidalgo.

[W]hat she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. It was not simply her eyes that told her truth. [...] Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and over again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. What she meant was rather more complex than what everyone else so eagerly understood, and her moments of unease came when she felt that she could not express these nuances. (169)

Yet Briony never voices these thoughts and doubts publicly. As time progresses, it is said that “she would have preferred to qualify, or complicate, her use of the word ‘saw’. Less like seeing, more like knowing.” (170) but the interrogators, the judicial system and all the people around her make it clear that they would not accept such a nuanced phrasing:

‘You saw him then.’
‘I know it was him.’
‘Let’s forget what you know. You’re saying you saw him.’
‘Yes, I saw him.’
‘Just as you see me.’
‘Yes.’
‘You saw him with your own eyes.’
‘Yes. I saw him. I saw him.’ (181)

In other words, “[e]ither she saw, or she did not see. There lay nothing in between” (170), and Briony as portrayed does not want to disappoint (cf. 170). Consequently, she tries to repel her doubts by “plunging in deeper. By clinging tightly to what she believed she knew, narrowing her thoughts, reiterating her testimony” (170) until her story becomes so ingrained in her memory that she never actually believes that she is lying.

When more than five years later Cecilia refers to her sister’s testimony with those words, Briony is honestly taken aback, observing: “[Cecilia’s] perspective was unfamiliar. Weak, stupid, confused, cowardly, evasive – she had hated herself for everything she had been, but she had never thought of herself as a liar. [...] She hadn’t intended to mislead, she hadn’t acted out of malice” (336). What Briony *had* done, instead, was merely to mistake interpretation for fact and to unconsciously spin her particular interpretation into a story which she then, unable to express its complexities, presented as fact.

As Briony’s life progresses and she matures both as a writer and as a person, her awareness of this issue is shown to grow, demonstrated in her increased interest in open-to-interpretation, open-ended narratives. Briony’s stories over the course of the novel become less and less a means to express her personal certainties, just like they become less and less a means for self-elevation. Instead, mature Briony focuses increasingly on motifs of self-sacrifice, subordination and prioritization of others. And yet, strikingly, it could be argued that in her most penitent final moments, seventy-seven-year-old epilogue Briony once more depicts herself as a saviour, this time of Robbie’s and Cecilia’s love. By proclaiming that her

novel is the only way in which the couple will be able to live on forever, Briony could be said to stylise herself, the writer, as the source of Cecilia and Robbie's immortality. This reading, however, would entirely neglect the rest of *Atonement's* core message about the power inherent to all narratives as such, independent of their author. What gives life to Cecilia and Robbie is the sharing of their story, Briony as the story-teller serves merely as facilitator or catalyst.

3.1.6 Flourish and Detail through Implicit Metareferences

Before wrapping up this chapter I would like to draw attention to one final aspect of *Atonement's* use of metareferences. In addition to all these examples of very explicit and in-depth poetological and poetology-adjacent commentary, the novel furthermore contains a lot of language and implicitly metareferential imagery which only blossoms into salience within the context of its highly metareferential surroundings. The following description of Cecilia arranging flowers in part one constitutes only one perfect example:

She spent some minutes making adjustments in order to achieve a *natural chaotic look* [...] It made no sense, she knew, arranging flowers before the water was in – but there it was; she couldn't resist moving them around, and not everything people did could be in a correct, logical order, especially when they were alone. (23, my emphasis)

At first glance, these sentences have nothing to do with literature but are merely mocking Cecilia's behaviour in a very Austenian manner. And yet considering the novel's central themes it soon becomes apparent that Cecilia's sentiments in this situation apply to the subject of literature and narratives as well. On the one hand, her process of flower arrangement demonstrates just how much construction is involved even in the presentation of a seemingly wild and "natural" scene. On the other hand, her acknowledgement of the lack of "logical order" in human behaviour exposes the paradox inherent to the construction of narratives based on logic and causality. The fact that Cecilia is furthermore portrayed as fighting against the "wilful neatness" and "orderly pattern[s]" (45) of the flowers because they do not suit her romantic sensibility of what a picturesque wild-flower bouquet should look like, only emphasises the discrepancy between reality and our narrative tropes even further.

In addition to these types of double-coded scenes, *Atonement* bursts with language and imagery drawing from literature- and text-related lexical fields: from Cecilia trying to "interpret" (27) Robbie's behaviour, to Briony trying to "read his expression" (184), to the girls' mother observing that "[t]he indistinct murmur of voices heard through a carpeted floor *surpassed in clarity a typed-up transcript*" (66, my emphasis), to the library-setting of the sex-scene, to the constant aforementioned references to documents and letters and even to the

reading of wine labels (cf. 126), to the portrayal of Londoners removing destination boards from buses and taking down or blackening out street signs to confuse potential German invaders (cf. 318) – metareferential language is everywhere. And while often these remarks are barely more than asides, only there for the most attentive of readers to notice, at other times they appear in scenes which are so striking that the references are impossible to miss.

One particularly impactful example of this can be seen in the scene portraying Robbie's arrival at Dunkirk in part two. Just outside the city, he witnesses soldiers disposing of items they cannot take with them when they retreat. The passage describes many things that the men are ordered to destroy so that they cannot be used by the enemy: uniforms, blankets, weapons, horses – but also documents and document-related items. From “[a] beefy lance-corporal with a sledgehammer [...] smashing typewriters and mimeograph machines” (242) to “a chaplain and his clerk [...] dousing cases of prayer books and bibles with petrol” (243), the range of related objects is wide and varied. Whereas the first example serves as an homage to the power of the printing press and its derivatives, the second example once more establishes the spiritual power of words. Either way, both the practical tools involved in the spreading of words and the actual content of the words being spread are depicted as significant and dangerous enough to be worth destroying.

What all these implicit uses of metareference contribute to *Atonement* is to emphasise the omnipresence of words, documents, texts and narratives in our every-day lives. For in the end, the novel is not about Briony's personal obsession with narratives and writing, it is about the role narratives and writing play in our society. Within Briony's personal development, this message is conveyed through her shift from stories as a means to distinguish herself to stories which contribute to communal knowledge and history instead. Though interestingly enough, this latter approach to storytelling is already portrayed much earlier in the novel, namely through Briony's brother.

When he is first introduced, the oldest Tallis sibling Leon is portrayed as a young man who loves to share anecdotes – and who does so in a manner strikingly different from the highly intellectualised and pre-constructed approach to storytelling embodied by Briony. The narrative voice describes Leon's stories as follows: “The effect of [his] anecdotes was to make his listener warm to humankind and its failings” (107). Furthermore, Leon's anecdotes are always about people rather than about abstract ideas, for “[l]iterature and politics, science and religion did not bore him [but] they simply had no place in his world” (108). Finally, Leon's entire storytelling process is depicted as a much more social enterprise than Briony's. All his narratives are born out of social situations – they are tales of events which Leon has

experienced with or heard from others – and all their narration itself is social: he tells them orally, to an audience, and his aim is to entertain that very audience rather than to demonstrate his personal, authorial skill (cf. 107-108). The communal significance of his narratives is what gives them their meaning.

This observation invokes a final noteworthy implicitly metareferential element found within part one of *Atonement*. When Cecilia is shown to be arranging her flowers, the vase she is using – a cherished family heirloom passed down from an uncle who had died in the Great War – is described as follows: “The vase was respected not for Höroldt’s mastery of polychrome enamels or the blue and gold interlacing strapwork and foliage, but for Uncle Clem, and the lives he had saved, the river he had crossed at midnight, and his death just a week before the Armistice.” (24) That is to say, the most honoured art piece in the Tallis household – a household otherwise filled with grand fountain replicas and first edition books – is presented as deriving its value not from the craftsmanship involved in its construction but from the additional personal meaning it carries for the members of the family. It is precious because it has history, context, a social and communal component, not because of some intrinsic artistic value.

3.1.7 Conclusion: *Atonement*’s Use of Metareference

This last fact becomes particularly important when one considers how often metareferential works are criticised for being narcissistic embodiments of l’art-pour-l’art beliefs. Throughout its narrative, however, *Atonement* makes it very clear that it does not care about art for art’s sake but for the sake of its relationship with society. Whilst *Horizon*’s editor in the novel might still suggest that he “[does] not believe that artists have an obligation to strike up attitudes to the war” and that “[i]ndeed, they are wise and right to ignore it” since “artists are politically impotent” (314-315), *Atonement* shows very clearly that as a result of the immense influence which narratives have on our perception, our memory, our knowledge and our history, works of art and their creators are anything but impotent. Consequently, artists such as Briony are also shown to most definitely have certain obligations (cf. also Weidle 68) – if nothing else then at least to fight reality’s destructive tendencies by giving people and ideas eternal life within our cultural memory.

What is particularly striking about *Atonement*’s take on this pivotal message is the fact that the intertwined nature of reality, narratives, memories, etc. – unlike in the novel’s Postmodernist predecessors – is actually not presented as something negative. It is merely

shown to be something which needs to be approached with maturity. As Katharina Rennhak has pointed out, the novel's focus is therefore not on the "crisis" of reality and representation, as scholars such as Alistair Cormack seem to believe (cf. 76-82), but on the question of how we can move past this crisis (cf. 216-219). Just as Briony as part of her development needs to first realise the impact of narratives on her beliefs, and then needs to find a way to translate that realisation into her work, so all literature, all human beings and all authors, according to *Atonement*, need to do the same thing. In the process, authors specifically are encouraged to grow and to discover new styles and means which allow them to keep writing impactful, ethically valuable texts within their new Post-Postmodernist framework (cf. Rennhak 218-219)³⁴. For just because all reality is constructed, that does not mean that all constructs are created equal (cf. also Wolf, "*Atonement*" 301): young Briony's narratives, for example, are unmistakably more flawed and thus less meaningful than those composed by mature Briony. In other words, according to *Atonement*, even as certain narratives fail us, others can still rise in their place and achieve a variety of purposes – one such purpose, in the spirit of Briony, being that to metareferentially uncover their past transgressions and in the process possibly to achieve atonement.

³⁴ For more detailed philosophical elaborations on the possible nature of such ethical texts as suggested by McEwan cf. Bradley and Tate; Concha; Harold; Ionescu; as well as O'Hara. For an opposing view doubting literature's reliability as a "tool for improving the ethical behaviour of humanity" (21) cf. Mathews.

3.2 Metareference in *The Book Thief*

The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn't be any of this. Without words, the Führer was nothing. There would be no limping prisoners, no need for consolation or wordly tricks to make us feel better.

What good were the words?

(The Book Thief 525)

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* shares many similarities with Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: the young-girl protagonist; the highly self-conscious and emotionally involved narrator; the abundance of metareferences; the commentary on the correlations between narratives, identity, trauma and interpersonal relationships; the portrayed omnipresence of language and books. Yet with all these parallels, the two books are also very different: Liesel and Briony have little in common beyond their age and gender, and the metareferential foci of the two novels are different as well. As a result, a comparison between the two works as well as an individual analysis of Zusak's are warranted within the framework of this study.

3.2.1 Tropes, Traditions and Self-Aware Narration

To start things off, compared to *Atonement*, *The Book Thief* is far less explicit with its references to extra-compositional, real-life literary predecessors and traditions. The majority of the stolen "books" invoked in Zusak's title are, in fact, entirely fictional. Contrary to McEwan and Briony, Zusak only positions his novel within a larger literary context through the use of small, usually implicit metareferential elements. For example, on the form level, the typography and layout of the title pages as well as the partial summaries included thereon are clearly inspired by literary classics. Similarly, Liesel's reading and writing lessons – performed with the help of letters painted onto the walls of her basement – (cf. 77) invoke even older writing traditions of hieroglyphs and pictograms on cave walls.

The most explicit Zusak's Death narrator ever gets on the topic of narrative tradition is the acknowledgement of the fact that some of the story's characters are based on familiar tropes. When he³⁵ describes the mayor's wife, for example, Death does so with the following words: "You have seen her before, I'm certain. In your stories, your poems, the screens you

³⁵ I was unable to find a single explicit mention of Death's gender throughout the entirety of *The Book Thief*. However, based on a remark within the text which suggests that Death would have been called a "Saukerl" (cf. 536) – an insult previously introduced as referring specifically to men – and based on the film-adaptation's casting choice, male pronouns seem to be appropriate. The grammatical gender of the German word for death might be the reason for this.

like to watch” (153). Similarly, the sadistic Hitler Youth leader’s name, Franz Deutscher, is explicitly described as “the ultimate name for the ultimate teenage Nazi” (278). What is striking about Death’s use of tropes throughout these descriptions – especially when compared to the use of tropes in *Atonement* – is the fact that the exact origins of the employed tropes seem to be irrelevant since the narrator never refers to them. Instead, the focus of Death’s elaborations lies exclusively on the fact that his characters, like all archetypes, stand for more than themselves and are representatives of larger issues. Furthermore, while Death himself initially never suggests that the events he is narrating are fictional, the attention he draws to the highly archetypal nature of some of the elements of his story raises first questions about the truthful versus constructed nature of *The Book Thief*’s narrative.

In addition to these metareferential remarks about his characters, Zusak’s narrator, in a very traditionally metafictional manner, also constantly comments on his own process of narration. Already the multitude of asides interrupting the narrative to provide additional information or explain individual words and elements of the story can be read as implicit examples of this. After all, by interrupting the text flow – and arguably the readers’ immersion – they encourage an engagement with the respective passages and lexical items from a different perspective. Even more explicitly, however, Death also repeatedly discusses his story’s chronological structure, in particular his constant jumping back and forth across Liesel’s timeline.

For example, when Death gives a foreshadowing summary of the ten books that will impact Liesel’s story, he finishes by saying that he is getting ahead of himself (cf. 37). Likewise, when he temporarily abandons a plotline related to the girl’s foster father, Death comments: “We’ll give him seven months. Then we come for him. And, oh, how we come.” (134). Similarly, when he temporarily abandons Liesel’s plotline to describe Max Vandenburg’s journey he explains that “We move forward now, to a cold night struggle. We’ll let the book thief catch up later” (164). Finally, when Death shortly after brings Liesel’s and Max’s plotlines together, he observes that “The juggling comes to an end now, but the struggling does not. I have Liesel Meminger in one hand, Max Vandenburg in the other. Soon I will clap them together. Just give me a few pages” (175). In other words, throughout the novel, Death repeatedly employs traditional *entrancement* elements to metareferentially explain his narrative’s structure and to facilitate its understanding. Yet according to Death himself, this is not the only reason for his use of metanarrative commentary. At the beginning of the novel’s final part Death takes one last temporary jump forward and immediately announces that “Again, I offer you a glimpse of the end. Perhaps it’s to soften the blow for

later, or to better prepare *myself* for the telling” (501)³⁶. Thus Death suggests that the metanarrative comments in *The Book Thief* are also used to steer the readers’ (as well as the narrator’s own) emotions.

A final, even lengthier example providing insight into the reasons for Death’s repeated narrative time jumps can be found after he foreshadows (or “spoils”) Liesel’s best friend’s future death not even half-way into the book, two years ahead of it actually happening:

Of course, I’m being rude. I’m spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. I have given you [...] events in advance, because I don’t have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me. It chores me. I know what happens and so do you. It’s the machinations that wheel us there that aggravate, perplex, interest and astound me.

There are many things to think of.
There is much story. (253)

In other words, Death explains that a final function of his narrative’s structure is to direct the reader’s attention away from the mere facts of certain events to the circumstances and motivations leading up to them – an idea very much in-synch with mature Briony’s narratological goals portrayed in *Atonement*. Equally in accordance with Briony, Death also explicitly points out that he wants to make people experience his experiences through his story. For when at the beginning of part six of the novel he gives a summary of the events he witnessed in 1942, he immediately explains: “I could go on, but I’ve decided for now that three examples will suffice. Three examples, if nothing else, will give you the ashen taste in your mouth that defined my existence during that year” (318). Clearly, it is the shared “ashen taste” that is important to him, not the factual details of the horrors he witnessed during the war.

3.2.2 Human Languages versus a Human “Language”

This topic of sharing experiences through stories remains central throughout the entirety of *The Book Thief*, and as the novel progresses it is more and more intertwined with questions about the function of language. For language, according to Zusak’s narrative, can be both the means through which experiences are communicated and the reason why attempts at communication fail.

To portray this idea, *The Book Thief* employs a variety of frequently metareferential methods and motifs. On a purely formal, linguistic level, the author and his narrator

³⁶ For an interesting study on how this last line might in fact summarise Zusak’s whole point of including Death as a character (as well as all associated components of Magic Realism) into his novel cf. Adams, Jenni.

themselves use multiple languages to tell their story. While most of *The Book Thief* is written in English, the novel is full of individual German words and phrases, often with translations but sometimes without (cf. e.g. 28). Frequently, these “foreign” lexical items create a setting and an atmosphere of strangeness, implicitly demonstrating just how easy it is to fall prey to ‘othering’ based on language. In fact, even for readers who do understand German, the choice of words and phrases which are incorporated into *The Book Thief* still often triggers a feeling of ‘otherness’ since many of the lexical items are highly region-specific (the story is set in Bavaria) and since even common German phrases are transcribed in a way which carries dialectal traits (cf. e.g. “Was wuistz?” (101)). Finally, this idea of linguistic ‘otherness’ is ultimately emphasised by the fact that Death himself makes a point of presenting himself as an outsider to the German language. For example, when discussing the place name of Molching, the narrator explains that it is “said best by the likes of you and me as *Molking*” (33). Asides such as this, while certainly helpful to Anglophone readers, clearly position Death as linguistically – and potentially culturally and psychologically – closer to those readers than to the German characters in his story.

As mentioned before, however, *The Book Thief* does not only portray specific languages as dividing lines between people but also stresses that there are forms of “language” which can overcome such divides. Interpersonal communication specifically is shown to be able to function as a rope connecting people across any chasm, as the image of Liesel “thr[owing] some words across” (433) to her best friend after an argument suggests. This duality of language is most clearly exemplified in the following sequence of scenes depicted in chapter nine of the novel.

Early on in that chapter, Death describes the events at Stalingrad as things that “happened when there was snow and guns and the various confusions of human language” (474). Symbolically, the inability to communicate is depicted as lying at the core of war and chaos. This idea is further elaborated upon when the narrator then describes a particular battle by saying that “[t]hose who remained were firing into the blank pages in front of them. Three languages interwove. The Russian, the bullets, the German.” (475). Conflicting languages are thus once more, and this time quite literally, equated with the violence of bullets and weapons. Yet importantly, rather than focusing on the conflict between the two nations till the end, the Stalingrad scene eventually culminates in Death’s portrayal of a very basic, intuitive and human exchange between two enemy soldiers – one dying, one almost doing so – at which point Death remarks that in this moment of their connection “[t]he voices suddenly all

sounded the same” (475). Language divides, whilst existing, are thus purposefully portrayed as not unsurmountable.

This motif of overcoming language boundaries is picked up again roughly twenty pages later when Rudy and Liesel are shown to witness the crash of an Allied Forces airplane. When the two children run up to the wreckage, they find the pilot near-death and uttering what could be his final words in a language which the children do not understand (cf. 494). This once again marks the man as more than just linguistically ‘other’ and alien, and yet Rudy still immediately and actively forms a bond with the pilot. Without understanding what the man is saying, the boy chooses to place a teddy bear with him in the cockpit in an instinctively human attempt to provide the man with comfort. Moved by this wordless gesture, the soldier replies “Thank you” (495) – and while Rudy, naturally, once more does not understand the words (cf. 495), no reader would deny that they have just witnessed a meaningful exchange between the two characters. In this passage, as in the Stalingrad scene, language is once more portrayed as a barrier which simple, instinctive human behaviour can easily overcome through empathy and non-language-based communication.

3.2.3 Language and Communication Skills in Relation to Personal Identity

In addition to thus portraying the role of language and interpersonal communication within human (co-)existence, *The Book Thief* also repeatedly shows how closely verbal and communicative skills are related to individual personal identities, relationships, mental and emotional states. Zusak and his narrator, in fact, frequently use the characters’ respective skills to characterise them at different points throughout the narrative, thus further elaborating upon the significance of the skills in question. All the while, the fact that both “language” and “communication” in this context are to be understood as complex constructs and processes which go beyond the mere use of words is repeated again and again.

To give a few examples, the very different personalities of Liesel’s foster parents are first introduced to the readers through the way the two adults communicate with and around the girl. Liesel’s foster mother’s incessant cussing is directly contrasted with her foster father’s quiet nature – and whilst the woman’s violent verbal outbursts are shown to repel the newly-arrived Liesel, the man’s near word-less attempts to connect with the girl through playfulness and music are shown to form the basis for a deep bond between the two (cf. 40). Similarly, the character of the mayor’s wife is introduced as too traumatised to speak – and yet her and Liesel are capable of having meaningful exchanges in the woman’s library without the need

for words, merely through nods, gestures and facial expressions (cf. e.g. 140-141). In short, throughout all these examples, as well as through the Stalingrad and airplane crash examples described before, Zusak and his narrator again and again stress the idea that acts can be as much a form of communication as actual words, and in fact can express what words cannot – an idea most strikingly condensed into the following aside: “DEFINITION *NOT FOUND IN THE DICTIONARY*. ‘Not-leaving’: An *act* of trust and love, often *deciphered* by children.” (43, my emphasis).

In addition, the novel’s main side characters are not the only ones introduced and portrayed through their communicative skills. Instead, protagonist Liesel’s entire development is equally depicted through this theme in a way highly reminiscent of *Atonement*’s link between Briony’s personal and authorial development. Throughout *The Book Thief*, the novel’s protagonist develops from a petrified, mute girl (cf. 39-40) to a girl who on lonely nights greets the stars (cf. 51) but still does not speak at school (cf. 94), to a bedside reader who takes over that comforting role from her foster father when Max falls ill (cf. 327) or is too afraid to sleep (cf. 343), to a public reader comforting her entire neighbourhood in air-raid shelters (cf. 388-390) and during funerals (cf. 510) and braving her foster father’s letters from the front (cf. 485), to a words-juggling writer (cf. e.g. 528-532). In fact, foreshadowing Liesel’s entire development, Death describes the girl already at the end of part one as follows: “She was the book thief without words. Trust me, though, the words were on their way, and when they arrived, Liesel would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out, like the rain” (86). Similarly to McEwan’s portrayal of Briony through her writing style, Zusak thus portrays Liesel’s personal development through her increased mastery of and skill with words.

And it is not only Liesel’s positive development and growth that are thus described through her communicative skills. Instead, her personal setbacks are equally shown to impact and set back her communication skills. Most strikingly, when towards the end of the narrative, bombs quite literally destroy the girl’s entire world, the trauma – just like the initial trauma of losing her mother – is once again portrayed as a temporary loss of meaningful speech. When Liesel is pulled out of the rubble, she is rambling. Whilst her sentences are grammatically correct, they are seemingly utterly disconnected from reality. Or as Death puts it, only “[t]he girl’s mouth wander[s] on” (537).

Only as the girl begins to push through the immediate trauma does she slowly begin to regain control over her words so that when she eventually begins to find one body of a loved one after the other, she is increasingly able to express the sentiments she wishes she would

have expressed while the respective loved ones (Rudy cf. 539, Mama cf. 541, Papa cf. 542) were still alive. In her need to find the right words to say goodbye, Liesel slowly finds the strength to pull herself together rather than to let the trauma overwhelm her. Unlike Liesel's neighbour and the mayor's wife who throughout the novel are portrayed as having retreated into silence, Liesel is described by Death to have "the opposite reaction to her devastation" (549). With her world in ashes, she "spoke and spoke – to herself – well into the night" (549). Speaking, expressing, letting everything out is thus depicted as the girl's way of successfully processing her traumatic experience by putting it into words.

It is especially worth noticing hereby that Liesel is portrayed as *voicing* rather than writing down her thoughts. For whereas *Atonement* is very much a novel about the written word, in *The Book Thief* the spoken word is of highest importance. In fact, Zusak's focus on the oral transmission of information goes so far that his depiction of voices extends far beyond the typical description of personal characteristics. Instead, throughout *The Book Thief*, voices repeatedly take on a physical shape, sometimes even reaching full personification.

When Max first arrives at Liesel's door, for example, Death remarks that "the young man's voice was scraped out and handed across the dark like it was all that remained of him" (181). Similarly, when Liesel's foster father during a World War I battle gets volunteered by a friend to write letters for a commanding officer rather than to go into combat, his friend's speaking out is described as "a voice stepped out and ambled towards the sergeant. It sat at his feet, waiting for a good kicking" (185). Continuing the motif, Death later on describes Max's voice as explicitly having a "physicality [...] like friction – like a stone being gently rubbed across a large rock. It was deep in places and scratched apart in others, sometimes breaking off altogether" (225). Finally, when Max brings Liesel his book-gift and the half-asleep girl is unable to grasp his presence, Death comments that "[s]he couldn't tell exactly where the words came from. What mattered was that they reached her. They arrived and kneeled next to the bed." (246). Voices, and words for that matter, are thus shown to have a life, a presence of their own for Zusak and his Death. And through images such as these those life and presence are brought to the foreground of the readers' attention.

3.2.4 The Power of Words, Names, Labels and Poetic Language...

Considering the significant life-force *The Book Thief* assigns to voices and words, it is not surprising that in addition to using such imagery as a form of double-coded metareferential commentary on the topic, Zusak and his Death also discuss the power of words explicitly throughout the novel. In fact, this motif is one of *The Book Thief's* central themes.

Firstly, already from the start of the novel, Death as the narrator constantly draws attention to labels such as “Communist” (cf. e.g. 38) or “Jew” and “Jewish” (cf. 66). In the process, he repeatedly points out the incongruity between how inherently meaningless these words are – the child protagonist is after all unable to instinctively comprehend them – and how much unstoppable power and influence they still carry. The first label is soon acknowledged to have cost Liesel her biological father, and the second, eventually, costs her even more. The fact that an early mention of either label immediately serves as an ominous foreshadowing if not for Liesel then most definitely for the more mature and historically aware readers of the text only stresses the cultural weight infused in these words even further.

The novel’s discussion of the power of labels derives additional significance through Zusak’s chosen historical backdrop of the Hitler-era propaganda machine which the author and his narrator reference repeatedly. Already early on in *The Book Thief*, for example, Death points out that the first thing that the Hitler Youth did with new arrivals such as Liesel was to “make sure [their] *Heil Hitler* was working properly” (47). Thus the imprint of correct terminology is shown to be more important to the Hitler Youth apparatus than the imprint of actual ideology or the enforcement of practical ideals such as bodily orderliness.

Continuing this thought, bonfires organized by the Nazis to destroy “anti-German” writings (cf. e.g. 107-108) feature prominently in the novel and show that the political elite of the time acknowledged the power of words not only as part of their own propaganda but also when the words were directed against it. The announcer of the festivities surrounding the first bonfire Liesel experiences, for instance, is said to exclaim “Today is a beautiful day [...] Not only is it our great leader’s birthday, but we also stop our enemies once again. We stop them reaching into our minds...” (116). That is to say, the book-burners of the period are explicitly portrayed as doing what they do not because they consider “anti-German” words worthless, but because they acknowledge their power to affect people’s minds. This idea is immediately reiterated by Liesel’s foster father who, after Liesel saves one of the books from the fire, is said to study the title “probably wondering exactly what kind of threat this book posed to the hearts and minds of the German people” (132).

This omnipresent attitude towards words unsurprisingly soon permeates Liesel's mind and awareness as well. Consequently, once she gains access to the mayor's library, it is equally unsurprising that one of her first thoughts, according to Death, is the following:

Once, words had rendered Liesel useless, but now, when she sat on the floor [...] she felt an *innate sense of power*. It happened every time she deciphered a new word or pieced together a sentence.

She was a girl.

In Nazi Germany.

How fitting that she was discovering the power of words. (154, my emphasis)

For this power, she by then is fully aware, is central to the Nazi apparatus. Yet if the Nazis are able to use words to affect the world, then by learning to decipher and use such words, Liesel herself realises she is gaining the power to do the same.

This is especially true since, as *The Book Thief* also demonstrates, it is not only politically backed labels that have power. Instead, individually assigned labels are shown to be similarly impactful. For example, the term "coward" thrown at Liesel's foster father by his Nazi-sympathizer son is shown to have an equally strong and destructive effect (cf. 111-112). Furthermore, the word is equally depicted as being charged with meaning beyond its literal one. Young Liesel therefore once again does not understand the full meaning of the insult, yet her foster mother (and the reader) does. So much so, in fact, that she for once remains silent – an occurrence so rare that the girl's silence itself becomes highly charged with meaning.

In a next step, *The Book Thief* also points out that labels can furthermore be detrimental and highly impactful even when they are assigned to a person by him- or herself. For example, Death makes a point of noting that Max thinks of himself as a deserter for leaving his own family behind and moving in with Liesel and her foster parents: "That's right – his *desertion*, not only his escape. That's how *he* viewed it" (202, my emphasis). This private and personal label, unknown to anybody else, is consequently shown as causing Max pain even though – or possibly even exactly because – it is "merely" self-imposed.

Importantly, however, it is not only negative labels that *The Book Thief* portrays as having an impact. Zusak and his Death demonstrate the significance of labels with traditionally positive connotations as well. A good example is the scene in which the foster mother's demand that Liesel should call her "Mama" comes across as heartless while Liesel herself admits that calling her foster father "Papa" would be no problem at all (cf. 42). In other words, this passage demonstrates the strong emotional connotations both of these labels carry, and that they are more than just words designating a person who is currently raising you. Continuing this thought, shortly after, Death describes how the mere whisper of the word "Mama" to herself is enough for Liesel to "see her mother's face a hundred times in a single

afternoon” (45) and to cause her to feel miserable. The evocative power inherent in the seemingly positive label “Mama” is shown to be at least as strong and complex as that of a word such as “Communist”, “coward” or “deserter”.

Whilst thus repeatedly portraying the power of labels, Zusak and Death, however, also continuously demonstrate just how unreliable, constructed, and thus seemingly random labels can be. During his train-journey to Liesel’s foster family, for example, Max is said to muse about the fact that shaving off his beard has changed his identity as follows: “[H]e had walked out of that building a new man. In fact, he walked out German. Hang on a second, he *was* German. Or more to the point, he *had* been” (166). The label of ‘German’, in other words, while so important for the young man’s survival, is shown by *The Book Thief* to be highly fleeting and almost nonsensically arbitrary since it can be influenced by something as banal as the presence or absence of a beard.

Finally, Zusak’s Death also makes a point of re-appropriating labels to suit his own narrative purposes. In the process, he repeatedly questions if people are labelled based on who they are or whether labels *make* people into who they are. Depicting the abysmal conditions in which Max is living in hiding, for example, Death describes what little means the young man has to wash himself only to follow up this description with a dead-pan use of the anti-Semitic “The Jew was filthy” (217) trope. Similarly, just in case his portrayal of the young man’s basement living quarters is not enough to evoke the image of rats living in small, dark spaces, Death makes sure to comment explicitly that “the Jewish rat” Max had to keep going “back to his hole” (223). In other words, in both cases, the narrator draws upon anti-Semitic labels – yet only to turn them on their heads and suggest that their applicability to Max is the result of Nazi persecution rather than a reason for the Nazis to persecute him in the first place.

Similar to this portrayal of labels, *The Book Thief* additionally depicts names as words with equally impactful, condensed and complex meanings. A particularly striking example of this motif can be found in the scenes which describe how Liesel’s foster father fulfils his army duty by cleaning up certain streets after bombings. One of the sights he is repeatedly confronted with during this period is the following:

Once in a while there was a person roaming doggedly through the fog, mostly single-worded. They always shouted a name.

Sometimes it was Wolfgang.

‘Have you seen my Wolfgang?’

[...]

‘Stephanie!’

‘Hansie!’

‘Gustel! Gustel Stoboi!’ (441)

Once, the name is even “‘Rudy!’” (443). Just as with the labels discussed before, individual words are once more shown to be loaded with nigh-infinite, life-encompassing and life-changing significance. Entire people with all their complexities as well as entire interpersonal relationships are encased in one or two shouted words – not to mention that an entire nation is depicted through these words as a result of Zusak’s choice of highly regional and/or Germanic names. The fact that Liesel’s foster father eventually hears a familiar name, even though the boy it is referring to is a stranger to him, further stresses this idea of names as carriers of cultural identities. Moreover, it demonstrates how easily a mere common word can create a bond between two strangers, in this case between Liesel’s foster father and the woman looking for her Rudy. Finally, a last central example of this motif can be found in the passages which describe the captured Max being marched through town with other Jewish prisoners. According to Death, all Liesel can do at the sight of her friend is to call out his name (cf. 514), and as soon as Max hears her he does the same: “his mouth shivered as he said the word, the name, the girl. Liesel.” (514). Even more than in the previous examples, the choice of words in this description equates the name with the person it represents. The mere utterance of the name is, consequently, enough to invoke that person, to summon Liesel to Max’s (figurative) side as a source of strength and comfort.

Continuing their elaborations upon the topic of the power of words – in a manner highly reminiscent of the treatment of the same subject in *Atonement* – Zusak and his Death next draw attention to the effects and use of curse-words. When Liesel arrives at her foster parents’ home it is said that “[i]n the beginning, it was the profanity that made the greatest impact. It was so *vehement*, and prolific” (39). Just like Briony, Liesel is thus portrayed as repulsed and shocked by what she considers to be unusually harsh language. And as the novel progresses, the profanities portrayed by Zusak and Death develop an even more near-tangible, material, almost physically violent quality: When Death describes Liesel’s foster mother’s unusual way of showing her love, he says “[i]t involved bashing [the girl] with wooden spoons and words” (41); when Pfiffikus is shouting after the children who have been taunting him, he calls Liesel a “little slut”, her perception of that insult being described as “The words clobbered her in the back” (59); when Liesel gets reprimanded by her foster mother for getting her clothes dirty, Death explains that “[t]he word *Saumensch* featured heavily in the administration of punishment. She [the foster mother] made mincemeat out of her [Liesel].³⁷” (61); an argument

³⁷ This last line thus drawing further attention to the literal, corporeal meaning of the expletive “*Saumensch*” which in English roughly translates as ‘pork human’.

between the foster mother and father is described as her using “uppercut words” (74) and him “counter-punch[ing]” (75), with Death thus using lexis normally reserved for physical fights to depict this verbal one; similarly, when Liesel gets into a schoolyard fight, cursing just like her foster mother, it is said that “[h]er voice, too, was able to scratch” the target of her rage (83). In short, in all these examples, the narrative’s imagery is centred around the idea that curse-words exert a physical force, bashing, clobbering, mincing, cutting, punching and scratching their victims.

According to *The Book Thief*, this physical, violent quality of words is furthermore not only inherent to curses. When at one point in the novel Liesel’s foster father is shown to have an epiphany, his exclamation is described by Death as “his voice was like a fist, freshly banged on the table” (132). That is to say, any emotional force carried through words is portrayed as comparable to a physical force. In addition, when the produce-stealing children described later in the text are running away from a farmer, their leader shouts one word which Death describes as follows: “It was his next word, however, that frightened. He called it out as if he’d already been attacked with it. His mouth ripped open. The word flew out, and the word was axe.” (172). Not only does Death in this passage thus explicitly draw another parallel between a word and a physical attack, but the expression “mouth ripped open” when combined with the consequent image of a flying axe, further solidifies the violent imagery unfolding in front of the readers’ eyes. And the brutal associations do not end there.

When Max at one point imagines himself fist-fighting with Hitler, the fantasy eventually culminates in the latter removing his gloves and “finish[ing] him” (264) by giving a hate speech, thus once again enforcing the idea of the deathly power of propaganda. The most violent verbal interaction in the entire novel, however, is arguably perpetrated by Liesel herself when the girl attacks the mayor’s wife after the latter’s husband decides he cannot afford to have Liesel and her foster mother do their washing anymore. Furious, Liesel assaults the woman in what could as well be a physical manner, throwing the woman’s trauma in her face and criticising her for the way she is living her life: “[Liesel’s] voice, though shaken, hooked at the woman’s throat. [...] She sprayed her words directly into the woman’s eyes. [...] Now she became spiteful. More spiteful and evil than she thought herself capable. The injury of words. Yes, the brutality of words.” (272). And the result of this word-lashing is described as equally physical: on the one hand, the mayor’s wife is described as “battered and beaten up [...] Liesel could see it on her face. Blood leaked from her nose and licked at her lips. Her eyes had blackened. Cuts had opened up and a series of wounds were rising to the surface of her skin. All from the words. From Liesel’s words.” (273); on the other, Death

suggests that the entire “glass casing of Molching had now been shattered” (273), thus portraying Liesel’s words as impactful enough to wound structures as well as people.

Moreover, even when *The Book Thief* discusses words of a less violent nature, they are still frequently shown to have a physical, tangible effect. For example, Death describes words as having the quite literal ability to get under a person’s skin, as the following passage describing Liesel’s foster father’s interaction with a newspaper containing the news that Hitler has taken Poland demonstrates:

On his way home, he picked up a discarded newspaper, and rather than stopping to shove it between paint tins in his cart, he folded it up and slipped it beneath his shirt. By the time he made it home and removed it, his sweat had drawn the ink onto his skin. The paper landed on the table but the news was also stapled to his chest. A tattoo. Holding his shirt open, he looked down in the unsure kitchen light. (79)

In other words, Zusak and his narrator once more portray words not only as capable of affecting people’s minds (as in the case of propaganda) but as being powerful enough to even cause physical ripples in people’s lives. And while sometimes these portrayed ripples are merely metaphorical (as in the case of the bruised mayor’s wife), there are also repeated examples, such as this last one, of Death describing actual bodily reactions to the use of words. Furthermore, *The Book Thief’s* entire Max narrative also demonstrates that the utterance of certain words can be factually dangerous, for if Liesel were to tell anybody about the young man living in her basement, this would have literally fatal consequences for him and possibly even for Liesel’s foster parents (cf. 210-211).

In addition to thus portraying the extensive power inherent to words, Zusak and his narrator also depict the ways in which the effect of such words can be transformed through re-appropriation. The author’s own implicit stylistic feature employed in his portrayal of labels is thus introduced as an active metareferential subject within the narrative itself. For example, observing how Liesel has begun to identify herself with her foster mother’s favourite swearword ‘Saumensch’ in a neutral, non-pejorative way just because she has heard it used in connection with herself so often, her foster father is portrayed as taking the re-evaluation of the term even further by adopting it as his loving nick-name for the girl. This re-appropriation culminates in the ultimate expression of the highly positive and emotional bond between him and Liesel in their bedtime ritual exchange of “‘Goodnight, *Saumensch*.’ ‘Goodnight, Papa.’” (73). This familial bond is soon extended to include the girl’s best friend Rudy as can be seen from his use of “‘Dear Saumensch’” (100) to address a letter to Liesel. Finally, as the story progresses, even the girl’s foster mother is shown to use the expression lovingly, for example

when praising Liesel for doing something right by saying “Good girl, *Saumensch*.” (220). With that, for the protagonists, the word’s meaning is changed for good.

A second significant example of re-appropriation depicted in *The Book Thief* is Max’s initially merely practical and eventually highly symbolic use of his copy of *Mein Kampf*. Firstly, together with his shaved beard and a fake identity card, the book is depicted as an integral part of Max’s passing for German during his train journey: “Look proud, he advised himself. You cannot look afraid. Read the book. Smile at it. It’s a great book – the greatest book you’ve ever read.” (164) Secondly, even while the contents of the book utterly repulse Max, the title is shown to resonate with the young man: “*Mein Kampf*. My struggle.” (166), or possibly even ‘my fight’ – these words apply to Max’s experience as much as the text containing them is one of the triggers for it. Finally, when Max uses the whitewashed, newly blank pages of the book for his own writing, the re-appropriation of the text is complete. As Max’s copy of the text is what makes the creation of his own literary work possible in the first place, *Mein Kampf* ironically serves as the young Jewish man’s “saviour” for the third time.

Mein Kampf is furthermore not the only narrative *The Book Thief* shows as capable of saving lives. In fact, this motif keeps reappearing again and again throughout the novel. Already early on, for example, Death remarks that “words and writing actually saved [Liesel’s foster father’s] life once. Or at least, words and a man who taught him the accordion” (69). This statement is mirrored in the experience of said accordion teacher’s son, Max, who himself later on is described as owing his life to “some reading and writing, and a book called *The Shoulder Shrug*” (221). Finally, her love for writing(s) is also quite literally what saves Liesel’s life during the bombing which kills her family since the girl escapes her parents’ and best friend’s fate by going into the basement to revise her book while everyone else is asleep in their beds (cf. 502-503). And even when she is eventually freed from the rubble, Liesel is still described as “holding desperately on to the words who had saved her life” (503).

What is particularly striking about the wording of this last sentiment is Death’s use of the pronoun “who” as a means to evoke the idea of words as corporeal, living beings – an idea which clearly mirrors *The Book Thief*’s previously described motif of imbuing voices with personalities. As proven by further passages such as the following: “The scrawled words of practice stood magnificently on the wall by the stairs, jagged and childlike and sweet. They looked on as both the hidden Jew and the girl slept, hand to shoulder” (247), words for Death and Zusak, be they written or uttered by voices, have undeniable anthropomorphic characteristics.

All these hitherto described elements, while never as elaborate as *Atonement's* poetological discussions, still draw constant attention to the power of words on the narrative level of Zusak's novel, both through story elements and through Death's repeated use of metaphors from highly metareferential lexical fields. Yet *The Book Thief* is also full of even more subliminal form-based metareferential commentary as Zusak's own choices of language and style equally contribute to the motif. For example, Death's frequently poetic, colourful and creative use of words is in itself a testament to language's endless potential. Already the following excerpt from the second page of the actual narrative serves as a perfect case in point:

The question is, what colour will everything be at the moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?
Personally, I like a chocolate-coloured sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every colour I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavours, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. (14)

The unusual choice of a brown colour for the sky, the link between colour and flavour, that last image of “a sky to slowly suck on” – right from the start, Zusak and his Death make a show of combining words into unusual and new patterns. Furthermore, they continue to do so throughout the whole novel: an Aryan woman is described as having “even [a] breath that smelled like *Heil Hitler*” (55); Pfiffikus is described as “He was a delicate frame. He was white hair. He was a black raincoat, brown pants, decomposing shoes, and a mouth – and what a mouth it was.” (58); the mayor's wife's smile is described as “the appearance now of a bruise” (142); a war scene is described as “There is air like plastic, a horizon like setting glue. There are skies manufactured by people, punctured and leaking, and there are soft, coal-coloured clouds, beating, like black hearts.” (319).

This short list, whilst nowhere near complete, already demonstrates the unusual nature of a lot of Death's use of imagery. On the one hand, Death's language is thus used by Zusak to characterise his narrator by portraying him as an unusual being with an unusual way of perceiving the world (cf. 13). On the other hand, however, all these phrases also serve as implicit, double-coded metareferential commentary on the power of words to innovate and to elicit emotions. Death's descriptions are, in fact, a prime example of how poetic language can most certainly become metareferentially salient as a result of its narrative context. In a different work, appearing with a lower frequency, surrounded by fewer additional metareferential elements, all these descriptions could easily be read as a mere stylistic quirk of the author/narrator. Yet within the thematic focus of *The Book Thief*, within a novel which explicitly discusses the beauty and potential of words, the surprising nature and beauty of the

narrator's own language plays directly into the wider metareferential network established in the readers' minds and re-affirms its motifs. In the process, Death's words, however, also always form fully-functional descriptions. Their stylistic divergence is never as radical as to start breaking grammar, coherence or all sense of illusion in a traditionally Postmodernist fashion (cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 380-381). Instead, Death's linguistic flourishes constitute a perfect example of double-coded metareference.

In addition to using the narrator's language to implicitly demonstrate the poetic power of words, Zusak furthermore often employs it to spin a similar cognitive web of text- and communication-related imagery as the one spun in *Atonement*. From describing an individual battle as a "conversation of bullets" (183) to describing his reaping of souls after the bombing of Cologne as

By the time I was finished, the sky was yellow, *like burning newspaper*. If I looked closely, I could see the *words*, reporting *headlines*, commentating on the progress of the war and so forth. How I'd have loved to pull it all down, to *screw up the newspaper sky and toss it away*. My arms ached and I couldn't afford to burn my fingers. There was still so much work to be done. (345, my emphasis),

Death's continuous drawing from the lexical fields of words, documents and conversations fashions a thread which ties the whole world of *The Book Thief* together.

A final form-based contributor to the novel's linguistic web are Zusak's typographical and structural choices which constantly foreground the medial features of the novel. In addition to the design of the multitude of title-pages mentioned before, *The Book Thief* also uses font and layout to highlight Death's numerous asides. While their main narrative function is to let the narrator share additional facts, theories, thoughts and comments, their bold type and their set-apart, central placement on the page further add to the interruption of the flow of the story and to an increased metareferential awareness in the readers. Finally, the asides are further supplemented by smaller and more scattered typographical anomalies such as irregular indents or line breaks (cf. e.g. 81, 123) which are used to highlight individual words or phrases and to add meaning through rhythm and stress. In the process, the complexities and potential of poetic language are once again brought to the foreground of the reader's attention.

3.2.5 ... and the Difficulty and Importance of Finding the Right Ones

As strong as Zusak's focus on the power of language and communication is, *The Book Thief* also contains, especially in the final chapters, many scenes in which finding the right words is shown to be difficult. Sometimes, the difficulties are only temporary, such as when Liesel

sees Max being driven through the street and Death describes how “[h]er voice trailed off and fell away, inside. She had to re-find it – reaching far down, to learn to speak again and call out his name.” (513). More often, however, the difficulties persist. When Liesel is caught stealing her final book from the mayor’s wife, for example, and the two have their first proper conversation, while many things are shared, the process is described as far from easy-going. Eventually, Liesel is left not knowing what to say: “There was an itch to leave then, but also a peculiar obligation to stay. She moved to speak, but the available words were too many and too fast. There were several attempts to snatch at them” (467), but those attempts remain unsuccessful. The “too many and too fast” words remain unspoken.

Similarly, when Liesel’s neighbour soon after, heartbroken by the death of her son, freezes and does not want to go into the bomb shelter, the girl is once again portrayed as being at a loss for words. Liesel knows that she has “a multitude of words and sentences [...] at her fingertips” (490): “Frau Holtzapfel, we have to go.”, “Frau Holtzapfel, we’ll die if we stay here.”, “You still have one son left.”, “Everyone’s waiting for you.”, “The bombs will blow your head off.” (490-491) – yet all these sentences, whilst true, are also nigh-truisms, utterly devoid of meaning for the traumatised neighbour. Finally, Liesel goes for the last option that comes into her head: “If you don’t come, I’ll stop coming to read to you, and that means you’ve lost your only friend” (491) – but even this specific, personal and purposefully violent choice ends up having no effect on the woman. The power and moving force of words is thus portrayed to have limits after all.

Communication is also depicted as difficult for Frau Holtzapfel’s equally traumatised surviving son. When he first returns home from the front, the young man is depicted as having difficulties to speak with anyone. His mere *attempt* to share his experiences at his brother’s deathbed is consequently portrayed as miraculous (cf. 473) – yet even this miracle ends in a failed communication as the man repeatedly misjudges what he should and should not say (cf. 473-474) until he, eventually, simply tries to “bury [his wrong words] beneath some other words” (474). From there on, throughout the rest of the novel, the young man’s survivor’s guilt – a guilt he remains unable to express – keeps eating at him until he finally commits suicide. And Liesel, who wants to help him, never finds the right words to prevent it. As Death comments:

How do you console a man who has seen such things? Could you tell him the Führer was proud of him, that the Führer loved him for what he did in Stalingrad? How could you even dare? You can only let him do the talking. The dilemma, of course, is that such people save their most important words for after, when the surrounding humans are unlucky enough to find them. A [suicide] note, a sentence, even a question, or a letter, like on Himmel Street in July 1943. (507-508)

Thus according to *The Book Thief*, after some traumatic experiences, neither the traumatised nor the people trying to help them are capable of bridging the divide through words. The fact that Liesel in contrast chooses to speak and speak all night after the bombing that kills her family is thus only further proof of the special relationship she has with words.

Yet even in less dramatic and traumatic situations, the novel shows that words are too often left unsaid. For example, when her foster mother presents Liesel with the book Max has left behind for her, Liesel embraces her but is not capable of putting her feelings into words: “[t]here was also a great longing to tell Rosa Hubermann that she loved her. It’s a shame she didn’t say it.” (449). Similarly, when Liesel increasingly becomes aware of her love for Rudy she cannot find the words to tell him this: “Restricted as she was from speaking, she wanted him to kiss her” (522) – but Rudy, never knowing her feelings, never does. When Liesel one month later finds the boy’s dead body after the bombing, her previously awkwardly held back feelings finally flow out of her in the form of words. She similarly for the first time calls her foster mother “Mama” upon finding the latter’s dead body in the rubble, too. In both cases, the words come too late (cf. 539, 541).

In addition to all these examples of failed verbal communication, *The Book Thief* also demonstrates that the difficulty of finding the right words is not only confined to speaking on the spot. Letters, which – just as in *Atonement* – play a central part in Zusak’s novel, are often shown to suffer from the exact same problems. For example, the first letter Liesel’s foster father writes home from the front is described by Death as follows: “A COMPLETE LETTER HOME. To my dear Rosa and Liesel, everything is fine here. I hope you are both well. With Love, Papa.” (439) At first glance, the word “complete” in the heading of this aside is thus highly ironic. After all, considering the terrible experiences that have been left out of this written communication, there is nothing (factually) “complete” about this letter at all. Yet arguably, letters from the front – just like Death’s (and Briony’s) writing – are not about factual completion. They are signs of life, a way for soldiers to express that they are thinking of their families, a way for them to keep interpersonal bonds alive and at the forefront of their battered minds. Looking at this type of letter from this perspective, Liesel’s foster father’s communication actually does cover all of these aspects completely. And by labelling the aside as “A Complete Letter Home”, Zusak and his Death actively and metareferentially draw the reader’s attention to this fact by asking for a resolution of the seeming discrepancy.

Whilst this interpretation of the letter’s purpose would already exonerate the shortness of Hans Hubermann’s communication, *The Book Thief* further defends the man by portraying the limited length of the text not as an example of a character refusing to communicate but as the

result of overcoming a difficulty to communicate in the first place. For the foster father's writing process leading up to the letter in question is described as follows:

A few hours later [after a particularly emotionally draining bombing-aftermath], when he'd washed and eaten and thrown up, he attempted to write a detailed letter home. His hands were uncontrollable, forcing him to make it short. If he could bring himself, the remainder would be told verbally, when and if he made it home. [and he does cf. 498]

To my dear Rosa and Liesel, he began.

It took many minutes to write those six words down. (443)

Just like Liesel and unlike all the side characters previously discussed, Hans Hubermann is thus portrayed to push through his trauma by putting words on paper even if it is difficult. The *physical* effort involved in something as seemingly simple as letter-writing is once again particularly brought to the readers' attention in the process, as is the sheer force required to keep communicating after a traumatic experience.

This idea that it is crucial to keep trying to find and voice the right words no matter how gruelling the process is one of the central themes of *The Book Thief*. The novel, even whilst depicting the difficulties of communication, always stresses how they are outweighed by the rewards for overcoming them. One of the most salient passages in that respect is once more the portrayal of captured Max's march through town. As explained before, the situation is described as so dire and traumatic for both Liesel and Max that it would be only natural for either of them to assume that words in that moment would be futile since they cannot stop what is happening. Yet once Liesel "re-finds" her voice, once the two call out each other's names (cf. 513-514), and once Liesel begins to quote passages from Max's book (cf. 515-516), the two friends are shown to successfully re-establish a meaningful connection and to be able to provide each other with comfort. Specifically, Death describes Liesel's perspective as follows:

Somewhere inside her were the souls of words. They climbed out and stood beside her [...] The words were given across from the girl to the Jew. They climbed onto him. [...] Hot tears fought for room in her eyes and she would not let them out. Better to stand resolute and proud. Let the words do all of it. (515-516)

Speaking and sharing words is thus depicted as a form of defiance. In stark contrast to the loving yet mellow portrayal of instinctive, non-verbal acts of communication and humanity described before, this passage stresses that, within the right context, the actual articulation of thoughts and words is essential.

3.2.6 The Roles and Functions of Books

Unsurprisingly therefore, books as a means for such (self-)expression constitute a central topic within *The Book Thief*. Firstly, however, Zusak's novel also portrays a variety of other roles texts can play in people's lives. For example, similarly to *Atonement*, *The Book Thief* also draws attention to the idea that people's thoughts and linguistic choices can be influenced by the books they have read. After all, Liesel is shown on multiple occasions to remember, use and comment on quotes from books whilst making her own experiences (cf. e.g. 479, 523). And yet, this particular functional aspect of literature is not one of the main foci of Zusak's attention.

Much more central, by contrast, is the idea of books as items and/or symbols which can provide mental support.³⁸ Already early on in the novel, in a passage foreshadowing later events, Death introduces this idea of books and writing(s) as anchors or lifelines through the following description of Liesel's thoughts upon emerging from her bombed home clutching her "most precious item" (24), her self-written book:

Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. [...] She was dying for it – the safety, the home of it – but she could not move. Also, the basement no longer existed. It was part of the mangled landscape. [...]

She dropped the book.

She kneeled.

The book thief howled. (23)

It is thus immediately clear from this very early excerpt that Liesel's writing will eventually serve her as a refuge and safe haven amidst the traumatic experiences of her life – an idea very similar to the one embodied by Briony. Only the shock of utter destruction is then shown as being strong enough to "mangle" this sacred space and to render it, at least temporarily, meaningless. As Liesel consequently drops the book which both "had saved her life" (503) and by nature of being her autobiography contains her life, and as the girl subsequently hits the ground at the same time as the book does, it is her entire sense of self that is portrayed as falling apart, reducing the otherwise eloquent book thief to a howling animal.

Yet strikingly, even as Zusak and Death thus acknowledge that books and concepts of home, self and personal narrative can lose their meaning for an individual in the face of trauma, they also repeatedly point out that such discarded books and narratives can still impact the lives of others meaningfully. The mayor's wife, for example, even though she herself has given up on reading, is portrayed as still capable of realising that the books in her

³⁸ For a fascinating study analysing Zusak's text from the specific perspective of bibliotherapy cf. Abate.

library might be useful to Liesel (cf. e.g. 142). And true enough, as *The Book Thief* demonstrates, without access to the mayor's library, Liesel's life would certainly have developed very differently. Similarly, when Liesel herself abandons her book after the bombing, it does not remain discarded for long. Instead, it is picked up by Death himself and thus gives life to the entire *The Book Thief* narrative. For as Zusak's narrator points out already at the beginning of the novel, once he acquires it, Death cannot stop re-reading Liesel's story "marvel[ling] at what the girl saw and how she survived" (24).

Two further functions of books suggested by *The Book Thief* in the process are their ability (1) to allow readers to partake in the life of others, and (2) to consequently open up new worlds, insights, perspectives and experiences to the readers. These new insights and perspectives in turn are shown to enrich the readers' own views and experiences by expanding the readers' horizons and by enriching their cognitive networks. In regards to his perusal of Liesel's story, Death eventually points out that "the best [he] can do" is to "watch [her story] fall into line with everything else [he] spectated during that time" (24). In other words, while Death – just like all readers – is unable to change anything about Liesel's tragic life story, he still suggests that meaning can be derived from it through learning from and contextualisation of the experiences contained within it.

This idea of the importance of passing on experiences by passing on stories is central to the entirety of *The Book Thief*. In the novel, similarly to McEwan, Zusak repeatedly stresses the seemingly limitless potential of narratives to carry ideas and experiences across time and space. In fact, even in a world full of bombs and Nazi bonfires, *The Book Thief* portrays not only narratives but even books as nigh impossible to destroy. They are kept safe in libraries; they are collected by Death himself and carried across time; and even the book burnings are revealed to frequently perpetuate instead of to destroy the narratives contained therein. For Death explains that the Nazis' love for bonfires only "gave people who were partial to books the opportunity to get their hands on certain publications that they otherwise wouldn't have" (89).

Still, even with this highly symbolic portrayal of books as nigh immortal and transcendent, it is important to note in the context of *The Book Thief*'s wider metareferential complex that the novel never fully neglects the physical aspects and characteristics of its written texts. In fact, as Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario has pointed out, Zusak's text outright "celebrates the tactile nature of bibliophily" (104, my emphasis). For example, from the beginning of the novel, Death always makes a point of describing the covers of the books Liesel steals (cf. e.g. 31-32, 90). Furthermore, when Liesel first gets access to the mayor's

library she spends her whole initial visit just enjoying the *sight* of the full shelves as well as the possibility of running her fingers over the books' spines: "It sounded like an instrument", Death describes, "or the notes of running feet. She used both hands. She raced them [...] and when she eventually stopped and stood in the middle of the room, she spent many minutes looking from the shelves to her fingers and back again." (141). This multi-sensory experience is equally essential to Liesel's first reading of Max's self-made booklet:

The pages crackled. Just slightly. One edge of them curled into the floor. [...] She reached down and picked them up, listening to the paper as it rippled in her early-morning hands. [...] As she turned them, the pages were noisy, like static around the written story. [...] There were the erased pages of *Mein Kampf*, gagging, suffocating under the paint as they turned. (246)

Finally, Liesel is also described as carrying one of her stolen books with her because "[s]he like[s] to feel it in her hand. Either the smooth spine or the rough edges of paper" (310). In short, *The Book Thief* – much more so than *Atonement* – is not only a novel about narratives and cultural and personal stories, but it is also a novel about *books* as such, as corporeal objects.

Furthermore, books are not the only text-containing objects portrayed throughout *The Book Thief's* narrative. In fact, the novel is filled to the brim with references to a variety of written text forms. For example – in addition to all the letters and newspapers already mentioned – on his train journey across the country, Max is depicted as armed with a book, an identity card and a map (cf. 146-147); the instructions for his journey are said to have been delivered to him through letters (cf. 203); and the entire journey is the result of an address scribbled on a note (cf. 202). Continuing the motif, Liesel is shown to search garbage bins for newspapers and crosswords she can bring Max to help him pass the time in the basement (cf. 229). In fact, Death describes that Liesel "could never dampen the feeling of victory each time she found a *Molching Express*, or any other publication. Finding a newspaper was a good day. If it was a paper in which the crossword wasn't done, it was a great day" (257). In other words, in this world in which Max is deprived of everything, printed words in combination with the communal spirit of Liesel are shown to be his only escape.

Of course, even with all these references to other forms of texts, the most central text type referenced in *The Book Thief* remains the book. Especially the ten "stolen" books which form the backbone of Liesel's life and development are equally central to Zusak's novel structure. Death summarises the girl's "illustrious career" as a book thief as follows:

I should hasten to admit, however, that there was a considerable hiatus between the first stolen book and the second. Another noteworthy point is that the first was stolen from snow, and the second from fire. Not to omit that others were also given to her. All up, she owned fourteen books, but she saw her story as being made up predominantly of ten of them. Of those ten, six were stolen, one showed up at the kitchen table, two were made for her by a hidden Jew, and one was delivered by a soft, yellow-dressed afternoon.

When she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started not just to mean something, but everything. Was it when she first set eyes on the room with shelves and shelves of them? Or when Max Vandenburg arrived on Himmel Street carrying handfuls of suffering and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*? Was it reading in the shelters? The last parade to Dachau? Was it *The Word Shaker*? Perhaps there would never be a precise answer as to when and where it occurred. (37)

And this passage, which can be found merely twenty or so pages into the text, strikingly foreshadows all turning points crucial to Liesel's story. Consequently, it also provides an implicit index for the entirety of *The Book Thief*'s narrative which, in accordance with Liesel's view of her own life, is divided into ten parts, each named after one of the ten books which make up the girl's story.

As hinted in this early paragraph, Liesel finds her first ever book in the snow, more specifically in the snow near her baby-brother's grave, where it has fallen out of a gravedigger-assistant's pocket. It is described as black with silver writing on the cover (cf. 31-32) and thus the reader might initially be misled to believe it to be a bible. Once Liesel's foster father reads the title for her, however, it turns out to be *The Gravedigger's Handbook*. This clash between the readers' expectation and the reality of the book serves as a symbol for the way in which death and more precisely burials are generally perceived in Liesel's world: despite the presence of a priest, there is nothing spiritual about the activity; it is just a chore to be completed as efficiently as possible. In contrast, for Liesel, the book is portrayed to actually *have* a spiritual meaning even *after* she learns of its contents. Since the girl is unable to read, the book is not treasured by her because of its words anyway (cf. 45, 70) but because of what it represents. As Death explains, it is important to Liesel because it is her last link to her dead baby-brother (cf. 45).

Liesel saves her second book, *The Shoulder Shrug*, from a Nazi bonfire. Death describes the event as particularly important for the whole story because "when the book thief stole her second book, not only were there many factors involved in her hunger to do so, but the act of stealing it triggered the crux of what was to come" (89). Therefore, a closer look at these factors serving as catalysts is warranted.

Firstly, even at this early point in her life, Liesel's relationship with books is already a highly complex one. While the two children's books she receives from her foster parents for Christmas in recognition of her growing literacy are portrayed as filling her with some of the

strongest joy she has ever experienced (cp. 91, 94), this joy is also immediately depicted as unsustainable. Her parents simply do not have the financial means to reliably satisfy Liesel's desire for new reading material on a regular basis. And since the girl's reading experiences at school are charged with highly negative emotions, borrowing books from there is equally unthinkable (cf. 93-94). Thus stunted in her development, Liesel is then confronted with the idea of the book burnings – an event specifically designed to further withhold books from people. No wonder this confrontation further fans the flames of her desire and sparks her act of stealthy defiance.

In addition, the book burning itself also demonstrates to the girl for the first time the power texts and words can have within society in general, beyond providing personal satisfaction. The propaganda-permeated event is in fact as eye-opening for Liesel as the fountain scene is for Briony. As a result of the hateful proclamations against Jews and communists, which accompany the book burning, Liesel for the first time makes the connection between Hitler, the dangerous label "Kommunist" (a word she had heard before but of which she had never understood the meaning), and the loss of her biological family (cf. 117-119): "The word *communist* + a large bonfire + a collection of dead letters [she wrote to her mother] + the suffering of her mother + the death of her brother = the Führer" (120). Furthermore, as Liesel processes this epiphany and exclaims that she hates the Führer, the slap she immediately receives by her otherwise gentle foster father together with a warning about just how dangerous the words she has just uttered are, fully cements her image of words as so powerful that they can be deadly (cf. 121-122).

Finally, watching the people she now recognises as responsible for her family members' deaths equally attempt to destroy books causes Liesel to form an even closer bond with the objects thrown on the pyre. On the one hand, she sees the burnt books as victims of Hitler's destructive machinery, just like her parents and brother. On the other hand, the books she finds to have survived the flames provide her with her first proof that Nazi destruction can be escaped. Discovering these "small section[s] of *living material*" (125, my emphasis), these "[s]urvivors" (125) "pok[ing] their noses out" (126) from the ashes, "unhurt" (126), Liesel picks up the one closest to her and hides it underneath her uniform in an act of defiance which further demonstrates her growing identification with these increasingly anthropomorphised objects. Carrying it, the text explains, makes her feel the book heat up again as if igniting from the inside, burning her chest (cf. 127). *The Book Thief* thus quite literally depicts the power of narratives to ignite symbolic fires in our chests. Specifically, Liesel's second stolen book ignites the flame of the girl's personal rebellion against the Nazis. When Liesel

eventually shows her foster father the book and asks him whether he will tell on her, Death describes her actions as follows: “She brandished it in the air, as if waving a gun” (133) – the image of a rebel leader brandishing his weapon as a threat to the establishment is thus evoked by Zusak’s narrator.

The third book which impacts Liesel’s life – in this case without her even opening it – is *Mein Kampf*. Brought into her home by Max, the book is already significant by being a manifesto of the Nazi ideology which shapes her life. Furthermore, it is however also one of the safety measures which make it possible for Max to equally enter and shape Liesel’s life. Finally, by providing Max with whitewashed paper for his own book, Max’s specific copy of *Mein Kampf* plays an even more central role in the girl’s development. Even while Liesel’s interaction with this particular work is rather limited, *The Book Thief* still successfully uses the text to demonstrate two central qualities of the medium in question: its physicality as well as its physicality-transcending role as a vehicle for society-shaping discourse.

The fourth book important for Liesel’s development is another work she is gifted. Whilst a book she receives from her foster parents for her twelfth birthday is once again appreciated but barely impactful (cf. 229), the text she receives from Max soon after is what really makes a difference to the girl’s life. Written by Max himself onto the white-washed paper of his *Mein Kampf* copy as a response to Liesel hugging him, the thirteen-page booklet called *The Standover Man* is *The Book Thief*’s most striking example of re-appropriation. Through it, in addition to physically transforming the pages of *Mein Kampf*, Max also transforms the image of people standing and towering above others. Whilst normally linked to threat and danger, in Max’s story the image is re-coded as something positive, as a symbol of love referring to Liesel’s stance whilst watching over Max (cf. 233-246). In the end, through both of these re-appropriations, *Mein Kampf* – a book written to (amongst other things) divide Germans and Jews on multiple levels – is transformed into the first verbal acknowledgement, expression and documentation of the strong bond between Max and Liesel which forms the core of a lot of the girl’s childhood experiences.

While the fourth book thus stands for interpersonal bonding and an emergent communal spirit, the fifth book in Liesel’s story is the result of, as well as at the basis for, conflict. It is furthermore the first text the girl actually steals. Specifically, *The Whistler* is a crime novel Liesel keeps reading at the mayor’s house. Once the girl’s and her foster mother’s services are rejected, the mayor’s wife tries to give Liesel the book as a parting gift but the latter is too angry to accept the gesture. Not wanting to “be bought” she throws the book at the mayor’s wife’s feet (cf. 272-273) only to steal it shortly after for the specific purpose of experiencing

victory (cf. 293). As Death puts it, “[s]he wouldn’t tolerate having it given to her by a lonely, pathetic old woman. Stealing it, on the other hand, seemed a little more acceptable. Stealing it, in a sick kind of sense, was like earning it.” (297). In other words, hurt by the mayor’s wife, Liesel steals her first book in an attempt to regain some of her own dignity and power and arguably to regain some control over her own narrative as well, “preserv[ing] her ‘self’ during the chaos of war” (Ceccio and Ceccio 51) in the process.

Furthermore, the significance of the fifth book does not end with it being another act of rebellion and defiance. Instead, it also forms the core of a series of events central both to Liesel’s relationship with Rudy and to her personal identity. When Liesel chooses to steal the book, she does so instead of stealing food as she had promised her starving best friend (cf. 299-301). And the fact that Rudy never complains on the one hand indicates the strength of the boy’s feelings for the girl, but on the other also shows that the two children are slowly growing up and reaching a stage of development in which they are acknowledging that certain things, concepts and actions are more important than their base physical needs. Both these ideas are immediately reinforced when soon after the theft Rudy jumps into a freezing river to save and return the book to Liesel after a confrontation with a local bully without any consideration for his own health and safety.

Admittedly, all throughout these passages *The Whistler* could easily have been replaced with any other item for the book itself is not what is of value to either of the children. Still, the fact that Zusak does use a book for these scenes adds to *The Book Thief*’s overall metareferential message which establishes all books as potential carriers of meaning and ideas more important than food, as well as as potential sources for (in this case Liesel’s) personal growth and further development of abstract, ideological thinking. Finally, the sequence triggered by the theft of the fifth book is also what eventually leads to Liesel’s nickname and *The Book Thief*’s own title. For once the children return after their experiences, Rudy is described by Death to “brand[Liesel] with her title” as he parts from her with the words “Goodnight, book thief” (302).

Liesel acquires her sixth book once again by stealing it from the mayor’s library, only this time it is not revenge she has in mind. Instead, Liesel simply wants a new book to read to the ill and unconscious Max. Consequently, she breaks into the library and this time chooses *The Dream Carrier* because the name reminds her both of Max’s and of her own nightmares, and of the bond they have formed over them (cf. 336). “It’s a new one, Max. Just for you.” (337), she announces, thus for the first time actively committing theft as an act of love and hope rather than as a form of anti-establishment transgression. Through Liesel’s sixth

important book Zusak in other words further develops the theme of reading out loud to each other as a communal bonding experience.

The seventh book to have an impact on Liesel's life is a copy of *The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus* which the mayor's wife leaves out for the girl in an act of reconciliation. While the narrative never explicitly shows Liesel making use of her new book, Death himself increasingly keeps using dictionary-based asides throughout the subsequent part of the novel to convey Zusak's related metareferential message. Already before Liesel receives the book, there is a first aside giving the "DUDEN DICTIONARY MEANING" and "related words" of a German word, in this case of "Zufriedenheit – happiness" (366) when describing the last happy and peaceful days Liesel experiences before the bombs begin to fall. The next Duden-aside gives the definition of the word "Verzeihung – forgiveness" (376) when Liesel reads the mayor's wife's letter. This is followed by definitions of "Angst – fear" (383) when Liesel and her neighbours spend their first night in a bomb shelter, of "Wort – word" (390) when Liesel finishes reading out loud to her neighbours for the first time, and of "Gelegenheit – opportunity" (393) when a neighbour hires Liesel to read to her in private. The next word explained is "Elend – misery" (397) when a mass of starving Jewish prisoners is marched through town on their way to Dachau. The second-but-last definition is that of "*Schweigen – silence*: the absence of sound or noise. Related words: quiet, calmness, peace." (404) when Liesel walks in on her stock-still foster parents after Max has had to leave – a definition which Death immediately rejects with the words "Now more than ever, 33 Himmel Street was a place of silence, and it did not go unnoticed that the *Duden Dictionary* was completely and utterly mistaken, especially with its related words. Silence was not quiet or calm, and it was not peace." (405). The final definition given is ultimately that of "Nachtrauern – regret" (408), which is what Liesel's foster father has to live with every day after his instinctive act of trying to help one Jewish prisoner jeopardizes Max's safety and forces him to leave.

What is striking about Zusak's use of all these definitions and asides is the intricate nature of the relationship between words and their meanings, which is portrayed thereby. Traditionally, as Joseph F. and Cathy M. Ceccio have pointed out, dictionaries and thesauri are meant to hold the "keys to understanding" (53). Yet as Liesel with the help of her seventh book learns more complex words for more complex concepts, she is repeatedly confronted both with the immense power and with the limitations of language in relation to expressing these complexities. On the positive side, the juxtaposition of short definitions with lengthy, detailed narrative sections portraying Liesel's experiences of "misery", "happiness",

“forgiveness” etc. shows just how much meaning and densely packed emotions can be contained within one single word. On the negative side, the juxtaposition of the definition of “silence” with the realities of Liesel’s experience demonstrates that some words and experiences have far more nuances to them than could ever be included in a basic definition. What is particularly notable is the fact that it is precisely “silence”, a state without words, which is shown to carry more meaning than the word supposed to denote it ever could. And as Liesel learns this lesson, Zusak’s use of asides makes sure this metareferential issue is brought to the reader’s attention as well.

The eighth and arguably most impactful book described in *The Book Thief* enters Liesel’s life at a time during which she is growing increasingly disillusioned with the heroes and heroines of the usual books she has access to, heroes and heroines whose circumstances are so far removed from Liesel’s life that she feels the characters do not even know what they are talking about (cf. 433). In this time of crisis, Liesel’s faith in the written word is only restored when she is gifted a book much more relevant to her situation, namely Max’s *THE WORD SHAKER. A Small Collection of Thoughts for Liesel Meminger* (449). Thus Zusak stresses the importance of the existence and distribution of as many different narratives as there are different personal experiences.

Hand-written and hand-drawn by Max, the short eighth book contains mostly stories and sketches inspired by topics Liesel and Max have already discussed. Only the actual name-giving story “The Word Shaker” is new and has the strongest impact on the girl. Death describes it as “a fable or a fairytale. Liesel was not sure which. Even days later, when she looked up both terms in the *Duden Dictionary*, she couldn’t distinguish between the two.” (450). Meanwhile, Max’s own introductory note explains that he almost removed the story from the collection for being too much like either of these classic genres: “I thought you might be too old for such a tale, but maybe no-one is. I thought of you and your books and words, and this strange story came into my head. I hope you can find some good in it.” (450). In other words, in an approach very different from the one voiced by Briony, Max and through him Zusak suggest that rather than being something to be outgrown, fairy tales and fables can be eternal.

Max’s particular tale of “The Word Shaker” – as highly metareferential as *The Book Thief* itself – begins with the story of a young Hitler witnessing a mother first admonishing and then comforting her child. Through this experience, young Hitler is portrayed to realise that he could rule the world without ever having to pick up a weapon. Words, he suddenly understands, would be enough (cf. 451). Consequently, he plants and cultivates words and

symbols as literal trees all throughout Germany to once again literally feed the word-fruits to his people. Furthermore, he tasks a select number of people called “word shakers” to climb the trees and shake the boughs to drop the words down to the rest of the populace. The best word shakers are said to be those “who understood the true power of words”, especially one girl who “knew how powerless a person could be *without* words. She had desire. She was hungry for them” (452). Eventually, that girl acquires her own word seed from a tear shed in friendship and plants her own tree (cf. 452). Hitler, disconcerted by the latter’s quick and strong growth, tries to have the tree cut down yet as long as its word shaker stays with it, high up in its branches, secretly provided with supplies by other word shakers, the tree does not yield (cf. 453-454). Only once the girl is reunited with her friend and they leave the forest together does the tree finally fall (cf. 454-456). Though even then, as the two walk away, they can still hear words being spoken behind them, coming from the direction of the girl’s fallen tree, most likely carried by the voices of the people who had witnessed it all.

As this summary shows, “The Word Shaker” is the most densely metareferential book as well as section in the entirety of *The Book Thief*, to a point where it almost resembles *Atonement*’s poetological discussions. It explicitly references the power of words to both punish and comfort. It demonstrates how people can shape and “cultivate” individual discourses, how they can “feed” them to others, and how those others can in turn “consume”, internalise and “live off” these discourses, blindly. Yet the story also shows how one individual, even a little girl, can take control of her narrative and change it, in the process changing the narrative and life of others. By embracing the power inherent in words shared in love and friendship, such an individual can gain an indestructible means of fighting oppression. Furthermore, he or she can trigger a chain reaction, the new narrative being communicated from person to person, indefinitely – until it maybe, one day, makes its way into a book such as Max’s.

The importance of the ninth book significant to Liesel’s life pales by comparison with the eighth, yet it is still worth mentioning. Once again it is a work the girl steals from the mayor’s library. Specifically, Liesel is described to pick the book called *The Last Human Stranger* at random (cf. 466), and the effect it has on her life is twofold. Firstly, *The Book Thief* portrays a scene in which Liesel is reminded of a quote from the stolen book whilst lying alone and vision-plagued in bed during the war: “There were people everywhere on the city street, but the stranger could not have been more alone if it had been empty” (479). In this scene, the book serves as an example of how relatable passages in texts can help us put our own experiences into words. Beyond that, ironically, this book seemingly dealing with feelings of

estrangement is also significant in its role as the one thing which finally helps Liesel and the mayor's wife to bridge the gap between them. The theft of the book is shown to trigger Liesel's first proper deep conversation with the woman, which in turn sets the girl on her Briony-esque path of recognizing and valuing the mayor's wife despite her trauma as a fellow human being, as complex and alive as the girl herself.

The tenth and final significant book in Liesel's life is the one she eventually comes to write herself. This book is born once again out of a crisis of faith in the girl's relationship to words, which *The Book Thief* describes as follows: Soon after Liesel witnesses Max being marched through town, she is said to once again climb into the mayor's library looking for "[b]ooks and pages and a happy place." (524) only to this time get frustrated with her own book-based happiness in a bout of survivor's guilt.

She had seen a Jewish man who had twice given her the most beautiful pages of her life marched to a concentration camp. And at the centre of all of it, she saw the Führer, shouting his words and passing them around.

Those images were the world, and it stewed in her as she sat with the lovely books and their manicured titles. It brewed in her as she eyed the pages full to the brims of their bellies with paragraphs and words.

You bastards, she thought. You lovely bastards.

Don't make me happy. Please, don't fill me up and let me think that something good can come of any of this. (524-525)

In other words, in this one moment, the clashes between neat, orderly narratives and the turmoil of war, between literary escapism and the harsh reality, between Max's beautiful, elevating, life-giving words and the ugliness and violence of Hitler's rhetoric all rise to the forefront of Liesel's awareness as Zusak metareferentially brings them to the attention of his readers. Soon, the girl cannot help but ask herself the ultimate question(s) with which I introduced this chapter:

The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn't be any of this. Without words, the Führer was nothing. There would be no limping prisoners, no need for consolation or wordly tricks to make us feel better. What good were the words? She said it audibly now, to the orange-lit room. 'What good are the words?' (525)

More than just criticising the words' potential for both good and evil, Liesel thus eventually even suggests that words are the origin of all evil. Fully disillusioned and furious, the girl – who at the beginning of her story notably felt that burning books was a crime – subsequently begins to randomly tear pages out of one of the library's books. As she writes in the letter she afterwards leaves behind to apologize to the mayor's wife: "I was just so angry and afraid and I wanted to kill the words. [...] I love this place and hate it, because it is full of words." (526)

The eventual resolution to Liesel's crisis of faith comes in the form of an empty book the mayor's wife soon after brings the girl to encourage her to channel the talents visible in her

letters into at least writing if she does not want to read any more (cf. 527). Further developing *The Word Shaker's* implied symbolism of the importance and power of planting your own tree, and transforming this symbolism into explicit words, the mayor's wife thus falls in line with *The Book Thief's* general metareferential commentary. The fact that the empty book is accompanied by the previously unimaginable sight of a smile on the mayor's wife's face, as well as by the most articulate and thoughtful sentences the woman has spoken since the death of her son, only stresses the significance of her communication. Moreover, it also immediately and directly demonstrates how impactful overcoming one's silence and voicing a suggestion can be (cf. 527-528). For, eventually, Liesel takes her new book into the basement where she first learnt to write, the basement in which Max wrote his stories, and she begins her own writing which is to have a major effect even on Death himself. In a clear homage to the title of Max's *The Word Shaker*, Liesel titles her work *The Book Thief. A Small Story by Liesel Meminger*.

3.2.7 Writing as Story-(Re-)Telling as Communal Experience

The way in which the process of writing and its functions are depicted in *The Book Thief* varies starkly from the one portrayed in *Atonement*. Specifically, as with many previously discussed metareferential topics of Zusak's novel, the focus is once again placed much more strongly onto writing's communicative aspects.

Already the very first time in the story Liesel is depicted as writing longer texts exemplifies this different focus. In the relevant scenes, the girl is told in school to compose a letter to a friend. Yet Liesel immediately rejects the assignment as a pointless and meaninglessly abstract exercise and asks to write to her absent mother instead (cf. 101). In other words, right from the start, Liesel expresses a desire for real, meaningful communication through writing instead of an interest in writing games, fictional assignments and fanciful experiments of the kind Briony is shown to enjoy. The fact that Liesel, however, does not need her writing to be a *two-way* communication is demonstrated immediately thereafter as well. Even when Liesel's mother never responds to the letter her daughter ends up writing, Liesel is still not dissuaded from writing. In fact, she continues to write five more letters even if she never sends them due to the initial lack of response (cf. 104). The focus of Liesel's early writing is thus eventually placed on the inherent meaning of self-expression and of the verbalisation of her own experiences, independent of the arrival of her message at any recipient.

A similar oscillation between needing and not needing a recipient for one's writing is depicted in Max's early attempts at the craft. His process of writing is described by Death as follows:

In his loneliest moments in the basement, the words started piling up around him. The visions began to pour and fall and occasionally limp out of his hands.

[...]

Originally, Max had intended to write his own story.

The idea was to write about everything that had happened to him – all that had led him to a Himmel Street basement – but it was not what came out. Max's exile produced something else entirely. It was a collection of random thoughts and he chose to embrace them. They felt *true*. They were more real than the letters he wrote to his family and to his friend Walter Kugler, knowing very well that he could never send them. The desecrated pages of *Mein Kampf* were becoming a series of sketches, page after page, which to him summed up the events that had swapped his former life for another. Some took minutes. Others hours. He resolved that when the book was finished, he'd give it to Liesel, when she was old enough [.] (287)

Initially in this passage, Max's writing is shown to be a near intuitive, free-flowing form of (self-)expression. Described as barely bound to their author's original intentions, words are portrayed as bursting out of the young man. Max's writing is furthermore depicted as a replacement for letters to his family, which, due to his exile, his family will now never be able to read. And yet, by the end of the passage, Max is also shown to have decided to transform his text and thoughts into a book specifically intended for Liesel to read. Through this decision, the importance of sharing and communicating one's experiences with loved ones is immediately reinstated.

The next example of possible functions of writing depicted in *The Book Thief* can be found in the section portraying Max's illness. When Liesel on a walk with her foster father sees an interesting cloud, she wonders how she could bring it home to Max to lift his spirits, asking "How do you give someone a piece of sky?" (330). To this her foster father immediately responds with "Memorise it. Then write it down for him" (331). Once home, Liesel does so and places the piece of paper containing her words with other items she has collected as presents for Max. As she does so, *The Book Thief* further reinforces its metareferential message of writing as a means to capture moments forever and to carry them across time and space so they can be shared with and experienced by others.

Soon after this portrayal of Liesel's first short narrative creation, Death increasingly begins to foreshadow how the experiences he is describing will eventually find their way into the girl's own book. From an actual sample of Liesel's final work presented in an aside (cf. 362) to individual quotes (cf. e.g. 395, 505) and paraphrases (cf. 399) of her text incorporated into Death's narration, Liesel's own voice begins to be more and more visible to the reader

during the subsequent passages of *The Book Thief*, highly symbolic for how Liesel's voice itself develops increasingly throughout this period of her life. Furthermore, in addition to portraying Liesel's growing identity through an increased reference to her actual words, these passages also constantly remind the readers that Death himself is not actually telling a story he has created, witnessed or one which he knows because of his omniscience but that he is, in fact, relating and commenting upon a story he has acquired through reading himself (cf. e.g. 507, 508). Rather than representing a factual report or a unique product of Death's imagination, *The Book Thief's* main narrative thus positions itself firmly within the usually oral tradition of narrative story (re-)telling. In the process, the focus of the narrative – and of writing(s) in general – is placed even more firmly on the idea of sharing stories through writing rather than on scribbling down ideas in the privacy of one's study, as is the case in so many scenes of *Atonement*.

Once Liesel receives her empty book in the final part of *The Book Thief*, Zusak's narrative emphasis switches even further towards an explicitly metareferential depiction of the girl's writing process and what writing means to her. Specifically, at the very beginning of this stage in Liesel's life, writing down her own thoughts in the basement where she first bonded with her foster father and Max over words is portrayed to serve as a reminder "that words had also brought her to life [...] there would be punishment and pain, and there would be happiness, too. That was writing" (528). And it is exactly in the harnessing of this life-bringing potential as well as in the sharing of it with others as the two men had with her that Liesel sees the purpose of her written work from the start. In fact, already when she receives the book from the mayor's wife the girl immediately promises that if she ever finishes writing something, she will show it to the woman (cf. 528). As a result, even though Liesel consequently retreats to the solitude of her basement to write, her writing is never linked to a desire for isolation. Instead, just like with her very first letters, Liesel is interested in communicating, and her only creative worry is "not knowing how she was ever going to get this right" (529).

The way Liesel is subsequently portrayed to "get it right" is by keeping her book with her at all times and trying to write down ten-pages-worth of her life-story "exactly as she remembered it" (531) every night, no matter how emotionally daunting the process is, how physically (cf. 530-531) and cognitively (cf. 532) challenging, and no matter how strong her fear is that with "so much to consider, so many things [were] in danger of being left out" (531). Eventually, as the girl's writing experience grows, so does her skill in all of these areas, until Liesel is finally able to produce a work which contains her own experiences, both past

and present, as well as her memories of Max and pieces of his writing (cf. 531). In this, the structure and concept of Liesel's *The Book Thief* implicitly mirror those of Death's story and Zusak's novel.

Just like Zusak's entire text, Liesel's book is shown to contain an experience-focused plot, intertextuality and (meta)reflections – raising the question in the readers' minds of just how much of the depiction of Liesel's writing process applies to Zusak's as well. The fact that Liesel's book is furthermore divided into the same ten book-based parts as Death's narrative and Zusak's novel draws further parallels between the intra- and extradiegetic narratives, partially conflating their respective authors (cf. 532). Finally, when a quote from Liesel's book describing Rudy's dive into the freezing river (cf. 532) reveals that the words Death used to describe the same scene (cf. 251) are in fact Liesel's, the line between these two narrative voices is blurred even further: for once the reader has realised this direct appropriation, he or she can never be sure anymore which parts of Death's narration are really his and which are just him directly relaying Liesel's words without marking them as quotes anymore. In the end, the readers are left with an increased sense of immediacy (Death not always being an additional narrative filter) and a devaluation of the identity of the narrator, both of which place the focus of *The Book Thief* on the experiences shared therein and the sharing itself rather than on the person doing the sharing. Once again, the difference to *Atonement* and Briony's pivotal role in it is striking.

In addition to all these specific examples of directly portrayed interrelationships between narratives and interpersonal exchange, the general motif of stories, language and knowledge as shared, communal experiences can really be found throughout the entirety of *The Book Thief*. To start things off, Liesel only succeeds in learning to read within an encouraging social setting. Whilst she is described to have serious trouble with the subject in school, under her foster father's tutelage the girl soon begins to show signs of progress – not because his instruction method is different (it is explicitly mentioned it is not) but because the girl for once is not intimidated by or uncomfortable with her surroundings but is being taught by someone she loves (cf. 72). Once established, this motif of the social component of successful knowledge acquisition keeps reappearing throughout the rest of Liesel's learning experience as well: for example, whilst she expands her vocabulary through books she reads on her own she also explicitly always brings the new words home with her so she can discuss them, initially with her foster father (cf. 152) and subsequently with Max (cf. 258).

Building upon these communal learning experiences the novel further depicts many instances of actual oral storytelling as crucial social interactions. For example, both Liesel's

foster father's sharing of his story (cf. 210) and Max's sharing of his own (cf. 224-225) are depicted as having a strong emotional impact on the respective listeners, and the same applies to Liesel's and Max's re-telling of their nightmares to each other. In all these cases the communal aspect of the sharing of experiences is shown to create and/or tighten interhuman bonds. Admittedly, for the respective story-tellers, this communication of their experiences is often shown to be a difficult, strenuous task: for example, Death describes Max's narration as "[t]he course of his survival" which he "related, piece by piece, as if he were *cutting each part out of him* and presenting it on a plate" (225-226, my emphasis). Yet the resulting social bond, according to *The Book Thief*, is always worth the pain. After all, in the end, it constitutes a significant part of what saves both Max's and Liesel's lives.

In a much less dramatic manner than through the sharing of such existential stories, bonds in *The Book Thief* are also shown to be formed through conversations in general, no matter the topic: from seemingly irrelevant subjects such as Liesel's descriptions of the weather to Max (cf. 259), to emotionally impactful ones such as Max's and Liesel's exchange about their feelings for each other (cf. 342-343) or Rudy's expression of just how badly he needs a win (cf. 293), the sharing of thoughts and emotions is what repeatedly helps characters connect. And as the following quote shows it is not even the contents of these shared stories that are crucial to the process. For as Death points out when Liesel accompanies her foster father to his window-blackening job: "Every day when they worked together, he would tell Liesel his stories. [...] Each day there was a story, and Liesel forgave him if he told the same one more than once." (363) In other words, the value of shared stories, according to this passage, explicitly does not lie in the communication of 'new' information but in the underlying communal spirit.

Finally, just like the oral telling of stories, the communal reading of books is also depicted in *The Book Thief* as being capable of creating bonds. Already from the beginning of the novel, rather than only being something characters do in private and on their own, reading is depicted as a shared activity reminiscent of parents' reading of bed-time stories to their young children. Initially, it is Liesel and her foster father who are portrayed as always reading together. This dynamic changes once the foster father purposefully pairs up Liesel and Max for these reading sessions to on the one hand help Liesel get over her discomfort around the young man, and on the other to help Max feel included (cf. 221-222). The first actual conversation between Liesel and Max is consequently the discussion of a book (224) – another form of sharing one's reading experience, portrayed again and again as Liesel shares stories of books and words she has discovered in the library (cf. 257-258). Liesel and Max's

bond is further cemented by her reading to him while he is ill, evoking again the image of parental bed-time comfort (cf. 327).

Eventually, the motif of communal reading culminates in what is arguably the strongest and most symbolic metareferential image of the entire novel: the depiction of Liesel as reading to an entire basement full of her family, friends and neighbours hiding from the falling bombs. Firstly, Liesel begins to read out loud simply to distract herself (cf. 388), yet soon she focuses specifically on distracting everybody else as well:

She didn't dare to look up, but she could feel their frightened eyes hanging on to her as she hauled the words in and breathed them out. A voice played the notes inside her. This, it said, is your accordion.

The sound of the turning page carved them in half.

Liesel read on.

For at least twenty minutes, she handed out the story. The youngest kids were soothed by her voice, and everyone else saw visions [...] Liesel did not. The book thief only saw the mechanics of the words – their bodies stranded on the paper, beaten down for her to walk on. Somewhere, too, in the gaps between a full stop and the next capital letter, there was also Max. She remembered reading to him when he was sick. [...]

Everyone waited for the ground to shake.

That was still an immutable fact, but at least they were distracted now, by the girl with the book. One of the younger boys contemplated crying again, but Liesel stopped at that moment and imitated her papa [...] She winked at him and resumed. (389)

At this moment, Liesel thus realises that what for her foster father is his accordion – the symbol of one of his strongest interpersonal bonds, the instrument which makes him feel most social and communal – for the girl are books and the words contained therein. The act of reading itself, just like the acts of personal story-telling discussed before, is once more depicted as difficult and physical, the words need to be “hauled”, “beaten down”. Yet sharing them, “hand[ing them] out” in that moment is shown to be as rewarding and as needed as the handing out of blankets, food, or life-vests. And whether the audience is old enough to understand the text or whether they are just listening to the girl's voice, they are all enticed, just like Liesel used to be by her foster father's early readings. Once more, the passage is thus not about the comforting potential of the content of any given story but about the potential of story-telling as such.

In the process, the initially highly intimate act of a (foster) father reading to his little girl is willingly shared by the girl in question with her entire community, to equal bonding success. At the end of the reading, even a previously hostile neighbour is not only shown to explicitly thank Liesel (cf. 390) but also to begin to pay the girl to read to her outside of the shelter as well (cf. 394-395). And this neighbour continues to do so even after she receives the news that one of her sons has been killed at the front and the woman retreats into an otherwise nearly catatonic state of silence (cf. 473, 492), an even more extreme version of the mayor's

wife's response to trauma. Even though, as Death points out, the broken woman from that moment on does not actually hear the words which are read to her (cf. 476) she still is portrayed as repeatedly "asking" for Liesel to come (cf. 473). Liesel does and thus keeps reading, day after day, night after night, "for that's why she's there, and it feels good to be good for something in the aftermath of the snows of Stalingrad" (477, cf. 510).

3.2.8 Conclusion: *The Book Thief's* Metareferential Focus

All these passages make it very clear where the focus of *The Book Thief's* metareferential message about books and narratives lies. Just like Liesel eventually learns that the library she keeps stealing from does not actually belong to the mayor but to his wife, and that its function therefore is not to provide a man in power with knowledge (cf. 467) but to provide a mother with material to "read[...]on the floor with a young boy pointing at the pictures and the words" (467), *The Book Thief's* readers are encouraged to come to the same realisation about the social purpose and significance of stories.

Furthermore, similarly to *Atonement*, *The Book Thief* presents life stories as being synonymous with their respective protagonists' lives, and even with the protagonists themselves, as the following foreshadowing of Max's arrival by Death clearly demonstrates: "In the times ahead, *that story* would arrive at 33 Himmel Street in the early hours of morning, wearing ruffled shoulders and a shivering jacket. *It* would carry a suitcase, a book, and two questions. A story. Story after story. Story *within* story." (76, my emphasis, last italics in original). Equally similarly to *Atonement*, life stories – the sum of people's experiences – are also portrayed as not needing to be plausible or to "make sense" in the way young Briony's understands these words. For as Death points out in the context of Liesel's foster father's life: "They're strange, those wars. Full of blood and violence – but also full of stories that are equally difficult to fathom. 'It's true', people will mutter. 'I don't care if you don't believe me[.]'" (181). The only thing stories need to be able to do, according to Zusak's novel, is to communicate people's experiences to others.

The reason for this, *The Book Thief* further shows, is that this type of communication is central for different people to be able to understand the value of each other's experiences. In fact, according to the text, such communication is crucial for people to be able to understand the value of human life and humanity as such. After all, Death himself explains his reasons for picking up Liesel's book and for collecting human stories in general as follows: "[I]n one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry,

each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt – an immense leap of an attempt – to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it” (24). In other words, according to Death, our personal stories are what justifies the existence of humanity as a whole. For as Death elaborates in a later passage describing his view of the German civilians hiding in shelters: “As is often the case with humans, when I read about them in the book thief’s words, I pitied them” (384). It is thus only Liesel’s stories which help Death empathise with the average German perspective on the Nazi era and World War II experience, resulting in him developing pity and at least a partial understanding for a people who otherwise could be so easily vilified during this period of history. In fact, Liesel’s story is shown to not only incite sympathy in Death himself but to cause him to want to spread his sympathy further by in turn sharing the girl’s story with others – us readers – until it becomes part of our collective cultural narrative (cf. also Henke 95).

In the end, according to *The Book Thief*, these collective, communally shared and disseminated narratives are what keep our memories alive even past the expiration date of books as material, degradable objects:

I [Death] remember clearly what Liesel Meminger had to say [...] A lot of the words have faded over the decades. The paper has suffered from the friction of movement in my pocket, but still, many of her sentences have been impossible to forget. (362)
[...]
That’s why I tell this story. [...] Say something enough times and you never forget it. (533)

In Death’s own words – and what stronger authority on the topic could there be – stories, lives and ideas through re-telling can and do become immortal. And this immortality together with the aforementioned achievement of mutual understanding is the main purpose of stories according to Zusak’s novel. It is what makes the tremendously difficult work of overcoming trauma-based silence worthwhile³⁹.

The Book Thief ends with a portrayal of Death’s first actual interaction with Liesel on the day of her death, many decades later. Death shows the girl that he has picked up her book and explains that he has read it many times over. The one thing the dying Liesel then wants to know is if he was able to understand (cf. 553), thus one final time reinforcing her writing goal as well as the importance of successful communication. Death’s answer is as follows:

I wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality. But what could I tell her about those things that she didn’t already know? I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race [...] I wanted to ask her how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words so damning and brilliant.

³⁹ This highly complex topic has of course been discussed by many other authors and scholars, especially in the aftermath of Adorno’s famous proclamation in “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft”. For a more in-depth analysis of *The Book Thief*’s position within this discourse cf. Wehming.

None of those things, however, came out of my mouth.

All I was able to do was turn to Liesel Meminger and tell her the only truth I truly know.

I said it to the book thief and I say it now to you.

A LAST NOTE FROM YOUR NARRATOR. I am haunted by humans. (554)

This one concluding paragraph sums up the entirety of *The Book Thief's* metareferential views on language and stories brilliantly: once again there is the power of words, containing within themselves both the ability to create meaning and beauty, and the ability to cause utter destruction; there is once again the impossibility of expressing or sharing anything more than one's personal experience, one's personal "truth", as well as the importance of doing just that; finally, there is the ultimate image of the never-dying memories of people haunting Death, and all of us, forever, in the form of stories.

4. Metareference in Contemporary Film

Most of film's metareferential discussions have their origin in the complex and ever-changing relationship central to the history of cinema between reality and its representation through the new medium. Consequently, an understanding of the way in which people viewed and view film's mediality is integral to a study analysing how metareferences are used to address that mediality. The following short diachronic summary of the prevalent perceptions on the matter during different periods of cinema's history shall provide the necessary basics.

In the first years after the invention of the medium, as Werner Wolf has pointed out, film seemed to almost entirely take over the field of illusionist narration since it was actually considered to be a near-transparent medium (cf. *Ästhetische Illusion* 683-684). In fact, as Matthias Hurst has explained, in the early days of cinema, the new medium's entire potential for art was repeatedly questioned based on this idea that all it was capable of showing was an unadulterated reproduction of the reality it captured (cf. 235). Film, early critics furthermore argued, would as a result forever be artistically constrained by the superficial material and visual nature of the items and occurrences it depicted (cf. Hurst 235). And it was not even just critics of the fledgling medium who held these views. Early supporters shared the same beliefs, merely with the difference that they considered film's bond to reality to be something positive since consequently film, and only film, was capable of depicting reality (cf. Hurst 236).

Only as time went on and the medium developed beyond the short documentary clips of the Lumière brothers, did these early ideas about film begin to change. By the 1920s, Sergei Eisenstein was experimenting with montage techniques, F. W. Murnau and Georges Méliès were using trick photography and early forms of special effects, cameras were mounted on cranes and dollies, and film had thus moved universes away from its beginnings as a static and comparatively straightforward reproduction of reality (cf. e.g. Pramaggiore and Wallis 103-120). As Keith Cohen has pointed out, for audiences at the time all these cinematographic innovations were so jarring that they forced the medium's recipients to "pay at least as much attention to the film's process of production as to its unfolding fiction" (9). Through this, in an unintentional yet typically metareferential manner, the medium-awareness and -knowledgeability of audiences began to rise.

As time moved on even further, these initial innovations became, however, so commonplace that their potential for illusion-breaking began to decline. After all, an average audience member today would be hard-pressed to name, for example, the number of jump- or

cross-cuts her or she has witnessed in any given film, having internalized this technique as well as others as just another basic part of the medium's language. Consequently, over the last few decades, filmmakers wanting to draw attention to the mediated nature of their work began to look for new, increasingly explicit means to achieve their goal: the use of shaky hand-held cameras, the portrayal of objects seemingly on the camera lens, the inclusion of purposefully exposed on-screen and in-frame equipment such as cameras or microphones, having characters break the fourth wall and address the audience or even just look straight at the camera, special effects mimicking the forwarding, rewinding or burning of film stock – these are only a few of the techniques employed to achieve the desired effect (cf. e.g. Hauthal 586; Limoges "Gradable Effects" 393).

As a result of these developments – just like literature – cinema by now has developed a strong tradition of metareferential works. Also just like in the case of literature, this metareferential cinematic tradition includes a variety of very different films (cf. e.g. Ames 18-19; Aubrey 18-19; Pfeifer 410). For example, in some genres such as that of the horror movie, self-reference is used as a means to add entertainment value and to rope in a usually particularly genre-loving and genre-savvy audience by challenging viewers to recognise all tropes (cf. e.g. de Villiers 357-377). In other, frequently auteur-focussed, films, metareference is used to achieve illusion-breaking, Brechtian effects (cf. Nöth et al. 34; Reinecke 13). A third type of film is specifically interested in the processes of film-making and film-watching (a theme that can be traced back at least as far as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)), especially in the context of these processes being part of an entire movie *industry*. A fourth type of metareferential film discusses cinema as a medium frequently used for adaptation and examines for example what "metadaptations" (Voigts-Virchow 137) reveal about film's representational potential (cf. Faubert 160; Voigts-Virchow). A fifth type uses the deconstruction of roles and characters to portray identity crises. Finally, a last group of films tackles the even broader Postmodernist issue of the increasingly blurred borders between truth and illusion, reality and fiction, reality and film. In fact, some scholars such as Barbara Pfeifer have argued that film might be particularly well-equipped for the discussion of this last topic due to the aforementioned high-transparent quality assigned to the medium at its conception (cf. 410).

In short, the metareferential topics addressed by metafilms over the last decades are as complex and varied as those discussed in metanovels. Furthermore, as the previous paragraph shows, the topics under discussion are also frequently similar to the ones thematised in metareferential literature. There is, however, one subject matter which is nearly unique to the

newer medium's metareferential explorations, and that is their frequently strong focus on the medium's technological component as a feature which distinguishes the medium film from its text-based and stage-based predecessors. After all, in the words of Keith Cohen, "movies were the first '*invented*' art" (8, my emphasis). Furthermore, as Christopher Ames has pointed out, movies are also still a comparatively new art and thus "their status as technological novelty is still in recent memory, and the discourses of magic, illusion, and wonder still influence how the moviegoing experience is depicted and marketed" (3). The amount of time, effort and not least of all money our present-day film industry spends on the development of new CGI- and 3D-technologies for particularly illusionary special effects certainly confirms Ames' observation. Furthermore, in an era in which grand silver screen magic seems to increasingly be considered the only way to tempt audiences away from their television- and computer-screens, this type of cinematic self-stylisation could even be considered crucial to the industry's survival.

In addition, the technological aspects of film production can be seen as particularly well-suited for the depiction of (post-)Postmodernist ideas and thus lend themselves particularly well to metareferential treatments. As Keith Cohen has observed,

rather than becoming more complete, more all-encompassing, or more efficient through automation, [filmic representation] is full of deletions, ellipses, and partial views. Cinema can be seen as the epitome of twentieth-century relativism for the way in which it cuts up reality, endows these 'rescued fragments' with special significance, and combines them in an order at odds with their lived sequence. (8)

In other words, the purely mechanical processes of creation involved with the highly technological medium film can serve as a perfect symbol for our current technological society's general processes of creation of meaning.

A final essential aspect of the medium as well as of the industry of film and therefore often used as a centre-piece of medium-specific metareferential discussions is the idea of stardom. Christopher Ames has formulated the brilliant phrase that "[a]ll Hollywood movies are about Hollywood; some just happen to be set there as well" (2, my emphasis). What he specifically refers to with this statement is the fact that, in one way or another, "all Hollywood films contribute to the larger story of film and celebrity that gives 'Hollywood' its complex meaning" (Ames 2). "Celebrity" – or stardom – is thus acknowledged by Ames as a crucial component of the movie industry's appeal. As he further elaborates, "[a]lmost from the beginning of the film industry, its artistic productions have been associated with the glamour and luxury of those who make them" (Ames 3).

Already this prominent role which stardom plays within the medium of film would be enough to explain filmmakers' frequent metareferential interest in the subject. However, the relevance of this motif extends well beyond the realm of cinema itself. Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara and Britta Neitzel describe a star as an actor who constantly oscillates between referring to him-/herself and referring to his/her role (cf. Nöth et al. 52-53), and Erika Greber has similarly suggested that stardom is "fuelled by [actors', directors' etc.] self-exploration and self-fashioning" (616). In other words, stardom can thus also be seen as a fruitful metaphor for our processes of identity-creation in general. Consequently, any related metareferential explorations have the potential to discuss a universal theme of high social and cultural significance as well as a medium-specific characteristic.

For a case study on how exactly all these themes are approached and deliberated upon specifically in contemporary Anglophone cinema, once again many films could have served as a basis: For an analysis of the parallels between stardom, roles and identity creation, as well as of the blurry lines between reality and fiction, the Charlie Kaufman-penned *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002) and *Synechdoche, New York* (2008) would have constituted perfect subjects. In contrast, Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) would have lent itself perfectly for a demonstration of the increasingly explicit use of metareference in cinema – after all, while all of Tarantino's films are filled with intertextual references, in this one for the first time a cinema, a propaganda film and an actual movie star play central roles in the film's story. Finally, many people would argue that the entire barrage of found-footage films and mockumentaries which has flooded the market over the last decade or so just *has* to be included in a study such as this. I, however, would argue that not all found-footage films are really fully-metareferential works.

While the footage presented in films such as Daniel Myrick's and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) is actually meant to have been shot in the process of making a film and thus is highly metareferential, the footage used in films such as Matt Reeves' *Cloverfield* (2008) or David Ayer's *End of Watch* (2012) says much more about the role of online video in our society than about that of cinema. And then of course there are films such as George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* (2008) which are located somewhere in the middle of the spectrum opened up by the previous two extreme examples. The complexities of this genre, in short, would be better served by a separate study than by an exemplary inclusion in a case study on metareference such as mine.

For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, setting the found-footage genre aside, I looked for examples of movies which include all metareferential themes central to the other films just

listed as well as metareferential comments on the technological features which make film so different from literature. Fulfilling all these requirements, E. E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) and Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011) will be the two works under discussion for the remainder of this main chapter.

4.1 Metareference in *Shadow of the Vampire*⁴⁰

Our battle, our struggle is to create art. Our weapon is the moving picture. [...] We are scientists engaged in the creation of memory. But our memory will neither blur, nor fade.

(Shadow of the Vampire 0:14:01-0:14:56)

E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* is a Gothic film which makes the Gothic nature of all films its main topic. And while this would already be enough to classify this work as highly metareferential, the fact that its main plot revolves around the production of a classic Gothic film makes it even more so.

4.1.1 The Self-Referential Use of Gothic Tropes

Firstly, with a focus much more similar to that of *Atonement* than to that of *The Book Thief*, *Shadow of the Vampire* is hyper-aware of its Gothic genre's traditions across all media, and Merhige clearly situates his film within this lineage. Stylizing itself as a perfect example of a work within a movement, *Shadow of the Vampire* consequently incorporates elements from all of the genre's developmental stages. The stock-characters and -settings typical of the eighteenth century Gothic novel are combined with the ambiguities, the psychological debates and the social critique of works from the nineteenth century. In addition to these traditional features, *Shadow of the Vampire* further includes the most recent discourses of the Neo-Gothic, displaying a high level of intertextuality: just like Gothic literature constantly pays homage to its predecessors, Merhige's film acknowledges its cinematic heritage by making the creation of a genre classic, F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), its subject. This elevates *Shadow of the Vampire* from a mere prototype of a Gothic vampire tale to a self-reflexive meta-film, which not only deconstructs the Gothic by exposing how it is constructed for film, but also deconstructs film itself by revealing its Gothic nature.

Already the initial title sequence of *Shadow of the Vampire* (cf. 0:00:51 – 0:05:38) sets the mood for a Gothic adventure. Through arched palace gates the viewer is led into a golden and exotic world which already foreshadows the motif of the magical, curtain-framed cinema screen. The world displayed is inhabited by heroic knights in strange armour fighting against unknown forces and mysterious creatures peering out from thick and wildly interwoven foliage. The repeated focus on a particularly beastly face and on a decorated letter "V"

⁴⁰ For a previously published essay of mine on this topic with a slightly different focus cf. Baeva, "As Gothic as It Gets?"

resembling a family crest are first hints at the vampire motif. Together with the title sequence's two-dimensional monochromatic style and its emphasis on the depiction of battle scenes, they evoke images both of medieval tapestries and of cinema's early Art Nouveau influences. This intermedial invocation of a strange historical framework is furthermore itself in perfect accordance with the traditions established by early Gothic fiction (cf. e.g. Snodgrass xiii; Taubenböck 36), and it remains a central feature of *Shadow of the Vampire* throughout its entirety.

For not only does Merhige's film open on a historic scene in 1922 Berlin, but the majority of the story takes place in the even more "exotic" historical setting of an isolated rural area in Czechoslovakia. In the process, the Eastern European region and its inhabitants are presented with all the inherent racism and focus on 'otherness' which is typical of early Gothic literature. The emphasis lies clearly on the suggestion of "primitivity", epitomised in the one single car available in the area, the lack of electricity at the merely rudimentarily equipped old inn in which the film crew is staying, and the strong superstitiousness of the "simple" locals who seem to not even have reached the Age of Enlightenment yet.

This setting stands in stark contrast to the highly technological nature of even the earliest film shooting equipment which Murnau and his crew are shown to be using. Through this simple juxtaposition, *Shadow of the Vampire* both metareferentially draws the audience's attention to the suddenly conspicuously mechanical aspects of filmmaking and simultaneously creates a typically Gothic scenario which isolates the protagonists through alienation. Believing themselves to be superior to their surroundings, Merhige's fictional film crew chooses to always keep to themselves and considers their hosts unworthy of any form of exchange. The only occasion on which one of the locals attempts to communicate her beliefs and worries to the visitors ends with Murnau's scream of "Albin, a native has wandered into my frame!" (0:19:38). In other words, unlike the medium of books in *The Book Thief*, the medium of film in *Shadow of the Vampire* is introduced as a distance-creating and isolating one.

The Gothic motif of 'the other' is furthermore not the only trope Merhige's film genre-consciously employs on a regular basis. Describing stock-features of the eighteenth-century Gothic setting, Maggie Kilgour pointedly lists "one castle – preferably in ruins" and "some gloomy mountains – preferably the Alps" (4), and Charles L. Crow adds "dark forests" (1) to this list. In *Shadow of the Vampire*, all these elements are present and fulfil their traditional functions of evoking deterioration, entrapment, danger and wilderness (cf. e.g. Snodgrass 15; Baldick quoted in Grunenbergr 195). In addition, Merhige's film is filled to the brim with

genre-typical premonitions of evil. Sometimes, these premonitions are provided on a symbolical level – for example, the train which takes the film crew to Czechoslovakia is called “Charon”. Most premonitions, however, are conveyed in the form of blatantly used traditional Gothic motifs: there are uneasy restless horses (cf. 0:14:57), mysterious bottles filled with a red liquid which looks like blood (cf. 0:15:00), dramatic thunder and lightning (cf. 0:16:34), crew-members who suddenly seem to suffer from mysterious illnesses the origins of which remain unknown, etc. And just in case all these visual narrative foreshadowings are not enough, there is always the film’s highly moody and atmospheric soundtrack, its minor scales and tense strings consistently conveying a sense of danger even in the seemingly most peaceful and harmless moments of the film.

Even more than the score and the aforementioned plot elements, it is Merhige’s use of lighting which accounts for the gloomy Gothic atmosphere of *Shadow of the Vampire*. Many of the film’s scenes are kept very dark. The darkness is so heavy, in fact, that even the sepia coloured scenes in the inn with all their candles and fires do not feel warm and cosy but heavy and impenetrable. Furthermore, the heavy shadows present in most of these scenes are rarely static. Instead, they constantly press in on the characters, forcefully restricting the audience’s sight and thus producing the atmosphere of oppression and claustrophobia so typical of the Gothic. This effect is probably the strongest in the scene in which Gustav enters Orlock’s ruin for the first time: when both the (fictional) actor and his character move forward, the tree branches start to cast their shadows on the man, giving the impression that they are embracing him and pulling him more and more into the darkness (cf. 0:22:42). What is particularly metareferentially striking in all these scenes is the fact that the Gothic imagery thus invoked is always tightly linked to features of the medium film itself: from symbolic nods to the significance of shadow-play for the medium’s history, to the encroaching shadows mirroring and thus further foregrounding the medium-specific feature of a closing iris, to this iris being – from today’s perspective highly unusually – visible in the film-within-film sequences, *Shadow of the Vampire* portrays features of the Gothic and features of the medium film as nigh inseparable.

A final prototypically Gothic sensation successfully evoked by *Shadow of the Vampire* is that of paranoia. In addition to his use of the already mentioned shadows to generate a fear of what could be crouching and hiding inside them, Merhige repeatedly employs an extreme bird-eye perspective to frame some of his film’s most pivotal scenes. For example, both during Murnau’s debauchorous nightclub visit in Berlin (cf. 0:10:34) and during the film crew’s first visit to the ruin (cf. 0:21:45, 0:25:52), the extremely steep camera angle used by

Merhige places a strong emphasis on the image of characters being watched without their knowledge and/or consent. Murnau's decadent sexual voyeurism in the early scenes is equated with that of the vampire Schreck/Orlock in the later scene, and even with that inherent to every film director's view from behind the camera. Furthermore, the unusual extremity of Merhige's chosen framing device additionally draws the audience's attention to the mediated nature of the scenes they are watching and thus to the voyeurism inherent to that process as well.

In addition to all these form-based and implicit (meta)references to typically Gothic tropes and cinematic devices, *Shadow of the Vampire* also contains plenty of explicit discussions of these very same topics, courtesy of the fact that the creation of a Gothic film (*Nosferatu*) is portrayed on the narrative level of *Shadow of the Vampire* as well. By showing Murnau and his crew prepare and discuss shoots and by having Murnau give audible, explicit directions such as "darker and smokier, dustier" (0:27:57), Merhige's film constantly brings the constructed nature of both Murnau's and Merhige's creations to the audience's attention. Mary Ellen Snodgrass has argued that such conscious play with traditional Gothic traits is one of the most important features of the highly metareferential Neo-Gothic genre (cf. 250) – and *Shadow of the Vampire* incorporates this feature of this newest Gothic tradition seamlessly.

Furthermore, *Shadow of the Vampire*'s setting and atmosphere are not the film's only elements which are in perfect accordance with the many traditions of the Gothic genre. Merhige's protagonists are equally representative thereof. The most common character constellation in early Gothic fiction has been described by scholars as follows: "a passive and persecuted heroine, a sensitive rather ineffectual hero [and] a dynamic and tyrannical villain" (Kilgour 4) all joined in a "maiden-in-the-castle" (or -in-the-abbey) needs-to-be-rescued plot (Snodgrass xiv). In contrast, late Gothic texts are characterised by more and more disappearing heroes, increasingly complex heroines and villains which arguably grow more charismatic than ever (cf. e.g. Landsteiner 54-61) – if it is, in fact, even possible to make such clear distinctions between the three types of roles at all. Returning to our contemporary Gothic film at hand, *Shadow of the Vampire* once again clearly draws from all of these traditions.

Merhige's film keeps the early Gothic character constellation of heroine, hero and villain intact but portrays especially the first two types highly ironically. Murnau's lead actress Greta, for example, might be prototypical in her role as a female victim sacrificed by an evil tyrant but she is definitely not a pure maiden-in-distress. Instead, she has quite the loose tongue, is decadent, promiscuous and a drug addict. The Gothic heroine's traditional

passiveness and fainting at the sight of danger need, in the case of Greta, to be induced by sedation. The movie star heroine – arguably exactly as a result of the effects of her stardom on her personality – is thus portrayed as being far from heroic. And the concept of hero is questioned even more.

Gustav plays the part in the film-within-film but in Merhige's story he is nothing more than a continuous subject of ridicule. As a result of his stardom he is portrayed to be too vain and too pleased with himself to be able to be effective. His power in the film industry is thus shown to render him powerless in his real life. In fact, Gustav never even realises that the whole crew is laughing at him behind his back and that Murnau keeps calling him "imbecile" (0:09:46) and "leading mule" (0:15:48). Finally, in the climactic scene of Greta's sacrifice, he not only is not able to save his "damsel" but he is not even physically present.

Gustav is furthermore not the only ineffectual hero of Merhige's story. In the second half of *Shadow of the Vampire*, new cameraman Fritz Arno Wagner swoops in, quite literally, on an airplane brandishing his gun, his technological "magic skills" and his masculinity, all the while referring to his time in the war. Introduced in this way, Wagner seems predestined to become a hero when Schreck's real identity and the terms of his contract are revealed, yet the cameraman's first thought is to flee the island. That being impossible, he eventually not only does not prevent but he contributes to Greta's sacrifice, and he is portrayed as fascinated by the cinematographic qualities of the scene. The same level of inefficiency applies to producer Albin Grau, despite his position of power within the industry and his seeming role as the representative of reason. Greta's last hope for a saviour thus lies in script writer Henrik Galeen. He is the only crew member portrayed by Merhige as moved by the demise of the first camera man Wolf; the only one to suspect Schreck and to criticise Murnau's obsession; the only one who does not put their film first – his professional link to the mesmerising medium being the weakest. As a writer of words on paper Galeen is depicted as the one member of the film crew with the strongest morals and the most independent views. Yet his exclusion from the inner circles of the movie industry is also exactly what causes Galeen to arrive at the scene of Greta's sacrifice too late to be of any help. His fate, typical of the "sensitive rather ineffectual hero" (Kilgour 4) of early Gothic literature thus implies an impotence of old(er) media to interfere with cinematic developments.

Finally, Merhige's villains are equally built around eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic models. Murnau, for example, is the perfect prototype of a Gothic tyrant who needs to control everything and everybody around him. With him being the director of the film, this of course addresses a variety of questions about authorial control, reminiscent of the ones asked

in *Atonement*. As long as Murnau is fully in charge, he is calm and composed, speaking slowly and quietly. Yet even the slightest disruption is shown to send him into a fit of rage during which he becomes as wild, aggressive and violent as any vampire. When the landlady in Slovakia walks into his frame (cf. 0:19:38), he not only screams at her furiously and treats her with utter contempt, but for a moment there is even a slight note of panic in his voice as he calls on his producer to sort things out. Similarly, it is Murnau's realisation of his loss of power and control which leads to the first of two dramatic confrontations between him and Schreck (cf. 0:40:23-0:44:55), during which the vampire is the one to show composure and indignation while the director is reduced to raving.

Another quality of Murnau's which combines classic Gothic villain traits with film industry and stardom tropes is the director's portrayed history of transgressions: his sexual "escapades" (there are several explicit references to his bisexuality (cf. e.g. 0:09:59) and to his sadomasochism fetish (cf. 0:10:00-34, 1:02:25)) and drug addiction⁴¹ (cf. 0:09:48) – representative of Hollywood's negative sex and drugs image – are known to everybody and he even flaunts them in front of his crew (cf. e.g. 0:08:30, 0:12:25).

Thus combining tyranny and transgression, Merhige's Murnau joins a long line of eighteenth-century villains. Yet he is also a perfect example of those populating the nineteenth-century Gothic texts. For Murnau is further portrayed as the prototypical "mad scientist" popularised by novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Keith Cohen, in addition to calling cinema "the only truly invented art" (49), has described film as "the first artistic brain-child of modern industrial science" (49), a medium "entirely dependent on the tools of modern technology" (9). Consequently, it is only fitting that Merhige's Murnau, a man in charge of making films and thus creating art through science, is depicted as wearing a lab coat and goggles and as responding to the nickname 'Herr Doktor'.

In perfect accordance with the Gothic trope of the "mad scientist", Murnau begins his journey into darkness as a man with a vision:

Our battle, our struggle is to create art. Our weapon is the moving picture. Because we have the moving picture, our paintings will grow and recede. Our poetry will be shadows that lengthen and conceal. Our light will play across living faces that laugh and agonize. And our music will linger and finally overwhelm because it will have a context as certain as the grave. We are scientists engaged in the creation of memory. But our memory will neither blur, nor fade. (0:14:01-0:14:56)

⁴¹ For a more detailed exploration of the addiction motif in the film cf. Davison.

According to this explicit manifesto, Merhige's fictional director is specifically looking for a way to make memory and art last for eternity – or in other words, like many Gothic scientists before him, he is on a quest for immortality. And just like McEwan and Zusak argue through their novels that their medium of literature is capable of giving everlasting life, so Murnau believes *his* medium of film to be the one through which immortality can be achieved. By and by, however, the director's initial vision becomes an obsession until, to fulfil his dream, Murnau willingly enters into a Faustian pact – another typically Gothic motif (cf. e.g. Snodgrass 124, 144-145, 210) – and sells his lead actress and with her his conscience not to the Devil but to an equally demonic figure: a vampire.

According to *Shadow of the Vampire*, the reason for Murnau's willingness to employ a vampire at all cost is the director's ultimate desire to achieve new levels of realism. This statement is of course highly ironic if one considers the tantrums Murnau throws whenever locals walk into his frame or if one considers his demands for added and thus unnatural darkness or dust. Clearly, even Murnau himself is thus actually aiming for a balance between realism and creative composition. As for Merhige's views on the subject, through his depiction of both of these opposing forces prevalent in Murnau's work, *Shadow of the Vampire's* director brings the complexities of cinema's relationship with reality to the foreground of his audience's attention.

Through his collaboration with Schreck, Murnau eventually seems to achieve the realism for which he is aiming – yet he does so at a very high price. More and more isolated and torn between ambition and traces of his conscience, Merhige's director slowly begins to lose his sanity. As *Shadow of the Vampire* approaches its finale, the initial "Herr Doktor" is more and more frequently portrayed as a mad man who has been scratching symbols into the walls of his cell-like bedroom (cf. 1:08:28). As a result of his fanaticism and arguably of his denial of the film medium's inherently non-realist nature, Murnau is shown to regress from a pioneer of the technical avant-garde to a "savage" who paints on cave walls. In the end, during *Shadow of the Vampire's* last scene, Murnau – having abandoned all which remained of his scruples and humanity in the name of his art – completely loses touch with reality in a truly Gothic manner (cf. Landsteiner 81): after Albin Grau is murdered by Schreck during the filming of Greta's sacrifice, the director continues to talk to his producer and to give him instructions as if nothing has happened (cf. 1:21:29) – even if the sadness in Murnau's transfixed eyes suggests that somewhere deep inside he is still aware of the horror.

Throughout his deterioration, Murnau loses more and more control over his film project while Schreck's power increases. And this circumstance and their bargain are not the only

two things linking director and revenant. *Shadow of the Vampire* constantly keeps drawing parallels between the two men so that one more highly Gothic motif, that of the *doppelgänger* (cf. e.g. Snodgrass xiv), is established. On the most basic level, Murnau and Schreck are connected through the vampire's actual immortality and the man's desire for it. In his isolation and degeneration, Schreck foreshadows what Murnau will become if he continues on his quest for everlasting life. By thus holding up a mirror to Murnau, Schreck's character and the whole story of the two men are in themselves highly self-referential.

Throughout Merhige's film, Murnau never wants to see these parallels and always makes sure to stress Schreck's 'otherness' by calling him "Nosferatu" (e.g. 0:31:30), "vampire" (e.g. 0:31:54) or other more colourful names (cf. the curse tirade during the shooting of Orlock's death scene at 1:17:52). Still, for the audience, this pejorative name-giving carries a lot of irony. A good example is the scene in which Murnau confronts Schreck for having killed the film's cinematographer by using the words "Why him, you *monster*, why not -- the -- script girl?!" (0:41:43, my emphasis). The fact that Merhige's director seems to seriously mean this and is thus shown to rate human life according to the importance of a person for the creation of a film, automatically raises the question of who the real monster is in this scene. In other words, while Murnau's attempt at othering aims to construct an antithesis between himself and Schreck, it simultaneously points out parallels between the two characters, hence blurring the lines between identities, between human and monstrous in a typically nineteenth-century Gothic fashion (cf. Botting 140).

The similarity between Schreck and Murnau is further underlined by a couple of cinematographic devices employed by Merhige. Firstly, there is the use of spirit photography during Murnau's manifesto monologue, which superimposes the director's face over the crew's train journey and gives Murnau a larger than life and ghostlike quality. From this rather general association of the fictional director with the supernatural, *Shadow of the Vampire* moves on to a more specific focus on the vampiric darkness inside him by continuously placing Murnau in shadows (cf. e.g. 0:32:58). Finally, there are scenes which visually link Merhige's director to his vampiric counterpart. One good example can be seen when the crew shoots Gustav/Hutter's arrival at the castle and Murnau gives the following direction: "You are afraid. Who is the person who brought you?" (0:21:20). Gustav subsequently turns around to an imaginary coachman yet through an elegant shot reverse shot Merhige makes the actor appear to be looking at Murnau. Through this choice of technique, the mysterious and powerful Gothic nature of both *Shadow of the Vampire's* director character and arguably all film directors in general is exposed. Another example is the similar

framing of the shadow cast by Murnau when he brings the vampire a bottle of blood (cf. 0:33:33) and the one cast by Schreck when he creeps around the hotel in Wismar (cf. 1:04:33). Finally, a parallel is also drawn by Merhige having Murnau's gesture when he attacks Schreck for endangering his film (cf. 1:01:58) clearly resemble that of the revenant when he feeds on the ship set in Czechoslovakia (cf. 0:51:50).

Notable in all these scenes, in addition to the parallels drawn between the film's two main characters, are the highly striking and anything but realistic and/or naturalistic cinematographic means used to portray them. Especially from the perspective of a present-day audience, spirit photography, dramatic shadows and the exaggerated gestures and facial expressions of both Schreck and Murnau are undeniably unusual. So much so, in fact, that they cannot help but draw the audience's attention to the mediality of what they are seeing at least as much as they contribute to the creation of a Gothic atmosphere and stylistically connect *Shadow of the Vampire* to the classic *Nosferatu*. That is to say, Merhige's chosen cinematographic techniques constantly oscillate between drawing audiences in (through atmosphere) and repelling them (through foregrounding of the medium), between familiarizing and de-familiarizing audiences with the action on screen in a prototypically 'uncanny' manner.

As the previous paragraphs suggest, one of the main functions of the vampire in Merhige's film is to be a *doppelgänger* to Murnau, a personification of his darker drives. Still, Schreck is also a typically Gothic character in his own right and an interesting combination of old and modern features of the vampire motif. His deformed looks and animalistic noises, adopted from the original *Nosferatu*, associate him with the traditional view of revenants as mere predators – primitive, monstrous and 'other'. Yet while in early texts and films these features made vampires frightening, Schreck's physicality and ticks are more likely to subject him to ridicule from present-day audiences, thus exposing a change in visual cinematic conventions.

Be it through fear or ridicule, as Heidi Kaye has suggested, the portrayal of physical monstrosity in film is usually employed to lessen the ambiguity of characters and distance them from the viewers' sympathy (cf. 190). *Shadow of the Vampire*, however, with the help of Willem Defoe's mesmerising performance, achieves the opposite effect. Admittedly, Schreck's oddities make him an unlikely candidate for easy identification but through Defoe's portrayal they also endear him to the audience and depict him as deformed to the point of triggering pity. As for the matter of a lessened ambiguity, it is exactly the paradox of Schreck's ridiculous features and the vampire's at times utterly hypnotizing presence which

gives the character its depth. After all, it is not too big an achievement to be charming and to evoke sympathy when you look like Gary Oldman (*Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992)) or Brad Pitt (*Interview with the Vampire* (1994)) and are wearing a tailored suit. Yet to be hypnotic and emotionally moving with bat-like ears, rodent teeth and inch-long nails requires that the viewers really engage with the character and the existential issues he (or she) represents.

Luckily, profiting from developments within the Gothic genre of the last century (cf. e.g. Brittnacher 124), Schreck is given the voice as well as the opportunity to explicitly address these issues. When asked by Albin Grau and Henrik Galeen what he thinks of Stoker's novel, the vampire replies the following:

It made me sad [...] because Dracula had no servants. [...] Dracula hasn't had servants in 400 years and then a man comes to his ancestral home and he must convince him that he is – that he is like the man. He has to feed him when he himself hasn't eaten food in centuries. Can he even remember how to buy bread? How to select cheese and wine? And then he remembers the rest of it, how to prepare a meal, how to make a bed, he remembers his past glory, his armies, his retainers and what he's reduced to. The loneliest part of the book comes when the man accidentally sees Dracula setting his table. (0:48:35-0:49:51)

This passage includes all Gothic motifs which Schreck represents: loneliness and isolation, melancholy and longing, nostalgia and decay – themes which are also present in Tennyson's "Tithonus" (1860) poem, which the vampire keeps reading (cf. 0:33:50-0:34:02) as well as reciting (cf. 0:45:30-0:46:03). The millennia (he tells Fritz later on that he knew Plato (cf. 0:55:58), which would make him at least 2,300 years old) have taken away the vampire's wealth, his power, any form of company, his humanity and even his identity. Asked by Albin and Galeen where and when he was born he responds that he does not remember. In fact, he does not even have a name. I have been referring to him as Schreck because that is how he is credited, but of course this is only the name of the actor he is playing for Murnau's crew. This lack of a clear identity transforms "Schreck" from being a particular individual into being an embodied concept: it increases his indefiniteness and thus makes him the perfect Gothic figure. And as the rest of *Shadow of the Vampire* shows, it also makes him the perfect subject for a medium itself so closely linked to isolation, longing and de-humanisation.

4.1.2 The Gothic Nature of Cinema

Fred Botting has argued that the medium of film has played a crucial role in the sustenance of the Gothic genre throughout the twentieth century (cf. 156). This is not really surprising if one considers how many qualities cinema and cinemas have which make them perfect for the telling of Gothic stories. Firstly, the visual component of motion pictures arguably increases the impact of the supernatural elements by giving them a higher degree of graphic reality (cf.

Silver and Ursini 57) – an idea clearly in line with Murnau’s self-proclaimed realist goals. Furthermore, the mere atmosphere within a film theatre helps to underline the Gothic mood of any story: everything is dark and the only things visible are the flickering shadows and lights on the screen (cf. Merhige quoted in Houswitschka and Meyer 179). And how these silver spectres actually come to exist was, especially in the early days of cinema, a mystery to most audience members, who were therefore as mesmerised by the spectacular effects and illusions created for them (cf. Kaye 180) as they would have been by a real ghost. Some early critics and viewers, in fact, even compared the very first films to black magic (cf. Kaye 180) – a theme explicitly picked up in *Shadow of the Vampire* when Albin Grau refers to Fritz Wagner’s knowledge of slow motion as an “esoteric skill[]” (0:53:47).

In addition to these general links between cinema and the Gothic mode, *Shadow of the Vampire* suggests through an extensive accumulation of implicit, double-coded metareferences that film is not only the most suitable medium for this type of fiction, but that it is also the most Gothic medium as such, and that film watching and film making are two very Gothic businesses. As a first example of ‘uncanny’ and mystical film industry behaviour, Merhige lists our society’s tendency to put the people involved in the production of films onto a superhuman pedestal comparable to that of the Gods and idols of Old (cf. Merhige in DVD audio commentary 0:03:03) – an idea visually portrayed in *Shadow of the Vampire* by Merhige’s repeated framing of Murnau’s crew as standing on scaffolds, evoking the image of Mount Olympus. And if one considers the auteur and star cult which has characterised cinema from its early beginnings, it is undeniable that actors and directors really are often treated as if they were supernatural beings. *Shadow of the Vampire*’s particular interest in this regard lies in the dark side of this elevation.

First, there are Greta and Gustav, whose stardom-fuelled decadence is the origin of their ineffectuality as hero and heroine. Even more strikingly, however, there is Schreck, who serves as the epitome of an actor who as soon as he (or she) realises his (or her) star function becomes increasingly demanding and despotic. As Thomas Elsaesser has observed, the vampire motif is particularly well-suited to expose the monstrosity of a star’s egocentricity (cf. 15): the more destruction Schreck gets away with and the more power and energy he can “suck” from Murnau and his surroundings, the more does the revenant feel his own strength and glory return. He does not care about the production, he has no artistic ambitions, he merely enjoys to sadistically exercise his power by torturing Murnau (cf. 0:43:01). The latter, however, is in no way less Gothic than the vampire. As already argued before, he is a prototypical tyrant willing to sacrifice everything and more importantly everyone for his

obsession, and Merhige portrays Murnau's godlike position as director as the thing which gives him the chance as well as, as he thinks, the *right* to do so.

Another metareferential argument *Shadow of the Vampire* makes is that that cinema has uncannily changed our perception of the world. Fred Botting has identified the subversion of the distinction between fiction and reality as a typical element of not only general Postmodernist fiction but also specifically of Neo-Gothic texts (cf. 169). And it is exactly this subversion which Merhige suggests is an inherent feature to the medium film, which according to him always blurs the line between reality and fiction and even defies the idea of a chronologically organised (hi)story through techniques such as editing (cf. DVD audio commentary 0:03:16, 0:21:03). In a way, therefore, according to Merhige, there is something 'monstrous' about the whole medium of film as such since it is at least as transgressive as Schreck or Murnau.

There are many scenes in *Shadow of the Vampire* which exemplify this particular idea. In addition to the discrepancy between Murnau's desires for realism and his use of highly constructivist techniques mentioned before, a further element questioning the link between film and reality is Merhige's use of a very similar visual style – black and white, chiaroscuro lighting, visible iris – both for the film-within-film sequences and for Greta's flashbacks of her "real" memories when sedated (cf. 1:15:44). Furthermore, there are scenes in *Shadow of the Vampire* in which the question of what constitutes reality is explicitly addressed by several of the film's characters: Galeen, for example, when he still believes Schreck to be an actor, is shown to wonder if the latter ever forgets that he actually is not Count Orlock (cf. 0:33:17); approaching the topic from his cameraman perspective, Wagner is portrayed as proclaiming that "everything can be engineered" and that "that's the only reality" (0:56:23); Murnau, even more existentially, even voices the belief that "if [something i]s not in frame, it doesn't exist" (1:21:54). Finally, Merhige himself gives the whole topic an additional intertextual twist by seamlessly embedding short sequences of original footage from *Nosferatu* into his own film (cf. e.g. 0:20:28), thus entirely dissolving all dividing lines between narratives and diegetic levels. In short, all these examples leave no doubt that for *Shadow of the Vampire* and its director, film eliminates the borders between fiction and reality. The medium is depicted as the ideal transgressor and therefore as ultimately Gothic. And the fact that within *Shadow of the Vampire* there is the film-within-film and there is reality, but that this reality in turn is merely a film to the real-life audience, only adds one more level of complexity.

Yet the movie business and film production are not the only aspects of cinema which Merhige depicts as highly Gothic affairs. Instead, he portrays the process of film *watching* as equally uncanny. This idea is developed very early on in *Shadow of the Vampire* as it can already be seen in the design of the title cards used throughout the film (cf. e.g. 0:06:17). The pattern around the borders of the cards resembles the silhouettes of moths and therefore immediately draws a parallel between the power of cinema to attract people and the hypnotising yet destructive power of light over insects. This image is picked up again in one of *Shadow of the Vampire*'s central scenes in which Schreck is left alone with a projector (cf. 0:38:33-0:39:45). Again, Merhige's emphasis lies on the attraction of the medium as the vampire is portrayed to be physically drawn to the machine. The scene reaches its emotional climax when the footage the vampire is viewing shows him the sun. This causes a deeply emotional reaction in the revenant, which in turn culminates in Schreck staring directly into the projector, mesmerised by the image of the one thing he simultaneously desires and fears the most.

Applying this concept back to the everyday viewer, Merhige thus suggests that the fascination of cinema lies in its ability to show the audience things otherwise dangerous and forbidden (cf. Houswitschka and Meyer 175). Film-viewing, in other words, is represented as a form of socially acceptable voyeurism. By his repeated interspersions of point-of-view shots of Murnau filming and of the vampire observing Merhige further encourages this idea and invites the audience again and again to see the world as Murnau and Schreck do. The viewers are thus constantly made accomplice to the characters' transgressions, madness and murder (cf. Kaye 21) – arguably becoming Gothic figures themselves.

Still, according to *Shadow of the Vampire*, there is one element of cinema even more Gothic than the people and processes involved, and that is the medium itself. Christoph Houswitschka and Michael Mayer have defined *Shadow of the Vampire* as “a film on film making and the power of the technical apparatus over reality” (178), and it is exactly this unique relation between fiction, technology and reality which Merhige's film depicts as utterly Gothic. In *Shadow of the Vampire*, the motion picture camera itself is portrayed as a technological vampire (cf. DVD audio commentary 1:24:12): it gives immortality by taking away the flesh and blood of its subjects (images on film do not have physical bodies, after all) and by transforming them into mere spectres and shadows on a screen – or in other, slightly more drastic words, it gives everlasting life by killing. This idea is already visually evoked in Merhige's film by the make-up Gustav and Greta wear in the film-within-film scenes. Whilst clearly intertextually inspired by early cinematic traditions, it also makes the actors' skin look

pale and greyish, and their eye sockets appear hollow due to the strong use of shadows – in short, on camera, both characters are shown to look dead and ghostlike. This sentiment, full of traces of Walter Benjamin (cf. *Kunstwerk*), is even voiced explicitly when Murnau's leading actress answers the question as to why she would rather star in a play than in a film with: "A theatrical audience gives me life, while this -- *thing* merely takes it from me" (0:08:37).

As the story of *Shadow of the Vampire* progresses, the "thing" in question increasingly begins to develop a life of its own. Time and time again, there are shots of the diegetic machinery towering and looming into the frame (cf. e.g. 0:08:40). Every time Murnau's first cinematographer Wolf is seen to operate the camera, he looks weaker and more lifeless, as if the apparatus itself is what is draining him (the audience never sees Schreck's nightly feedings on him in between the shooting of scenes). In short, the supposedly familiar, harmless, man-made and man-controlled machine appears to become a revenant itself – a motif as 'uncanny' and as Gothic as they come. In the film's final scene when Murnau is filming the deaths of Wagner, Grau and Schreck (cf. 1:21:06-1:25:55), the crosscuts to the diegetic camera become more and more frequent. All the while, the rhythmic movements of its machinery become faster and faster, its noises more and more intense, the camera eye glows stronger and stronger until the audience gets the pressing feeling that the apparatus itself has taken complete control of Murnau, whose usually intense and powerful facial expression simultaneously dissolves more and more into an empty stare.

Of all the deaths *Shadow of the Vampire* portrays as related to the medium of film, Schreck's is the one which Merhige portrays with the strongest and most salient metareferential symbolism. Already Murnau's plan of opening a gate to kill the vampire with the sunlight which subsequently floods the room clearly resembles the process of filmstock being exposed. Merhige cinematographically takes the metaphor even further, however, by overlaying and eventually fading Schreck's death scene into footage of burning celluloid (cf. 1:24:16-1:24:28). Schreck, the revenant, is thus once more symbolically equated with the medium film, which in turn is irrevocably portrayed as the most destructive force in the story – as a truly Gothic villain, and a very classical one at that. In the end, many nineteenth-century texts and tropes of the genre originated in their authors' fears that society's increasingly mechanistic and atomistic view of the world would eventually lead, on the individual level, to a loss of humanity and, on a more general level, to a loss of community and wholeness (cf. e.g. Botting 157; Kilgour 11). Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* clearly expresses similar concerns with respect to the arguably equally mechanistic medium of film.

4.1.3 Conclusion: *Shadow of the Vampire*'s Metareferential Message

In an interview, E. Elias Merhige has argued that with *Shadow of the Vampire* he never wanted to create a vampire genre movie about blood and seduction. Instead, it was the exploration of “art-making obsession, the idea of science and the quest for immortality, the cinema as life and art coming together as an immortal fusion” (quoted in Houswitschka 68) which interested him. What Merhige’s film actually achieves, however, is a typically Gothic mixture of both. It tells a traditional vampire tale, in which the motifs of blood and life, seduction and passion *are* present, just as a battle between good and evil and a general atmosphere of gloom and nostalgia are. Yet in a next step, Merhige also takes these simple eighteenth- and nineteenth-century formulas and in a truly Neo-Gothic manner transforms them into metareferential symbols complex enough to represent all his ideas about cinema.

Heidi Kaye has suggested that Gothic tropes in general lend themselves particularly well to such transformations as they

seem destined to be continually reborn to suit the fears and desires of each new period. The monsters, their creators and their victims are sufficiently malleable in their indefiniteness to allow them to convey ongoing human concerns and tensions: the need for love, the fear of suffering, the yearning for knowledge, the anxiety over isolation, the desire for power, the terror of mortality, war, sexuality, science, government, economics (191)

and, in Merhige’s case, art. The uniquely Gothic motif of vampirism is a particularly good example of this tendency as over the last few centuries it has been invested with meanings ranging from psychoanalytical questions of sexuality and obsession, to scientific concerns with illness and the search for ways to prolong life, to social problems such as xenophobia, to many, many more (cf. e.g. Botting 146; Snodgrass 345-346). With *Shadow of the Vampire*, Merhige further expands this list to hold the transgressive power of film as well.

As an homage to F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, *Shadow of the Vampire* pays tribute to the artistry and power of cinema while at the same time expressing a highly critical opinion of the effects the medium has had and still has on society by reshaping our approaches to both art and reality. Merhige thus portrays film as a medium which is simultaneously both beautiful and frightening – a seeming paradox which, however, comprised in terms such as Edmund Burke’s “sublime” or Edgar Allan Poe’s “pleasurable pain” has always formed a central part of the Gothic.

4.2 Metareference in *Hugo*

If you've ever wondered where your dreams come from, you look around. This is where they're made.

(Hugo 1:11:59)

Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* is the perfect film to compare to *Shadow of the Vampire* for whilst it thematises many of the same aspects of cinema – the traditions, the magic, the technology – and whilst it also builds its story around a fictional version of a historical director, George Méliès, the overall view of the medium depicted within *Hugo* is highly different. Scorsese's film is also particularly interesting within the context of my thesis because it is a blockbuster movie aimed (at least partially) at children and as such is a rather atypical example of the metafilm genre, which, according to Barbara Pfeifer, till the present day is still mostly associated with arthouse cinema (cf. Pfeifer 420). Finally, *Hugo* is also an interesting piece of art from an intermedial perspective since it is the filmic adaptation of Brian Selznick's novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007), which in turn tries to imitate cinematic angles and story-board art in its illustrations to support its film-related story and to engage with an audience “conditioned by visual culture” (Seeber 445).

Whilst an analysis of Scorsese's adaptation process (including a detailed comparison between individual Selznick illustrations and their cinematographic executions) would certainly be a productive study subject, for the purposes of this chapter I will restrict myself to an exclusive analysis of Scorsese's film. While a discussion of the potentially different effects achieved by Selznick's barely self-referential book-about-film and Scorsese's highly metareferential film-about-film would certainly be interesting⁴², I fear it would exceed the scope of this dissertation. Furthermore, I see myself forced to mostly restrict my analysis to a study of the 2D-version of Scorsese's film since this is the only version currently available for repeated re-viewing. Considering the symbolic significance of 3D technology in this particular Scorsesean work, I will still refer to its general use and effect – detailed scene-based references, however, are outside of the realm of my capabilities⁴³.

⁴² For a first step in this direction cf. Clement and Long.

⁴³ For more detailed analyses of the film's use of 3D cinematography cf. Annett; Erstić; Higgins.

4.2.1 The Metareferential Portrayal of the Early History of Cinema

Even more so than *Shadow of the Vampire*, *Hugo* is explicitly and extensively steeped in cinematic traditions. Whereas Merhige's film only actually namedrops *Nosferatu*, Scorsese's film references a large number of its cinematic predecessors by name from very early on. In this, *Hugo* strongly resembles *Atonement*, even if the film only covers the first few decades of its medium's history in contrast to McEwan's overview of the history of literature. As with *Shadow of the Vampire*, already the title sequence of *Hugo* symbolically and implicitly sets the historical, metareferential scene. Opening his film with steam train noises which accompany the production company logos, and then slowly transitioning into frames depicting an actual train arriving at the film's central location of a grand Paris train station (cf. 0:00:05:-0:01:35), Scorsese immediately evokes the birth(place) of cinema by referencing the Lumière brothers' famous train-sequence from their cinematograph piece *A Train Arrives in the Station* (1895) – a motif which, for multiple reasons to be discussed throughout the rest of this chapter, keeps recurring throughout the entirety of Scorsese's film.

Once the film proper starts, *Hugo* slowly and intermittently takes the audience on a journey through the entire early history of cinema. Even before the first intertextual references to classic films appear, Scorsese's introduction of Hugo's sketchbook contains a striking homage to one of cinema's early predecessors, the 1868-patented kineograph or as it is more commonly known today, the flipbook. As Hugo thumbs through his notebook, the sketched automaton face therein seemingly turns to face both him and the audience (cf. 0:05:47). The resulting illusion of movement immediately references the quick consecutive display of 24 still frames per second which forms the basis of all "moving pictures". This technique is referenced again an hour later when Méliès' granddaughter Isabelle stumbles with a box containing sketches of her grandfather's work, sending the papers flying into the air (cf. 0:58:18). With the help of added CGI effects, Scorsese once more makes these still images come to life like a flipbook. In the process, he combines present-day cinematographic techniques with those of the past and implicitly comments on the still shared core and function of both.

Moving on from cinema's predecessors, as *Hugo* progresses, its audience is soon introduced to a first selection of early film classics when the movie's two child protagonists sneak into a silent-film festival so that Isabelle can see her first film. The cinema's outer walls are shown to be covered in old posters of Charlie Chaplin and Charley Chase films, as well as to exhibit a singular Max Linder film poster which becomes highly symbolic in a later scene.

Once inside the theatre, Hugo introduces Isabelle to his favourite medium through a screening of *Safety Last* (1923). At the same time, Scorsese equally introduces his audience to the Harold Lloyd classic by incorporating authentic footage from the movie into his own film. In particular, *Hugo* includes the iconic scene of Lloyd's character trying to climb the outside wall of a twelve-storey building only to end up precariously dangling from the face of a clock.

Soon after the two child protagonists leave the film theatre, they discover the connection between Isabelle's supposed toy-maker grandfather Méliès and early cinema. Eager to know more, the children visit the Paris Film Academy library, in which Hugo, Isabelle and the audience receive their first comprehensive lesson in cinema history through the (fictional) book *The Invention of Dreams* by René Tabard. From this book, the children and the audience first explicitly learn about *A Train Arrives in the Station* and the effect it had on its audience. Accompanied by the voice-over narration of the children reading Tabard's text out loud, this scene in *Hugo* contains a second example of authentic early film footage. Only this time, Scorsese soon merges the original footage with images of a Technicolor audience watching the Lumière brothers' film. Finally, by adding even more present-day CGI-effects to the scene, Scorsese literally has the train drive out of cinema's past into its and our cinematographic present (cf. 1:06:15-1:06:42).

The passages the children read out-loud from Tabard's book describe the cultural impact of *A Train Arrives in the Station* as "no one had ever seen anything like it before" (1:07:37). And a real-life eye-witness report by Maksim Gorky from 1896 describes the early-twentieth-century audience's response to the Lumière brothers' creation as follows:

From far away a courier train heads right at you—watch out! It rushes on just as if it had been shot out of giant cannon, it rushes right at you, threatening to squish you; the station-master runs hurriedly beside it. The mute, noiseless locomotive is at the very edge of the picture... The viewing public nervously shifts in their seats—this machine of iron and steel at the last second will burst out into the darkness of the room and crush everything... (2)

In other words, for the film's contemporary audiences, the scene on the screen seems to have felt uncomfortably real, leaving viewers with the feeling that the train might at any point break free and roll over them. Scorsese's narrative framing of the original Lumière footage specifically stresses this effect early films used to have on their audience. By including the portrayal of the audience's reactions in his shots, Scorsese visualises both Gorky's and Tabard's words. Furthermore, through his use of 3D-effects commonly used for shock-effect in theme parks, Scorsese comes as close as possible to recreating the movie's original effect on its contemporary audience by having the on-screen train protrude from and thus seemingly burst out from our modern-day movie screens as well.

The thus described iconic nature of *A Train Arrives in the Station* is one probable reason *Hugo*, in addition to containing classic Lumière brothers footage, is also set in a train station, and train motifs keep recurring throughout the entirety of Scorsese's film. Another notable reason is the fact that *A Train Arrives in the Station* is nowhere near the only early film using trains as a trope or setting (cf. e.g. Cohen 58 for an extensive list), thus making the motif even more evocative of the entire early age of cinema. In addition, scholars have also argued that trains, and locomotives in particular, are generally a great symbol for the medium of film since they are both "the first major invention of the steam age" (Cohen 56) and "the first object whose 'meaning' lay entirely in the fact of its motion through space" (Cohen 56). In this, they closely mirror cinema's nature as the aforementioned first invented art form as well as as an art form characterised by physical "perspective mobility" (Cohen 159-160; cf. also Reinecke 12) and defined by – and as – "moving pictures". Finally, on a much more practical level, a lot of early cinema's moving shots were achieved by mounting cameras on train-like, rails-following constructs (cf. Cohen 159-160), thus cementing the link between the two technologies. Combining all these concepts, it can consequently be argued that trains are, in fact, the perfect objects to be employed as symbolic representations of film technology, film techniques and traditional film tropes at the same time. Scorsese's use of the trope, therefore, strongly – if implicitly – contributes to *Hugo*'s metareferential density.

Continuing onward from its description of *A Train Arrives in the Station*, Tabard's book takes Hugo, Isabelle and the audience through the rest of cinema's early history, with Scorsese including even more authentic classic footage (cf. 1:06:54-1:07:42): from *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), to first attempts at story in Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd comedies or in melodramas such as *Pandora's Box* (1929), to early forms of Western and Gothic movies, etc. The development from black-and-white to tinted films is equally represented until, finally, the children – and with them the audience – encounter the iconic screenshot of a rocket protruding from the moon's eye from Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). This image is accompanied by Tabard's words that "[t]he filmmaker Georges Méliès was one of the first to realize that films had the power to capture dreams" (1:07:47-1:08:00).

In addition to this explicit poetological sequence depicting Tabard's views on early cinema and introducing the audience and the child protagonists to the early history of the medium, Scorsese furthermore pays homage to his classic predecessors through many implicit, double-coded means interspersed throughout *Hugo*. Firstly, the iconic scenes from both *Safety Last* and *A Train Arrives in the Station* are recreated in Scorsese's film as parts of the main narrative. For example, just like his cinematic predecessor Lloyd, Hugo eventually

ends up hanging precariously from the face of his clock(tower) home after his ultimate flight from the Station Inspector (cf. 1:44:28). Similarly, after reading about *A Train Arrives in the Station*, Hugo is portrayed to have a nightmare of an unstoppable train which drives into, through and out the back wall of his station, ending in a recreation of the famous photograph of the 1895 derailment incident at Paris' Montparnasse station (cf. 1:18:43-1:20:38).

These two scenes, in addition to once more paying tribute to two classic films and to the Studio Lévy and Sons photograph, present an interesting relationship between film, reality, and the Tabard-suggested power of cinema to “capture” or maybe also to influence dreams. Firstly, *Hugo*'s clock-tower scene demonstrates that filmic tropes can find their way into our “real” world by being – just like literary motifs – strongly ingrained in our cultural consciousness. For arguably, it is exactly Hugo's familiarity with *Safety Last* which gives him the idea that surviving by hanging onto the clock hands might be possible. Meanwhile, the boy's train nightmare clearly demonstrates that film tropes most definitely find their way into our dreams, cinematic imagery thus being shown to be absorbed into our subconscious. The fact that the audience initially receives no indicator that what it is watching is a nightmare and not reality further emphasises just how vivid and realistic both our dreams and the processed cinematic images in our minds can be. And when Scorsese eventually uses the exact same footage of the incoming train and its operators for a later scene in which Hugo really is almost hit by an incoming train (cf. 1:46:29), the director's stylistic choice further dissolves the boundaries between film, dream and reality.

In addition to these two very specific homages to two very specific iconic films and scenes, Scorsese also intersperses smaller and more general stylistic references to film classics and tropes throughout his movie. For example, *Hugo* contains multiple scenes which contain highly traditional slapstick-comedy elements first introduced by, amongst others, the aforementioned comedians Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd. Whether included in one of *Hugo*'s multiple chase scenes (cf. e.g. 0:06:57-0:08:50) or in the technically more dramatic incoming-train sequence, the extreme gestures, the increased speed of movement, the style of the accompanying music, the use of tropes such as sooty faces or near-collisions with cakes – many of *Hugo*'s elements could easily belong to films from the early days of cinema. And the same goes for Scorsese's individual uses of old-school cinematographic techniques such as ghost-photography (cf. 0:44:36).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ For a more detailed and extensive list of *Hugo*'s intertextual references cf. Higgins 206.

Hugo guarantees the salience of all these metareferences by combining these implicit tributes with the aforementioned examples of authentic footage, which consequently helps the audience recognise the tributes as such. Furthermore, Scorsese's film also includes explicit conversations between characters discussing not only the history of film but also specific cinematic techniques used in the early days of cinema. As usual, both the child protagonists and the real-life audience get their first introduction into the topic at the same time, in this case when Tabard gives a description of his childhood visit to one of Méliès' filmsets. Sharing his memories of that inspiring experience, Tabard explains a lot about how filming used to be done. He recounts how directors used to shoot in glass-houses to let in the natural light, and how everything had to be achieved with practical effects, props and optical illusions (cf. 1:10:58-1:11:30). How the very first non-practical special effects were accomplished is later on described by Méliès himself when he shares his personal story together with his insider knowledge of movie magic (cf. 1:31:41-1:35:42). Finally, Madame Méliès shares her own expertise and experiences as well, for example explaining how actors did not use to be stars (cf. 1:26:33) and how films shot in black-and-white needed to be tinted by hand to appear in colour (cf. 1:27:05-1:28:43).

4.2.2 The Wonders of Cinema's Mechanical Magic and Its Limitations

All these scenes, whilst explicit in regard to old-school film techniques, simultaneously provide implicit commentary on the differences to twenty-first-century filmmaking. After all, even the youngest present-day audience members can be expected to know that special effects and colour imagery are achieved very differently today. The result of these sequences in *Hugo* is thus the foregrounding of the ever-changing capabilities of the medium film as well as of the involved technologies. Furthermore, these scenes also aim to rekindle a feeling of awe and respect for especially these early magical films and for the vast amount of work, ingenuity and cutting-edge technology involved in their creation.

Scorsese further achieves this implicit foregrounding of film's technological aspects and their magic by building a lot of *Hugo*'s visual style around beautiful images of things mechanical. Already the film's title sequence, for example, introduces a gears and cogwheels motif which spans across the entirety of *Hugo*'s aesthetic. Mirrored in the image of the initial train's turning wheels, central to the visual design of Hugo's highly mechanized clock-tower home, picked up again through the automaton Hugo is trying to fix, through Tabard's manually-operated portable projector, through Méliès' mechanical toys, even through the

Station Inspector's metal leg supports, the motif of traditional mechanical elements and machinery is omnipresent in Scorsese's world. And the film's many camera flights along pipes and narrow tunnels, enhanced by 3D-depth-effects which in themselves carry a strong high-tech connotation, only increase the audience's feeling of seeing inside a complex apparatus.

In addition to this general mechanical aesthetic motif, *Hugo* also contains multiple set pieces which specifically evoke the image of a film camera or projector. For example, already Scorsese's introduction of the name-giving protagonist as someone who looks out through the glass of a mechanical apparatus (cf. 0:01:36) is highly evocative of the view from behind a camera (lens). In fact, this image of the boy as looking out from behind industrial components is picked up again and again throughout the entirety of Scorsese's film (cf. e.g. 0:23:06, 1:44:33, 1:44:42), establishing the motif even further. The inner workings of a historical camera or projector are further evoked by multiple shots throughout *Hugo* in which the framing combines light effects with lens-like elements, rotating gears and sometimes even a crank (cf. e.g. 0:02:15, 0:10:11).

Finally, one more visual and one narrative element complete *Hugo*'s implicit metareferential tapestry by filling in the last few referential gaps. Firstly, Scorsese introduces the automaton which forms the mechanical heart of his film's story as a mere shadow of a bulging object hidden beneath a white cloth, its outline flickering in the light of a candle (cf. 0:16:27). Through this, Scorsese manages to include a reference even to the earliest pre-form of cinematographic "technology", the shadow-play. Secondly, even the early references to the death of Hugo's clock-maker father in a museum fire can be read as implicit, double-coded and highly symbolic metareferences, as the threat of fire used to be particularly relevant to *film* museums and archives due to the highly flammable nature of celluloid.

Noticeable throughout all of Scorsese's mechanical aesthetic is the fact that – unlike *Shadow of the Vampire*'s portrayal of film technology as an undead and monstrous apparatus – the machinery in *Hugo*, even with that last interpretation of Cabret senior's death, is depicted strikingly positively. Firstly, Hugo never blames the museum or the items his father worked on therein for the man's death. Secondly, the boy's home, despite all the narrow spaces, industrial steam and metal, is never portrayed as cold or harsh. Thanks to Scorsese's choice of brassy colour-palette, warm lights and an either soft or lively score permeating the respective scenes, the clock tower more often than not appears quite cosy and inviting (cf. e.g. 0:10:08-0:10:19, 0:11:03-0:11:22). Even the work Hugo has to do to keep the clock running, while shown as strenuous, is never presented in the dark and ominous way one would expect

from a depiction of what is essentially child labour. Instead, Hugo is shown to actively *care* for the clock, in both the physical and the emotional sense of the word, the omnipresent machinery seemingly making the boy feel less rather than more lonely.

This emotional connection between man and machine is a central theme throughout the entirety of *Hugo*, most densely represented in the figure of the automaton⁴⁵. By the end of Scorsese's film, that figure is revealed to be the one creation Méliès, even during his worst days, is unable to destroy and merely gifts to a museum in the hope that "he would find a home" (1:37:32) – "he", not it. Hugo and his father are similarly shown to start referring to the automaton as "him" (cf. 0:16:56-0:17:14) almost immediately upon finding him. This idea of the machine having a form of life of his own is further reinforced when Hugo and his father first look at the automaton from up close. In the subsequent scene, Scorsese includes a warm light glowing from the upper left side of the figure's torso where his heart would be (cf. 0:17:48) whilst Hugo's father comments that "the secret" – or based on Scorsese's choice of visualisation arguably 'the heart' or even 'the soul' – "was always in the clockwork" (0:17:47). Combined with the heart-shaped key required to make the clockwork come to live (cf. e.g. 0:18:46), the automaton is thus clearly portrayed as having at least the potential of being a type of living creature. Furthermore, in stark contrast with *Shadow of the Vampire's* depiction of an all-devouring apparatus or with popular culture's classic trope of a calculating and scheming artificial intelligence such as Skynet, *Hugo's* technological life-form is portrayed as one full of heart and soul, and magic.

Whereas *Shadow of the Vampire* focuses on the mysterious, uncanny "magic" of film technology, the magic depicted in *Hugo* is that of stage acts and entertainers. When Hugo's father introduces his son to the automaton, he specifically explains that "[m]agicians used machines like this when [he] was a boy. Some walked, some danced, some sang" (0:17:38, my emphasis), and Méliès' writes. In other words, all of *Hugo's* automatons – and the equally technological medium of film they represent – are made to perform and celebrate different art forms and to spread wonder and awe.⁴⁶ More specifically, they are meant to evoke the most pure and childlike form of these emotions as embodied by *Hugo's* child protagonists, by the child versions of Tabard and Cabret senior, and arguably by Scorsese's chosen young target audience for his film as well.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed analysis of *Hugo's* automaton specifically in relation to the 'automaton' trope as it appears throughout film history cf. Meikle 178-179.

⁴⁶ This quality of early cinema in general and of Méliès' works in particular has led to Tom Gunning labelling the period and style in question as the "cinema of attractions". For more on this as well as for a more detailed analysis of *Hugo's* relationship with this period and style cf. Gunning; Clement and Long; Erstić.

From the explicit references to the fantastical novels of Jules Verne, which Hugo and his father used to read together (cf. 0:28:29), to the fact that old Méliès, even whilst otherwise crippled with depression, works as a repairman and builder of children's *toys* of all things, to the fact that he immediately starts to perform and teach little card-tricks for/to Hugo as soon as the two start bonding (cf. 0:31:38-0:32:20), the sharing of one's sense of wonder and joy, the inspiration of others through little feats of magic is portrayed in *Hugo* as a central source of happiness. It is also portrayed as the key motivator for Méliès' – and arguably Scorsese's – filmmaking. For as a young Méliès announces to the boy Tabard stepping onto his filmset, the early director's goal with his movies is to “make” his audiences' dreams (cf. 1:11:59). And unlike the drug- and obsession-fuelled nightmares of *Shadow of the Vampire*, the cinematic dreams depicted in *Hugo* are the most exuberant and uplifting flights of fancy one could wish for. Furthermore, rather than being solitary experiences, dreams in *Hugo* are explicitly portrayed as uniting creators, audiences and even critics such as Tabard in their communal sense of wonder. When in the film's finale Méliès addresses the audience of a movie theatre event held in his honour with “And now, my friends, I address you all, tonight, as you truly are: Wizards. Mermaids. Travellers. Adventurers. Magicians. Come and dream with me.” (1:51:16-1:51:48), he is thus inviting his wife, Hugo, Isabelle, Tabard, every stranger in the theatre as well as Scorsese's real-life audience to equal degrees to share in the magic of his creations. In this, *Hugo*'s metareferential message closely resembles *The Book Thief*'s approach to communal reading.

Whilst propagating the magical power of cinema to inspire joy and wonder, *Hugo* also acknowledges the potential limits of the medium in this regard when confronted with the ghastly extremes of reality. Specifically, during *Hugo*'s portrayal of Méliès' early life and of why he stopped making films, Scorsese uses a highly symbolic fluent visual transition (cf. 1:35:42) between authentic footage of the mesmerising explosions in Méliès' films and equally authentic newsreel footage of the brutal, deadly explosions of the Great War, to demonstrate just how jarring the juxtaposition between dreams and reality suddenly became at the time. Furthermore, *Hugo* has Méliès himself explicitly and succinctly summarise the effect of war on (his) art as follows: “youth and hope were at an end. The world had no time for magic tricks and movie shows. The returning soldiers, having seen so much of reality, were bored by my films. Tastes had changed, but I had not changed with them. No one wanted my movies anymore.” (1:35:54-1:36:20) – a sentiment which Scorsese further visualises through a symbolic shot of Max Linder posters peeling in the rain (cf. 1:36:20).

Eventually, bankruptcy and depression cause the decay of Méliès' magical glass-house over several seasons (cf. 1:36:28), and Scorsese's visually beautiful portrayal of that process through the use of time-acceleration and CGI effects – two magical tools of cinema, one old, one new – adds an additional metareferential layer of bittersweet regret to the scene. When Méliès is finally shown to burn his set-pieces and props, including his iconic moon (cf. 1:36:35-1:36:53), and to sell his films so they can be melted down into chemicals for something as mundane and literally down-to-earth as shoe-heels (cf. 1:36:54-1:37:07), the audience is invited to weep for the loss of magic and innocence in the world.

4.2.3 The Importance of the Preservation of Our Personal and Cultural Heritage

And yet, in its entirety, *Hugo* also postulates that such a loss of magic and wonder is never and can never be allowed to be final. In Scorsese's film, the preservation of our culture as well as of our personal sense of awe is portrayed as vital to our happiness and existence. *Hugo* emphasises this idea through its high number of positively connotated protagonists who are in one way or another involved in the collection and/or restoration of seemingly broken, "abandoned" (0:17:03) and unwanted (cf. 0:54:48) items: Méliès repairs toys, the Cabrets repair clockwork, Tabard looks for and restores old films, and even the minor character of the train station bookseller makes sure old second-hand tomes remain read.

The repairs performed by all these characters and the masterpieces many of them are shown to bring back to life serve as first pieces of proof that the hard work and the difficulty of finding the right "parts" involved in the restoration process is worth it, as Cabret senior explicitly points out (cf. 0:17:58-0:18:18). A second piece of proof is *Hugo*'s mirroring of the broken and discarded items motif with a motif of equally "broken" and "discarded" people. The orphan Hugo, the depressed and angry Méliès, the many lonely regulars at the train station, even the war-veteran Station Inspector who serves as a villain throughout most of the film are all characters the lives of which are eventually transformed for the better, demonstrating that nothing and nobody is beyond worth and repair.

Whilst *Hugo* thus portrays every character and every item, even the smallest toy, as worth restoring for their own sake, for the joy and happiness they can bring, the film further explains why it is particularly important to preserve pieces of art. Specifically, *Hugo* draws the audience's attention to the vast amount of personal as well as cultural heritage contained within individual artefacts. For example, *Hugo*'s automaton serves as a cultural representative of the clockwork men era of Cabret senior's childhood whilst also reminding the Cabrets of

Hugo's otherwise never mentioned dead mother who shares the figure's place of "birth" (cf. 0:17:31). Similarly, Tabard is portrayed as admiring Méliès for his skill as a filmmaker, for his impact on the history of cinema, and also for the fact that his filmset introduced young Tabard to a world of magic and wonder. Both cultural and personal memories are thus shown to be closely intertwined and preserved within pieces of art.

Being a highly metareferential film, *Hugo* particularly emphasises *cinema's* power to preserve and relay personal as well as cultural memories. Firstly, through Scorsese's repeated inclusion of authentic footage, *Hugo* demonstrates cinema's power to show both the culture (through movies) and the reality (through newsreel footage) of a time period captured on film. Furthermore, through his own use of early twentieth-century Parisian costumes and set-pieces, Scorsese demonstrates how cinema, even a century later, has the ability to recreate and evoke a past time, place and its unique atmosphere and culture. Finally, *Hugo* also picks up on a belief shared by all metareferential works analysed up to this point, namely on the motif that art can immortalise people. When Madame Méliès at one point explains that she used to be a different person when she acted for her husband, Tabard asks her whether she would like to meet that person again (cf. 1:25:27). He then takes out his portable projector and shows the aged actress, the child protagonists and Scorsese's real-life audience one of Madame Méliès' films. The moved expressions on all of the characters' faces throughout the subsequent sequence consequently leave no doubt that on the silver screen, the young Madame is still very much alive.

In addition to memorialising the people, places and cultures captured and/or recreated within them, films are also depicted in *Hugo* as being able to prevent their creators from disappearing into oblivion. At the beginning of the film, Hugo and Isabelle learn that Tabard and his colleagues believe Méliès to have died in the Great War since he never resumed his craft after it ended (cf. 1:12:42). Simultaneously, *Hugo's* early scenes also show that Méliès, whilst physically alive, is barely living, suffocated by his belief that his life's work has become irrelevant. It is only Tabard's and the children's insistence on proving to Méliès that "he's not forgotten" (1:13:27) by restoring his films and the automaton and sharing them with the world, which eventually brings the magician "back from the dead" (0:59:03) by proving to him that now that the immediate crisis of the war was over, people were eager to dream with him again. Culminating in *Hugo's* final movie theatre event, the restoration and re-screening of (in this case Méliès') films is thus portrayed as an important way of honouring both past works and their creators by acknowledging them as worthy of being shared with new generations.

The exact processes involved in preserving and sharing our cinematic heritage are portrayed at length throughout *Hugo*. At the centre lies the hunt for and restoration of old film stock, described by Tabard as follows: “We began a search, we looked through vaults, through private collections, barns and catacombs. Our work was rewarded with old negatives, boxes of prints and trunks full of decaying film, which we were able to save.” (1:49:11-1:49:28). Tabard’s choice of the words “rewarded”, “boxes”, “trunks”, “vaults” and “catacombs” immediately evokes images of adventurers finding chests full of treasure. And once the footage has been “saved” and restored, *Hugo* makes it clear that it is vital for it to be shown and not merely shelved in a museum or archive. From the early film festival which returns the peeling Max Lindner poster to its former function and introduces Isabelle to the magic of cinema, to all the smaller and larger scale screenings of Méliès’ films portrayed throughout the rest of the movie, *Hugo*’s focus is unmistakably on the sharing, not storing, of our cultural heritage. Furthermore, Scorsese’s film also suggests that collecting and exhibiting memorabilia such as old photographs, props, programmes or antique cameras (cf. 1:09:37-1:10:05) can equally contribute to the recording and sharing of cinema’s history, as can the writing of books such as Tabard’s (cf. 1:53:15-1:53:25). Finally and most importantly, however, *Hugo* emphasises the importance of sharing and thus passing on one’s “passion” (1:09:37) for the medium, as Tabard’s brother did with him, as Hugo’s father did with his son, as Hugo does with Isabelle, as Tabard does with both the children and the Méliès, as Méliès, through his films, did and does with the world, and as Scorsese, through *Hugo*, does with his audience.

4.2.4 Conclusion: *Hugo*’s Ultimate Metareferential Message

This motif of sharing one’s passion is the final core metareferential trope in *Hugo*. Similarly to *The Book Thief*, Scorsese’s film repeatedly emphasises the communal aspect of cinema and the shared experiences which can result from engaging with the medium. Already the portrayal of *Hugo*’s very first movie-watching experience focuses strongly on the emotional reactions of the child protagonists watching *Safety Last*, as well as on their interactions with each other. As Scorsese repeatedly cuts between the on-screen footage and the two children’s faces, he continuously draws attention to Hugo’s and Isabelle’s bonding over their shared feelings of suspense and laughter, even including the classic trope of Isabelle jumping and grasping for Hugo’s hand when she is frightened by an almost-slip of Lloyd’s (cf. 0:38:15-0:38:58). All the while, Scorsese’s framing of the scene envelops both children in the

projector's bright light (cf. 0:38:15) and literally highlights their awe and wonder by forming halos around them (cf. 0:38:23).

Eventually, the film festival scene ends with Hugo explaining his own induction into the medium of cinema to Isabelle as follows:

My father took me to the movies all the time. He told me about the first one he ever saw. [...] He said it was like seeing his dreams in the middle of the day. The movies were our special place. Where we could go and watch something and we didn't miss my mum so much. (0:39:38-0:40:07, my emphasis)

Thus for *Hugo's* name-giving protagonist, movies are explicitly shown to be a form of magical, dream-like escapism – yet not in the solitary sense frequently associated with that final word. In Scorsese's film, a visit to the cinema allows people to dream and escape *together*, thus connecting people and helping them, once they are back in the real world, to communally overcome their sorrows. Whether it is Hugo and his father coping with the loss of the mother, whether it is Tabard and the children helping the Méliès cope with the loss of their dreams, whether it is Hugo finding a new family in the process, or whether it is the variety of train station regulars finding new friends and lovers, in the end, *Hugo* is a film about forging interpersonal bonds as much as it is a film about film. Scorsese's implicit metareferential comment is that the latter can contribute to the first. Specifically, cinemas can serve as physical locations for people to bond over their love of film, or the medium of cinema as such can form bonds between whole generations by showing them their shared cultural heritage (cf. e.g. 0:18:00-0:18:35). Just like one lonely, discarded automaton can bring together Hugo's father (who finds it), Hugo himself (who keeps repairing it), Isabelle (who contributes the heart-shaped key), both Méliès (who built it), Tabard (who is the key to the Méliès) and all the train station regulars, cinema's magic is portrayed as capable of bringing together everybody who wishes to experience a sense of awe and wonder.

In fact, not only cinema but any type of art, according to *Hugo*, carries this same precious potential. For even if *Hugo's* main metareferential subject is the medium of film, the movie's core message of coming together and sharing in each other's passions is only cemented further by bringing together a variety of different artistic media as well. To make this point, the Paris train station in which most of the film is set is presented as a perfect microcosm of art and culture: there is music (cf. e.g. 0:07:27) and dancing (cf. e.g. 0:02:14), paintings hang on the walls (cf. e.g. 0:23:34), there is a book store, and even the prototypically French croissants (cf. e.g. 0:23:51) and lavender flowers (cf. e.g. 0:25:15) for sale can be seen as cultural motifs. Throughout *Hugo*, they all, at one point or another, serve as the basis for the formation of interpersonal bonds. Similarly, in the movie's final sequence, not all of *Hugo's*

protagonists are portrayed as pursuing a future in film (cf. 1:53:15-1:54:36): Méliès and Tabard are portrayed as working on scholarly texts on film history, Hugo is learning new magic tricks, and bibliophile Isabelle (cf. e.g. 0:15:21-0:15:42, 0:26:20-0:27:58, 0:42:48-0:42:56) begins to write a novel about Hugo's adventures. Scorsese's homages to his own medium of cinema are thus never done at the expense of other art forms. As long as people can connect over a piece of art and are inspired by it to explore their own creativity, the piece, according to *Hugo*, fulfils a valuable purpose and is worth preserving and passing on.

5. Metareference in Contemporary Television Series

Whilst forms of entertainment have existed since the dawn of humanity, scholars have argued that society as a whole has never before spent as much time indulging in them as it does today (cf. e.g. Vorderer 70). We live in what has been called an “Entertainment Age” (Vorderer 70), and there are few media which embody that title as much as the medium of television. Louis Bosshart has argued that our desire for entertainment results from the latter’s ability to satisfy a variety of human needs: it fulfils our aesthetic needs for beauty, harmony and closure; it fulfils our psychological needs for escapism, stimulation and emotional experiences; finally, it also fulfils our socio-psychological needs for orientation and belonging – partially through the quasi-interactions between, for example, show-masters and audiences, and partially through viewers’ sense of belonging to a whole community which participates in that specific form of entertainment (cf. 23).

Bosshart’s observations are particularly interesting from the perspective of a study of metareferences for two main reasons. Firstly, they raise the question of how metareferential devices traditionally accused of being disorienting and illusion-breaking are being incorporated into a medium seemingly so focused on escapism. Secondly, Bosshart’s last category of socio-psychological needs already draws attention to the one quality of the medium of television which both literature and film – no matter what *The Book Thief* and *Hugo* suggest – lack to this extent, namely the strong communal component to the medium’s immediate reception.

As David Marc has pointed out, from the early days of television, the idea of a family sitting together in front of the television set has been central to the medium’s image as well as to its production and reception (cf. 136). In fact, especially in the first few decades after the introduction of the medium, many scheduling and programming decisions were based on this idea that people watch television together, in family units (cf. e.g. Casey et al. 109). And while audiences can also go to the cinema in groups, the context is clearly very different: the grandness of the movie screen, the darkness, the expectancy of silence and the strangers in the theatre result in a very different viewing experience than that of a group of friends or family members sitting in a circle formed by couches and armchairs in the comfort of their own home (cf. e.g. Casey et al. 110-111).

This much more casual atmosphere of television’s viewing experience further complicates the concepts of illusion- and immersion-breaking so central to the study of metareferences. The fact that viewers can be talking to their friends whilst watching

television, that there are generally more possible distractions in a home than in a cinema, that television sets can be run as mere background noise, not to mention the fact that any possible narrative tension is continuously interrupted by add breaks, all these features of the television viewing experience suggest, as Marion Gymnich has pointed out, that the medium's illusion-creating potential can be much lower than that of cinema (cf. 132, 135). From the perspective of metareferential studies, this observation of course immediately begs the question whether metareferential devices are consequently more or less easily accessible in television – more because illusion-breaks are already part of the medium's language, or less since television needs to try particularly hard to create and sustain narrative immersion.

Another question arising from television's arguably lower immersion potential is that whether this specific characteristic of the medium clashes with television's predominantly assumed escapist nature (cf. e.g. Maase 53). This, however, would only be the case if we presume all escapist narratives to be automatically illusionist to the point of being naïve and simplistic, and only appealing to audiences who lack any reflective distance. As Werner Wolf and Michael Dunne have pointed out, however, such a simplistic view on escapist narratives is nonsense, for very few (and no mentally stable) members of those narratives' audiences ever *fully* lose their distance to the shows they are watching (cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 63; Dunne 18). Instead, the reception of escapist work is always a simultaneous activation of the audience's imagination (which produces illusion) *and* of its reason (which creates distance). After all, when viewers (or readers) engage with something fictional, the knowledge of its fictionality always remains present at the back of their minds (cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 64-67). Of course, over the course of a work's lengthy reception process recipients might be more or less focused on this knowledge at any given time – still, it is always present.

If this was not the case, as Hans-Otto Hügel has correctly observed, many of the enjoyments derived from watching television would be impossible. Firstly, in regards to the communal viewing experience mentioned before, the pleasure of that type of experience often results from the simultaneous shared emotional engagement with the content *and* the provided opportunity to comment and reflect upon that content, often ironically (cf. Hügel, "Genaue Lektüren" 44). This reception process – perfectly suited for the reception of metareferential content due to its oscillating, reflective nature – would be entirely impossible if escapism meant a (temporarily) full disengagement from reality. Furthermore, as Hügel has also pointed out, if viewers were losing all sense of detachment whilst engaging with escapist media, they would be living in fear of, for example, every act of violence they might see portrayed on their screen (cf. *Lob des Mainstreams* 20).

This objection by scholars such as Dunne, Hügel and Wolf furthermore puts an end to the typical simplistic criticism of television as an inherently manipulative medium. Specifically, it demonstrates that immersion into television (just like into any other medium) and the consequent absorption of any ideas presented therein still requires the audience's initial willingness to engage with the medium, to partially and temporarily ignore its medial framework and to dive into the illusion before ultimately oscillating back towards distance and reflection (cf. e.g. Hügel, *Lob des Mainstreams* 20). This is, however, not to say that television does not have any – or even a particularly strong – perspective-shaping effect on its viewership.

In the late 1970s, Jeff Greenfield described television as follows:

With the single exception of the workplace, television is the dominant force in American life today. It is our marketplace, our political forum, our playground, and our school; it is our theater, our recreation, our link to reality, and our escape from it. It is the device through which our assumptions are reflected and a means of assaulting those assumptions.

Most starkly, television is the pervasive American pastime; cutting through geographic, ethnic, class, and cultural diversity [...] A country too big for homogeneity [...] America never had a central unifying bond. Now we do. Now it is possible to answer the question, 'What does America do?' We watch television. (11)

Similarly, in the late 1980s, Sarah Kozloff called television “the principal storyteller in contemporary American society” (67). Even as late as the 2000s, Bernadette Casey and her co-authors still argued that “[t]he centrality of television in public and private life means that, for most people, it is a primary source of news, information and entertainment” (169), which gives television, and in particular its news programmes, the role of a “cultural intermediary” (169). In other words, whilst not being inherently more manipulative than other media, television has still been acknowledged by many scholars to have been the most discourse-shaping medium of its (pre-internet) time. Even critics of the medium have always credited television with a strong influence over people – in fact, this influence is usually the main source of the criticism in question. Put into a political context, far-right critics have repeatedly accused television of single-handedly destroying family values and far-left critics have objected to the medium's supposed sustenance and perpetuation of consumerism (cf. e.g. Dunne 183-185; Greenfield 13-14). And whilst the two parties might disagree on the exact detrimental effects of television, it is important to note that both sides seem to hold the medium “morally culpable” (Dunne 185) for a deterioration in society – an observation which in turn lends moral value to any metareferential discourse engaging with the medium's consequent moral responsibilities.

The exact ways in which television is capable of influencing society have been discussed by many scholars. In the words of Bernadette Casey and her co-authors, “television can ‘set the agenda’”, meaning that “television programmes can help define the boundaries of what audiences talk about and think” (9-10, cf. also 11). For example, news programmes are able to push certain topics and/or views by privileging certain voices and positions, by interviewing the people sharing these positions more or less combatively, and even just by choosing who gets the last word (cf. Casey et al. 10). Consequently, television and its decision makers – its editors and producers – function as mediators or potentially even as gatekeepers for the knowledge and values which are perpetuated by their medium and/or channel (cf. Casey et al. 10, 169). Consequently, in the words of Michael Dunne, a lot of our culture is thus “brokered for us” (15) by television (and other mass media), as is easily proven if we consider just how strongly we associate historically significant events of the last few decades (the assassination of Kennedy and 9/11⁴⁷ being two sad yet salient examples) with the images we have seen of them on television. As David Marc already pointed out in the 1980s, our lives for decades now “have been accompanied by a continuing electronic paratext to experience”, by a “shadow memory” which interacts with our individual memory and provides “images that function as personal signifiers” (135), as a personal soundtrack to our individual experiences if you will, whilst simultaneously documenting and re-documenting our collective experience.

This central role television plays in our views of the world can be highly problematic for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is vital to remember that the medium frequently setting our public agenda depends strongly on corporate, commercial and/or governmental funding for its survival (cf. e.g. Casey et al. 11; Gymnich 131). As a result, corporations, commercial and governmental parties can easily end up being the ones *de facto* setting the agenda, as has been so frequently pointed out within the framework of the current “fake news” movement. The second problematic effect of television’s function as a cultural mediator is the fact that, as Neil Postman argued already in the 1980s, if all public discourse is being mediated through a mass *entertainment* medium, all public discourse can suddenly begin to take on the form of entertainment. Before we know it, in the words of Postman, “[o]ur priests and presidents, our surgeons and lawyers, our educators and newscasters [then] need worry less about satisfying the demands of their discipline than the demand of good showmanship” (98). Postman further suggests that “under the governance of the printing press, discourse in America was different from what it is now – generally coherent, serious and rational” while “under the governance

⁴⁷ For a certainly interesting if controversial essay on the latter cf. e.g. Žižek.

of television, it has become shrivelled and absurd” (16) to the point where “culture-death is a clear possibility” (156). Obviously, Postman’s prediction of a “culture-death” is ridiculously fatalistic. Yet it is undeniable that now, thirty years after his work’s publication, our wars are increasingly presented as media events, and entertainment shows like Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* (1999-2015) or John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight* (2014-present) are often pulling higher viewership numbers than traditional news (cf. e.g. Colapietro 32; Hügel 34-35). The only questionable aspect of Postman’s theory, therefore, is that of whether the consequences of the development need to be quite as deadly and dire as Postman would have them.

In the mid-1980s, critics of a less pessimistic disposition began to suggest that one way of averting an apocalyptic fate would be to combat any illusions of objectivism and medium transparency related to television and to expose the ideological dimensions at play. In other words, critics began to advocate for an active enhancement of the audience’s media awareness and, luckily, many television creators soon got on board with this agenda. Consequently, the increased inclusion of metareferences into television programmes began despite early producers’ doubts about their audience’s willingness to accept metareferential elements (cf. Dunne 56-57; Gymnich 131).

Throughout the 1980s, creators began to build upon parodistic, intertextual and intermedial references characteristic of pop-culture in general and to incorporate those elements into their own medium and works⁴⁸ (cf. Dunne 10). They furthermore utilized the fact that the audience’s strong familiarity with the medium at this point had already resulted in viewers beginning to learn and understand the medium’s language on their own, similarly to how we all learn human speech through extensive exposure (cf. Dunne 191). In the end, by the late 1980s, open, public, popular televised discussions on topics such as the “spin doctoring” during televised presidential debates were increasingly common (cf. Dunne 6). By the 1990s these and similar discussions were, in fact, even considered commonplace enough to be incorporated into fictional television shows and series as well, resulting in a first peak of metatelevision (cf. e.g. Gymnich 128-129; Rajewsky, “Metatelevision” 415).

The incorporation of metareferential discussions into television programmes helped the medium retain those members of its audience who – by then fully aware of the not-so-new-anymore medium’s tricks – were becoming increasingly wary of what television was trying to “sell” them (cf. Dunne 18; Keazor “Stuff” 482-483). Furthermore, television creators and producers soon realised that the serial aspect of many of the medium’s creations lent itself

⁴⁸ For specific examples cf. Dunne, especially p. 10.

particularly well to metareferential purposes. After all, the inherent repetitive structure of a television series automatically results in later episodes referring to their predecessors, and thus to the entire series referring to itself (cf. e.g. Gymnich 133; Rajewsky, “Metatelevision” 415-444). Television’s potential for inside “jokes” was consequently equally recognised and complex referential schemes began to be developed, the understanding of which provided additional entertainment value as well as intellectual stimulus for television’s increasingly media-competent audience (cf. Rajewsky, “Metatelevision” 438-439; Seeber 447-448).

According to Henry Keazor, the first metareferential elements incorporated into television series were basic self-references introduced in later episodes of long-running shows (cf. Keazor, “Stuff” 482). By choosing such late entry points, producers hoped to (1) be addressing an audience proficient enough in the show at hand to not be too disoriented by any illusion-breaking elements, and (2) to have an audience already engaged enough with the narrative to not walk away even if they should be temporarily disoriented (cf. Keazor, “Stuff” 482-483). With time, emboldened by early successes and increasingly confident that their target audiences are used to certain metareferential elements, creators furthermore began to include metareferences into new series right from the start (cf. Keazor, “Stuff” 482-483). Finally, during the aforementioned first peak of metatelevision in the 1990s, as Gaby Allrath, Marion Gymnich and Carola Surkamp have pointed out,

TV series increasingly began to employ experimental narrative techniques like multiperspectivity and unreliable narration as well as innovative functionalizations of voice-over narration and of audiovisual presentation of consciousness. One can also quite often observe such experimental techniques as intramediality, intermediality and metafictionality (Allrath et al. 4),

the most central reason for this development most likely being the burgeoning idea of “quality television” and television series’ consequent desire to be considered as innovative and “high-brow” as their more established medial predecessors (cf. Starre 206).

All these developments over the last quarter of a century have resulted in a versatile tradition of metareferential television series. From critically acclaimed shows such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) or *The Simpsons* (1989-present), which are filled to the brim with metareferential elements, to pop-series with merely individual metareferential episodes (e.g. *Charmed* (1998-2006)⁴⁹) or even just metareferential episode-titles (e.g. *Friends* (1994-2004), *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003)⁵⁰) – going through the entire list would warrant its

⁴⁹ Cf. e.g. episode “Chick Flick”

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g. episode “Really Big Season Opener”

own separate study. For the mere purposes of this dissertation, for example, I considered all of the following series as possible subjects for my analysis:

The Sopranos (1999-2007) and their (in)famous ending would have provided great material for a study of the depiction of communal television-viewing habits. I could have used the early episodes of *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and even most of *24* (2001-2010) to look at the role which add-breaks play within the medium. I could have analysed recent cases of individual metareferential episodes through series such as *Supernatural* (2005-present)⁵¹ or *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007)⁵². I could have studied series such as *30 Rock* (2006-2013), *Extras* (2005-2007) or the short-lived *Cult* (2013) as great examples of shows with ‘life behind-the-scenes of a TV production’-components. I could have analysed the development of David E. Kelley’s work from *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) to *Boston Legal* (2005-2008) for its move from generalised fictum-metafiction depicting the sometimes blurry lines between reality and fantasy, to its explicit fictio-metareferential criticism of programming politics, scheduling times, target audiences and, eventually, *Boston Legal*’s own cancellation. As a parallel to *Hugo*, I could have used several episodes from the early seasons of the new run of *Doctor Who* (2005-present)⁵³ to demonstrate how metareferences can even be incorporated into a series made to be accessible for children. Finally, the mock-reality-show boom which has been going on ever since Ricky Gervais’ and Stephen Merchant’s *The Office* (2001-2003) and its American reiteration (2005-2013) – from full mockumentary series such as *Modern Family* (2009-present), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) or the short-lived *My Generation* (2010), to the mere incorporation of reality-TV elements into otherwise non-metareferential series such as *Defying Gravity* (2009) – would warrant another entirely separate study as well. In the end, I settled on Aaron Sorkin’s *Sports Night* (1998-2000), *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006-2007) and *The Newsroom* (2012-2014) for the wide, interwoven and unusually in-depth insight they provide into the American television landscape by having television professionals working within three different sub-genres of the medium form the main focus of their stories.

⁵¹ Cf. e.g. episodes “The Monster at the End of This Book”, “Changing Channels”, “The Real Ghostbusters”

⁵² Cf. e.g. episode “200”

⁵³ cf. e.g. episodes “The Long Game” (07. May 2005), “Bad Wolf” (11. June 2005), “The Parting of the Ways” (18. June 2005), “The Idiot’s Lantern” (27. May 2006)

5.1 Metareference in *Sports Night*, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* and *The Newsroom*

Will: What does winning look like to you?

MacKenzie: Reclaiming the Fourth Estate, reclaiming journalism as an honourable profession, a nightly newscast that informs a debate worthy of a great nation, civility, respect, and a return to what's important, the death of bitchiness, the death of gossip and voyeurism, speaking truth to stupid, no demographic sweet spot, a place where we all come together.

(The Newsroom 1x01 36:08-37:58)

Sports Night, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* and *The Newsroom* are prime examples of critical, fictio-metareferential television. Furthermore, all three series are also filled to the brim with both intra- and extra-compositional metareferences, thus always putting Sorkin's⁵⁴ views on television in a wider historical and cultural context.

5.1.1 Honouring Television's History and Traditions

All three of Sorkin's metareferential series are built around (in the first two cases eponymous) shows-within-shows which in turn are homages to real-life television programmes such as ESPN sports news in the case of *Sports Night*, *Saturday Night Live*-like satirical sketch-comedy shows in the case of *Studio 60*, and a variety of anchor-based prime-time news programmes in the case of *The Newsroom*. In fact, especially *Sports Night* episodes often open directly with footage from the series' show-within-show (cf. e.g. 1x04; 1x06-1x09; 1x13-1x15; 1x19; 2x09-2x11; 2x13; 2x18; 2x21), thus blurring the distinction between the two *Sports Night* shows for the audience. As with all metareferential works discussed up to this point, however, Sorkin's acknowledgement of his shows' predecessors does not restrict itself to such mere implicit references through imitation. Instead, all three series repeatedly thematise television's history quite explicitly.

In *Studio 60*, for example, actor Tom is shown to give his visiting parents a tour of the venerable theatre building in which the show-within-show is filmed. Whilst doing so, with shining eyes, Tom also explains the history of the sketch-comedy genre as a whole, how it developed out of burlesque and vaudeville and moved from the stage to film to radio and, finally, to the medium of television (cf. 1x06 9:41-10:52, 18:00-19:51). The same episode

⁵⁴Assigning authorship of a television series to one individual is a blatant simplification considering the number of rotating scriptwriters, producers and directors usually involved in each project (cf. e.g. Allrath 6-7). For the purpose of brevity, however, and considering the strong auteur-ship traditionally accredited to Sorkin, I will refer to him as the main driving force behind each of these three series throughout this dissertation.

also contains a guest character who further elaborates on the hard times the genre and its contributors experienced during McCarthyism (cf. 1x06 27:02-28:15). With the help of this character, *Studio 60*'s entire sixth episode is transformed into one explicit ode to the show-within-show's genre, which furthermore pays tribute to the people who suffered because of their love for their art. Beyond that, *Studio 60* characters are repeatedly shown to bond over inside jokes stemming from old television programmes (cf. e.g. the reference to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) in 1x02 34:24), thus portraying the show-within-show's professionals as people who live, breathe and think in television but also suggesting that all our cultural vocabularies are equally permeated with television tropes. Finally, when *Studio 60*'s team is portrayed to choose their musical guests based on the specific question of "What do we have that says *legacy of television*, like Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Orchestra?" (1x02 27:49, my emphasis), Sorkin explicitly shows his characters – and arguably himself – as actively wanting to contribute to this very same cultural legacy.

Similarly to *Studio 60*, *The Newsroom* also constantly references its predecessors. Already the title sequence of the show's first season opens on the footage of a flying broadcasting satellite (cf. N 1x01 08:02), followed by a series of black-and-white anchor desk footage of Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite and Chet Huntley, as well as by backstage images from other historical broadcasts (cf. N 1x01 8:06-8:34). Eventually, exactly at the opening theme's crescendo, all this classical footage transitions into comparable sequences depicting Sorkin's *News Night* team in action, thus framing the show-within-show and the characters behind it as the latest link in a long chain of traditions. In addition to contextualising both *The Newsroom* and *News Night*, the famous anchor men portrayed in the series' opening sequence are also repeatedly mentioned by name throughout Sorkin's series with characters explaining their significance. For example, when the managing director of the news division, Charlie Skinner, at one point tries to convince main protagonist and anchor man Will McAvoy to not hold back on important issues in front of the camera he does so with the following words: "Anchors having an opinion isn't a new phenomenon. Murrow had one and that was the end of McCarthy. Cronkite had one and that was the end of Vietnam." (1x01 1:02:10). Similarly, when two episodes later Will broadcasts a public apology for not having done what Charlie asked him to do earlier, he does so by admitting his regret for the fact that "honest-to-God newsmen with names like Murrow and Reasoner and Huntley and Brinkley and Buckley and Cronkite and Rather and Russert now [had] to compete with the likes of [him]" (1x03 5:02). In short, *Studio 60*'s idea of a legacy which deserves to be upheld and predecessors which deserve to be emulated is reiterated within *The Newsroom* as well.

5.1.2 The Steps and Elements Involved in the Production of Live Television

In addition to their repeated depiction of homages, *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* are further highly metareferential because of their overall narrative focus on the work and personal lives of professionals involved in the production of live television shows. Thus already the series' settings and the characters' day-to-day actions and concerns help Sorkin expose the practical, technical and commercial components involved in the making of these types of television programmes. Furthermore, Sorkin's famous dialogues full of typically vocal discussions on matters of ideology add many explicit debates on the merits, problems and functions of television to the three series' metareferential tapestry.

In regards to the exposure of production elements, each of the pilot episodes of *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* contain a variation of the same line which immediately stresses the show-within-show's nature as a live broadcast. *Sports Night* opens with an establishing shot of the New York city skyline accompanied by a voice-over announcement spreading through the studio's diegetic communication system: "Studio 8, this is master control, you're up on router 7, have a good show." (1x01 0:07). Similarly, within three minutes of the beginning of *Studio 60*, as the flying camera establishing the show's setting enters the production room, the announcement of "Studio 60, this is Broadcast Center, you're up on router two, have a good show" (1x01 03:05) can be heard. Finally, *The Newsroom*'s first footage of the *News Night* control centre is also accompanied by a voice-over announcing "Studio 1-A, this is Broadcast Centre, you're up on router 3." (1x01 49:33). All these establishing lines, combined with the behind-the-scenes visuals, immediately draw attention to the production side of Sorkin's shows-within-shows. Furthermore, since all three lines are voiced by Sorkin himself, they also serve as a metareferential signature and reference that with those words of their pilot episodes, *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* themselves are equally going on air.

Building upon these one-line introductions, all three pilot episodes of *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* include multiple sequences which aim to give audiences an overview of the people, stations and technology involved in the production of television content. In *Sports Night*, this overview is kept comparatively to the background and is mostly achieved through the inclusion of representative items (e.g. TV-monitors showing sport events, people walking around with video tapes, research being done at computers), dialogue asides (e.g. about the bad weather impacting the satellite reception cf. 1x01 9:57) and more or less complex professional jargon in the framing of scenes in which the main narrative focus

lies elsewhere (cf. e.g. 1x01 10:47). In other words, all these introductory metareferential scenes are double-coded both with narrative-progressing elements and with metareferences which help establish the atmosphere of the workplace setting. Furthermore, the jargon used in these scenes portrays the characters speaking it as professionals with a high level of competence in their field (cf. e.g. 1x01 12:11-14:08). Sorkin's ideal of a professional, knowledgeable media elite is thus introduced immediately.

In *Studio 60*, the metareferential overview sequence is already much more explicitly and exclusively just that. Rather than establishing the setting through what is happening in the background of different scenes, Sorkin and his frequent collaborator, the episode's director Thomas Schlamme, include a several-minute long sequence which focuses exclusively on the view of a flying camera soaring across different areas of the theatre in which the show-within-show is about to be recorded. In the process, *Studio 60*'s audience is introduced to the show's diegetic control room, in which the crew is implementing schedule changes (cf. 1x01 3:08-3:32), to the backstage area, in which a variety of people are getting ready (cf. 1x01 3:33-4:56), to the show-within-show's stage itself as it is visible in one of the production monitors (cf. 1x01 5:00) whilst a producer is making adjustments to the corresponding camera's angle and frame, and finally, the flying camera and the audience catch a glimpse of the diegetic theatre audience as the final countdown to the show-within-show's airtime begins. The whole flying sequence eventually ends in a shot of the show-within-show's opening as seen through one of the cameras recording and broadcasting the live footage (cf. 1x01 5:27). In fact, this metareferential capture of scenes by pointing the extra-diegetic camera at diegetic monitors and/or cameras showing and/or filming that exact same scene within the diegetic world is a common technique Sorkin and his team employ across all three series (cf. e.g. *SN* 1x01 1:17, 1:43; 1x02 4:12; *S60* 1x01 6:12 – 6:45; *N* 1x01 52:54, 53:08, 53:16), thus constantly reminding their viewers that what they are seeing is an equally constructed television show. In the case of *Studio 60*'s overview sequence, the final view of the stage through the broadcasting camera's viewfinder is eventually replaced by a cut to the actual footage of the show-within-show's first sketch that particular camera would be broadcasting (cf. 1x01 5:28). In the process, the real-live audience's point of view is conflated with that of the show-within-show's diegetic television audience, and the introduction to how a television programme arrives on our screens is complete.

Finally, in *The Newsroom* the introduction to the production aspects of television is disconnected even more from the narrative by being provided through the series' title sequences instead. Already the season one titles mentioned before include footage of producer

rooms, of actual broadcasts, of anchor desks, cameras, teleprompters, lighting rigs, information gathered on computers and phones, news bulletins and alerts, etc. (cf. 1x01 8:34-9:26). The title sequence of the following seasons only takes the idea even further, being comprised almost entirely of close-ups of items and actions which represent the backstage processes at work in a newsroom (cf. 2x01 0:07-1:03). To name only a few: a wall full of international clocks represents the scope, complexity and relevance of news content; footage of journalists speed-reading newspaper articles and exchanging documents depicts the research involved in the compilation of news; the company logo visible in multiple frames draws attention to television's corporate aspects; the shot of an anchor fixing his tie addresses matters of presentation; and an entire series of close-ups introduces the technological tools of the trade such as alert tickers, stage floor cables connecting cameras, the operating room switchboards, teleprompters, and, of course, the classic red "on-air" light. In short, *The Newsroom's* second title sequence's main function is to evoke the metareferential production setting of its show-within-show. In fact, during the entire sequence, apart from the last two seconds or so, the audience never sees the faces of the people performing all these actions. The focus lies less on the introduction of the characters of the show and more on *The Newsroom's* portrayal of the production processes of television.

In addition to these three condensed introductory overviews, all three of Sorkin's series contain a continuous backdrop of jargon and of exposed production elements such as specifically referred to microphones and ear-pieces or visible cameras, monitors, television screens, show-within-show set elements, etc., all of which help to establish the setting of the series at any given time. Furthermore, throughout all three series, additional production elements are exposed through a variety of metareferential asides which further flesh out the setting and refer to concepts and processes which cannot easily be indexed through a prop in the background.

In *Studio 60*, for example, multiple episode titles serve as such asides and introduce audiences to medium-specific terms such as "The Cold Open" (1x02), "The Focus Group" (1x03), "The West Coast Delay" (1x04), "The Long Lead" (1x05) or "The Wrap Party" (1x06). The first of these episodes furthermore includes a scene in which a character explicitly lists every individual profession involved in set design by name: set construction, camera department, sound, set dressing, wardrobe, props, graphics, video playback, gaffers, grips, electricians, FX (cf. 1x02 24:00-24:30). Similarly, scenes interspersed across all three series further reference issues regarding colour (e.g. a backdrop suddenly looking beige cf. *SN* 1x02 17:38), stage lighting (e.g. concerns regarding the different directions an anchor has to face at

different times cf. *N* 2x03 4:22-4:40 or regarding an anchor's potential facial hair changes cf. *SN* 1x05 6:58) and audio (e.g. soundboard issues endangering a producer's ability to do her job cf. *SN* 1x03 11:08-11:24, 12:03-12:19). The three series furthermore reference daily schedules (e.g. the number of run-down meetings cf. *SN* 1x07 6:57), rehearsal processes (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x05 22:33-23:44) and interview practices (cf. *N* 1x02 14:07-15:56). They contain explanations of what an "overnight book" is (cf. *N* 2x07 21:38-22:14) and of how focus groups work (cf. *S60* 1x03 34:53-35:06). They make jokes about television using unusual tape formats (cf. *S60* 1x01 11:48-11:58) and about everyone choosing to shoot in Vancouver as a way to save budget (cf. *S60* 1x01 31:54). Finally, they reference what audiences in the first few centre rows of a live show need to wear so as not to pull focus (*S60* 1x03 5:27) and what guest-hosts need to know to hit their camera mark and plug their own shows correctly (cf. *S60* 1x10 0:37-1:40).

As already this limited list shows, the number of referenced production elements throughout Sorkin's three series is astronomical. The function of each of these hyper-specific metareferential asides, however, is mostly the same. Namely, the focus of all these references lies on the enormous amount of people, work, technology, steps, considerations and cooperation involved in even the smallest production aspects of television. Through their metareferential asides *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* expose both the highly constructed nature of television and the skill this construction requires from creators. In the process, the three series increase their audiences' medium-awareness whilst simultaneously voicing and demanding respect for the people working in television.

In addition to all these individual elements mentioned once or twice throughout the three series, there are certain aspects of television production which receive a more in-depth exploration in Sorkin's series. Firstly, both *Sports Night* and *The Newsroom* repeatedly portray the research process involved in the production of news shows. Throughout the first of those series, the *Sports Night* characters are shown making phone calls (cf. e.g. 1x01 3:03), keeping up with trade reports (cf. 1x13 3:35-3:46) and cultivating sources (cf. 1x13 12:26-12:53; 14:00-14:11; 14:42; 15:54-16:50; 18:56). Connectedly, the series also explicitly discusses the question of how much of the information they present anchors should be able to understand (cf. 1x21 5:25, 6:32).

While few of these scenes are actually central to the dramatic arcs of their respective episodes, their existence – even as background – always emphasises the importance of well-sourced knowledge and of skilled staff for the creation of a respectable news show. Thus already through these minor metareferential asides, Sorkin expresses his poetological views

on what good television should be like. These views and the related portrayal of research processes are picked up again in *The Newsroom* and provided with even more explicit commentary on the professional responsibilities of newsmen and -women – which is why I will address them in detail later in the corresponding section of this chapter.

The next production aspect discussed repeatedly throughout all three series is the process of script writing. This being Sorkin's own domain, he unsurprisingly has a lot to say on this most self-referential of topics. On the psychological level of character development, both *Sports Night* and *Studio 60* are riddled with depictions of anchor man Dan Rydell and head writer Matt Albie, respectively, suffering from writer's block (cf. e.g. cf. *SN* 1x07 3:50-5:02, 13:14-14:03, 16:19-17:03; *S60* 1x16, especially 1:56-03:12). More importantly for a metareferential study such as mine, however, both series also portray a lot of the practical aspects of the writing process.

For example, throughout *Studio 60*, Matt's segment board is one of the most frequently seen background props. All three shows furthermore explicitly discuss the effect of different script formats on timing (cf. *S60* 1x09 1:34), they include arguments about rhyme-structures and rhythm/sentence distribution (cf. *SN* 1x01 14:17-:46), and they portray possible reasons for and consequences of plagiarism (cf. *S60* 1x04 23:58-24:26, 35:24). Moreover, the dynamics of a writers' room are exposed as well: who comes up with ideas, who pitches to whom, who makes decisions, who then works on what (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x02 11:52-12:03, 14:43; 1x04 0:10-1:57, 5:07-5:20, 31:49-32:05; *SN* 1x01 14:17-14:46); who writes for which actors (cf. *S60* 1x02 14:36); can one person possibly write a whole show on his or her own (cf. *S60* 1x03 21:00); what happens to writers whose ideas do not make it into the show (cf. *S60* 1x04 35:24); etc.

Finally, *Studio 60* also addresses the necessity for (racial) diversity on a writing staff by making the topic one of the central plotlines of its sixth episode. Specifically, the episode points out that a lack of diversity limits a writer's room's potential drastically (cf. 1x06 11:50-13:57): it restricts the cultural fields accessible to writers in their search for source material and inspiration, and it even limits the writers' ability to make certain jokes without fear of being called racist for making them "as a white guy". Furthermore, the episode also includes two concrete examples of minority-culture-based stand-up comedy: a bad one which shows that merely belonging to a minority is not enough to be able to write about it interestingly and without the perpetuation of internalised minority stereotypes (cf. 1x06 21:43-23:20), and a good one which succeeds in portraying a specific culture through insight and precision (cf. 1x06 30:50-32:27). The actual skill involved in the process of writing is thus also emphasised

by Sorkin in his portrayal of some of the cultural consideration relevant to television programming.

In his audio commentary to the *The Newsroom* pilot, Sorkin explains his reasons behind the recurring writer motif as follows: “I like writing about writers who are struggling with writing. Especially when I’m struggling with writing. It seems like my easiest way in.” (1x01 14:58, commentary track). Looking at the variety of writing-related features portrayed within his three series, however, it becomes clear that this form of self-therapy is not the only effect achieved through Sorkin’s portrayal of writers. Instead, his work also provides audiences with a highly detailed and informative insight into the writing process, thus once again exposing the number of steps and considerations, the amount of work and construction which goes into writing a television show. Last but not least, Sorkin’s metareferences on the topic also expose the emotional and psychological battles as well as the interpersonal and cultural aspects involved in writing. In other words, his procedural references are always imbued with cultural commentary and potential for character development as well, in a perfectly double-coded manner.

Moving on from writing, the next link in the television production chain portrayed repeatedly throughout Sorkin’s three series is the editing involved in the creation of the television shows. Specifically, the selection of “worthy” footage (cf. e.g. *SN* 1x07 7:48-8:22) and the cutting down of this footage to fit a designated segment length (cf. e.g. *N* 1x05 4:42-5:31) are the two most common processes brought to the viewers’ attention. In the relevant scenes, the fact that the choice of footage can strongly influence the audience’s views on any given matter is acknowledged and the seemingly merely practical issue of creating footage of a certain length is presented as a far more complex and ethically significant matter worthy of careful consideration further complicated by the question of who and/or what makes any footage “newsworthy” (cf. *SN* 1x02 13:20-14:40, 16:00-17:00, 18:31-18:45).

Continuing from there, after an individual reference to producers and crew double-checking audio- and video-feeds and rearranging segments till the very last minute (cf. *SN* 1x01 0:08-1:12), Sorkin’s three series move on to portray their characters’ jobs and experiences while their respective shows-within-shows are on air. Once again, the complexity and intensity of the duties performed is particularly emphasised in the process, as are the many stages and segments which constitute the final product. Notably, in more than one episode, the skeleton of segments making up the show-within-show also provides the extradiegetic show with its structure. Especially in the case of *Sports Night*, many of the narrative-progressing scenes are set during advertisement breaks and cuts to correspondents,

thus further emphasising the show-within-show's segmented structure so typical of television. In addition, episode intros and outros of the extradiegetic *Sports Night* are frequently conflated with those of the show-within-show, thus further stressing the similarities between the two series' structures.

For example, in *Sports Night*'s seventh episode, the initial going-on-air announcement of "music - go, roll credit - go" (1x07 0:28) applies to both the diegetic and the extradiegetic show. In fact, the diegetic theme music which consequently does begin to play is immediately revealed to be the same as that of the extradiegetic *Sports Night*. *Studio 60*'s pilot does something similar by including footage of the show-within-show's studio audience as they are welcomed and introduced to *Studio 60*'s proceedings, the announcer's information being equally relevant for the extradiegetic audience seeing the studio for the first time (cf. 1x01 0:00-1:19). Finally, the very last shot of *Sports Night*'s pilot picks up the motif in reverse by having the episode close on both anchors sitting behind their desk, bantering, with the sound slowly fading out and the extra-diegetic camera panning out to show the full studio – a shot clearly reminiscent of the few seconds often seen at the end of real-life news broadcasts, during which muted co-anchors seemingly continue to talk to each other until the titles appear (cf. 1x01 21:40-21:52). In short, in their choice of framing devices, Sorkin and his team repeatedly blur the lines between diegetic levels by constantly zooming in and out across them. In the process, the audience's field of view constantly fluctuates, at some points inviting viewers to immerse themselves in the story and the characters' ordeals, and at others gently repelling them and reminding them of the mediated nature of the television product they are consuming.

In addition to thus using on-air sequences to blur diegetic lines, Sorkin's three series furthermore use these sequences to portray television production elements specific to live television. Firstly, through repeated comic references to anchors not wearing pants on air (cf. *SN* 1x01 02:02; 1x22 02:58) or to them making silly faces at their co-anchor while the latter is talking (cf. e.g. *SN* 1x13 11:27, 14:16), the three series draw attention to the very restricted field of view employed in live television, thus raising awareness of the highly controlled and mediated nature of even supposedly one-to-one live broadcast content. To a similar effect as well as for the purpose of once more demonstrating the high level of professionalism and skill required, Sorkin's shows also repeatedly portray the tense work of live television producers who constantly have at least three different people talking to them at the same time (cf. e.g. *SN* 1x15 1:12; *N* 2x08 23:03, 23:27-23:43), and who need to keep their eye on a complex multi-camera, multi-feed setup, always ready to edit or reroute feeds on the fly to respond to

technical issues or new developments effecting individual segments (cf. *S60* 1x04 36:36, 37:52; *N 2x01* 8:58-12:30). Finally, the uniquely American television phenomenon of having the possibility to change and re-tape segments before their West Coast time-delayed broadcast is equally addressed (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x04 27:25-28:50).

Also included in Sorkin's portrayal of live television broadcasts are, of course, the many difficulties which can arise from the partially unpredictable nature of live, unscripted television. From sports matches taking much longer or far less time than expected and thus compromising both scheduling and viewer retention/attraction (cf. e.g. *SN* 1x17 0:50-1:58, 2x11), to the idea that there actually can be *too* much audience laughter during a comedy show since it can begin to impact the segment length (cf. *S60* 1x04 19:22), to journalists going too far on camera in their pursuit of a story (cf. *N* 1x06 26:06) – once again Sorkin and his team present us with a variety of fictio-metareferences depicting the realities and pitfalls of the medium.

The final unique aspect of live television broadcasting which all three of Sorkin's series address are the potential legal ramifications of things said or done on air. From humorous scenes depicting anchors getting in trouble for singing Happy Birthday on air without acquiring the rights to the song in advance (cf. *SN* 1x04 6:44-8:56), to the much more sombre tone of *Studio 60's* pilot episode during which disillusioned showrunner Wes' industry-exposing opening monologue is cut short when he uses one of the words banned by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) from live broadcasts (cf. 1x01 7:22-7:30, 7:48-8:48), the topic is referred to again and again. In fact, the FCC restrictions are further parodied in *Studio 60's* eleventh episode during which the show's whole network gets fined for airing a news segment which contains a soldier swearing during a live broadcast when he is almost hit by a grenade mid-coverage (cf. 1x11 8:58-9:46, 10:16-10:37; 23:07-25:04). In none of these scenes do Sorkin and his team mention the word censorship explicitly – yet by merely metareferentially exposing the absurdity of the industry-specific rules the creators of live television broadcasts need to follow, the makers of the three series discussed here still voice a clear criticism of the medium's and the industry's current state of affairs.

5.1.3 Television as an Industry

Such commentary on the general state of the television industry today is another common thread across *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom*. In addition to the references to the FCC regulations, Sorkin's series contain multiple mentions of Hollywood's insurance policy

practices when it comes to actors or directors with drug problems or drug abuse histories (cf. *SN* 1x02 9:58; *S60* 1x01 29:00-29:57). The series furthermore portray how open job positions in the industry are filled – both based on merit and “grooming” (cf. *SN* 1x12 3:49-5:46) and on knowing the right people (cf. *SN* 2x07 10:06-10:47). The series also include references to union strikes (cf. *S60* 1x17 2:35-03:15; 03:42-03:52) and to the impossibility of actors having the same name as another union member (cf. *SN* 2x12 0:13). Finally, questions of diversity are addressed in this context as well, and they are once more portrayed in a multifaceted manner.

In addition to the *Studio 60* scene mentioned before, the question of race is also featured quite prominently in the eleventh episode of *Sports Night*. Portraying a scenario still depressingly familiar to audiences twenty years later, the story of the episode centres around the coverage of an African American college football player’s refusal to play at a stadium flying a confederate flag (cf. 1x11 5:41-6:40). As soon as the subject is introduced, *Sports Night*’s network head – a Caucasian Southerner and alumnus of the college in question – is portrayed as wishing the topic to be covered with an emphasis on the Southern sport and cultural traditions which are symbolised by the flag. Through the inclusion of this character, *Sports Night* immediately demonstrates how easily and inappropriately personal, political and commercial concerns can drive news coverage’s agenda – at least if nobody in charge intervenes. Dan, however, immediately urges African American managing editor Isaac Jaffe to fight this demand. Yet interestingly, Isaac’s first response is to exclaim that he does not want to have to always be “the champion of all things black” (1x11 7:40). Eventually, Isaac of course does take the moral high-road and atypically goes on air himself to read out a statement in the form of an editorial (cf. 1x11 16:00-18:18), yet only after Sorkin and his team have thus taken the time to show that matters of race are never simple. On the one hand, the series eventually stresses the importance of using one’s medium and position to join the public debate and combat injustice. On the other hand, it, however, also acknowledges that just because a member of staff belongs to a certain minority group that does not make him or her automatically responsible for everything related to the minority in question. After all, he or she is a professional with skills and interests and work to do first, and a member of a minority second.

Whilst racial diversity is thus given centre stage at least twice throughout the three series, gender diversity is seemingly only touched upon, yet with a similar and similarly strong message. All three shows make a point of portraying competent, strong women in positions of power: Both *Sports Night* and *News Night* have women producers, the newly-appointed

president of *Studio 60*'s broadcasting company is a woman, the company behind *News Night* is owned by a woman and its financial news are presented by a woman who gives lectures at university in parallel to her job as an anchor. Yet when *Studio 60*'s president Jordan McDeere is asked whether she thinks more high-ranking female television executives like her would help bring a different sensibility to the industry (cf. 1x02 0:15), she responds that she does not actually think gender really matters that much (cf. 1x02 0:23). This answer clearly echoes the idea that just because Isaac is black that does not mean that he has to champion all things black: here, just because she is female, Jordan does not need to champion all things female, neither does she even need to believe that there is anything unique about women executives. This particular approach to the topic is what characterises Sorkin's own portrayal of gender issues as well. Once he and his team have made sure to portray strong women characters in important positions, any further long and explicit elaboration upon their womanhood becomes unnecessary and arguably inappropriate. Once their competence and importance within the shows' narratives have been established, Sorkin's women are treated just like every other character, as a complex individual with interests and pet-peeves, admirable qualities and flaws, their gender (just like Isaac's race) purposefully never mentioned as a main defining characteristic.

Staying within the realm of Sorkin's character portrayal, a next important component of the production of television thematised in *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* are of course the people who work within that environment. The most metareferentially interesting aspect of their depiction is the effect the three series suggest that working in television has on its professionals. Firstly, Sorkin and his team frequently depict the loss of privacy which stardom – or specifically one's role as the public face of a show and/or company – can bring, as well as the standards one's behaviour needs to consequently meet as a result. From references to the tediousness of obligatory galas, black-tie events (cf. *SN* 1x03 3:41-4:47, 10:07) and even talk shows (cf. *SN* 1x11 3:44) which medium representatives need to attend to sustain or better even increase their fame and likeability and thus grow their business and ratings (cf. e.g. *SN* 2x20 15:57-16:44, *N* 2x06 28:25-29:12), to mentions of the ridiculous extent to which what an anchor wears on camera matters (cf. *N* 1x01 50:51), to the portrayal of anchors being reprimanded by lawyers and “a guy from ‘Standards and Practices’” (*SN* 1x02 4:00) for breaking the “morals clause” in their contract (*SN* 1x02 9:26) and for not fulfilling sponsor expectations by not projecting “an image of good health and clean living” (*SN* 1x02 8:38)), to plot-arcs in which an old D.U.I. mug-shot of Jordan (cf. *S60* 1x03 2:56) and nude pictures of Sloan leaked by a vengeful ex (cf. *N* 2x05) become press fodder, to

references to focus group data being gathered purely about whether an anchor is liked or not (cf. *N* 1x01 19:17) since his or her likeability has such a strong impact on ratings that positive focus data can affect a professional's creative freedoms as well as his or her salary (cf. *N* 1x01 20:16-20:44, 22:11-22:17, 30:12-30:47) – Sorkin's three series make it very clear that being the public face of a television show places high demands not only on a person's behaviour at work but on his or her personal life as well.

In addition to having to be liked for professional reasons, television men (and interestingly enough *only* men) in *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* are also repeatedly shown to eventually begin to crave the love and admiration of their millions-strong audiences for themselves, usually with negative effects on the men's psyche as well as on their creative and journalistic integrity. Both *Sports Night*'s Dan and *The Newsroom*'s Will, for example, are portrayed as news anchors who, at least temporarily, have become addicted to their on-screen popularity (cf. e.g. *SN* 2x05 0:11-0:30; *N* 1x02 7:20-7:42) to the point where it is damaging their interpersonal relationships and own moral compasses (cf. *N* 1x02 46:37). *Sports Night* explains Dan's behaviour with a lack of real-life social skills and family life (cf. e.g. 2x06 1:28). Meanwhile, *The Newsroom*'s MacKenzie explicitly accuses Will of being afraid (cf. 1x02 46:30) in addition to the show's implicit portrayal of Will's love-life as just as empty and in need of filling as Dan's (cf. e.g. *N* 2x06 39:15-39:54). In both cases, the love an audience can give is shown to serve as a form of comfort and affirmation of self-worth, be it a rather unhealthy one.

Consequently, in *The Newsroom*, both MacKenzie and the show's managing director Charlie Skinner repeatedly try to dissuade Will from constantly checking his and the show's ratings – yet as the series also points out, matters are not as simple. After all, when Will eventually rejects his friends' advice with the argument that it is *him* – not them – who actually has to sit in the anchor chair every night and publicly own the show's content (cf. *N* 1x02 44:14), he is neither lying nor mistaken. In the end, every story the *News Night* team covers, every sentence they broadcast, gets directly associated by millions of people with Will's face, with him as a person. Every emotion the audience feels as a result of the show, they, eventually, connect to him. If they grow angry or disappointed, it is not only with the programme but with *him*. In other words, in Sorkin's series, the ability to reach an immense number of people is portrayed as a double-edged sword which can provide comfort but also cause an intense fear of making a mistake and wronging and/or disappointing millions of people. Furthermore, these passages of *The Newsroom* simultaneously draw the audience's attention to flaws in their own (viewing) behaviour. After all, any thoughtless equation of one

figure head or showrunner with a programme created by hundreds of people – as Sorkin emphasises time and time again – is unreasonable, simplistic, and actively putting an unhealthy amount of pressure on that individual.

In addition to this specific effect of ratings on the self-perception of individual key figures, the general effect of ratings on entire shows and networks is of course also thematised in Sorkin’s three series. In fact, ratings being arguably the perfect signifier for the commercial side of television, for television as a business rather than as a medium, and for the impact this business side has on the medium, they and their effects are unsurprisingly the most-discussed aspect of the television industry throughout the entirety of *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom*. All three of Sorkin’s series, at one point or another, portray their shows-within-shows’ existence as threatened by financial troubles resulting from ratings-related concerns. Whilst providing drama and narrative tension, this double-coded metareferential motif also consistently provides Sorkin and his team with opportunities to discuss the business practices of the television industry.

The list of examples *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* provide of commercial aspects relevant to the making of television is long. From references to press, advertiser and affiliate relationships needing to be considered when decisions are made (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x01 14:03-15:49), to the importance of appealing to “alpha consumers” and influencers (cf. *S60* 1x04 16:09-17:08), to economic-jargon-filled budget meetings discussing add-revenues, personnel cost and the value difference between add-breaks (accepted as part of the medium) and product placement (still seen as a form of conscious endorsement) (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x09 9:12-10:10, 15:05, 22:31-24:01), to explicit criticism of CEOs cashing-in huge bonuses while award-winning shows and staffers are facing personnel cuts (cf. e.g. *SN* 2x19 0:00-3:42) – the role commercial considerations play in television is proven by Sorkin’s three series to be so big that when *Studio 60*’s network chairman Jack Rudolph at one point exclaims that “Hollywood isn’t run by liberals, it’s run by companies” (1x07 33:13), the now metareferentially-educated-on-the-topic audience is likely to agree.

According to Sorkin’s three series, these commercial influences are particularly troubling when it comes to the production of news shows. In their seminal introduction to the field of television studies, Bernadette Casey, Neil Casey, Ben Calvert, Liam French and Justin Lewis have pointed out that unlike, for example, in British television – which as a result of the dominance of the BBC is strongly influenced by the ideal of ‘public service broadcasting’ – in American television “commercial sponsors and advertisers have [always] exerted a good deal of direct and indirect control over content, style and scheduling of programmes” (45, cf. also

46). However, Casey and her co-authors also acknowledge that “[i]n both Britain *and* the United States, news programmes [specifically] are [*still*] often regarded by broadcasters as a ‘public service’” (183-184, my emphasis). In fact, as Sorkin and his team explain both in an aside in *Studio 60* (cf. 1x11 8:38-8:50) and in the following excerpt from the lengthy apology Will gives on air in *The Newsroom*, this idea of ‘public service’ is what forms the legal basis for networks in America not being required to pay for the use of the country’s broadcasting systems. As Will elaborates:

In the infancy of mass communication, the Columbus and Magellan of broadcast journalism, William Paley and David Sarnoff, went down to Washington to cut a deal with Congress. Congress would allow the fledgling networks free use of taxpayer-owned airwaves in exchange for one public service. That public service would be one hour of air time set aside every night for informational broadcasting, or what we now call the evening news. Congress, unable to anticipate the enormous capacity television would have to deliver consumers to advertisers, failed to include in its deal the one requirement that would have changed our national discourse immeasurably for the better. Congress forgot to add that under no circumstances could there be paid advertising during informational broadcasting. They forgot to say that taxpayers will give you the airwaves for free, and for 23 hours a day you should make a profit, but for one hour a night, you work for us. (N 1x03 4:08-5:01)

This passage, whilst once again paying homage to the medium’s past – this time in the form of broadcast network presidents Paley (CBS) and Sarnoff (NBC) – clearly identifies the purpose of news shows as that of “working for”, of serving the people. This purpose, however, as this excerpt also shows, can be in direct opposition to the present-day need for news to be advertiser-friendly. This opposition leads to the central dilemma of the television industry depicted in *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom*, namely the constant conflict of creators desiring to preserve their own and their work’s integrity whilst needing to achieve the ratings necessary to stay on the air.

This conflict is presented in its most condensed form in *The Newsroom*’s third episode, which juxtaposes Will’s highly moralist and idealist apology about the current state of news media with multiple scenes from meetings between Charlie, the company owners and a market analyst, which all focus solely on the mercantile, financial and ratings-related aspects of the show-within-show’s performance in the months after the speech (cf. 1x03 7:20-7:37, 9:19-9:55, 11:34-12:14, 16:30-16:56, 19:56-20:07, 22:44-23:09, 25:30-26:03, 30:01-30:10, 34:30-35:20, 48:02-53:52). Contrasted with Will’s apology – the pathos and inspirational grandeur of which are established beautifully through Sorkin’s writing, Jeff Daniels’ delivery, the quiet yet dramatic background music and the reference to the apology given by the 9/11 Commission – the board meetings appear base and almost demeaning. Sorkin’s presentation of them thus clearly supports Will’s apology in its statement that these kinds of meetings are

the crux of contemporary news' problem: "The reason we failed isn't a mystery. We took a dive for the ratings." (N 1x03 4:06).

This idea of having to "take a dive for the ratings" is a common theme throughout *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom*. Already in *Sports Night*'s pilot, there is the portrayal of an argument between anchor man Casey McCall and a network representative, the latter demanding certain segments of the show-within-show be dropped because they are of no interest to the network's key demographic (eleven- to seventeen-year-olds) according to a "ratings book on [his] desk that is very instructive" (1x01 7:25). Casey's immediate response to this is to point out that his and his partner's experience in the business as well as their "awards for journalistic excellence" (1x01 7:48) make them better suited to make programming choices than teenagers and financial advisors. The concept of making decisions based on ratings is thus portrayed by Sorkin as the antithesis of making decisions based on journalistic competence.

To corroborate this statement, throughout his three series, Sorkin provides many concrete examples of how attempts at chasing ratings can result in the need to make moral and professional concessions. In *Sports Night*'s fifth episode, for example, the team's excitement over an exclusive interview which they have been promoting for days since it is guaranteed to bring them high ratings and a breakthrough into a wider market (cf. 1x05 0:00-2:52) is soon dampened by the fact that the interviewee's lawyer and agent, fully aware that *Sports Night* cannot afford to reject their terms, force strict guidelines on the interview (cf. 1x05 3:52), preventing the team from asking any actually important questions, such as questions relating to the interviewee's physical abuse of his girlfriend.

The conditions for the interview are soon complicated even further when producer Dana Whitaker subsequently attempts to get better answers from the misogynist interviewee by purposefully sending her *female* senior associate producer to do the pre-interview (cf. SN 1x05 14:57) – a choice which results in the man sexually harassing and physically assaulting the journalist (cf. SN 1x05 7:30-8:20). Whilst it can be argued that Dana's decision is made for the purpose of an interesting interview rather than just for the purpose of ratings, the context of the episode certainly adds this extra connotation. After all, the explosive interview she is looking for might be good journalism addressing important topics but it also most definitely would be good for the show's ratings. The fact that Dana, after the assault, even offers the interviewee's legal team her silence on the matter in exchange for a loosening of the interview restrictions only makes the length to which she is willing to go for this story more questionable (cf. SN 1x05 10:42-11:30). In the end, *Sports Night*'s entire fifth episode –

technically named after the abused girlfriend, Mary Pat Shelby – ends up being less about the girlfriend and more about the explicit, content-based metareferential discussion of how far a producer should be willing to go for ratings (cf. 1x05 4:25, 9:27-10:27, 11:24-11:56, 14:37-15:50, 18:46-19:30).

The motif of interviews coming with too many strings attached is picked up again in the twelfth episode of the second season of *Sports Night*, this time in the context of an upcoming interview with Michael Jordan. As a result of press kits for Jordan accidentally reaching the *Sports Night* studio, the team soon learns that rather than being willing to answer deep questions about sports, Jordan has been instructed by his marketing team to consistently bring the conversation back to his new cologne (cf. 2x12 6:18-7:30). Jordan's team furthermore soon contacts *Sports Night* directly and explains that the star player will, in fact, only make an appearance if the cologne company gets full editorial control over the final cut of the interview (cf. 2x12 15:40-15:55). In stark contrast to the "Mary Pat Shelby" case, in which the importance of the story compelled her to go too far, Dana this time immediately pulls the interview in response to the demands made by Jordan's team, drawing a clear line in regards to how much dilution of content she is willing to accept for the sake of ratings.

What is interesting about both these episodes from a metareferential perspective is the fact that in addition to portraying moral debates about industry practices, the episodes simultaneously expose the existence and details of those practices in the first place. To an uninformed audience, interviews are usually presented as unscripted affairs, led entirely by the questions which come from the journalists. Both episodes of *Sports Night*, however, demonstrate both the vast amount of conditions, restrictions and guidelines which in reality are imposed upon interviews by legal, publicity and marketing departments, and the amount of interviewee-coaching which precedes them. As a result, the influence of powers from outside the journalism sphere is uncovered, as is the constructed nature of one more television genre.

Continuing this trend of exposing details concerning ratings-related industry practices, *Sports Night*'s second season moreover introduces the profession of a ratings consultant to its audience and portrays the immense power over editorial as well as creative decisions, which is invested in a person who holds that position (cf. e.g. 2x02 17:06, 19:43). All three of Sorkin's series furthermore repeatedly portray meetings in which owners, studio representatives, and other "suits" equally try to "give notes" to their creative team despite, as is explicitly stated in *Sports Night*, not having any credentials or experience related to writing

and/or producing a television show (cf. 2x03 3:49-4:04). The collaboration between ratings-driven and creative departments is thus recurrently portrayed as antagonistic and strained.

Yet for all their criticism of ratings and their explicit references to working for ratings being comparable to “whoring out” (cf. *SN* 1x05 4:06), *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* also make sure to portray that matters are of course not always simple and that the supposed dichotomy presented is not always as black and white – especially since ratings are not actually entirely abstract, meaningless numbers but *are* representative of certain serious and relevant issues.

Firstly, all three series make it clear that ratings are relevant to sponsors, and that by being reflective of the relationship between a show and its viewers, they can even be relevant to governments. Both sponsors and government-collaboration, in turn, are not only relevant but essential for a network and show to be allowed to exist and to have certain freedoms (cf. *S60* 1x03 18:19-18:39, 28:28) – or in the words of *The Newsroom*’s company president Reese Lansing, ratings equal power which equals autonomy and freedom on air (cf. 3x01 42:49-43:04). And without that freedom or even without a show in the first place, creators lose their platform and thus their opportunity to do the valuable work of integrity they wish to do. Therefore, ratings *do* matter.

To prove this point, *The Newsroom*’s third episode, for example, lets company owner Leona Lansing explain very clearly to Charlie what disastrous effect Will’s antagonizing of the Tea Party and of gigantic and influential companies such as Koch Industries is having on her ability to run her business and fulfil her responsibilities towards her shareholders (cf. 1x03 49:46, 50:41-53:50). In a similar spirit, several asides in *The Newsroom*’s second season list the conditions attached to a journalist’s visit to American troops in Uganda and thus depict the good relationship with the government required for journalists to be able to do their jobs (cf. *N* 2x02 44:08, 2x03 50:03-50:20). Finally, *The Newsroom* also makes sure to explicitly portray direct consequences resulting from the voicing of politically problematic views on air. For example, Will’s on-air referral to the Tea Party as “the American Taliban” (*N* 1x10 50:44) is shown to have undeniable fallout: *News Night*’s network loses access to the judiciary committee working on SOPA (cf. *N* 2x01 5:16-6:25), one of their team is repeatedly bullied and denied time with the presidential candidate whose campaign he is covering (cf. *N* 2x01 22:08-22:29), and even the otherwise idealist Charlie feels the need to pull Will off the 9/11 anniversary-coverage out of fear of potential boycotts and advertiser fall-out but most importantly out of respect for the concerns voiced by 9/11 widows and first-responders in response to the quote-containing broadcast (cf. *N* 2x01 14:25-15:35).

This last aspect brings us to the second reason why ratings, according to Sorkin's three series, cannot be simply dismissed – namely, the fact that they are representative of viewer reactions. While all three series firmly believe in exposing audiences to opposing opinions and perspectives, they also emphasise that this should not be done in a mean, purposefully offensive and audience-alienating manner. According to Sorkin's shows, it is too easy to just treat viewers who are easily offended – or who simply do not understand what a show is trying to say (cf. e.g. *SN* 2x03 15:06; *S60* 1x03 0:44-1:06) – as stupid and not worth consideration (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x08 27:56). It is too easy to proclaim that the risk of being offended is part of living in a country with free speech (cf. *S60* 1x01 1:30-2:07). Instead, Sorkin's characters repeatedly acknowledge – as in the case of the aforementioned 9/11 coverage – that recognising and engaging with the origins of certain viewer responses is a worthy endeavour. Especially if the offended parties really are lacking the intelligence to understand what is being said, in which case simply talking above their heads and expecting someone else to provide them with “tutorials” does not change anything (cf. *S60* 1x03 0:44-1:06).

In short, *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* make it very clear that in today's climate ignoring realities – and ratings representative of these realities – is not viable behaviour (cf. *S60* 1x03 2:15-:45). In fact, when Matt, towards the end of season two of *Studio 60*, exclaims that “If we go on the air with sketches that ignore the world, then we're irrelevant” (1x20 14:04), his comment cuts both ways: yes, satire (or news for that matter) cannot and should not ignore the problems of the world just because they might be considered not funny or inappropriate; however, it should also not ignore the fact that certain things *are* inappropriate (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x01 34:58; 1x19 14:20-15:10, 16:56, 21:25-22:45).

As *Studio 60*'s first season already points out, for example, jokes against power are fair game but maybe comedians could consider not taking aim at underprivileged, simple people “just trying to raise their kids” (1x03 27:30) – even if those people are trying to do so by doing something as “stupid” as trying to forbid certain theatre plays (cf. *S60* 1x03 27:16-27:45). Instead, as both *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* argue explicitly, creators should try and engage those very people as an audience and help them grow to appreciate more complex input such as the one creators wish to create (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x03 25:30, 26:12; *N* 1x01 36:08-37:58). In other words, Sorkin encourages television professionals to abandon the simplistic binary of audiences as either smart or stupid, as either on-board-from-the-beginning or as hopeless. Finding a middle-ground should be a main goal, and reaching it constitutes according to Sorkin one of the television industry's main challenges.

Consequently, another central topic of Sorkin's three series, and especially of *The Newsroom*, is the idea of (potentially) worthy compromises. Over the show's three seasons the *News Night* team is repeatedly portrayed as searching for this exact right balance. Already Sloan Sabbith's appointment as the show's economic segment presenter can be seen as a first example of producer MacKenzie McHale's purposeful acknowledgement of the importance of catering to some audience preferences for the greater good. For while *The Newsroom* in a later episode ridicules the fact that there are agents in the industry whose main job it is to find particularly "sexy" witnesses, accused, police officers, etc. (cf. *N 1x08 31:00-31:25*) – another metareferential industry titbit exposed to the audience – the reason MacKenzie explicitly gives to Sloan for hiring her is the fact that her degrees and her professional skills are accompanied by the attractiveness of her legs (cf. *N 1x02 17:57-18:32, 46:01-46:09*). By already having established MacKenzie as a positive and idealistic character at this point, *The Newsroom* thus in one at first glance joking metareferential aside acknowledges that "sex sells" and portrays MacKenzie as not considering herself "above" utilizing Sloan's attractiveness to help their mutual goal of educating audiences about the realities of our economy.

Even more in detail and as a central topic, the question of potentially worthy compromises is discussed in the two-part episode preceding *The Newsroom*'s first season finale. Throughout the respective story arc – in a manner reminiscent of the interview negotiations depicted in *Sports Night* – the *News Night* team is portrayed to make one concession after the other to the quality of their programming in the name of a greater goal: in this case, the rights to stage and re-design the Republican presidential debate (cf. *N 1x08 10:12*). Instead of covering stories they actually consider important (cf. *N 1x08 20:17-20:53*) such as the congressional debt ceiling debates and their potential devastating consequences (cf. *N 1x08 11:00-11:51, 50:14-52:02*), the *News Night* team agrees to cover the Anthony Weiner "scandal" (cf. *N 1x08 14:50-15:23*) and, most importantly, the Casey Anthony murder trial (cf. *N 1x08 6:40-8:50, 9:34-9:49*). They furthermore agree to do so in a purposefully "exploitative" (*N 1x08 20:56*) manner (cf. *N 1x08 27:42-32:04*) as long as this helps raise their ratings as well as their standing with certain GOP members.

As the story arc progresses and the concessions grow bigger and bigger, Will defends his decision with another reference to his predecessors – arguing that Murrow himself had been willing to do "puff pieces" when necessary (*N 1x08 9:43*), even if not actual "poison" (*N 1x08 9:44*) "just this side of a snuff film" (*N 1x08 7:58*) as the *News Night* team call their own Casey Anthony coverage. Still, in the end, no concessions and no ratings spikes are enough to

convince the Republican party to accept the team's proposed changes to the debate format, thus rendering all qualitative sacrifices of the story arc meaningless. And yet, even in the moment of their defeat, the *The Newsroom* characters never voice regret or retract their belief that while concessions for ratings ad abstractum are morally dubious, concessions for ratings which result in opportunities to influence public debate and the political landscape can be worth it.

This acknowledgement that an utter disregard for ratings is not a simple solution to the problems caused by the tension between the creative and/or idealist and the financial and/or realist sides of the television industry – an acknowledgement for which critic Tim Gibson has denounced Sorkin as not being radical enough – naturally raises the question of what solutions, if any, the series propose instead. The answer to this question is seemingly simple: *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* all advocate for a clear separation of the responsibilities of the creative divisions of a network from the responsibilities of the financial divisions – a clear separation of church and state, if you will. In accordance with this idea, the personnel working for the latter divisions would be required to relinquish any and all rights of final say over editorial decisions, and the creative personnel would have to be freed from any and all obligations directly related to the raising ratings. All contract mandates exposed in *The Newsroom* in that regard (cf. *N* 1x03 8:01-8:35, 32:10-32:21), according to Sorkin's three series, would equally need to become obsolete.

In a highly double-coded comment, this idea is already expressed in a small aside in *Studio 60* when producer Danny Tripp is shown to wonder whether box office numbers actually belong in the review/art section of a newspaper or whether it would be better to move them to the financial section instead (cf. 1x10 23:21-23:51). In addition, the idea of a clear line between departments is also presented in the form of a much more explicitly metareferential verbal argument between two of *The Newsroom*'s main characters. When Will in the series' pilot tries to dissuade Charlie from hiring MacKenzie for personal reasons, the official reason he gives is that “[s]he's indifferent to ratings, competition, corporate concerns, and, generally speaking, consequences” (*N* 1x01 1:02:55) – to which Charlie immediately responds with “Good, ‘cause you just described *my* job.” (*N* 1x01 1:03:00). Charlie further makes it clear just how serious he is about this separation of jobs when in the following episode he tries to convince Reese to stop showing any ratings numbers to Will with the following words: “There are two important conversations, how do we do the best news possible, and how do we get the most people to watch. I don't want one of those conversations to have anything to do with the other” (*N* 1x02 6:39).

Whilst the three series under discussion thus advocate for a clear divide between corporate and creative divisions, it is important to note that Sorkin and his team do not suggest that this divide should never be bridged. As mentioned before in the context of the significance of ratings, all three series do provide guidelines as to when and how anchors, producers, writers, etc. should engage with ratings as well as with matters of public opinion. Similarly, *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* also present examples of how corporate personnel can contribute to the achievement of creative goals and what their exact ideal role in the industry consequently should be. Firstly, little sarcastic asides such as the following from *Studio 60* in which a character comments that “[i]t’s unusual to see the arts and leisure section in a boardroom” (1x12 12:22) indirectly request that company executives take the time to keep themselves informed about the cultural context of the medium their company is producing. Secondly and more importantly, however, Sorkin’s three series further suggest that executives should function as facilitators for their creative divisions.

This idea is most directly expressed in *Sports Night*’s second season when ratings consultant Sam Donovan gives a speech to a room full of overstepping executives about what they should be doing instead of harassing the creative department. In the episode, Sam tells the story of Cliff Gardner – the brother-in-law of Philo Farnsworth, the “inventor” of television – the point of the story being that aware of his lack of an “inventor’s mind”, Gardner still offered to support his more creative brother-in-law’s endeavour by learning how to and by producing the glass-tubes required for the invention to work (cf. *SN* 2x03 17:17-19:37). Through this highly metareferential analogy from the field of television history, Sorkin thus fully acknowledges the value of practical skills and business sense, and presents them as essential to the realisation of even the most ingenious creative idea. According to this scene, the successful collaboration between people from different fields is what makes world-changing masterpieces possible – as long as all contributors focus on doing what they are actually good at (cf. also *N* 3x06 42:19-43:00).

This ideal of an executive skilled in financial and commercial matters, interested in the medium and always having her (or his) creative team’s back, is personified in *Studio 60*’s Jordan McDeere. In the pilot episode of the show, she is introduced as being lauded for having helped to keep up and raise the ratings of many other television networks and programmes: NBC’s *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (1992-2014) is namedropped as reference, as is CBS’s *This Morning* show (1992-present) (cf. 1x01 9:11-10:10). And yet, by the end of the pilot episode, Jordan also proves multiple times that she does not *only* care about ratings. Through her character and characters like her, Sorkin and his team demonstrate

that, with the right people and attitude, creative and financial considerations need not always be in conflict. Sources of friction certainly exist but friction does not need to result in disaster – especially not if executives follow Jordan’s example to coax the best out of their creative talent and to then use their own business skills to make that product profitable. If they cannot do that, then in the words of *Sports Night*’s new owner in the final episode of the series: “It’s a good show, Dana. Anybody who can’t make money of *Sports Night* should get out of the money-making business.” (*SN* 2x22 18:40).

5.1.4 Television’s (Ideal) Role in Society...

In addition to discussing the functions and roles different divisions should play in the television industry, Sorkin’s three series also repeatedly discuss the functions and roles the industry and the television medium as a whole should or could play in society – in stark contrast to the dangerous and detrimental role a lot of television, according to the three series, actually plays today. This seemingly terrible state of present-day television is most emphatically summarised and explicitly voiced in Wes’s opening monologue at the beginning of *Studio 60*’s pilot. The most relevant passage of the whole speech in this regard is the following:

We’re all being lobotomized by this country’s most influential industry. It’s just thrown in the towel on any endeavor to do anything that doesn’t include the courting of 12-year-old boys. Not even the smart 12-year-olds, the stupid ones, the idiots – of which there are plenty, thanks to no small measure to this network. So why don’t you just change the channel? Turn off your TV. Do it right now, go ahead. [*inaudible*] --struggle between art and commerce. Well, there’s always been a struggle between art and commerce. Only now, I’m telling you, art is getting its ass kicked. And it’s making us mean and it’s making us bitchy. It’s making us cheap punks. That’s not who we are! People are having contests to see how much they can be like Donald Trump? [*inaudible*] We’re eating worms for money. *Who Wants to Screw My Sister?*! Guys are getting killed in a war that’s got theme music and a logo – That remote in your hand is a crack pipe. Oh yeah, every once in a while, we pretend to be appalled. [*inaudible*] Pornographers! It’s not even good pornography. They’re just this side of snuff films. And friends, that’s what’s next because that’s all that’s left. (*S60* 1x01 7:39-9:23)

According to this blatant homage to the classic metafilm *Network* (1976) – the monologue’s source is even explicitly identified within the episode – the central issues with the current state of the medium of television are the restrictive target audience, the consequent “dumbing-down” of content, and the rise of increasingly extreme shows – including news shows – produced for effect rather than content. Furthermore, Wes’ monologue also draws attention to the fact that all these bad medium practices are affecting our society as a whole: “[I]t’s making us mean and it’s making us bitchy. It’s making us cheap punks. [...] That remote in

your hand is a crack pipe.” The television medium in its current state is thus presented as a mind-altering drug which deteriorates our character and behaviour.

What seems to bother the creators of *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* most about all this is their firm belief that television has the potential to be so much more than it currently is. Especially *Studio 60* contains several explicit metareferential conversations between characters advocating for a more professional and serious approach to the medium. From comments as seemingly trivial as Matt admonishing his writer colleagues for coming to work dressed “as if they are in junior high-school” (cf. *S60* 1x02 17:48), to more earnest discussions between Danny and Simon suggesting that television should not be treated by actors and directors as a place to “slum in” between film and drama engagements (cf. *S60* 1x02 25:31-:40, 32:31-:52), to Jordan’s explanation to Danny that she thinks it important that high-quality, smart programmes are aired on freely accessible public networks such as theirs and not always hidden behind HBO-like paywalls (cf. *S60* 1x05 3:59-5:01, 36:21-36:31) – the series’ defences of the medium of (public) television are legion. Furthermore, these expressed beliefs are also all rules which Sorkin himself clearly attempts to live by, as demonstrated by his own dress style, his extensive work in the medium, his high-end casting choices (often of actors with theatre background) and his (admittedly not always successful) attempts at finding public networks for his series. In short, when Matt asks a prolific journalist in *Studio 60* why after covering presidential campaigns, presidents and wars she is now choosing to write about their television show, and she answers “I think what’s happening here is important. I think popular culture in general and this show in particular *are* important.” (1x05 1:42-1:49), the journalist’s opinion is undoubtedly as much Sorkin’s as it is the character’s.

When *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* advocate for a more serious approach to television, that of course does not mean that the people in the business need to take themselves too seriously (cf. *S60* 2x02 27:18) or even worse, that television itself needs to always be serious. When Tom’s visiting father in *Studio 60* criticises his actor son’s work as being meaningless and valueless compared to his brother’s service in Afghanistan (cf. 1x06 19:54), Tom – the moral authority in that scene – is portrayed to defend his profession with the following words: “I’m just telling you a story, Dad. I’m trying to take your mind off of it. That’s what I do.” (1x06 19:25, cf. 35:10). Through this statement, the worry- and pain-easing qualities of comedy and entertainment are acknowledged, as is the genre’s ability to temporarily distract audiences from everyday woes. Both effects are further presented as a decidedly meaningful and important function of television. In other words, even whilst Sorkin’s three series advocate for smart and sophisticated programming, they never deny the

value of all escapist media. In fact, through their narrative focus on interpersonal relationships, their numerous comedic elements and Sorkin's overall idealistic approach to his subject matter, all three of his series themselves are hardly purely intellectual, educational and "serious" works.

The second central ability of television acknowledged and propagated by *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* is the medium's power to inspire people. This idea is first introduced ex negativo when Casey admits to being unsatisfied with his job because it has stopped being about getting people excited about sports and instead consists mostly of reporting on athlete violence and misbehaviour (cf. *SN* 1x01 15:12-16:11). "I have a 7-year old son I get to see on Wednesdays and alternate weekends and these are his heroes. And now 6 days a week they're also his male role models" (*SN* 1x01 15:57-16:06), the freshly-divorced Casey explains, dissatisfied with the fact that sports anchors today are increasingly forced to take on the role of "PR-m[e]n for punks and thugs" (*SN* 1x01 15:29).

What ideal sports news content should look like, instead, is portrayed soon after in the same episode when the *Sports Night* team accidentally notices on a background monitor that a 41-year-old, unknown South-African runner with a history of seemingly unsurmountable political and physical adversities is about to set a world record. Whilst the rest of the team gathers in front of the monitor to cheer the man on, Casey is shown to immediately run to a telephone to wake up his son so the latter can turn on the TV and witness the runner's feat of resilience (cf. *SN* 1x01 18:46).

For Casey and Sorkin, this moment right there epitomises the magic and purpose of sports television. Whilst multiple side-characters throughout *Sports Night* repeatedly express an utter lack of understanding for why anybody would take the genre seriously (cf. e.g. *SN* 1x13 15:05, 1x17 13:39), this initial scene of *Sports Night* already provides the answer: when not misused for the idolisation of "punks and thugs" just because they are famous, sports television has the potential to show millions of people how persistence and hard work can lead to victory over adversity. As is voiced even more explicitly by assistant producer Natalie Hurley several episodes later concerning a Mount Everest ascent, sport achievements are symbolic proof of what we humans and humanity in general can accomplish if we set our mind to it (cf. *SN* 1x09 09:10-09:21). Sports television, consequently, by broadcasting these achievements to people around the world has the potential to inspire others to attempt and accomplish similar feats of greatness.

This idea of the inspirational potential of television is picked up again in *Studio 60*'s portrayal of a New Orleans brass band's performance after Katrina (cf. 1x11 36:56-40:51).

Furthermore, it forms a central motif throughout the entirety of *The Newsroom* as almost every news segment the *News Night* team airs – and especially the two manifesto segments of Will’s apology and his coverage of the Tea Party – is meant to inspire diegetic as well as extradiegetic audiences to affect change. In this context, the cinematographic choices made by Sorkin’s directors throughout these scenes are particularly interesting. Again and again, across all three series, inspirational scenes are always filmed as multiple shot reverse shots which depict the story unfolding on diegetic screens in parallel to a diegetic audience’s reactions: Casey’s excited eyes and voice, his team’s cheering, Matt and Danny’s admiration whilst watching the brass band perform, the variety of emotions triggered in *News Night* staffers throughout their coverage of different stories. Through this implicitly metareferential choice of editing, Sorkin and his directors thus always simultaneously present their audience both with inspirational diegetic content and with a depiction of characters actively being inspired. In the process, Sorkin and his team not only increase viewer response through a triggering of empathy as is the traditional function of this cinematographic technique, but they also actively portray the fact that watching television can be inspiring.

The final function of television discussed by Sorkin is the medium’s ability to keep people informed – an ability which has been increasingly questioned in recent years under the banner of “fake news”. This, according to *The Newsroom*, is the most central function of news shows and one which the *News Night* team are shown to both implicitly try to fulfil and to explicitly advocate for. Why the show’s characters consider information dispersal such an important part of their work is already explained in the very first few minutes of the series when during a speech on the current bad state of America as a nation, Will suggests that this was not always the case. According to Will, there was a time in which America *was* a front-runner of civilisation (cf. *N 1x01 6:22-7:13*) and its people used to achieve great things. Will’s explanation for that period is as follows: “We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were *informed*.” (*N 1x01 7:15-7:23*, my emphasis). With these words, Will and through him Sorkin insist that information, knowledge and awareness of what is going on in the world form the basis for a successful country, and specifically for a successful democracy.

Will’s and Sorkin’s views on the subject are further elaborated upon by MacKenzie, who in the second long speech of *The Newsroom*’s pilot episode explains her vision for *News Night* as follows:

MacKenzie:

There's nothing that's more important in a democracy than a well-informed electorate. [...] When there's no information or, much worse, wrong information, it can lead to calamitous decisions and clobber any attempts at vigorous debate. [...] I've come here to produce a news broadcast that more closely resembles the one we did before you got popular by not bothering anyone, Leno.

Will:

I think Jay and I would rather be employed if it's all the same to you.

MacKenzie:

It's not all the same to me, you punk. I've come here to take your IQ and your talent and put it to some patriotic fucking use. And where does it say that a good news show can't be popular? [...]

Will:

It's impossible, Mac! [...] Social scientists have concluded that the country is more polarised than at any time since the Civil War. *The Civil War*. [...] People choose the *facts* they want now. So what you've just described is impossible.

MacKenzie:

Only if you think an overwhelming majority of Americans are preternaturally stupid.

Will:

I do.

MacKenzie:

I don't. And if you let me, I can prove it. [...] People will want the news if you give it to them with integrity. Not everybody, not even a lot of people, 5%. And 5% more of anything is what makes the difference in this country. (*N 1x01 36:08-37:57*)

In short, according to MacKenzie, a well-informed electorate is crucial for a democracy because only an electorate in possession of all the facts can make thoughtful, reasonable political decisions. And while Will interjects that the voting public today are “stupid” and that they do not care about hard facts – this is, arguably, only the case because journalists are not doing their job of explaining things to the electorate in a way the latter can understand but are instead too busy maintaining their ratings by either entirely staying away from hard facts or by focusing on facts which please their respective viewers by confirming the latter's pre-existing beliefs and biases. In fact, it could even be argued that this latter approach, in a medium landscape filled with a multitude of networks catering exclusively to specific demographics, is what enables people in the first place to simply escape and/or ignore disturbing realities by “choosing their own facts” through their choice of channel.

MacKenzie's solution to the problems at hand is to demand that Will and *News Night* do their journalistic duty of dispersing accurate information to their millions of viewers even at the risk of losing some of them. For in the end, even if the team only succeeded in increasing the number of well-informed voters by 5%, they would still have made an impactful political difference. Consequently, MacKenzie proclaims her final goals for *News Night* as follows:

Reclaiming the Fourth Estate, reclaiming journalism as an honourable profession, a nightly newscast that informs a debate worthy of a great nation, civility, respect, and a return to what's important, the death of bitchiness, the death of gossip and voyeurism, speaking truth to stupid, no demographic sweet spot, a place where we all come together. We're coming to a tipping point. [...] There's gonna be a huge conversation. [...] You and I have a chance to be among the few people who can frame *that* debate. (N 1x01 40:17-41:01)

Reiterating Wes' complaints about the meanness of current television culture, MacKenzie thus stresses her wish to instead create a news programme which encourages, fosters and informs a civil, intelligent and active public debate as a means of encouraging and fostering a more civil and politically active society in general. In fact, as seen before, she considers this her, Will's and the medium of television as a whole's patriotic duty.

5.1.5 ...and How It Can Be Achieved

How exactly journalists can "Reclaim the Fourth Estate" is the final metareferential message of Sorkin's series. Will states in his opening monologue that "[t]he first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one" (N 1x01 7:25) – and with their critical portrayal and exposure of medium-specific problems, all three of Sorkin's metareferential series contribute to this step. Furthermore, all three series also show many examples of characters attempting to fix these problems. *The Newsroom* in particular depicts multiple model cases of how news stories, according to Sorkin, should be covered correctly. The fact that all these cases are built around real-life stories further allows viewers to compare the ideal version of the coverage on screen with the on average far less ideal coverage they have seen from their real-life media. Finally, in addition to implicitly modelling journalistic practices, Sorkin as usual also has many of his characters explicitly discuss these practices, their merits, and the reasonings behind them.

The pilot of *The Newsroom*, for example, focuses on the BP oil spill from April 10th, 2010. In addition to demonstrating one way of how journalists can be alerted to news in the first place – namely, through computer programs tracking information from sources such as The Associated Press (AP) (cf. N 1x01 32:14) – the episode mostly focuses on how the staff proceeds once they have received the alert. The central metareferential statements made in the process are the following: journalists should not rush stories (cf. N 1x01 32:35, 33:58-34:35); they should keep a constant eye on the story's progression (cf. N 1x01 33:12, 33:54-34:12, 34:40-36:20, 41:48-44:00, 48:54-50:47); they should research and acquire additional information, backing each new fact up with at least two reliable sources (cf. N 1x01 38:38-38:54, 41:17-45:46); finally, news teams should ideally consist of a group of knowledgeable

people, each with different fields of expertise, so that the team as a whole can look at a story from many different angles to find out what about it is really (most) important (cf. *N 1x01 42:40-45:02, 47:25-47:41*). Following all these rules, the *News Night* staff's actions demonstrate, improves the accuracy and truthfulness of the subsequent coverage – both characteristics which *The Newsroom* portrays as ethically, financially and legally vital for a news network's reputation and quality standards (cf. *N 1x01 46:10*).

Once *News Night* has acquired its basic story in accordance with these rules, the team is shown to move on to the actual production process of their news segment: staff members call contacts looking for further information, official statements and experts to book; graphics are created; cameras and sound equipment are set up and checked; a script is written for the anchor – or, as in this case, is drafted by Will himself whilst he is already sitting at his anchor desk surrounded by hair and make-up personnel (cf. *N 1x01 47:55-51:16*). For after having acquired such exclusive information, the team is portrayed as having no time to lose, not even for the purpose of writing a full script and putting it up on a teleprompter. Throughout its portrayal of the news production process, *The Newsroom's* pilot episode thus once more emphasises the immense amount of (construction) work and personnel involved in the creation of a single television segment whilst also demonstrating the high level of competence, responsiveness and flexibility required from everybody working in especially live television since breaking news rarely follow a pre-planned schedule or allow for lengthy pre-scripting. The importance of Will not just being a teleprompter-reading figurehead but also having the skills and rights to make creative decisions is particularly emphasised. For according to Sorkin's series, only if news anchors – like many of the previously referenced “newsmen of old” – are (at least partially) investigative journalists themselves can they be expected to react competently in urgent, live broadcast situations.

The third step of the broadcasting news process portrayed in *The Newsroom's* pilot is the actual news broadcast itself. To demonstrate the end-result of the *News Night* team's efforts, the episode shows an edited version of the show-within-show's breaking-news segment cut down from one hour to roughly seven minutes. The focus of exemplary news-coverage, according to this segment, lies on the presentation of facts and on the conducting of interviews with top scientists as well as with professionals directly involved in and/or responsible for the subject matter. The portrayed interviews are furthermore characterised by hard questions and by being fact-driven whilst still allowing for the expression of compassion towards interviewees as required (cf. *N 1x01 52:55-1:00:27*). Once *News Night's* model broadcast ends, the AP news alert is shown to switch to the highest urgency level (cf. *N 1x01*

1:00:52) and the White House is portrayed as calling to ask for more information (cf. *N* 1x01 1:01:02). With this Sorkin firmly establishes his message that, if done correctly, news broadcasts can and *should* contribute discoveries and influence events rather than just report on them.

Finally, *The Newsroom*'s second episode, which brings the oil spill plotline to a conclusion, also depicts the importance of knowing exactly when to end the coverage of a story. Sorkin and his team portray the factors which can contribute to whether or not coverage is continued in the following argument between Will and MacKenzie, which results from the latter's suggestion to start reducing the amount of air-time *News Night* assigns to the oil spill:

Will:

[But] the spill is all anyone's talking about!

MacKenzie:

Because we're the ones telling them to! We're still reporting on it, just not at the top.

Will:

I'm looking at film of an oil rig sinking into the ocean. That's pretty good television.

MacKenzie:

We don't do good television, we do the news. (*N* 1x02 3:36-3:47)

In other words, MacKenzie and through her Sorkin suggest that the right time to stop covering a story is when there is no new information left to add and hence there is nothing left to say. An ideal news show's main purpose is thus once again portrayed to be the contribution of new facts and information to a public debate, and not the airing of striking and emotionally manipulative images on repeat.

This idea of 'facts or nothing' is picked up again and again throughout the rest of *The Newsroom*. In the same second episode, for example, when planning *News Night*'s coverage of Arizona's immigration bill SB 1070, MacKenzie is portrayed to reject interviews with militia members or with impacted illegal immigrants on the basis of such interviews being merely exploitative, "emotionally manipulative" content (*N* 1x02 11:50) since neither of the suggested guests would be capable of providing any actual facts (cf. *N* 1x02 11:59). Similarly, a demand for an increased focus on facts during the coverage of governmental elections is also voiced repeatedly throughout *The Newsroom*. Both in the context of televised debates (cf. *N* 1x09) and in the context of campaign trail coverage (cf. *N* 2x03 8:36-9:56, 12:49-14:51, 30:43-31:08, 33:34-34:48, 45:24-48:40), Sorkin and the *News Night* team relentlessly request that journalists ask real questions, demand real answers and follow up on any factual discrepancies rather than simply allowing politicians to regurgitate the same pre-approved and pre-written statements. At the same time, media's own tendency to abuse politicians' verbal

slip-ups as soundbites for effect even when it is very clear what the speaker truly meant is equally criticised (cf. e.g. *N* 2x06 30:00-30:16).

In addition to advocating for a stronger focus on facts, *The Newsroom* also repeatedly stresses that one of the main goals of a good journalist must be to ensure the veracity of those facts. On a practical, process-exposing level the series expresses this belief by constantly portraying the *News Night* team's diligent and extensive research process in detail (cf. e.g. *N* 2x01-2x05 with an explicit summary of the process in 2x06 1:08-3:48, 2x07 3:30-4:00): their search for credible sources, their revision of hundreds of documents, their employment of a "red team" – a group of staff members purposefully kept in the dark during research – to double-check their facts. Furthermore, in addition to this depiction of model behaviour, Sorkin's series as usual also includes multiple explicit arguments between characters on the topic. The most emotionally impactful one takes place in episode four of *The Newsroom* during *News Night*'s coverage of the shooting of congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords: Whilst Reese is depicted as storming the studio demanding that the staff announce Giffords' death since "[e]very second you're not current, a thousand people are changing the channel to the guy who is. That's the business you're in. MSNBC, Fox and CNN all say she's dead." (*N* 1x04 53:08), the news team stands its ground and waits for official confirmation. "It's a person," one of them exclaims, "a doctor pronounces her dead, not the news" (*N* 1x04 53:21).

Eventually, Sorkin's and his team's ideas as to what well-done television journalism should look like culminate in two manifestos postulated by the *News Night* team throughout *The Newsroom*'s first season. The first is presented through the following set of questions MacKenzie demands the staff always ask themselves when preparing a story: "(1) Is this information we need in the voting booth? (2) Is this the best possible form of the argument? (3) Is the story in historical context? (4) Are there really two sides to this story?" (*N* 1x02 7:55-8:10). During the consequent discussion with her team, MacKenzie further defines "best possible form" as opposed to "most colourful" (*N* 1x02 9:55) and "most outrageous" (*N* 1x02 9:56) and as defined by the quality of the source, which she in turn defines "by the number of relevant facts it contains, and I define it by an X factor that I trust Will and myself to determine, using our combined five decades in the field." (*N* 1x02 10:01-10:12). Through this definition provided by MacKenzie, *The Newsroom* reinforces its message that news media's purpose is to provide relevant and accurate information to voters. Journalists are supposed to find and prepare stories accordingly, with the most experienced amongst them making the ultimate decisions. Finally, the exact contribution of anchor men and women to this process is defined by MacKenzie's as follows: "That studio is a courtroom, and we only call expert

witnesses. Will is the attorney for both sides. He examines the witness and reveals facts.” (N 1x02 9:18-9:30). Once again, the focus is placed on finding and portraying all facts, with as little self-proliferation, personal agenda and driving of the narrative as possible.

The second manifesto of *The Newsroom* comes in the form of Will’s on-air apology to the American public which follows the introduction of MacKenzie’s new rules and explains them to the diegetic viewers. The relevant passages of Will’s speech are the following:

[T]onight I'm beginning this newscast by [...] apologizing to the American people for our failure. The failure of this program during the time I've been in charge of it to successfully inform and educate the American electorate. [...] I'm a leader in an industry that miscalculated election results, hyped up terror scares, ginned up controversy, and failed to report on tectonic shifts in our country. [...] I'm a leader in an industry that misdirected your attention [...] From this moment on, we'll be deciding what goes on our air and how it's presented to you based on the simple truth that nothing is more important to a democracy than a well-informed electorate. We'll endeavor to put information in a broader context because we know that very little news is born at the moment it comes across our wire. We'll be the champion of facts and the mortal enemy of innuendo, speculation, hyperbole, and nonsense. [But we'll not be] computers dispensing only the facts because news is only useful in the context of humanity. I'll make no effort to subdue my personal opinions. I will make every effort to expose you to informed opinions that are different from my own. (N 1x03 3:20-6:49)

In short, with this public manifesto, the *News Night* team once again renounces current news media’s focus on drama, hype and bombastic narratives – even if those narratives are government-created (cf. N 1x03 3:51-4:02) – and instead vows to focus on facts, and more specifically, on politically relevant and useful facts. That these facts of course rarely exist in an abstract and absolute form in a vacuum but usually have a context and are shaped by opinions (cf. also Casey et al. 184-191) is, however, also acknowledged by Will and his colleagues. As a result, *News Night*’s public manifesto opens up several questions as to what journalists consequently need to do to still achieve an as unbiased and factual presentation of information as possible. The end of Will’s speech provides some answers and more are contributed throughout the rest of *The Newsroom*.

The first question related to coverage objectivity presented by Sorkin is that of *which* facts an inherently opinionated news team should eventually present. Bernadette Casey and her co-authors have observed that contemporary news media frequently see the answer to this question in the presentation of the two major opposing positions (cf. 190) on each topic for the purpose of creating a semblance of objectivity. At first glance, Will’s apology seems to advocate for a similar approach according to the last two sentences of the excerpt quoted above. *The Newsroom* as a whole, however, makes sure to explain that this solution in fact only applies to certain situations and that there is a danger to what MacKenzie and Will refer to as being “biased towards fairness” (1x02 10:27). For, as these two characters explain to the

rest of their team as well as to the real-life audience, not all stories have exactly two valid sides, some have five and some have only one (e.g. our world is flat and it would remain so even if an important government official suddenly proclaimed otherwise).

Another issue resulting from the awareness that news stories can be shaped by different opinions is the question of how much of their own opinions journalists should be actively voicing during broadcasts. During the opening scenes of *The Newsroom*, one of the major criticisms directed towards Will in his pre-apology state is that that he has “almost religiously avoided stating or even implying a political allegiance” (1x01 2:16), causing people to wonder if his behaviour is due to a desire to not compromise the integrity of his broadcasts or simply due to a wish to increase his popularity by “not bothering anyone” (cf. *N* 1x01 2:34). And *The Newsroom*’s later developments make it clear that it was, in fact, the latter motivation which affected Will’s actions since a news show’s integrity is not based on a lack of opinion from its anchors. After all, as Charlie points out towards the end of the pilot: “Anchors having an opinion isn’t a new phenomenon. Murrow had one and that was the end of McCarthy. Cronkite had one and that was the end of Vietnam” (*N* 1x01 1:02:10). Or in other words, newscasters owning their opinions, standing their ground and using their reach and power to affect corresponding political change constitutes a display of moral strength and of integrity in action. In contrast, according to *The Newsroom*, anchors who remain silent on important topics can be seen as acting cowardly and immorally. Expressing their opinions is, instead, the right thing to do – as long as the anchors and their team make sure that these opinions are expressed, as demanded by *News Night*’s second manifesto, in combination with a presentation of all accompanying facts as well as of any valid contrasting opinions, so that the audience can make an informed decision as to whether the opinions and arguments presented to them seem conclusive.

Finally, the last aspect of television (journalism) discussed in *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* are the lines that professionals within the industry should not cross and the limits to their power they need to respect. Starting off with the previous topic of voicing beliefs on air, Sorkin’s series acknowledge that there is such a thing as television personalities expressing *too many* opinions on air, to the point where they themselves become the story, which in turn begins to distract audiences from the respective show’s actual content. This idea is mostly portrayed in *Sports Night* (cf. e.g. 1x21 12:28) and in *Studio 60* (cf. e.g. 1x01 22:03-22:30) yet it stands in no opposition to *The Newsroom*’s proclamations since for the *News Night* team, which constantly demands a focus on facts and information above all, any distractions are detrimental to the quality of a broadcast.

Another item television personalities need to consider, according to Sorkin's three series, is the fact that they *are* in a position of power from which their actions and expressed opinions matter. Consequently, they should exercise caution – not out of fear for their ratings or of ramifications but simply because they acknowledge their influential role as “leaders” (cf. e.g. *SN* 1x02 10:47, 18:17-20:26; *N* 1x02 46:30-46:43) whose actions and words can impact what happens in the world, at their most extreme even causing actual casualties (cf. *N* 1x07 30:55-32:52; 2x06 34:06-34:47; 3x04 14:27-14:50), especially when topics related to national security are concerned (cf. season three's central debate on whether newsworthy leaked classified government documents should be made public or not since reporting on the information is every journalist's “responsibility to a democracy” (*N* 3x02 10:34) but it can also endanger the lives of both civilians and soldiers involved in any given conflict (cf. *N* 3x02 10:17-11:11, 21:07-21:32, 37:10-37:32)).

Furthermore, according to *Sports Night* and *The Newsroom*, television journalists should also acknowledge and respect other institutions with power. From Isaac's instruction of his team to hand over their hooligan riot footage to the police since no actual sources or informants are in it (cf. *SN* 2x14 17:00-17:37), to Will's refusal to use his legal knowledge to practically re-try the Troy Davis case on camera before the latter's execution – a refusal explained by Will with the words that the courts and judicial system have done their job and it is not the media's place to do it for them (cf. *N* 2x02 10:16-11:57) – Sorkin and his team make it very clear that for all their advocacy for media power and freedoms they do see limits to what media can and should do.

Finally, in this same context, Sorkin's three series also list a variety of other lines journalists should not cross, even with the best of intentions: Asking hard-hitting questions is important but journalists should not bully, no matter how reticent and frustrating an interviewee is behaving (cf. *N* 1x06 41:09-47:12). Journalists should not use overheard conversations (even when legally permissible) or otherwise trick people into giving statements even if it is hard to get honest on-the-record comments (cf. *N* 3x02 22:02-25:08, 31:30-32:53). Journalists should furthermore never overstep their role and start taking over a translator's job, answering questions instead of interviewees or making statements in the name of third parties (cf. *N* 1x06 25:00-26:55). Journalists should never break off-the-record agreements, no matter how important the information gained off-the-record is (cf. *N* 1x06 24:09-29:20). Journalists should also never break privacy laws in pursuit of a story (cf. *N* 1x08 25:48-26:32). Journalists should be very careful with what they ask of their sources, especially when it comes to the sharing of classified information (cf. *N* 3x01 45:54-46:45;

3x02 7:05-8:30, 10:42-10:55, 47:25-47:35; 3x04 44:22-46:50). And last but not least, no matter how certain journalists are of their story, falsifying evidence to convince more people of it is absolutely unacceptable (cf. *N 2x07 46:57-47:20*).

5.1.6 Conclusion: The Metareferential Functions of Sorkin's Metatelevision Triad

Having thus analysed the roles and functions assigned to television by Sorkin's three series, the last thing which remains to be done in this chapter is an examination of the metareferential functions of *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* themselves. The relationship between these functions and those ascribed to television by Sorkin shall form the starting point for this analysis since, at a closer look, both sets of functions are revealed to be nigh-identical. For in the end – just like television in general according to Sorkin – all three series discussed in this section are escapist, informative and aim to inspire their audiences. Both Sorkin himself and his directors describe *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* as dramatizations (cf. *SN "Face-Off" DVD bonus feature 5:29*) which present “the appearance of reality” (*SN "F-O" 3:46*, my emphasis) whilst focusing on getting the material “emotionally right” (*SN "F-O" 5:17*) rather than factually capturing every detail of a television professional's live. And this approach to the subject matter is exactly what makes it possible for Sorkin's three series to fulfil all three functions listed above.

The inclusion of enough facts to create an “appearance of reality” is what fills *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* with enough metareferential information to be eye-opening for most audiences in regards to industry practices, and to thus help raise the audience's medium-awareness. The focus on getting things “emotionally right”, meanwhile, helps the three series to not get lost in their portrayal of technical details. In a scene early on in *The Newsroom* a side character voices the opinion that “Nobody's gonna watch a classroom” (*1x02 48:26*) implying that dry information dispersal is boring to audiences. And while the rest of the series goes on to prove that statement wrong in the context of an evening news show, Sorkin's three narrative series take this objection to heart and consequently package their media critique and information with emotionally engaging, character-driven stories which provide an emotional as well as an intellectual experience to the audience. As a result, Sorkin is able to educate his viewers on problems within the television medium as well as within our society – the relationship between the two being portrayed as reciprocal – whilst still delivering an engaging form of escapist entertainment.

One of the main reasons why *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* constitute particularly good examples of escapist television is the highly idealist and thus inspiring nature of all three series. For even whilst Sorkin's three shows depict many troubles plaguing the medium and industry of television, the main focus is always on how great television, technically, could be. A quick look at the reception of some of *The Newsroom*'s most significant speeches online shows that many people in the top comments of clips posted on platforms such as youtube usually express the sentiment that viewers wished Will and *News Night* were real⁵⁵. And this effect is exactly what Sorkin's writing and his directors' cinematographic choices of swirling cameras and swelling music in those scenes aim to achieve. They are meant to accentuate the fact that the diegetic *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *News Night* each represent "the very model of a modern network TV show" (*S60* 1x02 38:30-40:40), the "media elite" (*N* 1x03 7:03).⁵⁶ After all, as *The Newsroom* explicitly states, it is one of the (shows-within-)shows' main goals to reclaim this term and – as Sorkin explains in the third episode's DVD audio commentary – to "turn it into a badge of honour" (1x03 6:46). As MacKenzie points out when a staff member expresses the worry that Will's clothing on-air makes him look like "an elite Northeastern prick" (*N* 1x01 51:01): The *News Night* team (and Sorkin's series in general) plan on making that "sexy again" (*N* 1x01 52:08).

On the story and character level, Sorkin's three shows further propagate this idea by depicting the earnest, eager and idealistic nature of their respective teams. Furthermore, *The Newsroom* in particular continuously emphasises the courage and willingness to face physical dangers which are required from journalists as members of an 'in-the-trenches' profession: three of *The Newsroom*'s major characters are introduced as having experience with reporting out of warzones (cf. 1x01 13:33, 19:20-19:51, 30:54-31:32), an entire episode centres on the story of how two other staff members and their informant are physically attacked while covering the Arab Spring on the ground (cf. 1x05), and the entire second season portrays the post-traumatic stress disorder of one of the team's youngest members following horrific events she witnessed (cf. 2x04 45:27-54:00) whilst covering a joined-task-force operation in Uganda. In short, throughout all these examples, Sorkin and his team clearly attempt to break the usual ivory tower associations and/or accusations directed towards the 'media elite' and to

⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXR0qjS9ZyA> [10. 01. 2018] for the on-air apology, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGAvwSp86hY> [10. 01. 2018] for the Tea Party story, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AF-BZsrtoPs> [10.01. 2018] for the mock debate

⁵⁶ For a fascinating study which takes these quotes onto a further meta-level than this chapter allows for and discusses how Sorkin's actual shows were in turn used by their respective networks to rebrand themselves as the real-life media elite cf. Szalay.

present a different definition of the term instead. The repeated invocations of the medium's pioneers throughout all three of Sorkin's series provide further examples of what really constitutes a 'media elite'. For even if outside journalists throughout *The Newsroom* criticise Will's orientation on predecessors such as Murrow as an embarrassing refusal to move with the times (cf. *N* 1x10 9:15) and even if they call the anchor's attitude "irrelevant and pompous" (*N* 1x10 9:21), *News Night's* as well as *The Newsroom's* creators clearly disagree.

Still, Sorkin's three series as a whole definitely *can* be accused of portraying a certain amount of "refusing to move with the times" as well as of "pomp" – at least at first glance. When, for example, *Studio 60's* Danny and Matt explicitly choose John Mauceri, the West Coast Philharmonic and the L.A. Light Opera Chorus as *the* musicians to "say[...] legacy of television" (1x02 27:49) and implicitly juxtapose them to and thus present them as superior to the show-within-show's usual contemporary rap/pop/rock musical guests, the series definitely exudes a certain level of elitism. Similarly, Sorkin's repeated derogatory statements directed towards seemingly all social and new media⁵⁷ can easily be read as unnecessarily stubborn and outdated, and as indicative of a better-than-thou attitude. However, a deeper and closer look past some of the characters' polemics soon makes it clear that the complaints which *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom* direct towards all here listed modern, pop-cultural items are very specific.

Firstly, Danny and Matt's choice of musical guests is not a general dismissal of contemporary music but merely fits the episode's theme of 'Returning to the Golden Age of Television' better. Secondly, and more importantly, social and new media really are not without problems: The unreliability of social media-led witch hunts (cf. 3x01 34:13-37:27) is a fact, as are the psychological problems caused for creators by the increased amount of predominantly negative (cf. *N* 1x06 9:08) critique by random, often anonymous people on the internet (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x02 12:22-13:15; 1x10 23:25-23:58, 34:34-34:52). The same applies to the ease with which (sexist) death threats can be sent digitally (cf. *SN* 1x06 5:32, 6:18-6:35, 13:06-14:22). Leaks of (personal) information online more often than not result in vile and destructive smear campaigns (cf. e.g. *S60* 1x02 21:51-23:55, 34:27-35:06; *N* 1x04 46:32-47:43) and can become particularly dangerous in the context of the aforementioned death threats (cf. e.g. *N* 3x05 45:45-48:30). Finally, anonymous twitter *opinions* and comments

⁵⁷ It is important to note at this point that within the series most discussions of "new media" are concerned with different forms of *social* media. Beyond that, as a number of critics have pointed out, Sorkin does not show much interest in discussing television within a wider (digital) media context (cf. Keilbach; Duffy, Liss-Mariño and Sender).

really do not belong on a scroll running across the bottom of a news show which is set on presenting verified *facts* (cf. e.g. *N 3x05 46:32-47:01*).

Of course, all these new types of media also have as much potential as they have problems – but Sorkin’s series never deny that, no matter what critics such as Judith Keilbach seem to think. The *News Night* team itself is shown to use twitter as a resource when staff members need to gauge initial reactions or research first-hand observations about and descriptions of public events (cf. *N 2x03 33:02-33:30*). One of the younger main characters’ backstory consists of him deciding to go into journalism after his ability to take out his phone and capture what is happening around him during the 7/7 London underground attack shows him the potential of modern-day journalism (cf. *N 1x05 13:36-13:49*). The usefulness of working with local bloggers and vloggers to portray stories such as the Arab Spring is fully acknowledged (cf. *N 1x05*), as is the informational potential of digital whistleblowing (cf. *N 1x05 26:52* as well as the entirety of season 3). Even the idea of online comment sections as valid platforms for public debate – if anonymity were to be removed and people were forced to own their comments – is thematised (cf. *N 1x06 7:35-10:16*). In short, despite many of his characters’ often polemic, derogatory remarks about new media, Sorkin’s series as a whole fully recognise and demonstrate that the internet is merely a tool, that its quality is entirely user-dependent, and that it is therefore the job of skilled media professionals to find ways to utilise this tool to its full potential (cf. *N 3x06 44:24-44:52*).

Indeed, what makes all of Sorkin’s positive examples of new media usage different from the previously discussed negative ones is the fact that the material provided through them, before it makes its way onto a broadcast, is shown to be filtered through a group of experienced professionals, through Sorkin’s ‘media elite’. Neal, the Londoner mentioned before, for example, does not become a vlogger as a result of his phone-footage collecting experience, he gets a low-level job in a renowned news division and begins to work his way up. Similarly, the initially gathered twitter information by staff members only makes it on the air once it has been processed, compared to pre-existing credible sources and potentially used to find additional ones. Finally, the vlogger who is permitted to contribute to *News Night*’s Arab Spring coverage is meticulously chosen by MacKenzie herself based on the quality of his previous footage, of the questions he is shown to ask, and based on the fact that he always uses sources which can be double-checked. He is furthermore initially instructed by MacKenzie as to who and what to film and only once he has proven himself is he allowed further contributive freedoms.

In short, what lies at the heart of Sorkin's criticism of new media – and of *all* media in general – is simply a demand for high standards of credibility and professionalism, on all levels of the production process. In fact, the word 'elite' in Sorkin's series explicitly does not refer only to the highly educated, high-earning executives and creative minds of the industry but it encompasses all competent professionals contributing to a show's creation, from stage workers to personal assistants (cf. e.g. *Sports Night's* on-camera portrayal and acknowledgement of the (show-within-)show's entire production crew, extradiegetic members portraying their diegetic counterparts with metareferentially overlapping names 1x11 19:30-21:10).

The word 'elite' in Sorkin's series furthermore explicitly does not mean to imply that these competent professionals working in the television industry are in any way superior to their audiences. For even if Sorkin's shows portray characters who in moments of frustration lament the ostensible stupidity of their viewership (cf. e.g. Will's exclamation during MacKenzie's 5%-speech in *N 1x01 38:16*), the moral authority in these scenes always lies with the characters that contradict them (cf. e.g. MacKenzie's response in *N 1x01 38:17*). The most prominent example of such a contradiction is voiced by Jordan in *Studio 60*, who in the series' second episode proclaims: "I believe that the people who watch television shows aren't dumber than the people who make television shows. I believe that quality is not anathema to profit." (*1x02 1:59*). This statement is probably the most condensed depiction of the core desired ideal portrayed in all three of Sorkin's metareferential series: a wish for audiences, high-quality content producers and the financial branches of the television industry to come together.

Naturally, this ideal state is far removed from current reality, and Sorkin's idealist characters' ability to achieve their goals within that reality is hence portrayed to be limited. *News Night's* brilliant oil spill coverage is explicitly acknowledged to have been only possible due to an insane amount of luck (cf. *N 1x01 45:51*). And when luck is removed from the equation, the characters of all three series are repeatedly depicted as failing to achieve their ideal for a variety of reasons too numerous to list.⁵⁸ In fact, the characters' often seemingly endless struggle to process and overcome such failure is arguably the main narrative-driving force at work throughout Sorkin's series. For in the end, as mentioned before, *Sports Night's*,

⁵⁸ Interestingly, many real-life journalists especially in their early responses to *The Newsroom* seemed to overlook this aspect of the series and to instead treat especially the presented best-case scenarios as personal attacks on their own work, ethics and integrity. For a collection of these responses as well as for a more in-depth analysis of their significance in relation to the current state and (self-)image of journalism cf. Koliska and Eckert as well as Peters.

Studio 60's and *The Newsroom's* main goals are to inform audiences of existing problems and to inspire them to attempt to fix them. And as *Sports Night's* portrayal of the South-African runner's world record already demonstrated, what better way to do that than to show characters who relentlessly battle to overcome adversity through willpower, hard work, and the firm belief "that we can do better" (N 1x01 38:28).

6. Metareference in Contemporary Computer Games⁵⁹

For well over a decade now, video games have been the most successful entertainment market in the world, their sales widely surpassing those of the film or music industry (cf. Adamowsky 22; Jahn-Sudmann and Stockmann xiii). Unsurprisingly, therefore, scholarly interest in the medium has also been growing exponentially since the early 2000s. With predecessors⁶⁰ in cognitive and educational science studies about ‘play’ in general (cf. Neitzel, “Gespielte Geschichten” 2), over the last decade or so, Game Studies have developed as a separate field in acknowledgement of the fact that games are, as Espen Aarseth puts it in his introduction of the first ever issue of the *Games Studies* journal, “a cultural field whose value is hard to overestimate” (“Computer Games” online). Of particular interest for *my* study is the fact that many Games Studies scholars consider video games to be the most inherently metareferential medium of all.

Firstly, any kind of play can be seen as highly metareferential. As Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara, and Britta Neitzel have pointed out, already Friedrich Schiller referred to the playing of games as a fully self-reflexive action since the action’s entire goal lies in the playing of the game itself (cf. Nöth et al. 119). Furthermore, Gregory Bateson has argued that the playing of any game, even amongst animals, always includes an understanding of and engaging in metareferential communication, since that is what is required to be aware that what is happening is play and not serious (cf. 179; cf. also Neitzel, “Metacommunication” 237). In the words of Bateson himself, successful play is only made possible by the highly self-referential, mutual understanding that “[t]hese actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote” (180; cf. also Nöth et al. 125). And as Nöth, Bishara and Neitzel have further observed, Bateson’s postulation is valid for both rule-less and rule-based games: for in the case of the first, every play action needs to send meta-signs to communicate that it is (still) part of the game; and in the case of the second, the rules themselves are self-referential, usually applying only to the one game in question (cf. Nöth et al. 129, 132).

The second highly metareferential aspect of video games is the fact that the interactivity which distinguishes the medium from most of its predecessors is inherently metaleptic. After

⁵⁹ I use the term ‘computer games’ for this title because all three games I will analyse in this section (1) can be played on a computer (in fact, *The Stanley Parable* is *only* available on PC and not for consoles), and (2) have been beaten by me on a computer for the purpose of this dissertation. Since most medium-specific features I discuss throughout this section, however, are present in all types of video games, I often use this umbrella term when applicable throughout the text.

⁶⁰ For examples cf. e.g. Bateson or Sutton-Smith.

all, at the core of interactivity lies a desire to *experience* (cf. Wilhelmsson 69) scenarios, sensations, feelings – yet only vicariously (cf. Schank 50), thus positioning play on the borderline between real and fictional experience. As Hans-Otto Hügel and Louis Bosshart have pointed out, in fact, a lot of the enjoyment of entertainment – no matter through which medium the latter is provided – is often derived from such mediated experiences, which, importantly, do not have direct consequences and do not push the experiencing party towards anything (cf. Hügel, *Lob des Mainstreams* 25, 28; Bosshart 21).

Through such vicarious experiences without consequences, audiences and game participants are given the opportunity to visit strange and fanciful places, to experiment with behaviour and social norms, to contemplate different views and positions, and even to partially experience certain feelings such as fear without exposing themselves to any actual dangers (cf. Klimmt 249, 252; cf. also Maase 53-54; Venus 119-122). Thus, especially in the context of play, safe learning experiences are made possible and encouraged (cf. Klimmt 250, 253). And as Ralf Adelman and Hartmut Winkler have explained, such safe learning opportunities are particularly valuable in our contemporary society in which the gap between the supposed ideal of an ‘acting subject’ and the actual possibilities (or rather lack thereof) for the average, routine-encrusted individual to even attempt to show self-motivated actions is so large (cf. Adelman and Winkler 5; cf. also Neitzel, “Involvierungsstrategien” 86).

In addition, the metaleptic nature of video game interactivity does not end with this general in-between position of all play experiences. For as scholars such as Alice Bell or Britta Neitzel have argued, ontological metalepses are especially typical of – and possibly even form the basis for – specifically *video* games since what the video game player does in the real world (e.g. pressing a button) has direct effect on the fictional world of the game (e.g. an action is performed), which in turn causes the player to react in the real world, etc. (cf. Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis” 296; Neitzel, *Gespielte Geschichten* 52 and “Metacommunication” 248). This phenomenon, which Karin Kukkonen has labelled “interactional metalepsis” (“Metalepsis” 18), arguably contradicts Jeff Thoss’ statement that metaleptic border-transgressions between reality and fiction are never literal and/or physical (cf. Thoss, “Storyworlds” 10-11). For in fact, based on the level of immediacy created by the respective game, as Nöth, Bishara, Neitzel and Timo Schemer-Reinhard have pointed out, from a player’s perspective the real-world and the game-world actions can very well be perceived as being performed simultaneously (cf. Nöth et al. 119; Schemer-Reinhard 42). The player, in other words, can feel as if he or she is acting on two separate diegetic levels, in the fictional as well as in the real world, at the same time. And even if this sense of immediacy is

not achieved by a particular game, then players are still nigh-simultaneously acting (in the real world) and observing their own acting (in the game world). That is to say, as Jochen Venus and Britta Neitzel have suggested, video game players are constantly performing self-observation (cf. Neitzel, *Gespielte Geschichten* 56, “Point of View” 8-9; Venus 105-106) – a perfect example of metareference in action.

Another highly metaleptic video game aspect is the medium’s frequent use of an in-game player avatar. Within Games Studies, there are many different approaches as to what an avatar actually is: According to Alice McMahan it is an in-game personification of the player (cf. 74), but as Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara and Britta Neitzel have pointed out, this view is highly simplistic since the avatar does not share any actual characteristics with the player (cf. Nöth et al. 157; Neitzel, “Involvierungsstrategien” 96). Approaching the topic from a different perspective, for Ulf Wilhelmsson the avatar is the player’s ‘Game Ego’ which “serves as an anchoring force within the system of the game and provides a key element in the process of engaging the player and providing a sense of being within the fictional space time of the game through the possibility of exerting force upon the environment” (64). Meanwhile, for Rob Fulop the avatar is little more than a cursor (cf. quoted in Rosenberg online) whilst for a next group of scholars it is a figure into which the player eventually transforms once – through continuous playing of the game – the initial distance created for players through distracting, unfamiliar rules and mechanics disappears in favour of increasing immersion (cf. e.g. Venus 108-110). Finally, Marshall McLuhan-based (cf. e.g. *Understanding Media*) approaches see the avatar as a tool and thus as an almost cyborg-like extension of the player (cf. e.g. Nöth et al. 157-158).

All the while this critical debate is raging, game developers themselves equally have strongly diverging approaches to the role, function and utilisation of this particular video game device. On one end of the spectrum, some developers design avatars which are little more than empty hulls for the players to fill, whilst on the other end of the spectrum others create fleshed-out, film-like characters with which players can identify and empathise (cf. Nöth et al. 159).⁶¹ In short, the only thing all avatars – in theory and in practice – seem to have in common is their borderline-existence as the focal point in which the extradiegetic player world and the diegetic game world intersect, causing players to frequently switch between first and third person when narrating their exploits (cf. Venus 109-110; Tavinor,

⁶¹ For a survey-based study of how players see themselves in relation to their avatars cf. Calleja.

“Videogames” 28) and thus constantly raising questions of somatic displacement (cf. Holopainen 46, 54).

Widening the focus of analysis again, avatars – while arguably the most obvious – are not the only game features inherently metaleptic due to the interactive nature of video games. For example, as a result of the double-coded nature of avatars as both a character in the game world and as some form or aspect of the player, conversations between non-player characters and player characters frequently become highly metaleptic themselves. After all, when a non-player character addresses the avatar, it addresses both of the latter’s implied identities. As a result, game world (player) characters often end up being given instructions (especially in tutorial situations) which only make sense in the context of the extradiegetic world: for example, a soldier character will be instructed to make something happen by pressing a button on a controller which he or she of course does not have, the extradiegetic player controlling him or her does⁶².

Similarly, certain components of a game’s head-up display can be depicted as diegetic elements (e.g. as being part of the avatar’s visor in a first-person game) whilst still clearly being an extradiegetic user interface tool for the player (who they provide with the information needed for play). Likewise, interactive in-game objects (e.g. loot chests) form part of the diegetic world whilst frequently showing extradiegetic markers (e.g. colours, outlines, etc.) which communicate their interactive quality to the player. Finally, today even gaming peripherals such as certain force-feedback-including controllers attempt to further blur the line between what happens in and outside of the game by causing an actual physical impact on the extradiegetic player (e.g. through controller vibration) as a result of something happening on the diegetic level of the game.

Looking at all these metaleptic qualities of video games, it is not surprising that active metareferential discussions have also become increasingly common over the last two decades both within video games themselves – on the content level as well as through mechanical and/or rule-based elements – and within Games Studies. Specifically, many scholars have argued that intermedial references, references to other games and rulesets, and breaks of the fourth wall are the most common types of metareferences in video games (cf. Jannidis 541, 554, 557, 563; Kampmann 219-221). Furthermore, most of these scholars have proposed that, in the words of Bernhard Rapp, video games have adopted these metareferences from other

⁶² This particular example is taken from the beginning of the very first game-play sequence in *Metal Gear Solid* (1998). For more examples cf. e.g. Neitzel, “Metacommunication” 249; Nöth et al. 144-148; Ryan, “Metaleptic Machines” 460-461.

“more mature” media (“Self-Reflexivity” 261, cf. also *Selbstreflexivität*) mainly for the purpose of entertaining and flattering players who “get the reference”, as well as to provide replay value since players can go back to the game to look for little hidden references they might have missed during their first playthrough (cf. Jannidis 541, 554, 557, 563; Kampmann 219-221; Rapp “Self-Reflexivity” 261).

While there are undeniably countless video games which to the present day employ metareferential elements purely for the sake of their entertainment value, it will be one of the main goals of the rest of this section to prove that there are also many games which use metareferences for much more complex and critical purposes, the medium of video games today being (and having been for a while) far more “mature” than Rapp gives it credit for. Rather than just to entertain, all games (the oldest of which was published well before Rapp’s second essay) I will discuss in the following chapters instead use their metareferential elements to conduct serious discussions on the topics of identity, agency, self-determination and personal responsibility, as well as on the role of their medium in our society.

Before I get to my analysis, however, one last aspect of the medium of video games needs to be discussed. In my introduction to my study, I explained that I will restrict my case study to the analysis of *narrative* media – yet whether or not video games fall under that category is a topic which is still contested. At the birth of Game Studies, scholars such as Espen Aarseth, Markku Eskelinen and Jesper Juul, whilst trying to establish the importance of their subject as an independent field of study, radically declared themselves against the “colonization” (Eskelinen, “Towards Computer Game Studies” 36) or at least the “colonising attempts” (Aarseth, “Computer Games” online) supposedly perpetrated by narratologists against the field of Game Studies. To defend the sovereignty of their field, Aarspeh, Eskelinen and Juul specifically proclaimed that Games Studies deserve their independence because games, in fact, are not a narrative medium at all.

Admittedly, in the years since, many scholars have tried to reduce the impact of these initial proclamations: Espen Aarseth himself already toned down his statement in his editorial to the first ever issue of *Game Studies* by saying that “[o]f course, games should *also* be studied within existing fields and departments [...] games are [merely] too important to be left to these fields” (online, my emphasis); Jesper Juul eventually acknowledged that “[m]ost video games are ruled *and* make-believe” (*Half-Real* 13, my emphasis; cf. also “Games Telling Stories?” online), and thus are of interest to both ludologists *and* narratologists; finally, Gonzalo Frasca has even argued that the debate between the narratologists and the ludologists never took place (cf. “Ludologists” 92-99) but was merely something that was

blown out of proportion much later for dramatic effect. Still, just a glance at a prominent collective Games Studies volume such as *First Person* shows a sharp separation of topics into two separate categories of “Cyberdrama” (cf. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 1-33) vs. “Ludology” (cf. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 33-69), making it very clear that the two camps definitely existed, and arguably still exist. For if one looks at the highly aggressive, anti-narratologist and frequently polemic language Markku Eskelinen uses in his essay for this publication as well as in his other work (cf. e.g. “Towards Computer Game Studies” 36; “The Gaming Situation” online) it is easy to see that the debate is far from over.

At their core, the ludologists were of course not entirely wrong in their protest against video games being treated as merely a different kind of story-telling. After all, as Jesper Juul has observed, it is perfectly possible to have a game without narrative, it is even possible to have a *good* game without narrative, while it is not possible to have a game without rules, and a good *narrative* in a game does not automatically make a good *game* – in other words, for a video game, story is optional, while rules are not (cf. Juul, *Half-Real* 13). Still, this position does not explain, as Marie-Laure Ryan has pointed out, why if a good narrative is irrelevant to the medium’s enjoyment numerous developers keep investing so much time, effort and money in the creation of a narrative, rather than just presenting players with, for example, basic moving targets they need to hit with an equally basic cursor (cf. *Avatars* 117, 182). Furthermore, it does not explain why players commonly use guides or cheats to beat certain games and still derive enjoyment – after all, as Andrew Mactavish has pointed out, clearly those players’ enjoyment of these games cannot come from the overcoming of mechanical skill-challenges since the players chose to circumvent those by “cheating” (cf. 40).

Another convincing ludologist argument has been brought forth by Markku Eskelinen who has argued that, even in the case of games with story, “a mere story is not sufficient to make something a narrative, as there must also be a narrative situation implying the presence of narrators and narratees” (“The Gaming Situation” online) – and undeniably, a lot of video game characteristics play havoc with and stretch many traditional narratological concepts. An in-depth discussion of this topic would unfortunately go beyond the scope of this chapter but two basic, introductory examples shall be given:

Firstly, as Gonzalo Frasca and Britta Neitzel have argued, the player’s ability to influence the outcome of *some* events within the game world (Jan-Noël Thon suggests calling them “ludic events” (32) which eventually form a “player story/narrative” (41)) while the player

certainly is not in control of others (namely not of what Jan-Noël Thon calls predetermined “narrative events” (32) forming the “designer story/narrative” (41))⁶³ poses a lot of questions as to who exactly the author, creator, and/or narrator of a video game story is (cf. e.g. Frasca, “Simulation vs. Narrative” 226-227; Neitzel, *Gespielte Geschichten* 130-131 and “Frage nach Gott” 65; versus Murray, Janet H. 152). Furthermore, the existence of strong modding communities⁶⁴ for many computer games only complicates matters even more.

Secondly, as Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara and Britta Neitzel have pointed out, we normally speak of the three narratological levels (story, discourse, narration) with the expectation that we encounter the discourse and narration through a medium *after* the story has happened. In a video game, however, technically the story has not happened yet and the player, rather than just being a receptive narratee-equivalent, actually has to play the game to make the story happen in the first place (cf. Nöth et al. 182-183; Neitzel, *Gespielte Geschichten* 9, 131). Very differently from other media, therefore, one could argue, as Britta Neitzel has done, that video games do not depict a story, do not narrate what has happened, but instead merely present the conditions for something, for a story, to happen (cf. *Gespielte Geschichten* 108; cf. also Ryan, *Avatars* 189). Once again, the one-to-one application of narratological terms and concepts developed for other media onto video games thus proves difficult.⁶⁵

Finally, in addition to these questions of how video games fit into our narratological terminology, as a result of (initial) technological restrictions and of early examples of video games with either no or merely with a very basic, stereotype-laden story, the narratological capabilities of the medium per se have been questioned. In 1997, Janet H. Murray argued that games cannot tell good stories since the inherently happy ending of “beating the game” prevents the medium from dealing with complex, impactful and dark material (cf. 142). In 2001, Andreas Lange, while acknowledging the dramatic increase of narratives in video games (cf. 79), still argued that these narratives, however, serve merely as backdrop (cf. 83) whilst players focus on the objects they can interact with and the mechanical tasks at hand (cf. 81). Similarly, in 2005, Grant Tavinor wrote that “rather than a focus on interpretive and

⁶³ For a terminologically different but conceptually similar distinction to that of Thon, cf. also Ryan, *Avatars* 201.

⁶⁴ Online communities in which players modify the game code, create modifications (or “mods”) which impose the mod maker’s (or “modder’s”) rules, aesthetic choices or even story contributions onto the original game, and then share these mods with other players.

⁶⁵ For one approach to a possible narratological solution as well as for a much more in-detail analysis of the problem cf. Neitzel, *Gespielte Geschichten*; for a different approach trying to circumvent the problem by seeing video games as simulations rather than mere narratives cf. Frasca, “Simulation vs. Narrative”.

sympathetic engagement with narratives, videogames involve their appreciators in an active engagement with the problem spaces or kinetic narratives of gameplay” (“Videogames” 25). The main motivation for designers to include story elements, therefore, according to Lange, is to facilitate rule-learning and the engagement with “problem spaces” by associating them with familiar tasks, objects and situations (cf. 81). In 2004, Ken Perlin further suggested that video game characters can never seem as “real” and fleshed-out as those in films or novels since in the older media recipients get to see characters act independently and thus express a personality while in video games players only see themselves act – no perceivable agency, for Perlin, then equals no personality (cf. 12, 15; cf. also Aarseth, “Genre Trouble” 51). Finally, also in 2004, whilst acknowledging the possibility of games to grow in the future, Gonzalo Frasca still began an essay on the topic with the observation that video games are “far away from becoming a mature communication form that could deal with such things as human relationships, or political and social issues” (“Videogames of the Oppressed” 85).

In fact, not only have many scholars criticised the ability of video games to tell better stories, but some critics such as Will Wright have even objected to the idea that video games should aspire to do so, arguing that as a new independent medium, games should not copy elements from their predecessors (cf. 12-14). Similarly, critics such as Chris Crawford have suggested that improved narratives more often than not come at the cost of good gameplay since most video games add narrative complexity through the inclusion of lengthier and more frequent cut scenes and similar non-interactive elements taken from older media, all of which interrupt and sometimes even replace actual interactive gameplay (cf. 259-262; cf. also Nöth et al. 180; Ryan, *Avatars* 117).

I could at this point refute all six of these claims with examples from recent games. I could argue that games such as *Mass Effect 3* (2012), *Brothers, a Tale of Two Sons* (2013), *This War of Mine* (2014) and many more prove that beating the mechanical challenges of a game does not need to translate into a narrative happy end. I could demonstrate with the help of let’s-play videos and game wikis that there are many players who will search every nook and cranny of a game for hidden lore, clearly caring for the story at least as much as for the mechanics. I could elaborate on how repeated voice-over commentary by the main character during the gameplay sections of the *Tomb Raider* (2013) reboot or of *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (2017) succeeds perfectly in keeping the players aware of their avatar’s independent, faceted personality. I could point out that even though there are still plenty of cut-scene heavy games like *Beyond Two Souls* (2013), large portions of which have been screened unedited at film festivals to critical acclaim, there are also games such as the aforementioned

Brothers, a Tale of Two Sons which succeed in relaying their core narrative message through their use of controls – moving some players (myself included) to tears by one particular use of key-binding. Finally, I could list dozens of games – in addition to the three I will discuss in this section – which deal maturely with mature topics.

I could do all this but I would rather not spend too much time on such a one-sided, reductive defence of video games as capable of narratives: firstly, because the vast number of different types of video games and of ways in which people play them makes generalised statements about what “games” are and what they do unsustainable; secondly, and more importantly, because this war between narratologists and ludologists misses the possibly most central quality of games, namely the fact that they exactly include elements from *both* fields, and that therefore, every study of works from this medium needs to include an analysis of ludological as well as of narratological elements. In their work on television, Gaby Allrath, Marion Gymnich and Carola Surkamp have adapted Seymour Chatman’s idea of two information tracks – in the case of television an audio and a visual one – and presented the analysis of the relationship between the two tracks as crucial for the interpretation of television narratives (cf. Allrath et al. 2-3). This concept applies equally well to the medium of video games in which audio, video, game mechanics, and actual gameplay equally come together to contribute to an overarching narrative.

For the purposes of my study of metareference in contemporary video games, I have consequently chosen three computer games which use all tracks at their disposal to convey metareferential commentary. And rather than only doing so for the sake of entertainment – the unreliable narrators of *Dragon Age II* (2011) and *Call of Juarez: Gunslinger* (2013), the intermedial references, self-awareness and fourth-wall-breaking of *Deadpool* (2013), the creative use of user interface and game code elements in *Pony Island* (2016) and *Kingsway* (2017) all would have been great examples of that – my chosen games, as mentioned before, additionally engage in wider social, cultural and psychological discussions of identity, agency, fiction, reality and mediality. As a result, these games facilitate the drawing of parallels between themselves and the works previously discussed in this dissertation. Furthermore, they demonstrate beyond any doubt that by now video games have definitely reached the maturity Gonzalo Frasca was still missing only a decade ago.

There were many games I considered for the purposes of my analysis: *Undertale* (2015), *ICEY* (2016), *Nier: Automata* (2017), *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (2017) to name only a few. They all fulfil the criteria just listed and thus would have made great subjects for my study. In the end, trying not to burst the scope of this paper as well as to remain firmly within

the most fundamentally anglophone realm, I confined my choice to what I consider the possibly most multi-layered three, namely *BioShock* (2007) – arguably one of the first games to signal the possibility of “moral seriousness” in video gaming (Tavinor, “*BioShock*” 99) –, *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and *The Stanley Parable* (2013).

6.1 Metareference in *BioShock*

Andrew Ryan reminds us, we all make choices. But in the end, our choices make us.

(BioShock, repeatedly played announcement)

2K's *BioShock*, as a result of its narrative as well as mechanical choices, is a metareferential computer game which repeatedly addresses questions of agency, (acting) authority and choice, all of which are topics central to the medium of video games as a whole. After all, what distinguishes this particular medium the most from its predecessors is the sense of agency inherent to its interactive reception process (cf. Tulloch 30).

Set in a time long before the invention of videogames and never actually breaking the fourth wall, *BioShock* relies almost exclusively on implicit, double-coded means to convey its metareferential message. In the game, players find themselves in the year 1960⁶⁶, controlling an unnamed male protagonist who has just survived a plane crash in the middle of the ocean. Almost immediately, players discover a hidden underwater city named Rapture built in 1946 by a man named Andrew Ryan as an ideological haven for scientists, artists and “common people” who share Ryan's individualist and objectivist⁶⁷ ideals. Yet by the time the protagonist arrives, Rapture has decayed into madness, violence and chaos and the game's overall goal appears, at least initially, to be to find a way to survive and return to civilisation.

6.1.1 Linearity, Choice and (Presumed) Ludonarrative Dissonance

Because of this last thematic component, *BioShock* has often been classified as survival horror. On a more basic, mechanical level, however, the game belongs to the genre of first-person shooters. Following the advice of an inhabitant of Rapture who calls himself Atlas⁶⁸, and who communicates with the protagonist through a shortwave radio the latter picks up at arrival, the player and protagonist progress through the city accumulating an arsenal of guns as well as gene-manipulation-based superhuman powers. This progress itself is strictly linear since the game mechanics do not allow players to do much more than complete Atlas's instructions one after the other. Some independent exploration of the city is possible and is

⁶⁶ For a more in-depth analysis of *BioShock*'s creation of an 'alternate history' cf. Lizardi. For an ever more specialised study examining *BioShock*'s intertextual use of music to evoke this alternate history cf. Gibbons.

⁶⁷ The name 'And(rew) Ryan' is even build upon an anagram of 'Ayn Rand', further justifying the many studies that have been written on the parallels between Ryan's and Rand's worldviews (cf. e.g. Krogulec; Nelis; Packer; Schubert).

⁶⁸ This name is, of course, another reference to Ayn Rand, her *Atlas Shrugged* being a central point of intertextual reference throughout *BioShock*'s entire story (cf. Krogulec 83).

rewarded with hidden useful items as well as with tape recordings of different citizens illuminating the history and goings-on of the city, but this does not in any way contribute to the actual progression of the game.

Initially, this linearity can seem like a poor choice for a game which outside of its actual mechanics focuses on questions of choice and on the portrayal of a city founded upon Ryan's belief in the almost God-like power of the individual, as summarised in the following manifesto found in the game as soon as the protagonist sets foot in Rapture:

I am Andrew Ryan and I'm here to ask you a question: Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington. It belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican. It belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow. It belongs to everyone. I rejected those answers. Instead, I *chose* something different. I *chose* the impossible. I *chose*... Rapture. A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well. (chapter 0, my emphasis)

Through the inclusion of this manifesto, from the beginning of the game's narrative, a strong emphasis is placed on the idea that people should make their own choices in life instead of listening to other people's demands. At the same time, however, in seeming contradiction, the game's linear level design requires players to do just the opposite and merely follow Atlas' instructions.

As the protagonist progresses through the city, he passes by many banners and plaques which further advocate for the power of man-made choices, with slogans such as "Rapture. One Man's Vision. Mankind's Salvation." or "No Gods or Kings. Only Man." expressing the idea that making personal, individualist choices can elevate mankind above even the gods. In fact, the first time the protagonist encounters the second slogan, it is accompanied by a gigantic golden statue of Andrew Ryan looming above the protagonist in a very god-like manner. This statue literally embodies the idea that men are worthy of the same reverential and iconographic treatment as gods – yet it also immediately asks the question whether Ryan's vision was not in the end mostly about elevating himself rather than about elevating mankind in general.

As another excerpt from Ryan's manifesto heard later on in the game points out, however, these last two goals do not actually need to be contradictory, at least not from Andrew Ryan's perspective. In this second tape recording segment, Ryan can be heard to argue the following: "What is the greatest lie ever created? What is the most vicious obscenity ever perpetrated on mankind? Slavery... the Holocaust... dictatorship... NO! It's the tool with which all that wickedness is built. Altruism." (ch. 2). In other words, for Ryan, the way to

elevate mankind is for everyone to shake off any shackles of altruism and to, radically individualistically, elevate themselves – as he has.

Rapture is thus shown to have been built on the ideal that every person should not only be allowed to but should be encouraged to reach for his or her own, individual greatness without any consideration for social, political, religious or other limitations. Yet significantly, as the player and protagonist soon find out, this ideal has also been what has caused the city's downfall. *BioShock* portrays the former haven of Rapture as torn apart by individuals waging civil war on each other for power. Furthermore, the consequence of scientists being freed from socio-ethical restraints is shown to be surgeons disfiguring their patients to free them from their restrictive human form (cf. J. S. Steinman's audio-logs in ch. 2, especially "Adam's Changes", "Higher Standards", "Surgery's Picasso") and citizens modifying their genetic makeup in an attempt to improve themselves to the point of insanity-inducing overdose.

Almost all inhabitants of Rapture the player and protagonist encounter throughout *BioShock* are portrayed as having, in their search for ultimate individuality, actually lost their selves to madness and as having been reduced to rambling monstrosities unaware of their surroundings, only recognisable as types based on their preferred mode of attack, but not as individuals. In fact, many of these creatures (for they are barely human), known within the game worlds as splicers, when encountered are all repeating the exactly same phrases. This could of course be seen as a mere example of poor, time-saving writing by the game's developers – yet it also suits the portrayal of the splicers as devolved monstrous beings without individual thought or personality. In splicers' mouths, formerly meaningful individual phrases become empty mantras, still containing words yet as meaningless as a rabid animal's howl.

Yet if *BioShock's* central themes are so focused on questioning the value of individualism and choice for mankind, the question still remains why the game's developers have chosen a strikingly linear level design and formulaic mechanics for the portrayal of those themes. After all, considering the seemingly inherent contradiction, this makes it easy for critics to accuse the game of ludonarrative dissonance and to use it as an example for how the video game medium has only limited narrative potential since it is always held back by its mechanics (cf. e.g. Hocking). This interpretation of *BioShock*, however, is highly short sighted. For, two-thirds into the game, the highly metareferential reason behind 2K's choice of mechanics is revealed when the protagonist and through him the player discover that very few of their actions up to this point have really been the result of their own decisions. Instead, both player

and player-character are revealed to have been, in Grant Tavinor's perfectly chosen words, "a pawn in someone else's game" ("*BioShock*" 92).

6.1.2 The Illusion of (Player) Agency

BioShock's tenth chapter discloses that the protagonist himself is a genetic experiment, a man-made weapon created by Atlas for the sole purpose of killing Ryan. The chapter furthermore reveals that the protagonist does not have a fully free will but that he has been conditioned to blindly obey any order given to him accompanied by the phrase "would you kindly". This narrative twist firmly grounds the player's lack of mechanical choice within the story and explains it with the fact that the character the player controls does not have a choice either. In addition, *BioShock*'s narrative revelation gives the game its ultimate metareferential quality by raising one crucial question: If Atlas has been the one controlling the protagonist all the time – then what exactly was the role of the player up to this point? To answer this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at Atlas' function in the game, at his use of the trigger-phrase "would you kindly", and at *BioShock*'s general creation of a semblance of choice and/or linearity through the implementation of the game's overall mechanics.

Firstly, Atlas. For long portions of the game, the voice coming from the protagonist's shortwave radio functions as a guide for both protagonist and player: highly metaleptically, Atlas explains Rapture, as well as the game's actual mechanics. Every game has rules and it needs to convey those to the player – and while some games achieve this by means of extradiegetic user interface components such as text-window tutorials, *BioShock* combines such extra-diegetic explanations with diegetic ones provided by Atlas. Sometimes, instructions in the game are just given through text which appears on the screen indicating to the player what he or she must do in the real world to achieve a diegetic action (e.g. press X to pull a lever). At other times, however, it is Atlas who gives explicit, diegetic orders to the protagonist (e.g. pick up a wrench) which the player then needs to execute. Similarly, certain combat mechanics in the game are explained by on-screen text (e.g. a sentence appearing on top of the action and explaining to the player that he or she can use pyrokinesis to set oil puddles on fire) while others are explained by Atlas who, for example, suggests the protagonist use electricity bolts to hurt enemies standing in water. In all these instances, there seems to be no discernible logic as to when text and when Atlas is chosen to explain the rules, thus *BioShock* portrays Atlas and the game's ruleset as practically interchangeable. Or, more specifically, Atlas is shown to be to the protagonist what the game's extradiegetic ruleset is to

the extradiegetic player: Atlas and the rules set the framework and goals, they provide and restrict possible actions – and all the protagonist and player (themselves equated through the conflation of Atlas with the game’s ruleset) are able to do is to operate within the given framework and work towards the established goals.

Once the overlaps between Atlas and the game, between the protagonist and the player, are established, it becomes imperative to analyse just how Atlas is shown to control the protagonist – for that will demonstrate how *BioShock* represents the relationship between game and player as a whole. First of all, there is the idea of psychological conditioning: The protagonist of the game is eventually revealed to follow Atlas’s orders blindly because the rules for those interactions have been literally conditioned into him. Equally, for the player to have reached this point of the game, he or she must have blindly followed Atlas’ orders as well, completed diegetic goal after goal, extradiegetic level after level. Just like the protagonist would have been unable to act out of order even if he had started to question Atlas’s character and motivations, the player has no choice but to do as he or she is told – partially because the linearity of the game does not provide other options, but partially also because it would not have occurred to many players that in such a linear game they could even try to do something else. Seasoned players know that this is how games of this genre work: receive objective, complete objective, win the game. Or in other words, we as players have ourselves been *conditioned* through past experiences with the medium of video games to accept the blind following of quest instructions as “normal” behaviour. By exposing the protagonist’s conditioning *BioShock* thus metareferentially raises the players’ awareness of their own conditioned actions.

It is, however, important to note that even though Atlas has the ability to fully control the protagonist, he only actually uses the “would you kindly”-phrase seven times throughout the whole game. In between those instances, Atlas seems to let the protagonist roam, thus creating an illusion of agency both for the character and for the player. Both appear free to explore whatever they like within the seemingly “natural” limits of a decaying city filled with stone walls, unsurmountable piles of post-civil-war rubble, passages cut off by faulty electrics, etc. The fact that all those limits and blockages are of course not created by a dying city but by purposeful game-design is as elegantly covered in a semblance of normality as is the protagonist’s acting according to Atlas’s will.

The closest *BioShock* gets to providing opportunities for choice is the protagonist’s and the player’s ability to decide how to dispose of the creatures they encounter. In the case of the splicers, the game’s primary enemies, this choice merely restricts itself to the method of

execution. In the case of the Little Sisters (genetically altered children created to harvest and produce the material used for the genetic injections), however, protagonist and player get an active choice as to whether they want to kill the girls to drain them for power or whether they prefer to miss out on the additional power and save the girls instead. Thus the only choice player and protagonist are ever given is strikingly the same one between self-gain and altruism which lies at the core of Andrew Ryan's and Rapture's whole ideology, and thus at the centre of *BioShock*'s ethical and philosophical discourse (cf. also Tulloch 34-36).⁶⁹

Apart from this one context, however, the protagonist's and the player's options are extremely limited, and they are entirely nullified in the seven aforementioned cases in which Atlas issues a "would you kindly" order. These commands are given to (1) make the protagonist pick up the shortwave radio through which he will be able to receive further instructions, (2) to make him pick up his first weapon, (3) to make sure the protagonist pauses to witness the core of what Rapture has become in the form of the first encountered Little Sister, (4-6) to make the protagonist move on to the next relevant part of the city, and finally, (7) to order the protagonist to kill Andrew Ryan. In other words, Atlas' orders can be paraphrased as follows: Pick up the item which will give you your objectives, pick up the tools you will need to achieve these objectives, take your time to notice the backstory but mainly keep progressing down your designated path until you complete your final assignment. Phrased like this, Atlas' commands are revealed to be exactly the same commands every player automatically follows when he or she engages in many types of video games. In fact, players usually accept these rules as an unobtrusive and natural part of the medium. By linking them to a ruthless, abusive, mind-controlling killer such as Atlas, however, *BioShock* unveils this game structure's strikingly despotic nature.

In addition to these seven uses of the trigger-phrase, Atlas employs one more subtle method to control the protagonist – a method which once again is highly familiar to players. Atlas repeatedly provides the protagonist with emotional incentives for the actions he wants him to perform: do this, and you can save a multitude of little girls; do this, and you can save my family; do this, and you can liberate the city from the clutches of an evil tyrant and become a hero. In short, Atlas keeps motivating the protagonist with classic game tropes, all of which are, eventually, revealed to be nothing but lies, nothing but blatant, conscious manipulation of the protagonist by Atlas. Consequently, when the latter finally reveals their

⁶⁹ For three very different perspectives on the ethical subtleties of this choice and especially on the question of what might be motivating players to choose either course of action cf. Hocking online; Tavinor, "*BioShock*" 105; Wysocki and Schandler 3890-3891.

nature (cf. ch. 14) and bursts out into deprecating laughter ridiculing the protagonist for falling for his tricks, players are enticed to feel that same ridicule directed against them for all the times in their lives in which they have been drawn into playing (video) games, seduced by the exact same tropes and ideals.

The culmination of the player's loss of control amidst tropes and conditioned obedience is reached in the scene during which the protagonist confronts and kills Andrew Ryan, who in turn reveals Atlas' true nature and the meaning of the words "would you kindly" (cf. ch. 10). Cornered and accepting defeat, Ryan chooses the only form of self-assertion he has left, namely to take charge of his own death. With the words "In the end, what separates a man from a slave? Money, power? No. A man chooses. A slave obeys. [...] Kill. A man chooses. A slave obeys. OBEY." he takes away all the power and control from his killer-to-be by actually ordering him to kill him, using the conditioned trigger-phrase himself. With the protagonist obligated to follow blindly, the player is forced to watch him bludgeon Andrew Ryan to death, an event presented as a cut-scene without any form of interactivity so that the player is as powerless as his or her protagonist.

As pointed out before, this climactic scene takes place about two thirds into the game. In its wake, Atlas tries to kill the protagonist, who has now outlived his usefulness, but the latter is saved by the Little Sisters and the woman who created them. Wanting to make amends for her past actions, the scientist from that point on takes over as the protagonist's shortwave radio guide and helps him to free himself from Atlas's mental control so that he can hunt the latter down, kill him and truly liberate the city. What is particularly striking about this final third of the game is the fact that its rules and mechanics do not change after the "would you kindly" revelation. Admittedly, before being fully removed with the help of the scientist, residuals of Atlas' control cause sudden temporary gameplay restrictions such as detriments to health and a loss of superhuman abilities salient enough in the context of *BioShock's* larger metareferential control motif to demonstrate just how much at the mercy of a game's framework and code a player really is. Soon, however, these conditions are remedied and the game returns to its established pattern: A voice (now the scientist's) gives instructions through the radio, which the protagonist (once more prospective hero and saviour) follows to reach a 'final boss' (this time Atlas) whose defeat would constitute a successful completion of the game.

In fact, *BioShock* is fully self-aware of this continuation of the pattern and Atlas explicitly voices this awareness when he points out that even after freeing himself from his conditioning the protagonist is not really acting less like a slave. Or in Atlas' exact words: "Has Mother

Goose really got her hooks into you. You can knock Ryan all you want, but the old man was bingo on one point of fact: you won't even walk till somebody says 'go!'" (cf. ch. 13) – a statement which, whilst accurate on the narrative level regarding the dynamic between the protagonist and his guides, is also metareferentially significant as representative of the general dynamic between protagonist and player. After all, the first cannot do anything unless the latter presses a key.

6.1.3 Conclusion: *BioShock's* Metareferential Function

This continuation of gameplay patterns despite the protagonist's and player's increased self-awareness reveals a lot about *BioShock's* overall metareferential function. Unlike Sorkin's series discussed before, the game at no point presents a solution to the medium-specific feature of merely illusionary player freedom and control. In fact, *BioShock* never even expresses the opinion that within the context of the medium itself a lack of complete, meaningful agency is in any way game-breaking or enjoyment-diminishing. After all, even with the raised awareness of their restrictions, most players still enjoy the last third of the game. They do so, however, in a much more medium-conscious and self-aware manner.

In the end, 2K's game is not about whether the player and the protagonist actually get to choose to kill Andrew Ryan, or whether or not they actually get to choose to kill Atlas. *BioShock*, instead, merely focuses on having the protagonist and player stop and question *why* they are executing those kills – because they are mind-controlled weapons doing what they have been conditioned to do without even noticing, or because they have consciously considered the larger narrative and ethical context and have purposefully agreed to play along. This distinction – especially in the context of a game genre as frequently criticised for containing nothing more than hours-worth of mindless, endless killing as the first-person shooter – is undeniably an important one. And *BioShock*, through its use of metareferences, successfully portrays this idea from within the medium whilst still acknowledging and upholding the genre's entertainment value.

6.2 Metareference in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Think of the children! [...] Where's all this violence comin' from, man? Is it the video games?

I bet it's the video games.

(Spec Ops: The Line, chapter 11)

This criticism of shooter games as a medium encouraging mindless killing lies at the heart of the second game I have chosen for my analysis – a game which Matthew Thomas Payne has called “the game industry’s first major, *anti-war* military shooter” (266, my emphasis) and which Miguel Sicart suggests has been designed to “present[] players with a progressively challenging *ethical* experience” (112, my emphasis). A revival of an older series of tactical shooter games, *Spec Ops: The Line*’s main metareferential subject matter is the depiction of violence, particularly in modern warfare shooters such as the highly popular *Call of Duty* series. By being a third-person shooter itself, Yager’s *Spec Ops: The Line* metareferentially exposes and discusses many tropes of the genre – and of present-day militainment in general – either by saliently reproducing them or by actively breaking them. Furthermore, by being an adaptation of both Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Spec Ops: The Line* draws comparisons between the three different media of literature, film and video games in the context of their respective depictions of the experiences of battle and war. In the process, *Spec Ops: The Line* demonstrates what medium-specific tools computer games in particular have at their disposal to portray these topics in a challenging manner. Consequently, the game not only criticises the frequent glorification and glossing-over of violence in traditional shooters but it also demonstrates the strengths and advantages video games could have in relation to the depiction of the dark and traumatising sides of violence and war, if only the medium was used to its full potential.

Spec Ops: The Line is set in an alternate reality. More specifically, in an alternate modern-day Dubai in which the city has been hit by multiple all-devouring sandstorms. Through this choice of a literally “desert storm”-riddled setting, the game retains the real-life relevance of its war-commentary despite the dissociative placement of its action in an alternate reality. *Spec Ops: The Line* tells the story of Captain Martin Walker, who as the leader of an American three-men Delta Force squad attempts to rescue one of his idols, Lieutenant Colonel John Konrad, and his men, all of whom are stuck in Dubai after volunteering to try and evacuate the city. Once their mission had failed, Konrad and his battalion, The Damned 33rd, had been ordered to return to the United States yet they defied the order and remained in Dubai to try to lead survivors out of the city. Eventually, all contact

with the unit was lost for nearly six months before the military received a transmission from Konrad reporting utter mission failure. Walker and his men are consequently sent to investigate, their orders being to locate any possible survivors and to then leave the city immediately to report to command so the latter can send in a more appropriately-sized and better-informed rescue-team.

6.2.1 Subverting the Heroic Power-Fantasy and the Trope of the ‘Other’

At first glance, this narrative goal reads like the typical heroic quest trope prominent in so many video as well as tabletop games. This has led at least one critic to suggest that the game is thus “*luring*” (Björk 171, my emphasis) or “tricking” players into engaging with “dark play” which will, unavoidably, “make[] them feel bad about themselves” (Björk 171). In reality, however, when the players first encounter the narrative trope within *Spec Ops: The Line*, they already know that things will probably turn out very differently than the trope would suggest. For to reach any of this narrative data, players of *Spec Ops: The Line* first have to navigate their way through the game’s menu screen, which makes it very clear that this will not be your usual (cf. Keogh 1) glory-be-to-the-American-saviours story proclaiming the West’s supposed technological and ethical superiority.

In an animated still shot, the game welcomes its players with a view of the skyline of deserted Dubai, an American flag waving on one of the rooftops. This flag, however, is turned upside down and is ragged as it is swaying in the wind to Jimi Hendrix’s twangy and near-discordant electrical-guitar rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” from 1969. As the game progresses, if players ever exit the game to take a break and then restart it, this already ominous menu screen deteriorates further and further: a body appears, then a raven feeding on it. The menu screen thus constantly reminds returning players straight away of how the mood of the game has progressed to this point. Finally, every selection made in the menu is accompanied by a sound reminiscent of that of a clip being loaded into a gun, thus already symbolizing to the player that everything he or she does at this point is to prepare for a violent battle.

After pressing the start button, the player is thrown straight into the middle of a helicopter combat scene which functions on multiple levels. Firstly, as a highly dramatic flash-forward to a moment late in the game during which the player will have access to powerful, highly-destructive weapons, the opening sequence contains many genre- and medium-typical tropes normally used to excite players about the formidable skills and items they are soon to acquire

as well as about the explosive adventures they are soon to have. However, the emotional chaos and disorientation portrayed in the characters as well as the fade-to-black helicopter-crash ending of this scene already break the usual effect of this prototype of game introductions. Finally, awareness of the game's source material adds one more layer of complexity and implicit metareferential criticism to this introductory sequence: for the vehicle-based association of the player with Kilgore's helicopter-riding regiment in *Apocalypse Now* quickly causes discomfort in source-aware players since it draws parallels between the power-mad, desensitised soldiers shown in the film and the feeling of excitement and empowerment which the players themselves have just experienced if the medium trope has had its desired effect.

Once the opening sequence ends in the crash of the protagonists' helicopter, the resulting black-screen establishes the timeline and takes the players to the actual beginning of the game's story. In a cut-scene narrated by Walker and showing Konrad wandering his quarters in Dubai, the players are provided with the establishing information summed up at the beginning of this chapter. As a fully cinematic, non-interactive cutscene, this introduction at first glance does not contribute much to the discussion of computer games as a medium other than providing an example of the theory that video games usually resort to cutscenes to progress their narratives. However, a closer look at the double-coded nature of the topic of this narrative immediately reveals a deeper metareferential layer.

Spec Ops: The Line's story-establishing cinematic opens with the following lines: "Is John Konrad the greatest man I ever served with? Well, I dunno. [...] But the facts don't lie. The man's a fuckin' hero." The scene then superimposes Walker's voice-over definition of what makes someone a hero – actively volunteering to risk his life to help the people of a disaster zone rather than just sending money through a charity – onto Konrad's array of combat medals, further establishing the image of the war hero as a central theme of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s narrative. However, Walker's commentary is soon contrasted with the recording of Konrad's broken-voiced transmission of his mission failure report and thus the hero-image is immediately called into question. This instant challenging of the viability of the hero ideal is already highly self-reflexive in the context of a medium such as video games which is entirely built around the idea of the player as hero. Yet *Spec Ops: The Line* takes its introspection even further. By having Konrad report on his mission with the words that "[mission] ended in complete failure... Death toll... too many..." (ch. 0) and by having these words be the trigger for the narrative of a shooter game – a genre specifically criticised for its high death tolls – *Spec Ops: The Line* further establishes its highly metareferential nature.

After this introductory cinematic scene, the gameplay section of the game begins with another cutscene which slowly transitions into interactive gameplay. In the cutscene, Walker and his two squad members, Sergeant Lugo and Lieutenant Adams, are portrayed during their final approach towards Dubai, continuously bantering in a manner typical of most video games containing party member dynamics and particularly typical of squad-based shooters. Once the squad reaches the city's outskirts, the three soldiers and the player – bound to a fixed path by narrow, linear level design – have no choice but to pass and thus notice an American flag hanging upside down as well as a centre-screen-positioned stop-sign, both indicating that the squad is not welcome. Yager's choice of early game design and mechanics such as pathing thus complement the game's cut-scene-led narrative message right from the start.

Additionally, *Spec Ops: The Line* also utilises the verbal audio track created through the squad-member banter to further establish the game's central setting and themes: Lugo, for example, at the sight of numerous cars and structures buried under desert sand, is shown to joke that “what happens in Dubai, stays in Dubai” (ch.1). And while this aside is meant by the character as a mere pun connecting the famous idiom about Las Vegas with the literal stagnation of a city plagued by sandstorms, in the wider context of *Spec Ops: The Line's* setting and themes, Lugo's joke evokes more complicated issues. Most importantly, it raises questions about the responsibility soldiers should take for their actions in war and/or disaster zones, as well as about the responsibility players should take for their actions in video games, considering that “what I do in games has nothing to do with my actions in real life” is a typical justification of players accused of exhibiting dangerously murderous even if mediated behaviour in their pastime. This of course is not to say that the distinction made in this justification is entirely invalid. Lugo's comment in its war zone context merely raises awareness of the fact that matters are not quite as simple.

As the squad enters the outskirts of Dubai, Walker and his team begin to come across human corpses – some buried, some lying out in the open corroded by the sand. Other than Lugo once more joking, this time about how he prefers his vacation locations to have a three-to-one sexy ladies/dead bodies ratio, the men show no further reaction to the sight. Instead, they display a numbed down attitude towards death which once more functions both on a narrative and on a metareferential level. Within the game world, these scenes portray a level of disassociation from the soldiers which already could lead players to wonder about the characters' mental health. In the metareferential context of the game, these scenes furthermore mirror behaviour commonly criticised in shooter game players who are often reprimanded for

not being perturbed by the number of enemy corpses they see (not to mention leave behind) throughout their gaming experience.

The first emotional reaction the player sees from the squad in response to finding a body occurs when the three soldiers eventually come across the first dead member of the Damned 33rd (cf. ch.1). Thus, right from the start, a very clear us (American soldiers) versus them (everybody else) mentality is established, which is typical of video games in which nameless enemies are the ultimate ‘other’, yet which is also typical of real-life war scenarios in which, for the sake of the soldiers’ psyches, every enemy combatant needs to be treated in this same highly problematic manner. The ‘us versus them’ motif is hence central to *Spec Ops: The Line*’s commentary both on video game tropes and on the experiences of war, and it is consequently developed even further throughout the first chapter of Yager’s game when the squad as well as the player encounter the first members of the local populace (cf. ch. 1).

Firstly, these local men are all depicted as wearing desert-typical, generically Arab head wraps which, in addition to culturally othering their wearers, also hide their faces and thus further depersonalise them⁷⁰. Secondly, though the strangers technically speak English, Lugo in the spirit of diplomacy is soon shown to switch the negotiation to Farsi, which, despite the positive message of Lugo’s intentions, de facto results in the conversation becoming incomprehensible for the player since no translation, not even in the form of subtitles, is provided. As a result, the player is left with Adams and Walker discussing if-things-go-wrong tactics in English in the foreground while the unknown men and Lugo are trying to establish communication in Farsi in the background. Thus the strangers’ perspective on things is never heard (or at least never understood) by the player and at the same time the player’s attention is directed to the only conversation he or she *can* understand, namely the one which focuses on what to do if, or basically *when*, the strangers turn violent. The fact that the whole encounter initially begins with the locals exclaiming in English (before Lugo switches to Farsi) that they think Walker’s squad, *too*, has come to kill them – thus unmistakably suggesting that the hostility from those men’s perspective has been initiated by others (most likely the 33rd) – remains unnoticed and uncommented.

This first meeting between Walker’s squad and the locals eventually escalates and the first combat sequence of the game begins. It starts off strikingly clean and non-personal with

⁷⁰ Elements like this have led critics such as Soraya Murray to criticise the game for being progressive in its critique of genre conventions but not in its portrayal of race (and gender) (cf. 39, 44). Criticism like this, however, seems to neglect the full extent of the game’s metareferentiality and the fact that the non-progressive portrayal of race and gender is itself one of the genre conventions which the game, progressively, is trying to criticise.

Walker burying a large group of enemies under a sand avalanche he causes. From this highly tactical and surgical example of in-game killing onwards, however, the combat progresses in a manner which brings the fight increasingly physically closer to the protagonists, and consequently to the player: The sequence, which opens with Walker's precision shot, soon transitions through multiple exchanges of long-range gunfire accompanied by varying levels of blood-spatter (depending on the player's skill and weapon of choice) to a final scripted scene of close combat in which Walker knocks out an enemy by kicking a door open into the latter's face before (most likely) executing him.

Throughout this whole first combat sequence, the player is guided by short extradiegetic sentences which appear as text on the screen to introduce the game's key-bindings and mechanics by instructing players to press different buttons to achieve certain actions: run, vault, take cover, shoot, etc. Eventually, after Walker's ultimate door-kick, this text is also what instructs the player to execute the knocked-out enemy by pressing a designated key. And yet, notably, in this instance as in many later ones, the game code in no way forces the player to actually follow this instruction. Unlike other game tutorial sections which require players to complete every proposed action before being allowed to continue, *Spec Ops: The Line's* tutorial does not care if the player actually presses the execution key or simply walks past the knocked-out man on the ground. It does, however, never explicitly tell this to the player. The extradiegetic text never acknowledges the existence of a non-lethal option. The protagonist and the narrative do not express this idea, either. Therefore, the only way for the player to discover that he or she is not obligated to perform the execution is for him or her to actively decide to try and disobey the instruction given by the extradiegetic tutorial text.

Since this, however, is not how players are used to interact with games, especially not during tutorial sections, and since at this point in the game the player has just spent several minutes painstakingly following text-commands to learn the game's mechanics, it is highly unlikely that (m)any first-time players of *Spec Ops: The Line* will choose not to execute the man on the ground. In fact, most players will follow the given instructions automatically without even realising they *have* a choice or that there should be a choice in the first place. Through their decision to not advertise the non-lethal option, *Spec Ops: The Line's* developers thus put players in a position where their behaviour directly mirrors that of Walker, who, as a trained delta operative, in this scene similarly never stops to consider any non-lethal solutions to his problem. In other words, with this sequence – and similarly to *BioShock – Spec Ops: The Line* exposes both Walker's and the player's conditioning into unaware “killer machines”. And whilst this scene might be too highly implicit for many players to notice,

many metareferential repetitions of this unaware-of-choice motif throughout Yager's game retroactively increase this element's salience.

The player's obedient execution of the action requested by the tutorial prompt, meanwhile, leads to the first up-close-and-personal kill of the game: Walker puts his heavy-army boot on the helpless man's neck and breaks it. When the protagonist then straightens up again and wipes his mouth, his slightly slumped posture, his wavering body, his heavy breathing, his sweat and his own comment of "Thought we were rescuin' people" delivered in a deeply troubled voice form *Spec Ops: The Line*'s first dramatic break with shooter game traditions. After all, characters within genre-typical power fantasies are usually not allowed to show the physical as well as emotional exhaustion resulting from killing exactly so as to not destroy that genre-defining fantasy. Furthermore, the moral and ethical complexities of a quest objective such as "rescue people" are usually not questioned. This early scene from *Spec Ops: The Line*, however, does both, and in the process also demonstrates that immediate, up-close combat makes it much more difficult for soldiers like Walker, and arguably for players, to not physically see as well as mentally and emotionally acknowledge the individual features of an enemy but to keep him or her at an emotional distance as an unquestioned 'other'.

In fact, as *Spec Ops: The Line* progresses, the initially clear line between 'us versus them' so typical of shooter games is blurred further and further. In chapter two, Walker and his men soon discover that the locals they are fighting are led by an American CIA agent. Simultaneously, the American soldiers Walker's squad is trying to save are portrayed as being highly suspicious of the protagonists' arrival, eventually resulting in a scene in which all present members of the 33rd turn hostile and force Walker and his men to kill them. Already this early in the game, the line between 'us versus them' is thus blurred into non-existence: the enemies look the same as the player characters, they are wearing almost exactly the same uniform (to the point where depending on lighting conditions and positioning it can become difficult for players to distinguish their own squad members from targets), they are speaking the same language and they are even using very similar phrases for squad-internal combat communication. The exclamation "We're taking casualties!", for example, initially a sound-cue warning players that their own party members are taking damage, can from this point on be heard from one's own squad as well as from the enemy.

In addition to thus blurring the line between player characters and enemies, the game further keeps making a point of humanising those enemies. Often in shooter-games, enemies are not given a voice. As a result, a "shoot first, ask questions later" (ch. 2)-mentality such as

the one Walker orders his men to adopt in chapter two is highly common for both characters and players. After all, a pre-programmed, game code inherent inability to speak with the enemy is accepted and even expected by most players as a genre-inherent game-mechanic. *Spec Ops: The Line*, however, repeatedly plays with this common medium trope – if not to fully prove the players’ expectations as wrong, then at least to raise the players’ awareness of these expectations.

In chapter five, for example, the squad comes upon two enemy soldiers who, unaware of Walker’s and his team’s presence, are having a banter-filled conversation highly reminiscent of the interactions between Adams and Lugo seen and heard throughout the game. As a result, *Spec Ops: The Line* invites players to sympathise with the two men and to try and avoid a massacre by approaching or circumventing them instead of shooting first. The fact that the game’s code, however, does not allow for such a peaceful resolution of the encounter is (1) representative of real-life war experiences during which combatants do not get to choose who to shoot depending on how likeable the enemy is, and (2) causes players to feel a certain level of focused frustration towards the game’s limiting mechanics, thus making players question the conventions they are otherwise so used to accept.

Finally, to fully dissolve the initially seemingly clear line between “good” and “evil”, *Spec Ops: The Line* portrays even less likeable enemies who perform morally questionable acts as never inherently ‘other’ or evil. When in chapter seven Walker and his squad encounter two enemy soldiers tasked to kill civilians, if the player succeeds in sneaking up on the two men, he or she is rewarded with an overheard conversation between the two which shows the soldiers’ reluctance to fulfil the task. Similarly, in chapter six, the player and Walker’s squad can discover a recording in which the 33rd’s interrogator is shown to feel a bond between himself and his subjects, seeing himself and them as equal victims of the hell they are trapped in. Furthermore, by revealing the personal preceding trauma of the interrogator, the tape – and through it *Spec Ops: The Line* as a whole – also draws a parallel between the interrogator and the increasingly traumatised Walker himself, thus encouraging further sympathy and identification from the player.

Still, even with its own strong emphasis on humanising the enemy, *Spec Ops: The Line* never denies that it can be difficult to let go of us-versus-them thinking, especially in a scenario in which this mentality is central to having a justification for one’s actions, such as during war time or during shooter gameplay. Adams, for example, an otherwise positive character, is till the end of the game portrayed as someone who finds killing American soldiers in particular the most difficult aspect of their mission. When in chapter thirteen,

Walker and his men are forced by the 33rd's pre-programmed hostility to kill a "tower-full of US soldiers", a distraught Adams asks the existential question of "What the fuck happened to us, man?" to which Walker responds with "Nothin'. We're fucking soldiers." In other words, while Walker recognises mass-killings as part of his job, Adams is portrayed as still needing to hold on to the distinction between killing American and killing foreign combatants. To be able to morally live with himself, Adams still needs to believe that the horrors he has experienced throughout *Spec Ops: The Line* are in some way unusual and abnormal.

Walker, in contrast, is portrayed as the one member of the Delta Force squad who has accepted the moral grey zones of war and who has resigned himself to the fact that death and carnage are part of the combat experience. The fact that *Spec Ops: The Line* has the game's main protagonist voice this opinion, the character who is closest to the identity of the player, only once more metareferentially draws attention to parallels between soldier and player mentality and encourages conscious examination of those parallels by the players themselves. Furthermore, Walker's view of his profession in this moment also forms a strong counterpoint to both his own initial hero-worship of Konrad during the game's opening cutscene, and to the usual – not only video game medium specific – view of soldiers in general as glamorous, powerful heroes. In other words, through Walker's response to Adams, *Spec Ops: The Line* puts the visual symbolism of its menu screen and of the squad's arrival in Dubai into words.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, already the torn American flag in both *Spec Ops: The Line*'s extradiegetic and diegetic opening sequences indicates right from the start that Walker and his squad will not be examples of glorious saviours. The game further emphasises this message by making it a recurring and increasingly explicit central theme throughout its whole narrative. Already as early as chapter four, the scene which introduces the local civilians the 33rd had supposedly come to rescue makes it clear that these civilians, instead of feeling gratitude, simply want the warmongering soldiers gone. And by chapter eleven the game fully verbalises this rejection of the saviour motif as well as of the players' saviour fantasies by having the Radioman (a classic fool-character strongly inspired by *Heart of Darkness*'s Harlequin and Dennis Hopper's Photojournalist in *Apocalypse Now*) announce after a particularly devastating encounter that the eight scariest words in the English language are "We're Delta Force and we're here to save you".

All of this, however, is not to say that *Spec Ops: The Line* does not acknowledge the soldiers' (and players') good intentions. Throughout the entire story, every party (Konrad, the 33rd, the CIA, Walker) is given multiple opportunities to – admittedly in vain – stress how they have not come to fight but only to look for survivors to save. In addition, through careful

exploration, the player can find multiple tapes (or “intel items”) recorded soon after Konrad’s arrival which really do paint a positive picture of the 33rd by making it very clear that rather than being inherently evil, Konrad and his men initially only took over the region to try and end corruption and improve civilian life (cf. ch.3 “Castavin’s Diary”; ch. 7 “Radioman Tape – Soldier Interview”; ch. 14 “Code of Conduct”). However, as time passed, circumstances soon began to wear Konrad’s squad down and he and his men increasingly felt forced to employ more and more drastic measures to keep the peace (cf. e.g. ch. 6 “Interrogator Confession”; ch. 7 “Radioman Tape – After the Storm”): from torture by fire and “sandboarding”, to lynching, to mass executions, to the (ab)use of White Phosphorus, etc. In other words, the game portrays the American soldiers’ good intentions as having been eroded by the harsh reality of Dubai’s sandstorms just like the menu’s symbolic flag.

Spec Ops: The Line is particularly successful in conveying this message by having the player witness this degeneration of values and character not only in the game’s pronounced enemies but in Walker and his squad as well. In the process, the game breaks many traditions of the shooter power-fantasy genre in which the protagonist and player normally only get better, stronger and more unstoppable with every level they gain and with every piece of equipment they acquire. In direct juxtaposition, *Spec Ops: The Line* depicts an increasing physical as well as mental deterioration in Walker and his squad, which simultaneously leads to an increasing dissolution of the player’s power-fantasy experience.

Already on a purely cinematic level, throughout the game’s cutscenes, the player can witness the sun, the sand and the physical exhaustion taking their toll on the protagonist: Walker looks increasingly ragged, tired, and covered in dirt and blood (cf. end of ch. 6; even worse by ch. 11). More interestingly, however, *Spec Ops: The Line* also successfully employs gameplay elements to further depict the strain combat places on soldiers. It is common for many first-person games to visualise the damage a player’s character takes through a blood-spatter overlay placed across the player’s field-of-vision, which simulates the diegetic experience of seeing through a blood-encrusted visor whilst providing the extradiegetic damage information necessary to the player. *Spec Ops: The Line* takes this idea even further. If Walker’s health falls beneath a certain level, the game’s colours slowly fade into black and white while all sounds are dampened, almost as if superimposed with white noise. As a result, the player’s vision is destabilised by the change, the scene gets colder and gloomier, and any attempt at noise-based orientation is doomed to failure. In short, despite not being an actual first-person game, *Spec Ops: The Line* thus attempts to visually and auditorily simulate the

perception and experience of a man stunned and traumatised by his surroundings so as to let the player experience that very state as much as possible through the simulation.

The motif of exhaustion through combat is furthermore presented through Walker's facial expressions. As is typical of third-person shooters, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s "camera" is usually positioned behind the main protagonist's right shoulder so that all the player sees of Walker during most of the gameplay is the man's back. When Walker goes into cover, however, he crouches with his back to the obstacle he is hiding behind, thus giving the player full view of the soldier's face as well as of the emotional responses portrayed therein. This new angle – in addition to providing a possible empathic trigger for the player⁷¹ – draws attention specifically to the character's emotional responses to *combat*, and these responses are as follows: as soon as Walker takes damage, his face stops being the stern, strong and collected mask so archetypical of shooter game protagonists; instead, his mouth falls open, teeth clench, he begins to breathe heavily, his eyes open wide – in short, his features are shown to be distorted by stress, anxiety and fear.

Walker's feelings during combat thus introduced through the game's visual track are eventually explained on the narrative level of *Spec Ops: The Line* when the game reveals that its protagonist is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder caused by events Walker experienced several years earlier during a Kabul mission with Konrad. The full extent of Walker's condition is only revealed to the player in the game's final chapter. First hints at it, however, can be observed already much earlier. In chapter four, for example, a first tableau of soldiers, violence and refugees causes Walker to comment that the scene reminds him of his previous experiences with the Kabul death-squads. And in chapter five, the Radioman's voice – a voice Walker finally recognises as that of a journalist who used to follow Konrad in Kabul – triggers a memory which in turn triggers a full-blown PTSD-attack in the squad leader. By the player, this attack is experienced as a temporary distortion of vision: the light and colours on screen begin to change, the scene becomes increasingly blurry and blinding until, once again, the player's overview of the situation is restricted and the game once more attempts through simulation to enable the player to experience a situation through the eyes of someone suffering from trauma.

⁷¹ This in direct contradiction of Britta Neitzel's simplistic theory that *all* avatars are perceived as mere extensions of one's self by the player and are thus incapable of being subject to empathy, or to identification for that matter (cf. Neitzel, "Involvierungsstrategien" 102-103).

Eventually, confused by what is happening to his (and the player's) vision, Walker makes the wrong decision to burst through a door – a decision which the game presents as a short cutscene which evolves out of the usual gameplay, a cutscene just long enough to render the player incapable of preventing Walker's wrong move. Through this insertion of an unexpected cutscene, *Spec Ops: The Line* lets the players experience the same feeling of sudden loss of control which their character is currently trying to cope with. Eventually, as a result of his confused actions, Walker ends up falling a very long way down a multi-storied building. This scene, which especially following an earlier aside by Lugo about going down the rabbit hole (cf. ch. 5) is highly reminiscent of Alice's fall into the topsy-turvy world of Wonderland, symbolically mirrors Walker's PTSD-triggered descent into madness. The scene also reveals the double meaning of the title of the game chapter in question, "The Edge", as Walker's second recollection of Kabul is shown to drive him mentally, as well as quite literally, over the/an edge.

In the subsequent chapter six, *Spec Ops: The Line* continues its simulation of Walker's mental state by forcing the player to experience the overpowering and disarming effect of the protagonist's mental illness by temporarily taking away all the player's power. The game achieves this by stripping the player of all the weapons he or she has collected up to this point as Walker regains consciousness empty-handed, having lost his (literal as well as figurative) arsenal during the fall. By doing this, *Spec Ops: The Line* thus once more breaks with shooter genre traditions and instead of bringing the player closer and closer to omnipotence with each level, decides to portray the 'real' effects of prolonged combat: decreasing physical, mental and practical resources.

The player is, of course, soon allowed to rebuild his or her arsenal – Walker, however, never really recovers. By chapter ten his post-traumatic stress disorder is so acute and symptomatic that he begins to have visual hallucinations: Alone in a room full of nothing but mannequins, Walker and with him the player begin to see a particularly difficult enemy type appear in flashes of strobe-light. As disoriented as Walker, the player is then once more forced to share in the simulated experience by having to find a way to kill the enemy despite the seemingly random pattern according to which he keeps popping in and out of existence.

Adding to these visual hallucinations, cutscenes in chapter eleven portray Walker as increasingly jittery, violent, and out of control – both out of his own and out of that of the cutscene-watching player. Chapter twelve, furthermore, depicts the squad leader as losing track of time. Containing the helicopter scene which opened *Spec Ops: The Line*, the chapter has Walker eventually comment that "This isn't right. We did this already." Thus whilst

humorously referring to the player's déjà-vu experience resulting from the game's initial flash-forward, the scene also draws attention to the much more sombre tone the experience takes on for a man like Walker trapped in an illness which makes him constantly relive traumatic moments. Finally, in chapters thirteen and fourteen, Walker's visual hallucinations reach their ultimate form with the soldier (and player) suddenly seeing himself as standing amidst a burning, blood-red hell-scape: in chapter thirteen, a cutscene just after the helicopter-crash shows Walker imagining himself talking to a fiery silhouette of Konrad; in chapter fourteen, a lengthy combat sequence is repeatedly interspersed with similar hellish images, building up to a scene in which Walker sees the face of the by then killed Lugo in the face of an attacking enemy.

In both scenes, first Konrad and then Lugo are heard to blame Walker for everything that has happened in Dubai: "The only villain here is you, Walker. There's only you." (cf. ch. 13) – a line which eventually builds up to the game's big revelation in the following and final fifteenth chapter: namely, that Konrad has been dead for a while now, and that many of the things Walker and through him the player have up to this point seen, heard and perceived to be real have, in fact, been hallucinations as well. For one last time, the player is invited to share Walker's PTSD-experience: the confusion, the despair, and the brutal realisation that little throughout this (video game) experience has been what it has seemed. Furthermore, throughout this final revelation, both Walker and the player are also made aware of all the clues they have missed in regards to what is happening as a result of their unquestioning trust in their own abilities and in their knowledge of the "rules of the game" – be this "game" *Spec Ops: The Line* or war.

It is, however, not only the antagonists and the already mentally unstable Walker who are shown to deteriorate throughout *Spec Ops: The Line*. Instead, the player's entire squad succumbs to the pressures of combat. As the game progresses, the initially well-trained, well-cooperating, goal-oriented unit begins to dissolve more and more. On the narrative level, arguments and fights erupt with increasing frequency, especially between Lugo and Adams, and Walker is repeatedly required to break the two apart during cutscenes for behaving like "kids fighting in the dirt" (ch. 7). This deterioration of squad co-operation is, however, also portrayed on the level of the game mechanics. *Spec Ops: The Line*'s initial feature allowing the player to assign specific targets to different squad-members becomes increasingly unreliable throughout the game until in the very end it becomes entirely unusable.

Finally, the squad's increasingly high-strung nerves can also be observed in the development of the language the men use during the combat sequences. While initially the

soldiers are depicted as using highly formulaic military jargon, neutral to the point of unnatural coldness, with time their voices become louder and more agitated, and more and more swearing makes its way into their phrasing. Early examples can already be observed throughout chapters four to seven. By chapter twelve, however, every simple “I need back up.”-phrase initially used to indicate to the player that he or she needs to look after one of their squad-mates transforms into “Will you fucking keep those guys off me!”. Similarly, the straightforward announcement of “On the move.” becomes “On the move, try not to fucking shoot me!”. Lastly, by chapter thirteen, the squad’s responses to enemy deaths also change drastically.

While, initially, successful kills are reported with the highly clinical wordings of “Tango down.” or “Threat eliminated/neutralized.”, by the end of the game both Walker and his men are shown to constantly yell “Fuck you!”s at their opponents and to scream increasingly animalistic “Yeah!”s when they succeed in taking a target down. In other words, by this point, the Delta Force members are portrayed as having lost all their composure and professionalism and through that most of the initial characteristics which presented them as strong heroes in control of the battlefield. Furthermore, these scenes and exclamations also draw metareferential attention to traditional player behaviour during shooter games which is often accompanied by similar utterances. By depicting those reactions as the result of mental and emotional degeneration in the protagonists, *Spec Ops: The Line* criticises or at least questions such player behaviour and exposes its inappropriateness.

In addition to thus portraying the physical and mental degeneration of soldiers through the horrors of war, *Spec Ops: The Line* uses one more classic game medium feature to further deconstruct the power fantasy normally created for players, namely that of the combat music. It is common for many video game genres to overlay combat sequences with an extradiegetic music track to help set the mood and provide the player with his or her own action-packed soundtrack. Already the very first combat sequences in *Spec Ops: The Line*, however, break this mould by lacking any form of background music. During these gameplay moments, the game focuses as much as possible on a realistic representation of the chaotic sounds of battle (weapon noises, shouts, running feet, explosions, etc.) instead of on the creation of a powerful, cinematic experience for the player. Music in *Spec Ops: The Line*’s first chapter is thus only used to enhance the walking and exploration sequences of the game, during which twangy, melancholic, electric-guitar chords continue the motifs of the Hendrix song used for the menu screen to help convey the desolate atmosphere of the devastated Dubai.

In chapter two, in addition to not using the feature of extradiegetic combat music, *Spec Ops: The Line* moves on to explicitly thematise the topic. As Walker's squad joins a battle in a derelict news station, music suddenly does begin to play – yet rather than being an extradiegetic game element, it is soon revealed to be a diegetic one. The song, Deep Purple's "Hush" (1968), is portrayed as being broadcast by the Radioman as an accompaniment to his announcement that the local cease-fire agreement has just come to an end. The squad's subsequent reaction to this war soundtrack is metareferentially telling. Even Lugo, usually the joker of the group, refers to the musical accompaniment as "weird", and Adams calls it proof for things being "out of control". In other words, the Radioman's combination of music and glib commentary, purposefully broadcast across the city during active battles, is shown to be considered unsettling and inappropriate by the two experienced soldiers who at this point still form the moral centre of the game.

The Radioman's questionable choices of diegetic combat music accompany Walker's squad throughout the next few chapters, eventually culminating in an homage to *Apocalypse Now*'s famous "Ride-of-the-Valkyries" scene (cf. ch. 6): As the 33rd attempt to eliminate Walker and his men by "running and gunning" them down with a fully-armed helicopter, the Radioman accentuates their attack with a broadcast of "Dies Irae" from Verdi's *Requiem* (1874), in particularly beginning with the lines announcing "[t]he day of wrath, [the] day [that] will dissolve the world in ashes". The subsequent sequence is a perfect example of the traditional function of combat music in games. After all, Verdi's overpoweringly loud, dramatic and dynamic piece definitely helps to create the feeling that the 33rd have the power to bring on Judgement Day. However, through the intertextual link with *Apocalypse Now*, which ties the Radioman's behaviour to that of the morally highly dubious characters of Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore and his men, *Spec Ops: The Line* questions the appropriateness of this type of combat mentality. In the process, players are enticed to realise that their traditional behaviour during combat sequences is equally reminiscent of the ruthless and borderline-maniac behaviour of *Apocalypse Now*'s 9th Cavalry Regiment and to consequently approach the whole concept of games as vehicles for a power fantasy built upon music-accompanied killing more critically.⁷²

As the game progresses, the line between *Spec Ops: The Line*'s use of diegetic music-accompaniment and traditional uses of an extradiegetic soundtrack slowly begins to blur.

⁷² For a detailed survey-based study of actual player responses to the game and an analysis of the "positive discomfort" (feeling queasy on the one hand whilst valuing the opportunity for personal growth) most players seem to experience cf. Jørgensen.

Already in chapter five, the source of the music playing throughout the different battle sequences is impossible to locate. While it is possible and even likely that Walker and through him the player are still hearing Radioman broadcasts, there are no introductory verbal announcements made by the latter anymore which would irrefutably situate the music on a specific diegetic level. Considering the fact that the fifth chapter is also the one which marks the beginning of Walker's mental downward spiral, it is likely that this uncertainty as to the origin and thus the diegetic 'real'-ness of the sounds is intentional and representative of the protagonist's psychological state.

Building upon this idea, from chapter six onwards all combat sequences are accompanied by – mostly instrumental – music which, while still more melancholy than most classic examples, highly resembles traditional combat music. Thus the initially disconcerting combination of melody and massacre becomes another symbol for Walker's more and more crack-riddled psyche. The game, furthermore, never specifies (by verbal comments or otherwise) whether Walker himself actually hears this combat music or whether at this point it is fully extradiegetic and only audible to the player. The line of certainty between what is perceived by the player-character and what by the player him- or herself is thus also blurred, contributing to the game's oscillating play with simulation which, as already seen repeatedly, time and time again conflates player and player-character perspectives to convey its metareferential messages.

In addition to all these portrayals of the ways in which characters as well as the player respond to and experience violence, *Spec Ops: The Line* also discusses the committal of violent acts in detail – an element which lies at the core of the shooter video game genre. In its early stages, *Spec Ops: The Line* repeatedly depicts characters voicing explicit critique towards careless mass-killings: Walker orders his men to be careful when fighting near civilians (cf. ch. 4) and even the antagonistic CIA agent criticises his own men for recklessly using explosives (cf. ch. 3). In other words, both parties take a univocal stance against *unnecessary* deaths and violence. And as the game progresses and Walker and the player cannot avoid killing dozens and dozens of people – *Spec Ops: The Line* is a shooter and not a stealth-game after all – the protagonists' high death-toll is criticised continuously, more often than not through references to Walker's mental deterioration.

For example, Walker's aforementioned increasingly (hyper-)violent behaviour towards the last third of the game is met with visible concern and explicit disapproval from both Adams and Lugo on multiple occasions (cf. e.g. ch. 11). Similarly, when Walker in chapter twelve acquires a helicopter with an overpowered machine gun, exclaims in a manic voice

that he wants to “see what this gun can do” and then proceeds to obliterate an entire skyscraper full of members of the 33rd, the game’s exact portrayal of Walker’s behaviour makes it very clear that just like *Apocalypse Now*’s helicopter scene and in contrast to the 33rd’s own “Dies Irae”-attack, this scene is not meant to be a glorification of a soldier’s power fantasy. While there is no explicit objection from the other squad members at this time, *Spec Ops: The Line*’s exaggerated depiction of Walker as an animalistic, screaming maniac seemingly enjoying the destruction he is causing is enough to draw attention to the grotesque deformation which the squad leader’s initially calm and collected professional demeanour has suffered. Through this, the difference between the stylised outside view of the helicopter massacre and the actual mental and emotional deterioration of committing mass-murder is firmly established. In the process, this scene also once more draws uncomfortable attention to parallels between Walker’s and traditional player behaviour, raising players’ self- as well as shooter genre awareness.

To further break with what Holger Pötzsch calls the “selective realism” of traditional shooters (cf. Pötzsch 156-161) and to instead emphasise the usually omitted visceral realities of war, violence and killing, *Spec Ops: The Line* throughout its entirety repeatedly draws the player’s attention to the horrific, bloody, physical by-products of death and combat. While it is normally characteristic for combat-centric games that, once a battle is won, the enemy corpses are simply left behind and forgotten, *Spec Ops: The Line*’s code forces its players to stop and face the carnage. Already the game’s detailed depiction of the impoverished living conditions of Dubai’s civilian population in chapter four can be seen as a part of this pattern since it demonstrates that war is not clean and without consequences. Even more striking scenes, however, can be found in chapters six and seven, during which Walker’s squad comes across multiple mass graves of the victims of battles between the 33rd, the CIA and the civilian population.

To increase the player’s proximity to the horrors of these scenes, *Spec Ops: The Line* once again chooses simulation over cinematic or verbal narration, thus utilising the strengths of the video game medium. Instead of just showing the player the bodies and the squad’s reactions to them through a cutscene, the game’s level design forces the player to manually navigate those areas and to consciously walk Walker and his squad through the piles of human remains. Furthermore, to ensure that the player actually pays attention to the horrors depicted, the game slows down the characters’ walking speed for these sequences and makes their weapons unusable. The player is thus left with nothing to do but to take their time to notice and absorb the state of all the decayed bodies, to hear the buzzing of the flies, the

groans of the dying coughing out their last breaths, and to acknowledge Adams' and Lugo's comments on the "smell of death".

Eventually, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s critique of mass-killings culminates in chapter eight of the game during which Walker, after just having witnessed the 33rd's devastating use of White Phosphorous (cf. ch. 7) – an experience which through a change in lighting and sound is once more portrayed as being highly traumatic for him – faces the necessity of using the chemical weapon himself. The exact way in which *Spec Ops: The Line* depicts Walker's deployment of this weapon of mass destruction is metareferentially particularly interesting: To execute the attack, Walker and his men are shown to use a computer to launch an air-born camera which they consequently fly over the targeted area to receive thermal-like imagery of the silhouettes of structures, vehicles and people present in the area. Walker, who is operating the computer, subsequently uses the camera to lock onto targets of his choice at which Lugo and Adams then shoot the White Phosphorous mortars. In other words, this entire sequence is presented to the player as a metareferential game-within-game (or "mini-game") in which all the player as well as Walker have to do to commit mass-murder is to move a computer screen cursor onto a barely-more-than-a-blob target and press 'Enter'. Thus the scene draws attention to the often strikingly clinical and dissociative nature of computer-initiated violence – be it in video games or in real life as a result of our modern-day warfare's increasing reliance on game-like and game-based technology for soldier training as well as for drone strike operations (cf. e.g. Herbst 72; Kater 118; Lowood 84; Penny 75; Rentfrow 92).

In this dissociative portrayal of violence lies possibly one of the most defining and unique dichotomies of the medium of (shooter) games. For whilst video games often encourage a very immediate experience of the action on screen to the point where players can assimilate the events as personal experiences (cf. Murray, Janet H. 170; Nöth et al. 161), developers still also frequently keep these experiences and their triggers so highly stylised – especially in the context of violence (cf. Kater 118) – that they remain free of any actual emotional impact and consequences for the players (cf. van Dreunen 6). The White Phosphorous attack scene in *Spec Ops: The Line* exposes this dichotomy perfectly, metareferentially criticising it in the process.

Firstly, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s developers particularly emphasise the immediacy of the gameplay experience in this scene by merging Walker's and the player's view of the diegetic screen during the mini-game. Secondly, the instantly visible on-screen explosions accompanied by squad approval which follow Walker's/the player's button-press are a perfect portrayal of the instantaneous gratification usually received by players from witnessing an

immediate, dramatic, violently impactful, yet free of real-life negative consequences diegetic response to their extradiegetic actions – a sensation which many scholars have identified as one of the main reasons for the popularity of traditional shooter(-like) games (cf. e.g. Adelman and Winkler 8-9; Bonfadelli 287; Murray, Janet H. 119). Unlike traditional shooter(-like) games, however, *Spec Ops: The Line* at the end of the White Phosphorous scene does not simply let its characters and players rejoice at “beating” the mini-game and move on with their power fantasy, but it actually forces them to acknowledge if not any extradiegetic consequences then at least the diegetic consequences of their actions first.

Already during the attack, Walker and the player can hear the agony-filled screams of their victims which are not warded off by the symbolic technological walls of cameras and computers separating the burning people from their attackers. And should these horrific noises not be enough to break through Walker’s and the player’s dissociation with the targets, the following aftermath-portraying scene most definitely is. For *Spec Ops: The Line* follows up the highly abstract and mechanical sequence of shooting mortars at silhouettes with an immediate confrontation of both squad and player with the very gruesome, bodily reality of the results of a White Phosphorous attack.

To proceed to their next destination, Walker and his men are forced to walk (once again slowed down) through the remains of the people they have just killed. And just in case the emotional impact of the burnt and disfigured bodies is not enough, the squad has to realise that most of the people whose faceless silhouettes they conveniently chose to identify as enemy ‘others’, in fact, were unarmed civilians. In full shock, Walker eventually freezes in front of the devastating tableau of a mother and daughter, their bodies fused together in fiery, chemical death. The image consequently haunts him in his hallucinations for the rest of the game.

Theoretically, already the aforementioned mass graves of the previous two chapters can be seen as an implicit critique of the player’s own excessive number of kills. After all, at the moment when he or she is confronted with Konrad’s atrocities, his or her own death-toll is not exactly much lower. The White Phosphorous scene, however, transforms this implicit criticism into a highly explicit one. Realising what they have done, and how far from heroic their actions have become, Lugo exclaims to Adams: “He turned us into fucking killers!”. And while the “he” in this sentence diegetically refers to Walker, it also functions on a fourth-wall-breaking metareferential level as a criticism directed towards the player whose input has been controlling the squad’s actions.

6.2.2 Choice, Agency and Accountability

Whilst Lugo and Adams blame Walker for their actions in this scene, Walker himself begins to rage against Konrad and the 33rd for forcing his hand. In the process, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s last central metareferential motif emerges: just like *BioShock* before it, Yager's game also discusses questions of choice, agency, personal responsibility and accountability central to the medium of video games as well as to any discussion of soldier behaviour during times of war.

Throughout *Spec Ops: The Line*, characters are constantly shown to decry their seeming lack of choice. Especially Walker repeatedly keeps proclaiming his powerlessness like a mantra: in early chapters he keeps stressing that the squad had no choice but to shoot American soldiers (cf. ch. 4); at the end of chapter six he argues that he and his men had no choice but to work with the CIA, there being a whole desert between the squad and any other help; in chapter eight, as mentioned, he claims that the 33rd left him no choice but to deploy the White Phosphorous, and the same pattern repeats after every following massacre the Delta Force soldiers commit (cf. e.g. ch. 9, 12, 13). And while Lugo during the Phosphorous scene explicitly tries to object that there is always a choice, his opinion remains unheeded. Furthermore, it is even at least partially invalidated by Lugo himself, who equally blames Walker for his own actions and never considers that he himself would have also had a choice, namely to disobey Walker's orders.

Spec Ops: The Line's highly critical opinion of this kind of blame-shifting is obvious throughout the entirety of the game. The sheer absurdity of the earliest example of such deflection, which shows the Radioman blame a massacre committed by the 33rd on their by comparison powerless victims (cf. ch. 2), already sets the player on guard against the moral validity of such statements. Furthermore, the increasingly numerous and extreme occasions on which Walker and his men use the no-choice excuse equally leave a progressively bad taste in the player's mouth. Simultaneously, they also ask the question of who exactly the characters are trying to convince of their innocence with these assertions, their addressees or themselves. Walker's hallucinations in the late chapters of the game, which portray Hell as a place in which everyone holds him responsible, suggest that the protagonist himself, in fact, at his core, does not believe that none of his actions were his fault (cf. e.g. end of ch. 12). Especially Walker's vision of Konrad as a Lord of Hell who explicitly calls Walker more dangerous and deadly than the sandstorms (cf. end of ch. 12) is a clear indicator of the protagonist's real thoughts on the matter, seeing how the game's finale reveals Konrad to

have been dead the entire time and thus Konrad's voice Walker hears to really have been the voice of an alter ego of the traumatised protagonist himself.

All of this commentary *Spec Ops: The Line* provides on matters of denial and personal responsibility is culturally and ethically highly significant within the game's narrative context of human behaviour in times of war. It is, however, also of metareferential importance since the medium of video games is full of players who, whilst praising the feeling of agency the medium provides, simultaneously reject the idea of there being any real-life relevance to the acts (of e.g. violence) they are enabled by the medium to commit. Questions of personal responsibility are thus particularly interesting in the context of this specific medium, and Yager's game addresses them, as always, not only on the narrative but also on the mechanical level.

For example, throughout most of its gameplay, *Spec Ops: The Line* reinforces its characters' experience of lack of choice by providing its players with an equally choice-deprived, stringently linear gaming experience which Staffan Björk has described as "oppressive" (183). The few times the player *is* seemingly given a choice, the possible outcomes are all equally disastrous and have practically no impact on the overall game: in chapter seven, for example, the player is ostensibly presented with a choice between either trying to save a CIA agent who has previously saved their lives and who could be the key for getting to Konrad or trying to save two civilians. Soon, however, it becomes clear that whichever path the player chooses, the agent dies; and whether or not the civilians are saved has no effect on the hostility Walker and his men continue to experience from Dubai's populace, eventually leading to Lugo's death. In the words of Miguel Sicart, "in *Spec Ops*, playing is ultimately failing" (112).

This type of linear game design is generally emblematic for shooters, which – unlike, say, roleplaying games – usually simply guide players through a series of straightforward objectives which the players either complete or lose the game. By choosing this particular design model *Spec Ops: The Line*'s developers thus not only employ mechanics suitable to their narrative message of a perceived lack of choice but also predominantly follow genre traditions. Consequently, the few sequences during which *Spec Ops: The Line* diverges from these traditions become particularly striking and salient. The possibly most prominent scene in this respect shows Walker and his team come across two strung-up men about to be executed by a squad of 33rd snipers (cf. ch. 9). Once the protagonists approach, Walker hears Konrad's voice through the intercom explain that one of the two men is a water-thief, a crime so serious in sandstorm-plagued Dubai that it is punishable by death; the other man is the

soldier who was sent to apprehend the thief but who got so carried away with vengeance and retaliation that he killed the thief's entire family first. Konrad then asks Walker (and through him the player) to choose which of the two men to execute and which to let live, his exact words being "[W]hat is justice? How would you see it dealt? This is an order, Captain. Who lives? Who dies? Judge these men, or pay the price of insubordination." (ch. 9).

Based on the phrasing of Konrad's order, and according to classic game conventions, the player at this point is presented with two options: shoot the thief or shoot the soldier. There is no way to interact with Konrad so refusing to make the choice should – under traditional video game circumstances – result in the player being stuck at this point of the game forever. Most players, therefore, eventually, will decide which man to shoot – only to receive the same in-game compliment from Konrad in both cases, namely to be called "a man of action" who will fit well into Dubai. Considering the desolate state of the city, this "compliment" comes with a bitter aftertaste, which may or may not already cause players to question their decision and to experience the frustration of not having had a less drastic and deprived choice so familiar to Walker and his men. Yet the diegetic commendation from Konrad is not the only reward players receive for taking the shot, an extradiegetic achievement symbol also appears on the screen, accompanied by the achievement name of "Damned if you do...".

These idiomatic words and the ultimate ellipsis are the only active hint players ever receive about the fact that there are actually several more possible solutions to this interaction, all of which require that the player "don't" do something, namely follow Konrad's (and thus the game's own) orders. *Spec Ops: The Line* never traditionally offers its players (through extradiegetic text, diegetic dialogue or in-between user interface markers) the option of shooting the snipers or of shooting the nooses instead of the strung-up men themselves – yet both these options are permissible within the game code. All it takes for players to find them is an independent idea and an attempt to perform either of these seemingly divergent actions. Devastatingly, both of them eventually result in the death of the two strung-up men as well – thus justifying the name of the second extradiegetic achievement "... damned if you don't.". And yet, attempting these actions still provides players with a rare feeling of personal achievement for having, at least for one second, seemingly outwitted both Konrad and the game by following their own instincts and ideas.

In reality, of course, even in this scene, the game is still in full control of the player for its code is what allows for the supposedly divergent actions in the first place. And by the end of its narrative, *Spec Ops: The Line* makes sure to draw the player's attention to this fact through a typically double-coded metareference. When the full extent of Walker's hallucinations and

delusions is revealed in the game's final chapter, the player is forced to realise that the entire hanging scene – the one scene in which Walker and the player seemingly had managed to temporarily stop being Konrad's (and the game's) pawns – was nothing more but a figment of Walker's damaged imagination. In the end, the player's feeling of having outsmarted the game is thus shown to have been a mere illusion, the result of a lack of self- (and/or medium-)awareness from both Walker and the player.

This realisation finally brings Walker fully to his knees and presents him and the player with the only meaningful, story-changing decision of the game: at the end of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s grand finale, Walker must decide whether to shoot the image of Konrad he sees in the mirror, symbolically killing either his own demons or the externalised object of his blame, or whether to shoot himself. One way or another, players are asked to pronounce judgement on Walker – and since Walker is an avatar of the player, they are asked to pronounce judgement on themselves. Since a fair verdict demands for past actions to be taken into consideration, players are thus invited by *Spec Ops: The Line* to analyse both Walker's and their own behaviour and reactions throughout the game. The fact that their ultimate decision impacts whether the protagonist of the story survives or dies, asks players to judge whether they feel like they actually deserve a “win” in exchange for their successful committal of what is de facto psychosis-inducing and -induced mass-murder throughout the game.

6.2.3 Conclusion: *Spec Ops: The Line*'s Metareferential Message

To sum things up, *Spec Ops: The Line* is a game which through intertwined double-coded metacommentary on a variety of topics attempts to deconstruct the tropes of violent heroism particularly central to so many other modern-day military shooters. Whereas traditional video games frequently declare their protagonists heroes and saviours for successfully murdering hundreds of enemies on a quest to rescue a select few, *Spec Ops: The Line* depicts its main characters as a group of men on a physically as well as mentally highly destructive path. When Konrad eventually asks Walker “Do you feel like a hero yet?” (cf. opening of ch. 15), the latter's staggering posture, blistered face, shaking voice and blank nerves are in stark contrast to the image a player would normally have of his or her character at the end of a successfully completed video game. As Konrad continues his speech, *Spec Ops: The Line* makes its position on the matter even clearer: “You're no savior. Your talents lie elsewhere. [...] The truth is, Walker, you're here because you wanted to feel like something you're not.” – to which Walker quietly replies: “A hero” (ch. 15). *Spec Ops: The Line* thus explicitly

acknowledges the usual function of video games as power fantasies, as opportunities for players to “feel like something they are not”. However, the game also immediately deconstructs this function by criticising its moral standing, and by rejecting the idea that the mere blind completion of a vast number of kill quests makes a person – be they soldier or player – a saviour. Instead, *Spec Ops: The Line* declares that reckless murder makes a person not a hero but a “monster”, for the hunt of which locals are willing to literally melt their jewellery into silver bullets (cf. ch. 3).

In a co-written essay applying Albert Bandura’s theory of moral disengagement onto computer games, Christoph Klimmt, Hannah Schmid, Andreas Nosper, Tilo Harmann and Peter Vorderer have argued that there are seven methods which players usually employ, more or less consciously, to detach themselves from their monstrous in-game actions: (1) the invocation of a higher goal which justifies the means (‘moral justification’), (2) the use of euphemisms such as ‘neutralize’ instead of ‘kill’ (‘euphemistic labelling’), (3) the comparison of one’s own behaviour with that of people acting worse (‘advantageous comparison’), (4) the blame of one’s actions on orders from above (‘displacement or diffusion of responsibility’), (5) the ‘disregard or distortion of consequences’, (6) the ‘dehumanization’ of victims and (7) the ‘attribution of blame’ to those victims by arguing that they deserved what happened to them (cf. Klimmt et al. 112-113). One look at *Spec Ops: The Line*’s motifs described throughout this chapter, however, shows that Yager’s game makes it nigh-impossible for players to use any of these methods of justification, especially not unconsciously. For, as my analysis has shown, *Spec Ops: The Line* discusses *all* these dissociation mechanisms explicitly as central topics of its narrative and thus brings them right to the forefront of each player’s attention. Furthermore, by linking their increased use to Walker’s and his squad’s progressively deteriorating mental states, the game expresses clear doubts about the validity of such moral detachment as a healthy, acceptable way of dealing with the issue at hand.

Finally, it needs to be pointed out, however, that while *Spec Ops: The Line* is highly critical of computer game violence, it also makes it very clear that violent games should not be blamed for real-life violence, as is so often done in other contemporary media. When Walker in chapter eleven goes into a first full-blown rage against an already overpowered enemy and beats him to death, a Radioman broadcast – here representative of broadcast and traditional media in general – mocks the protagonist with the following explicitly metareferential words: “Think of the children! [...] Where’s all this violence comin’ from, man? Is it the video games? I bet it’s the video games.” As the player is fully aware, however, what really triggers Walker’s outburst at this moment is his pre-existing psychological

condition combined with the harsh realities of war. Add to this *Spec Ops: The Line*'s aforementioned focus on the general importance of not reassigning blame for one's own actions and the game thus clearly advocates for self-awareness and personal responsibility, as well as for a search for the real triggers and origins of violent behaviour, in place of the base vilification of the entire medium of video games.

6.3 Metareference in *The Stanley Parable*

When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left.

(The Stanley Parable)

Originally, the *Stanley Parable* was designed and released by Davey Wreden in 2011 as a free modification (or “mod”) for *Half-Life 2* (2004). In 2013, however, in collaboration with William Pugh and under the studio name of Galactic Cafe, Wreden re-released a high-definition remake of the mod as a full, standalone game. This latter version is the one which serves as the basis for this analysis.

Unlike the first-person shooter which provided the basis for Wreden’s mod, *The Stanley Parable* itself is a first-person exploration game. Specifically, it belongs to a sub-genre sometimes also referred to as interactive fiction, which is usually characterised by so strong a focus on the exploration of a specific environment and story that its interactive elements and gameplay mechanics are highly limited. In fact, at their most extreme (cf. e.g. the Chinese Room’s *Dear Esther* (2012)), games belonging to this sub-genre often reduce player involvement to the manual control of a character’s linear movement throughout a story and area. As a result, over the last few years, such extreme works have been – sometimes pejoratively – dubbed “walking simulators” and their right to call themselves games proper has been questioned by games critics and reviewers repeatedly (cf. e.g. Bain; also *bitmob*; Fletcher; Plunkett). The fact that *The Stanley Parable* as one such work chooses to itself debate the nature of video games through metareferential commentary is thus particularly interesting and worthy of further examination.

As is the case with many interactive fiction games, *The Stanley Parable*’s gameplay consists almost exclusively of walking up and down a highly restricted area. The number of items the player can actually interact with throughout the game is minuscule. Yet what differentiates *The Stanley Parable* from other, fully-fledged “walking simulators” is the fact that by deciding where to walk to, the players actually get to make a number of meaningful, existential choices and to explore a variety of different narratives. In fact, depending on just how the numerous secrets (or “Easter eggs”) discoverable throughout the game are counted and/or classified, *The Stanley Parable* contains approximately twenty different endings, all of which can be experienced within an average playtime of as little as six to eight hours (cf. howlongtobeat.com). In other words, each individual story branch of *The Stanley Parable* is kept very short so that players are actively encouraged to explore many different endings. For ultimately, the game’s highly metareferential message regarding questions of agency and

choice is only fully revealed through extensive exploration and a correlation of all twenty or so narratives.

6.3.1 The Metareferential Message of the Narrator-Led Plotline

Similarly to *Spec Ops: The Line*, already the menu screen of *The Stanley Parable* foreshadows the game's highly metareferential nature. Firstly, the menu screen's central graphical element consists of a picture of a desk with a computer monitor on top and already introduces the significance of the computer medium for the game's story. Secondly, the diegetic monitor itself also displays *The Stanley Parable*'s menu screen, thus showing another monitor with another menu screen – mirroring the still image into infinity. Finally, the player's movement of the mouse-cursor on his own real-life screen is equally mirrored ad infinitum and is visible on all mise-en-abyme monitors, as are any and all selections the player makes within the menu screen. Thus, right from the start, *The Stanley Parable* introduces player actions as having an impact on an infinite number of diegetic levels. And while all these levels are portrayed as separate monitors-within-monitors, the lines between them are still blurred by the fact that an action initiated on one (extra-)diegetic level is executed on all diegetic levels at the same time.

Once the player starts the actual game, the desk and computer monitor visible in the menu screen are revealed to be those of the game's protagonist, Stanley – though there are some small differences to the depicted space, such as a painting hanging from a different wall. An opening cutscene accompanied by voice-over narration subsequently introduces the game's protagonist as follows:

This is the story of a man named Stanley. Stanley worked for a company in a big building where he was Employee number 427. Employee number 427's job was simple: he sat at his desk in room 427 and he pushed buttons on a keyboard. Orders came to him through a monitor on his desk, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order. This is what Employee 427 did every day of every month of every year, and although others might have considered it soul rending, Stanley relished every moment that the orders came in, as though he had been made exactly for this job. And Stanley was happy.

This highly double-coded exposition speech is implicitly metareferential on multiple levels.

Firstly, the description of Stanley's job applies to the playing of video games as well. After all, reduced to their most basic core, video games also order players to press buttons based on prompts received through their monitors; and players are made happy by this obedient and successful execution of button presses, just like Stanley is. *The Stanley Parable*'s opening cutscene and especially its remarks about the protagonist's "soul

rendering” actions, in other words, accentuate and expose certain video game features and player behaviours in a highly sarcastic, implicitly metareferential manner.

In addition, *The Stanley Parable*’s opening sequence immediately draws attention to the fact that its story is highly medium-driven. From the start, the narrator’s words already hint at Stanley’s constructed nature. For the game’s protagonist, of course, *has* “been made exactly for this job” – he is a character *made* to fulfil a specific role in a video game. This fact is further stressed by the visual track of the opening cutscene, which has the “camera” zoom so far out during this narrator remark that the empty grey void surrounding the designed and animated space containing Stanley and his office is revealed. Through this cinematographic choice, *The Stanley Parable* further emphasises the highly limited and mediated nature of the character, his environment and the game’s narrative as a whole.

Once the character of Stanley has thus been introduced, the game’s narrator moves on to describe the exact circumstances in which the protagonist finds himself at the onset of the game: namely, no orders have appeared on his monitor for a while. The effect of Stanley’s realisation of this fact is described as follows: “Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time. But as he came to his wits and regained his senses he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office.” As these lines are uttered, the game’s opening cutscene slowly and almost unnoticeably transitions into interactive gameplay. As Stanley seemingly regains control of “his” senses, it is really the player who gains control by now being able to affect both the camera (and thus Stanley’s vision) and the avatar’s movement.

In accordance with typical video game traditions, most players at this point will follow the implied instructions included in the opening cutscene and will “get up” and “step out” of Stanley’s tiny office to find out why there have not been any orders. Once the player manoeuvres his avatar through the door, the arguably most defining feature of *The Stanley Parable* is introduced: the game’s persistent voice-over narration which resumes as soon as the player has executed all actions previously described by the narrator. For rather than just being an element of the game’s introductory cutscene, *The Stanley Parable*’s narrator – or rather Narrator – is central to the game’s message and to its whole gameplay experience to a degree which is highly unusual for the medium of video games (cf. Ryan, *Avatars* 185).

While certain aspects of the Narrator’s role in Wreden’s game are modified and questioned as the story progresses, others remain constant throughout *The Stanley Parable* and frequently form the basis for the latter’s metareferential commentary. Firstly, as already visible from the opening cutscene, Wreden’s Narrator often blurs the boundary between player and avatar by double-codingly drawing attention to thoughts and behaviour which both

parties share. Yet these specific comments are not even required for the Narrator to cross diegetic lines as his entire nature is inherently highly transgressive.

At his very core, Wreden's Narrator functions as instruction giver to the player by narrating Stanley's behaviour in advance – and this basic dynamic itself already breaks traditional narratological conventions as well as diegetic boundaries: for whilst the Narrator, imitating classic narrative voices from literature, tells his story in the past simple as something that has happened in his narrated world, the act is really only performed *after* the narration by an *extradiegetic* force located on an even higher plane than the Narrator himself. And once players become aware that they do not even *have to* do what the Narrator has just narrated, matters become only more complex. In fact, trying out possible deviations from the Narrator's story and listening to the latter's response to the deviant behaviour soon reveals itself to be the true core gameplay experience of *The Stanley Parable*. This experience is facilitated on the form level by the fact that many of the aforementioned twenty endings have an automatic (and often explicitly mentioned) reset-to-start included, and it is further supported on the content level by the Narrator whose resulting commentary often explicitly discusses metareferential topics such as choice, agency, narrative structure, gameplay mechanics and player behaviour.

Before looking at any of the specific narratives triggered by divergent player behaviour, I would like to start with an analysis of the story which unfolds if the player and Stanley do exactly what the Narrator wants them to do. To achieve the relevant ending, the player needs to pass through four clearly designated forks in the narrative path and do as the narrative voice foreshadows: (1) "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left [not right]."; (2) "Coming to a staircase, Stanley walked upstairs to his boss's office [not down]."; (3) "Stanley walked straight ahead through the large door that read 'Mind Control Facility' [not left through the one that read 'Escape']"; (4) "he decided [...] he would dismantle the controls once and for all [not turn the system back on]". In all four of these cases – and in stark contrast to *Spec Ops: The Line*'s predominantly hidden options – *The Stanley Parable*'s visual track and level design make it very clear to the player that the Narrator's version of events is not the only possible one. In fact, by presenting the player with two doors, two sets of stairs, two corridors and two different buttons to push, the game actively tempts the player to disregard the Narrator's words. And the Narrator's decisive, controlling, seemingly set-in-stone past simple narration only makes it even more alluring for players to try to test his control as well as the game's scope by experimenting with the deviant routes. In other words, even whilst following *The Stanley Parable*'s most basic plotline, the

players' attention is continuously drawn to matters of choice and to the medium's unusual relationship between "recipient" and narrative (voice).

If the player resists all temptations and Stanley plays his prescribed part in the Narrator's plot, the protagonist and the player eventually uncover the following story: All employees of Stanley's company up to this point have been mind-controlled by mysterious people working in a separate facility, who have been watching the employees on monitors and who have been influencing their behaviour and emotions by pressing certain buttons – not so different from the way in which players control avatars, in fact. Currently, however, for reasons unknown, the mind control facility is empty and the program is idle, providing Stanley with the opportunity to leave his office, to make his way into the facility, to choose (!) to turn off the system for good and to leave through a consequently opening gate leading to the outside. In short, the Narrator's narrative is thus a story about achieving ultimate freedom by making an independent, unguided choice.

Paradoxically, however, this seemingly happy ending of self-liberation is only reached by Stanley and the player if the latter consciously resists all choice and follows the narrative dictated by a highly restrictive, authoritative (and strikingly male, middle-aged and British-accented) voice-from-the-off. Consequently, when the final gate slowly opens throughout a short cutscene, the following commentary provided by the Narrator is received by the player as being highly ironic:

Yes! He had won! He had defeated the machine, unshackled himself from someone else's command. Freedom was mere moments away. [...] No longer would anyone tell him where to go, what to do, or how to feel. Whatever life he lives, it will be his. [...] Stanley stepped through the open door. [pause for player now back in control to actually step out] Stanley felt the cool breeze upon his skin, the feeling of liberation, the immense possibility of the new path before him. This was exactly the way, right now, that things were meant to happen. And Stanley was happy. ("Freedom" ending⁷³)

Already on the level of the protagonist himself, *The Stanley Parable's* mediated nature automatically questions the Narrator's words. Firstly, Stanley, in this moment, has not really "unshackled himself" from anybody's control as both the Narrator and the player have been making his choices for him throughout this entire sequence and continue to do so even after Stanley steps through the open gate. Even after the protagonist finds himself outside the office building and is finally able to see the wide blue sky and the open horizon – both symbolic of his supposed new freedoms and "immense possibility" – Stanley is still, quite literally,

⁷³ Almost none of *The Stanley Parable's* endings are explicitly labelled/referred to by name within the game itself. Rather than official titles I am therefore merely using descriptors, all of which are furthermore the ones commonly used by the game's online community.

restricted to following “the new path” before him, namely the clearly designated pebbled walkway across the lawn. The game does not allow for players to move their character onto the grass even if they want to. In addition, the image of destiny evoked in the second-to-last line of the Narrator’s own words, seemingly an expression of Stanley’s own thoughts, further suggests that Stanley is acting in accordance with somebody else’s predetermination rather than his own free will. Finally, the last line itself by being an exact mirror of the last line of the game’s very first introductory paragraph further questions if there is any difference between the pre-game Stanley controlled by someone in a facility pressing buttons and the game-finale Stanley controlled by a player pressing buttons in accordance with instructions coming from a computer. In both cases, the self-*unaware* protagonist might be happy in his naivety but he is clearly not the one in charge of his life.

Yet it is not only Stanley’s agency which is implicitly brought into question through the Narrator’s choice of final words. “Yes! He had won! He had defeated the machine” (“Freedom” ending) – these lines apply as much to the player at the end of a game as they do to the character of Stanley. Though it is very unlikely that many players feel any of the Narrator-suggested excitement and satisfaction from achieving the described “win”, exactly because they did not actually have to or get to “defeat the machine” to achieve it, they merely had to play along with the machine. In fact, such an utter lack of obstacles and ‘fail states’ is precisely what “walking simulators” are usually criticised for. After all, the medium jargon normally refers to a player’s win as the player “beating the game”, thus conjuring images of exerting dominance over and physically subduing a game. Merely following its story (and/or narrator) along to where it (and/or he) takes you, however, is a saliently different experience – and *The Stanley Parable*’s double-coded “Freedom” ending makes sure to draw the players’ attention to that.

Finally, the Narrator’s commentary within this ending also reminds players that Stanley’s straightforward, close-minded liberation experience does not need to be the players’ ultimate experience as well. Several of the lines omitted from the quote above, in fact, explicitly refer to Stanley reflecting “on how many puzzles still lay unsolved” (“Freedom” ending) in the building behind him. And while the Narrator explains that Stanley does not care about those puzzles because all he wants is to be free, the message *The Stanley Parable* conveys to its players in that moment is that their own freedom lies in the opportunity to go back and acquire the knowledge simple-minded and self-*unaware* Stanley, according to the Narrator, chooses to leave behind. The players are, in other words, encouraged once more to break free from the prescribed narrative and explore the deviant options.

6.3.2 The Metareferential Contributions of the Divergent Plotlines

Once the game auto-restarts after a fade-to-white at the end of the Narrator's speech, the player's choice to not immediately switch off their computer but to remain within the game to explore other options is immediately rewarded with a variety of small visual changes in the environment (e.g. suddenly present papers spread all over the floor of certain cubicles, newly opened rooms, etc.) as well as of new Narrator lines (e.g. comments on the weather, slight variations in behaviour descriptions, etc.). In fact, *The Stanley Parable* is filled with so many minor (self-)references and asides that an analysis of each and every one would vastly exceed the scope of this chapter. However, retracing one's steps as a player, making different choices at the four narrative intersections listed before and discovering a number of subsequent and/or hidden choices also leads to major narrative revelations comprised in *The Stanley Parable's* different endings. Many of these are particularly relevant to the game's overall metareferential message and thus require a closer look.

6.3.2.1 Agency, Choice and the Role of Consequences

Firstly, multiple endings explicitly recognise both Stanley's and the player's desire to retake control over their own actions – yet those endings also immediately point out that achieving that particular desire is impossible within the mediated framework of video games. If the player, for example, chooses to turn the mind control system of the facility back on (cf. “Explosion” ending) – this time seemingly with Stanley in charge – the Narrator explicitly acknowledges this choice as originating from a wish for “control”. He also, however, directly observes that “If you want to throw my story off track, you're going to have to do much better than that. I'm afraid you don't have nearly the power you think you do” (“Explosion” ending). Once again, the addressee of this statement is the player as much as Stanley.

To prove his point, the Narrator (or in this case rather the game itself) suddenly transforms Stanley's complete environment into an entirely new room containing many coloured and numbered buttons as well as a large two-minute countdown clock – thus showing to the player the god-like, literally world-changing powers of the game's code over the player's experience. With the Narrator explaining that a self-destruct sequence has been initiated (hence the timer), the players are subsequently encouraged to conclude based on classic game tropes that they are now expected to find the correct sequence of buttons in the room to push to stop the countdown. “It's your time to shine! You are the star!”, exclaims the Narrator, sarcastically, only to soon after question the player's/St Stanley's conclusion as a

whole by asking: “Why would you think that, Stanley? That this video game can be beaten, won, solved? Do you have any idea what your purpose in this place is?” (“Explosion” ending). Thus, through its “Explosion” ending, *The Stanley Parable* confronts the player with multiple metareferential considerations regarding the topic of control in video games.

Firstly, the Narrator’s words draw attention to the fact that even in this divergent sequence of attempting to “beat” the game through puzzle solving, the players are not independently fighting to “defeat the machine” but are merely following tropes they have been taught by previous machines. Secondly, by conflating Stanley and the player by addressing first Stanley (by name), then the player (there is no “video game” in Stanley’s world) and finally both with the same “you”, the Narrator flattens and annuls diegetic hierarchies and presents avatar and player as equally powerless and inferior to the medium the latter is engaging with. Finally, by following up his questions with the observation that “You’re only still playing instead of watching a cutscene because I want to watch you for every moment that you’re powerless, to see you made humble” (“Explosion” ending), the Narrator even comments on the specific means the medium in question has at its disposal to create and convey this powerlessness in the first place.

While the Narrator’s words expose the traditional effect of cutscenes to remove power from the player – an effect utilised metareferentially in both *BioShock* and *Spec Ops: The Line* – *The Stanley Parable* demonstrates that simulating powerlessness through gameplay can be equally, if not even more effective. Especially so if the game in question makes the player (self-)aware of the futility of his or her action, as the Narrator does in this scene by explicitly pointing it out. Eventually, no matter what the player tries to do, this ending of *The Stanley Parable* culminates in an explosion preceded by the Narrator wondering: “Will you cling desperately to your frail life, or will you let it go peacefully? Another choice! Make it count. Or don’t. It’s all the same to me. All a part of the joke.” (“Explosion” ending) – the ultimate joke, of course, being that all possible choices are already contained within the game’s code and are thus all created equal as well as are all equally created.

An entirely different and at first glance much more developer-independent type of player agency discussed in one of the smaller endings of *The Stanley Parable* is the concept of hacking. For in the end, all my references to the game code as something predefined, developer-created and inaccessible to players are, of course, mere simplifications. Depending on the game, many players certainly *can* acquire more or less convenient and direct access to a game’s programming by hacking the code. If this was not the case, the making of the original *The Stanley Parable* mod for *Half-Life 2* would have been impossible. The easy

console access in Wreden's game, which allows for a certain amount of mid-game code manipulation by players, facilitates this hacking process but it is in no way a unique feature within the medium of computer games. What is unique about *The Stanley Parable's* use of this feature, however, is that accessing the console triggers its own metareferential ending.

To trigger what is known as the "Serious Room" ending, players are required to open the console and type in "sv_cheats 1" to attempt to activate the server cheats. If they do, Stanley and the player are immediately transported into an interrogation room setting marked by sombre stone walls and a heavy central table lit from above. There, protagonist and player are then submitted to a long and "serious" speech by the Narrator – so serious, in fact, that the word is mentioned ten times throughout the monologue. The core sentiment of the speech is the idea that the player's attempt at cheating "runs the risk of breaking the entire game" ("Serious Room" ending). "You've got no respect for the strict order of scripted narrative events and I just can't have that," the Narrator exclaims and sentences the player to "one hundred, billion, trillion years [of] standing here in the serious room" ("Serious Room" ending). And true enough, there is no way for the player to escape the room other than manually restarting the game. In fact, if he or she tries to cheat again, the Narrator extends the player's sentence to "infinity years" ("Serious Room" ending).

This passage, whilst also functioning as a straightforwardly humorous self-referential joke, once more reveals a lot about the power-relationship between player and game. Firstly, it draws attention to the fact that code access is often referred to as using "cheats", thus suggesting that while players do have the power to do so, they are normally not encouraged to change the code. Secondly, however, this scene also demonstrates that certain "cheat" commands are built into games on purpose and that they use a common language known if not to all players, then still to a large select group. Otherwise, players would be unable to find this particular ending without inputting an infinite number of sign combinations to see if anything happens. How far the damning word "cheating" is really applicable to the use of such built-in commands is thus questionable – and *is* questioned by the Narrator's over-the-top "serious"-ness on the subject. In addition to this commentary on medium jargon, the idea of player agency and empowerment through this type of hacking is, however, also questioned. For in the end, by using cheat codes, rather than fully independently interfering with a game's programming, players are once more merely activating elements already contained within the game. Whether the input happens by using an interface or a console command does not make that meaningful of a difference at this point.

While the *Stanley Parable* questions how far players interacting with a game are able to make any impactful choices, this does not mean that the game denies the importance of making such decisions in the first place. There are in fact two correlated endings of the game in which the Narrator explicitly discusses the significance of choice. Both are initiated by the player choosing to go through “the door on his right” rather than left and eventually ending up in a room with a ringing, old-fashioned, corded telephone.

After several hints suggesting that the person on the other end of the line is Stanley’s wife, the Narrator asks his protagonist to “Please, stop trying to make every decision by yourself” and to “If you can truly place your faith in another, then pick up the phone” (Crossroads between “Apartment” and “Choice” ending). With these words, *The Stanley Parable* goes beyond its usual game/player relationship commentary and draws attention to our choice making processes in general. Specifically, the game points out that whilst its players at this moment in time are treating divergent behaviour as a way to prove their independence, in real life, contrary behaviour just for the sake of individualism is not actually always considered desirable. Instead, especially in the context of relationships, following a mutually pre-agreed upon path to achieve pre-decided upon goals is often an accepted and even esteemed form of behaviour.

Just how such collaborative choice-making could function is, however, never fully elaborated upon in the game for the Narrator soon reveals the wife, the family life, the apartment into which the protagonist is transported if he picks up the phone and, in fact, the whole game narrative as such to be merely a figment of Stanley’s imagination (cf. “Apartment” ending). According to the Narrator, this whole segment is merely one of many scenarios Stanley plays out in his head whilst at work to experience excitement and a feeling of freedom – two motivations which are usually ascribed to video game players as well.

This idea of the protagonist being engaged in two simultaneous activities – working and daydreaming – is visualised for the player by the fact that floating text soon begins to appear on the screen instructing Stanley to press different keys. If the player wants to experience the entirety of the protagonist’s fantasy, he or she is required to perform these button presses to progress the narrative. The more commands the player and Stanley execute, however, the more the apartment begins to slowly transform back into the office interior, portraying metaleptically how the protagonist’s monotonous work keeps breaking into Stanley’s escapist fantasy and even into the player’s escapist video game fantasy since in the end it is he or she who has to perform the key presses and respond to the work orders given.

These orders, meanwhile, become increasingly meaningful. While the first examples of floating text merely provide the instruction of “Please press X”, soon the commands assume the format of “Press X to do Y”, Y throughout the sequence standing for ‘watch TV’, ‘spend time with the boys’, ‘prepare dinner’, ‘tell your kids a story’, ‘tell your wife you love her’, ‘go to sleep’ and ‘be at work in the morning’, respectively. In other words, in addition to commenting on the emptiness and monotony of Stanley’s job, *The Stanley Parable’s* “Apartment” ending also criticises the potential monotony of family life we all can succumb to. If we are not mindful, the game suggests, what should be meaningful and important experiences of love, comfort, joy and relaxation can be reduced to actions blindly performed because they are expected rather than because they are purposefully chosen. In the process, these vital interpersonal exchanges can be degraded to the point where they are as hollow as mindless button presses.

In addition to thus criticising real-life behaviour patterns, *The Stanley Parable* throughout this sequence also once more exposes and discusses a traditional video game trope. After all, “Press X to do Y” is arguably the most common way to execute any type of action in games in general. By bringing this mechanic to the player’s attention in this specific context of repetitiveness, shallowness and monotony, however, and by further choosing entirely random keys for “X”, *The Stanley Parable* raises awareness of the emotionally, meaningfully and narratively flat and basic nature of this kind of interactivity. While it took popular games media and the wider gaming community another year to start discussing this subject – following a particularly egregious example of a forced attempt at interactivity in *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014), in which a funeral cutscene is interrupted by a “Press F to pay respect” prompt – *The Stanley Parable*, thus ahead of its time, pointed out that better means of player engagement are worth looking for. This is not to say that it is utterly impossible to convey meaning and emotion through key strokes. As already mentioned in the introduction to this sixth chapter, *Brothers, a Tale of Two Sons* achieves just that in a brilliant manner. Still, in most cases, “Press X to do Y” is a far too simplistic interactive device, which, whilst suited as a provider of tactile immediacy and as a trigger for basic actions such as ‘pick up an item’, ‘open a door’ or ‘shoot’, is not a convincing means to engage the player, evoke emotions and drive the narrative.

Finally, *The Stanley Parable’s* “Apartment” ending also discusses just how much choice is involved both in Stanley’s monotonous experiences and in our real-life routine behaviours. The Narrator describes the crux of Stanley’s lifestyle as follows: “Look at him, there, pushing buttons, doing exactly what he’s told to do. Now, he’s pushing a button. Now, he’s eating

lunch. Now, he's going home. Now, he's coming back to work. [...] One might even feel sorry for him, except that he's *chosen* this life" ("Apartment" ending) – and, strikingly, this last observation applies to most people's everyday lives. On average, nobody is literally forced into a specific monotonous job, a monotonous personal life or a hobby which (seemingly) consists of nothing but button presses. And yet, most people discussing all the real-life aspects listed by the Narrator would argue that matters are usually not as simple. Only in the context of categorising gameplay do we still try to separate "choice" from "no choice" as if those two options are binary, a simple matter of black and white. This sequence of *The Stanley Parable* reminds players that there is, in fact, plenty of grey worth exploring. In the end, the only really inherently fatal behaviour presented in this scenario is that to "Press 'U' to Question Nothing.". According to Wreden's game, executing this action to never question the mechanics that rule both our real lives and the media we immerse ourselves in ultimately leads to there only being one remaining instruction to follow, namely that to "Please die.", the last prompt of the "Apartment" ending.

The second possible ending achievable in *The Stanley Parable* through the room with the ringing telephone further elaborates on just how important it is that we question our surroundings and make meaningful choices. The ending is triggered if the player realises that, despite there being barely any objects he or she can interact with in this game and despite there being no indicator of there being any in this room (e.g. there is no medium-typical interface response to placing the mouse cursor on them), the player can actually click on the telephone's cable to unplug it (cf. "Choice" ending). If the player does stop the ringing, this action is rewarded with the following response from the Narrator

Oh no no no no, you can't [...] No, that wasn't supposed to be a choice; how did you do that? You actually... chose incorrectly? I didn't even know that was possible! [...] None of these decisions were supposed to mean anything! I don't understand. How on earth are you making meaningful choices? ("Choice" ending)

before the voice-from-the-off finally has an epiphany: "You're not Stanley. You're *a real person*. [...] This is why you've been able to make correct and incorrect choices!" (my emphasis). In other words, in this instance, *The Stanley Parable* directly equates being human, having an identity, being a "real person", with the ability to make choices.

Now aware that he is talking to such a real person, the Narrator proceeds to chastise the player for neglecting "basic safety protocol for real world decision-making" ("Choice" ending) and for risking a full negation of the whole game in the process. Appalled by the player's irresponsible behaviour, the Narrator attempts to educate him or her by showing the player an instructional video on choice making: a 50s-style, black-and-white, cartoon-

inspired, dark and racist parody which opens with the striking lines of “Choice. It’s the best part about being a real person but if used incorrectly can also be the most dangerous” (“Choice” ending). The Narrator’s video thus immediately emphasises that choices, whilst fun, also have consequences in the real world, and that those need to be considered in advance. This dual view of choices is particularly interesting in the metareferential context of video games. For the link between “best” and “most dangerous” implies that it is in the nature of choices to be both at the same time, each quality arguably contributing to the other. Yet how can this apply to the medium of video games, which – as suggested before – is said to provide pleasure exactly by providing experiences of choice *without* the danger of consequences? Can such safe choices ever be as pleasurable as the dangerous real-life ones which, according to the Narrator’s instructional video, constitute the best part about being a “real person”? And can such safe choices even be considered “proper” choices in the first place?

Whilst never providing definite answers to any of these questions, *The Stanley Parable* certainly discusses multiple aspects of them throughout its narratives. At the core of many of these discussions lies the idea that, as the Narrator suggests in his commentary to the instructional video, if players are to make genuinely meaningful choices throughout the game, they need to actually treat their choices with the seriousness and responsibility demanded by the “basic safety protocol for real world decision-making” – or if they do not, they need to be willing to face more or less dramatic consequences for their actions.

A first hint at this idea can be seen in *The Stanley Parable*’s “Reluctant” ending. This ending is triggered if the player realises that rather than exiting Stanley’s office at the very beginning of the game, he or she can direct the protagonist to close the office door and remain inside instead. This course of action results in the following lines by the Narrator: “But Stanley simply couldn’t handle the pressure. What if he had to make a decision? What if a crucial outcome fell under his responsibility? He had never been trained for that!” (“Reluctant” ending). These words serve as a very first warning about the potentially serious outcomes of “crucial” and impactful decisions – especially such made by the player.

Building upon this warning, many of *The Stanley Parable*’s endings proceed to portray examples of disastrous consequences resulting from the player’s divergent choices. While many games usually depict choice-based consequences merely on a narrative level (e.g. through actions resulting in characters dying like in *Spec Ops: The Line*) or very rarely on a basic mechanical level (e.g. through side objectives being lost and players consequently being locked out of certain secondary content), *The Stanley Parable* portrays the dramatic and

violent nature of consequences through metareferential and metaleptic breaks in the characters, the narrative, the game environment and the walls between diegetic levels as such. These consequences bring up topics which go beyond mere matters of choice and as such will be discussed in the following sub-chapters.

6.3.2.2 Metareferential Identity Crises and the Question of Who Is in Control

On the character level, there are three endings which – mentally and/or physically – break Stanley himself: two of them are triggered by Stanley choosing to jump to his death on two different occasions (cf. “Death” and “Space” endings); a third ending is triggered by Stanley and the player choosing to go down the building’s staircase instead of up to his boss’ office, thus going down a literal as well as symbolic downward spiral which eventually leads to Stanley’s mental breakdown (cf. “Insane” ending). While the first two of these endings play with the common motif of suicide as the ultimate last-resort option for the (re-)assertion of one’s will and independence – in the “Space” ending Stanley is explicitly said to jump to his death to ruin the Narrator’s happiness – the third ending is of particular metareferential interest.

The “Insane” ending shows that the one thing capable of breaking Stanley’s psyche – a psyche which has survived a devastatingly monotonous existence – is the character’s sudden realisation that he (as well as the player) cannot see his feet (a common feature of many first person games), that doors are closing behind him automatically (typical of level transitions in certain game genres), that rooms keep repeating themselves (typical of basic level design, here even portrayed as a full loop) and finally, that “there is a voice in [his] head dictating everything that [he’s] doing and thinking”. In other words, Stanley is driven mad by his rising (self-)awareness of the fact that he is a mediated character living in a world ruled by video game tropes related to camera angles, level design and narrative framework. After temporarily hoping that this experience is merely a dream and unsuccessfully trying to wake himself up, Stanley eventually shouts out: “Please just someone tell me I’m real! I must be real! I must be! Can anyone hear my voice?! Who am I? Who am I?!” (“Insane” ending). But, of course, nobody can hear Stanley’s voice just like nobody can answer his questions. The player hears even these most personal, desperate words merely through the Narrator since Stanley has no voice because he is a traditional silent video game avatar. Unheard and unanswered, increasingly losing grasp of his identity and not receiving a confirmation of his existence, Wreden’s protagonist, eventually, falls into an insane stupor.

The Stanley Parable could have easily left this ending at that, as a metareferentially framed portrayal of an identity crisis based on sudden self-awareness, yet the game instead takes its statement one step further. Once the screen fades to black on Stanley's consciousness, before the game restarts, the Narrator picks up the story from a different perspective. Beginning with the words, "This is the story of a woman named Mariella." ("Insane" ending), the subsequent game sequence portrays a scene in which that very Mariella witnesses a crazily raving man (Stanley) collapse face-down on the street in front of her. Consequently, the Narrator describes Mariella's thoughts of gratitude for her own better circumstances as follows: "I am sane. I am in control of my mind. I know what is real, and what isn't" ("Insane" ending). The irony of these words combined with Mariella's utter lack of self-awareness – after all, she is exactly as powerless a game character as Stanley – serve as comic relief after the protagonist's disturbing demise. Furthermore, they also draw the player's attention to the fact that, very likely, he or she had thoughts similar to Mariella's whilst watching Stanley's nervous breakdown. By portraying these thoughts as indicative of Mariella's lack of self-awareness, *The Stanley Parable* thus implicitly encourages players to question their own beliefs about their selves, and to (re)consider the ultimate certainty with which they approach their own perception of their arguably similarly constructed if not quite as externally mediated reality.

These identity crises resulting from divergent player choices furthermore do not limit themselves to the character of Stanley and, potentially, to the players themselves. In addition, multiple of *The Stanley Parable's* endings question the identity and hierarchical standing of the Narrator as well. Whilst the Narrator himself clearly seems to think of himself as a fully-fledged person, fully in control of the narrative, and whilst the fact that players are able to "hear his voice" puts him closer than the protagonist to being "a real person" on the spectrum of "real"-ness which stretches between Stanley and the player, a variety of narrative branches still expose the Narrator as not being nearly as much the one making all the decisions as he gives himself the air to be.

Already in the endings discussed up till now, there are several instances in which the complexity of the Narrator's role within the story is built up. For example, in the "Explosion" ending, the Narrator suggests that he was the one to disrupt the mind control facility and set Stanley free, which would imply independent agency. Yet during the "Apartment" ending the Narrator explicitly acknowledges that "I don't make the rules, I simply play to my intended purpose, the same as Stanley. We're not so different, I suppose." The exact reach and extent of the Narrator's control and independence is thus brought into question. In addition, the

“Space” ending even questions how much the Narrator *wants* to be “in charge” in the first place. For after Stanley has wandered around the respective ending-triggering path for a while, the Narrator eventually is heard to voice the following opinion: “The problem is all these choices, the two of us always trying to get somewhere that isn’t here, running and running and running [...] I would – we would both be so much happier if we just... stopped.” (“Space” ending). Choices, drive and agency are thus seemingly presented as a never-ending, draining and stressful activity which does not result in any real satisfaction.

To escape this endless running, the Narrator suggests that he, Stanley and the player stay and rest in a newly accessible room which has no walls or furniture but consists of merely a circular floor surrounded by the open, star-filled vastness of space. The edges of the floor are rimmed with soft lights and the player can suddenly hear ethereal music – all components which help create (and arguably parody) a Zen-inspired atmosphere of meditation, stillness, and in-the-moment peace. As restful as the Narrator may find this room to be, however, for the player this location is a dead end. While the game allows for the player to stay in the room as long as he or she likes without an automatic restart, there is nothing to “do” in it, no further narrative to be gained. Through this void, *The Stanley Parable* asks players themselves to decide if they agree with the Narrator that this form of stagnation is a source of happiness (in which case players are welcome to stop playing the game and simply stay in that room forever) or whether they actually prefer the endless search for more despite the stress it comes with. Players are furthermore encouraged to consider what it is they actually want from a video game: an ambience piece or (inter)active gameplay. Either way, by posing these questions and by forcing players to actively choose whether to stay or to leave, *The Stanley Parable* raises all these choice-related questions in the players’ awareness – fully in keeping with the “Space” ending’s Zen motif which after all equally evokes ideas of mindfulness, self-reflection and of a search for the ultimate self-awareness.

In addition to these elements within the previously discussed endings, there are two further endings which focus on deconstructing the Narrator’s position of control. The first of them is triggered if the player and Stanley go through the right door instead of the left, then allow the Narrator to redirect them towards the “correct” path only to discover a new divergent option and deviate again. This repeated fluctuation between following and abandoning the narrative eventually leaves the Narrator utterly disorientated, having lost the thread of his story as well as his way around the office building (cf. “Confusion” ending). After reaching multiple dead ends, he eventually despairs and announces that “It’s all rubbish now. The whole story... completely unusable” (“Confusion” ending). He tries to restart the

game but this does not fix the confusion since doors and rooms still do not function as before. This prompts the Narrator to wonder: “[D]id something change? Stanley, did you change anything when we were back in that room [...]? Did you move the story somewhere, or... Hold on. Why am I asking you? I’m the one who wrote the story. It was right here a minute ago. [...] Okay, then, it’s an adventure! Come, Stanley, let’s find the story!” (“Confusion” ending). In other words, the Narrator’s personal confusion is explicitly presented as a confusion and consequent dissolution of hierarchical structures.

Firstly, in this ending, the Narrator suddenly suggests that Stanley himself might be able to “move” the story despite the latter being located on a higher diegetic level. Secondly, the Narrator in this sequence also for the first time suggests that he is the one who actually wrote the narrative. This statement seemingly contradicts the Narrator’s previously mentioned assertion that he “doesn’t make the rules” (“Apartment” ending) and thus encourages players to consider how these two separate proclamations can be reconciled. One possible answer to this question is to see the two statements as metareferential commentary, which suggests that in the medium of video games the mechanical ruleset is located on a hierarchically higher level than the narrative and thus being in charge of the story does not make the Narrator in charge of the rules. Another possible answer is to approach this seeming discrepancy from the perspective of *The Stanley Parable*’s omnipresent theme of lacking self-awareness and to interpret this passage as the Narrator demonstrating that he is as unclear of his own role and limitations as Stanley is of his. This interpretation is further reinforced by the Narrator’s last words of “let *us* find the story” which suggest that at this moment in time the Narrator acknowledges himself to be on the same level of non-omniscience as his character.

The rest of the “Confusion” ending consists of multiple attempts by the Narrator to open new pathways and lead Stanley back to the story, each of which is highly metareferential. Firstly, by soon calling the experience the “worst adventure” ever, the Narrator suggests that all games lacking story, direction and interactivity (beyond manual walking) might make for terrible adventures. Secondly, after multiple unsuccessful attempts at solving the problem through restarts, the Narrator observes that he “find[s] it unlikely that we’ll ever progress by starting over and over again” (“Confusion” ending). With these words, the narrator unwittingly makes fun of a central video game feature, namely the fact that players usually *are* exactly expected to keep reloading the game every time they reach a failure state in the hope that they will be able to do better next time. And, of course, *The Stanley Parable*’s own main gameplay loop is literally built upon such reboots, which are what allow the players to experience all the different endings in the first place.

Not being able to make progress through restarts within this particular ending, however, the Narrator next tries to resolve his confusion by rebranding the current dead end as a win condition. Out of nowhere, floating text appears announcing “You Win!” – yet even the Narrator himself immediately has to admit that this does not feel right since nobody had to do any work to earn this “win”. This admission in turn reiterates an idea already seen in the “Freedom” ending: namely the idea that video games, traditionally, provide satisfaction through a feeling of achievement resulting from overcome obstacles.

The Narrator’s subsequent final attempt at overcoming his confusion is to introduce a literal, physical “Story Line TM” into the environment, a yellow line of paint across the floor which is supposed to help Stanley find his way back to the narrative. Happy with his idea, the Narrator exclaims “onward to destiny!” (“Confusion” ending) and thus once again draws attention to the similarities between the two goal-driven, predetermination-based concepts of destiny and narrative (cf. also “Freedom” ending). However, the Narrator also nearly instantly deconstructs this parallel again by wondering: “Though, here’s a thought: wouldn’t wherever we end up be our destination, even if there’s no story there? Or, to put it another way, is the story of no destination still a story?” (“Confusion” ending). The necessity of a predetermined goal for a narrative is thus brought into question.

Of course, the “Story Line TM”, being part of a pre-constructed game, *does* have a destination and thus is not a tool capable of answering this existential question. Yet *The Stanley Parable* solves this flaw in its symbolism by having the Narrator, Stanley and the player never really find out what the Line’s destination is, thus arguably making the latter irrelevant. For as the group continues to follow the yellow (non-brick) road, the line becomes increasingly jagged and erratic, it is suddenly painted on walls and ceilings instead of the floor, and it begins to cross itself. The Narrator explicitly tries to counteract his consequently rising frustration by adding, commenting upon and thus exposing another medium-typical feature, namely that of light-hearted and dynamic background music, but to no avail. Eventually, the Narrator exasperatedly addresses the line with the following remark: “[H]ow could you have done this to us, and after we trusted you?” (“Confusion” ending). Whilst doing so, he draws attention to the traditional function of plotlines to serve as guidelines recipients can “trust” to have a point and purpose. Furthermore, the Narrator’s statement also once more implicitly questions his position within the diegetic hierarchical structure. After all, whilst earlier within this ending the Narrator announced he was the creator of the story, at this point he suggests the story(line) itself is in control as an independent force separate from and superior to him.

As soon as the Narrator acknowledges his own current lack of control, he immediately begins to try and reassert it. He asks “Why can’t we make up our own story? Something exciting, daring, mysterious...” and begins to open new doors which diverge from the yellow-marked path. That is to say, the Narrator suddenly adopts a behaviour up to this point reserved for the players, and implicitly comments on the players’ possible motivations behind it by exposing his own thought processes. At the eventual sight of two open doors – a sight which mirrors the player’s first conscious choice in the game – the Narrator furthermore exclaims “Ah, a choice! We get to make a decision; from here, the story is in our control! How important we mustn’t squander the opportunity. In fact, I believe I need a minute to think here.” (“Confusion” ending). The idea of a correlation between choice-making and control is thus explicitly voiced. Yet all the Narrator’s thinking – presented as a highly illogical stream-of-consciousness, for of course no amount of logic can really help a character or player outthink and escape the game code’s ultimate control – cannot save him from eventually choosing a path which leads him, Stanley and the player into a dark room with a screen, the latter of which bears the title “The Confusion Ending” and lists all different sections and steps which constitute this ending.

At closer examination, the player and, soon after, the Narrator himself realise that the screen lists eight restarts as part of the “Confusion” ending, of which the player and Narrator up to this point have merely experienced the first four. Shocked by this revelation, his voice expressing sadness morphing into anger, the Narrator subsequently exclaims: “That’s what this is? [...] It’s all... determined? [...] Why don’t I get to decide?! Why don’t I get a say in all this?!” (“Confusion” ending). Once again, he thus acknowledges that he is as much a pawn of the game’s narrative and code as Stanley is, and the player is encouraged to realise that the Narrator’s exclamation applies to the player’s gameplay experience as well. After all, when the Narrator eventually attempts to establish his sovereignty by refusing to follow the on-screen description and to restart the game for a fifth time, the player has no other options but to either follow the Narrator and just stand in the room with Stanley and wait – there being no other pathways open to explore – or to follow the game’s instructions and to manually restart.

If the player chooses to wait, he or she is presented with further existential commentary by the Narrator, who begins to debate whether (and if yes to what extent) things can be affected by inaction – until, suddenly, the game cuts the Narrator off and automatically restarts, thus seemingly proving that in the end, nobody can escape its (or their) programming. Noticeably, however, no matter whether the player manually restarts beforehand or stays, this moment constitutes the end of the “Confusion” ending as this fifth reset puts all parties

involved back to the neutral opening state of *The Stanley Parable* rather than to the fifth restart state listed on the screen. Through this deviation from the list, the game thus after all suggests that the Narrator's sudden self-awareness and his choice to refuse following instructions *do* have an impact. Since the game code, however, is incapable of processing aberrant behaviour it merely resets to a neutral state rather than providing real opportunities for independent actions. This idea of a processing error is further emphasised by the sudden, dissonant, loud and electronic sound which accompanies only this particular automatic reset of *The Stanley Parable*.

The final major ending which exposes the Narrator's lack of control is triggered if the player chooses to go through the door labelled "Escape" instead of heading for the "Mind Control Center". Stanley's consequent path through a long dark tunnel and industrial backstage area eventually leads him onto an inescapable conveyor belt and into what seems to be a death trap between two vertical plates rhythmically smashing against each other (cf. "Museum" ending). The Narrator even narrates Stanley's seemingly last thoughts and finishes the protagonist's story with the words "Farewell, Stanley". Yet just before the plates' last crushing impact, the machinery suddenly freezes into place and an escape route opens up. More importantly for this metareferential study, however, a female narrative voice also takes over the narration, beginning with the words "'Farewell, Stanley,' cried the Narrator".

This female narrator, once she has inserted herself and her narrative plane into the game's hierarchical structure in this manner, continues to lead Stanley through the aforementioned escape route into an entirely new type of space. Passing through a door labelled with "The Stanley Parable", the protagonist and player eventually find themselves in a museum which exhibits the game as well as some of the development processes behind it. The new area is filled with displays containing individual props, set pieces and even entire 3D-models of *The Stanley Parable's* levels, Narrator quotes are mounted on walls in the form of inspirational posters, and paintings portraying multiple versions of the same room show how the design of that particular room has changed throughout the game's development. An acoustic installation furthermore plays outtakes from the Narrator's voice-over recording sessions, and, finally, the area also contains a wall inscribed with the names of all people involved in the game's real-life development, thus functioning as a first credits screen.

In addition, all these individual pieces, as is typical of museum exhibits, are accompanied by small explanatory plaques which contain further explicit metareferential information. For example, one of these signs lets the players know that the corridor length of the opening section was consciously designed with a focus on pacing aiming to make sure that Stanley

reached the two-door intersection “in a good time”; another plaque explicitly states that the “contradiction” posed by the narration at this two-door intersection is the heart of the game, everything else being mere further elaborations upon this core idea; a third sign discusses the technical aspects of how, for example, the button sounds audible in the “Explosion” ending were created; a fourth label refers to earlier designs of the “Freedom” ending in the industry-specific terms of them being “first iterations” during “alpha”; etc.

In short, this entire sequence, in addition to introducing the new narrative level of the female narrator, also provides an entirely new level of metacommentary. Whilst in *The Stanley Parable*'s other endings medium tropes and mechanics are mostly portrayed through double-coded asides, contextually salient narrator remarks and implicit play with traditions and rules, in the “Museum” ending the constructed nature of games explicitly becomes the central topic of the narrative, and the metareferential focus of the game zeroes in even more onto the fictio aspects of the medium. All the while, the female narrator – while never explicitly remarking on the museum’s exhibits – takes on the role of an external critic or museum guide who further comments on motifs and patterns recognisable throughout the narrative.

Whilst the female narrator does offer some additional commentary on certain philosophical questions raised by the game – e.g. by observing that “When every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance, death becomes meaningless, making life the same” and thus providing her perspective on the topics of choice and meaningful agency – most of her commentary is directed towards the characters of Stanley and the Narrator, and especially towards the relationship between them. Already right at the beginning of her narration, building upon the Narrator’s dramatic final farewell, the female voice observes that even if the protagonist’s death would have taken place as narrated by her male counterpart, soon Stanley “would restart the game, back in his office, as alive as ever” – so “[w]hat exactly did the Narrator think he was going to accomplish?” (“Museum” ending). In other words, just like the Narrator himself in other endings frequently points out the futility of Stanley’s actions, the hierarchically superior female narrator in the “Museum” ending does the same to her predecessor. In fact, it is one of the female narrator’s main functions in *The Stanley Parable* to point out the similarities between the two characters of Stanley and the Narrator.

With observations such as “Oh, look at these two. How they wish to destroy one another. How they wish to control one another. How they both wish to be free.” and “Can you see? Can you see how much they need one another?” (“Museum” ending) the female narrator repeatedly draws attention to the fact that the two characters’ existences and identities are

rooted entirely within their interaction with each other. As a smaller ending of the game already indicates by stranding the player and Stanley, who at one point can seemingly sneak out on the Narrator, in front of an escape pod which explicitly can only be operated if both Stanley and the Narrator are present (cf. “Escape Pod” ending), the female narrator’s comments continuously emphasise that the two characters cannot function without each other. After all, an abstract idea of a story without characters is as hollow as characters standing around without a story. Only once their roles and fates are combined do both Stanley and the Narrator suddenly derive purpose, most notably from their relentless attempts to control and/or outsmart and/or “beat” each other – in other words from interactions typical of player approaches towards and engagement with the medium of video games as a whole.

The female narrator, however, soon also points out that there is still something very unique about the player which separates him or her from the two in-game characters. The female narrator expresses her thoughts on the matter as follows: “But listen to me, you can still save these two [...] Press ‘escape’, and press ‘quit’. There’s no other way to beat this game. As long as you move forward, you’ll be walking someone else’s path. Stop now, and it will be your only true choice.” (“Museum” ending). At the core of the female narrator’s argument, in other words, lies the fact that while Stanley and the Narrator are forever bound to each other through their existence within *The Stanley Parable*, the player is of course free to walk away from the narrative. The concept of the player as the only “real person” capable of making real choices is thus once again emphasised. Furthermore, the most categorical way of “beating” a game is metareferentially portrayed to be the setting aside of the game and leaving it unfinished – and thus depriving it of its impact, influence and purpose.

6.3.2.3 Metareferential Easter Eggs and “Glitches”

The next two metareferential endings of *The Stanley Parable* are comparatively short; yet they still both play an important role in the game’s medium-exploring tapestry. They furthermore do so by themselves being perfect representatives of two typical video game components, thus being metareferential on the form level as well. The first of these endings is an “Easter egg” or secret which is triggered if the player realises – without being given any clues – that he or she can open the door of one specific broom closet inside Stanley’s office building and lock him- or herself inside it (cf. “Broom Closet” ending).

Once the player does that, the Narrator comments that “There was nothing here. No choice to make, no path to follow, just an empty broom closet. No reason to still be here”.

With these words, the Narrator suggests ad negativum that interactive objects, choices and progression are what usually provides players with “reasons” for playing. The Narrator further continues: “If I had said, ‘Stanley walked past the broom closet,’ at least you would have had a reason for exploring it to find out.” (“Broom Closet” ending). This sentence implicitly exposes *The Stanley Parable*’s “Stanley entered the door on his left”-motif as the purposeful, player-guiding curiosity trigger that it is. Furthermore, exploration and curiosity are thus also added to the list of reasons for playing video games. Additionally, the Narrator’s remark is also an indirect reference to the typical player behaviour of exploring everything else *but* the actual quest in any given area first to see what secrets (such as an accessible broom closet) might lie hidden within the level. In fact, in this sequence, the Narrator even explicitly mocks typical player conversations resulting from uncovering such secrets by proclaiming in a ridicule-exuding tone ““Oh, did you get the broom closet ending? The broom closet ending was my favourite XD””, thus emphasising the potential for social boasting inherent in finding secrets, which can be another driving force for players.

Eventually, however, the Narrator comes to the conclusion that the real reason why Stanley is still standing in the closet might be that “you are dead”. Whilst, initially, this ‘you’ might be interpreted as referring to Stanley, it is soon revealed that the Narrator is, in truth, breaking the fourth wall and addressing the player directly. For once the Narrator reaches his conclusion he immediately begins to shout: “Hello?! Anyone who happens to be nearby, the person at this computer is dead!”. He also moves on to suggest that the player has most likely succumbed to one of “*your* countless human [...] vulnerabilities” (“Broom Closet” ending, my emphasis), thus indicating that while the Narrator often speaks of himself as an individual, he does not actually think of himself as being human.

Wishing to continue his narrative, the Narrator subsequently asks anyone nearby to remove the assumed dead body and place a new human in front of the computer after “making sure they understand basic first-person video game mechanics, and filling them in on the history of narrative tropes in video gaming, so that the irony and insightful commentary of this game is not lost on them” (“Broom Closet” ending). Through this demand, *The Stanley Parable* for the first time explicitly draws attention to the pre-knowledge required both to play a video game in general – namely the understanding of basic mechanics – and to understand a metareferential game (or any kind of metareferential work for that matter) in particular – namely a strong enough familiarity with the medium to recognise tropes and ironies.

Once the Narrator has explicitly identified the ideal player of his (and Wreden’s) game, he instructs this presumed new player as follows: “Alright then [...], just step out into the

hallway.” (“Broom Closet” ending). Through this change in verb tense, mood, and point of view, *The Stanley Parable* for the very first time employs and hence references the traditional method of issuing instructions through direct second-person imperatives instead of the Narrator’s typical third-person narration. If the player follows these instructions – and he or she has no choice but to do so (other than restarting or abandoning the game, of course) – the Narrator ultimately exclaims: “Ah, second player! It’s good to have you on board. I guarantee you can’t do any worse than the person who came before you.” (“Broom Closet” ending). In one last aside the Narrator thus references one final common video game feature, namely that of the competition between multiple players all trying to “beat” and surpass each other’s performances.

The second secret, short ending which contributes to *The Stanley Parable*’s metareferential commentary by exposing specific video game features is triggered if the player realises that he or she can climb out of one of the office building’s windows (cf. what is known as the “Window”, “Voice Over” or “Song” ending). Due to the visual design of the relevant environment, the execution of the climbing action on screen looks less like a character’s exit through a window and more as if the player has found a way to “glitch” through the window⁷⁴. Thus the trigger for this particular ending transforms even what is traditionally a common coding mistake into a meaningful metareference. For as the player soon learns this seeming glitch is of course far from accidental. Furthermore, the “Window” ending also acknowledges and exposes the typical player behaviour of actively searching for such “flaws” by relying on this very specific behaviour for the ending to be triggered in the first place.

As soon as the player makes his or her way outside, the Narrator immediately explains the true nature of the seeming glitch as follows: “At first Stanley assumed he had broken the map, until he heard this narration and realized it was a part of the game’s design all along. He then praised the game for its insightful and witty commentary into the nature of video game structure and its examination of structural narrative tropes.” (“Window” ending). The “Window” ending thus contains the most strikingly explicit example of intra-compositionally metareferential narration in the entirety of *The Stanley Parable*. In fact, the Narrator’s precise analysis of this moment in the game he himself is a part of would be arguably more at home in an academic study than in a traditional purely (non-meta)fictional text.

⁷⁴ I.e. has found a flaw in the environmental design which allows the player to squeeze his or her avatar past certain elements to reach an area which he or she was never meant to be able to see and access, possibly even an area outside of the constructed game world.

Having thus exposed the exact function of the “Window” ending, the Narrator subsequently asks the player with the help of floating, pixelated text – an homage to old-school input systems – if he or she is “sick of this gag” yet. If the player chooses ‘no’, the game provides further “witty commentary” on structural video game and narrative tropes as well as on player behaviour. Most notably, the Narrator suggests that players are now probably wondering what would have happened if they had chosen ‘yes’ and whether it is worth replaying the sequence to find out. The Narrator further explicitly acknowledges that any potential worth of a replay would lie in the possibility to hear additional narration. In short, the Narrator throughout this section of the “Window” ending exposes some of the main elements consciously built into *The Stanley Parable* for the purpose of driving and directing the player’s curiosity and attention.

If the player, in contrast, selects ‘yes’ when asked if he or she is “sick of this gag”, the Narrator – once more highly self-referentially – bitingly exclaims that nobody is stopping the player from restarting the game at any point. The fact that he or she has, however, clearly not done so even whilst apparently being unsatisfied with what is happening in the game is commented upon by the Narrator as follows: “I’m enjoying what seems to be an internal conflict going on where you are literally unable to act on your own desires to restart the game” (“Window” ending). Thus questions of decision-making and agency are brought up again, this time in a much more sarcastic manner. The game takes the insult contained within the ‘yes’ answer and immediately turns the tables on the player. The Narrator ridicules the player’s inconsistent or at least passive behaviour and eventually even begins to sing a highly insulting song about how insufferable Stanley is and how if the player is not careful he or she will soon become equally unbearable and incapable of action.

6.3.2.4 The Art of Making Good Video Games

The second to last ending of *The Stanley Parable* which contributes to the game’s metareferential tapestry is triggered if Stanley and the player deviate consistently from the Narrator’s descriptions after stepping through the “door on [their] right”. Eventually, the player and Stanley find themselves in a vast empty hangar (cf. “Games” ending), the sight of which elicits the following response from the Narrator:

You see? There's nothing here. I haven't even finished building this section of the map, because you were never supposed to be here in the first place. Broken rooms, exposed developer textures... is this what you wanted? Was it worth ruining the entire story I had written out specifically for you? Do you not think I put a lot of time into that? Because I did. [...] Help me here, Stanley, help me elucidate these strange and unknowable desires of yours. What would have made this game better?

Through this response from the Narrator, the "Games" ending explicitly references hitherto unmentioned video game features, specifically usually masked elements such as developer textures and map grids which form the underlying skeleton of every video game. Additionally, the Narrator once more brings the topic of player motivation to the foreground. Finally, the "Games" ending also introduces an entirely new field to the metareferential discussion, namely that of what exactly can be done to improve the quality of a video game, and thus that of what exactly constitutes a good video game.

The Narrator first initiates his explicit metareferential investigation into player preferences by proposing particular changes he could make to the game design – "What did you want to see? Vehicles? Skill trees?" ("Games" ending) – and thus exposing further typical video game tropes. From there, the Narrator moves on to a game-industry-specific format of asking these very same questions. Namely, he asks the player to "beta-test" individual elements he creates inside the test-chamber-like hangar and to then evaluate them on a scale from one to five. From an increased number of choices (suddenly there are three doors to choose from instead of two) to the inclusion of a worldwide leader board tracking playtime, number of doors opened, steps taken and endings achieved, several classic game elements are subsequently metareferentially pitched to the player.

The Narrator always accompanies these beta tests with detailed questions about the player's response to the respective elements, thus revealing the response those features traditionally aim to elicit in the process. For example, at the end of the leader board segment the Narrator asks: "Would you say that competitive leader board helped you feel motivated to keep walking through doors?" ("Games" ending). Through questions like this, *The Stanley Parable* provides explicit metareferential commentary on the function of certain medium-specific features whilst simultaneously implicitly portraying the typical playtest / feedback loop characteristic of the final fine-tuning stages of video game development. Finally, the topic of choice is once more touched upon as well. For if the player ever rates anything as a three, the Narrator ridicules the player's seeming lack of opinion, pointing out that not all made choices are automatically meaningful, and exposes the pitfalls of using rating scales for feedback at the same time.

Once the Narrator has received multiple answers from the player, he suddenly decides to show the latter an early prototype of an entirely different game. In a next room, the player (Stanley, at this point, seems to have been entirely forgotten and removed from the increasingly metaleptic Narrator / player interaction) is confronted with the following mechanical setup: a cardboard cut-out of a baby moves endlessly along a straight track towards a burning fire accompanied by piercing crying sounds; meanwhile, a button in the room can reset the baby back to its original starting point, thus temporarily saving it from the flames. In short, the player is presented with a strikingly to-the-point yet also highly reductive exemplification of a classic gameplay loop: a mechanical, a visual and an audio track combined create a fictional danger scenario without real-life consequences, which the player can avert by pressing a button. Whilst the player absorbs this tableau, the Narrator describes the contraption as “a very meaningful game – all about the desperation and tedium of endlessly confronting the demands of family life” and further comments that he thinks “the art world will really take notice” (“Games” ending). The banality of the presented gameplay contrasted with these lofty aspirations voiced by the Narrator – a contrast which forms a parallel to the motif of a family life reduced to hollow button presses portrayed in the “Apartment” ending – meanwhile introduces the next metareferential theme of this *The Stanley Parable* ending, namely Wreden’s contribution to the debate whether video games are qualified to be considered an art form or not.

Based on the Narrator’s introduction of his prototype, the first impression players are encouraged to have of the debate is one of utter absurdity. Whether the brunt of the mockery, however, is directed at the idea of games as art or at the haughtiness of people assuming to have the right to judge what constitutes art and what does not is at this point still open to interpretation. Either way, the Narrator’s suddenly highly pretentious (and thus highly uncharacteristic) narrative style definitely pokes fun at a specific type of haughty, “artsy” and better-than-thou game developer as well.

To hear *all* of the Narrator’s further elaborations on the topic, the player is required to keep pushing the baby-reset button for four hours in a row. For the Narrator soon announces: “[O]f course, the message of the game only becomes clear once you’ve been playing it for about 4h. So why don’t you give it 4h of play to make sure it’s effective” (“Games” ending). Whilst very few players would be willing to perform this tedious action – the game thus implicitly drawing attention to the difference between the player and Stanley, whose entire work day consists of nothing else but contently and repeatedly pushing buttons – there have been players with the skillset required to write a macro-program to click the button for them,

who have recorded their “gameplay” experience for posterity (cf. e.g. *OuttaSpace*). And being the highly medium- and player-aware game that it is, *The Stanley Parable* builds an entire metareferential sequence on top of this predicted player behaviour.

In particular, after the player resets the baby’s movements several times, the Narrator himself remarks that he believes the player to be running such an automated program. The Narrator furthermore subsequently explicitly wonders if such a program does not “kind of ruin[] the point of the game, don’t you think? Wouldn’t that take the art out of it? You can tell me in your post-playtest analysis” (“Games” ending). And whilst expecting the player to manually perform the task at hand can certainly be considered madness, it is irrefutable that if the purpose of the prototype game really is to simulate the “desperation and tedium” of family life, then avoiding the tedium through the use of a program certainly does negate the game’s entire purpose.

By exposing this dilemma, *The Stanley Parable* implicitly raises the question of what the perfect game-design soft-spot could be which would create a realistic enough simulation to trigger the required experience without fully frustrating the player. Furthermore, these words by the Narrator also draw the player’s attention to the debate surrounding the question of just how suited the medium of video games really is for the portrayal of negative experiences – a question which of course becomes particularly relevant in the context of emotionally and psychologically darker games such as *Spec Ops: The Line*⁷⁵. While *The Stanley Parable* never explicitly provides a definite answer, it does indirectly suggest that the aforementioned soft-spot might play an important role.

If the player, with the use of a macro-program or not, pushes further on into the four hours of prototype gameplay, what he or she will soon notice is the fact that there is barely any Narrator commentary accompanying the player’s actions throughout this sequence and thus rewarding him or her for his or her resilience and determination. At first glance, this design choice might appear unusual, considering that – as explicitly acknowledged in the “Window” ending – the desire to hear more narration is one of the central forces driving player behaviour in *The Stanley Parable*. Yet unsurprisingly, this seemingly aberrant design choice is soon revealed to have a metareferential purpose when the Narrator’s voice explicitly addresses the fact that the player probably expected to hear more from him and announces

⁷⁵ Horror games would, of course, also serve as potentially less metareferential but otherwise even more dramatic examples, as would more experimental, psychologically demanding games such as *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice*, which is meant to simulate the experiences of a character caught in the middle of a psychotic episode (audio-visual hallucinations and all).

that this, however, will not be the case since he wants the player to engage with the prototype game for its own sake: “For the art! For the endlessly spiralling sense of pointlessness and despair! Yes, this is what drives your every action! Keep clicking that button! For hope! For freedom! For science! For love!” (“Games” ending).

Other than this, the rare few narrative segments present throughout the four-hour sequence focus on encouraging the player and on the Narrator’s relentless emphasis of the artistic value of his prototype. “This is it, Stanley, art! I did it! Video games are art!” (“Games” ending) he exclaims as he adds a second cardboard cut-out (a puppy) and a second button (to prevent the puppy from being lowered into a piranha tank) at the two-hour mark. And “It warms my heart to see how deeply the message of this game has resonated with you” (“Games” ending), he announces shortly after. These proclamations of the Narrator’s artistic vision eventually culminate in the prototype’s grand finale triggered by the gameplay reaching the four-hour mark: The screen turns white, a one-to-one representation of the monolith from Stanley Kubrick’s filmic version of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) appears, and through floating text introduces itself as “the essence of divine art” (“Games” ending), which promises to one day carry the player to its serene afterlife garden.

The pathos of this scene, when contrasted with the tediousness and absurdity of the preceding sequence, immediately brings the Narrator’s entire vision into question. This is, however, not to say that Wreden’s game mocks any kind of artistic ambition in video games in general. After all, *The Stanley Parable* itself is an artistically complex and undeniably ambitious computer game. The resulting question, therefore, is what exactly it is which makes Wreden’s creation better and/or less ridiculous than the Narrator’s prototype. *The Stanley Parable* never explicitly answers this question – and this lack of an answer, rather than being a mere omission, is the game’s chosen means of encouraging the players to think for themselves and to find their own answers to the unresolved problem in front of them now that the metareferential narrative has brought it to their attention.

Meanwhile, if the player does not have the patience or the basic programming skill required to keep the baby alive for four hours, the Narrator frustratedly ends the playtesting experience with a sarcastic delivery of “Thank you for playing! Your input was extremely valuable”, thus referencing and foregrounding the typical language used at the end of feedback questionnaires. Frustrated by the fact that the player does not seem to value his creation, the Narrator furthermore decides to test if the player (and possibly Stanley) would more enjoy games made by other developers. For this purpose, *The Stanley Parable* contains two consecutive segments copied entirely from two existing, real-life video games –

Mojang's *Minecraft* (2009) and Valve's *Portal* (2007), respectively – and the Narrator transports the player and his invisible since first-person avatar straight into them.

Throughout the subsequent two short scenarios, the Narrator still guides the player and Stanley within the respective game worlds in typical *The Stanley Parable* narration-driven manner. He does, however, also continuously comment on the characteristics of the two new games and how they compare to *The Stanley Parable*. In regard to *Minecraft*, for example, once he has demonstrated the typical exploration, resource, and building components of Mojang's sandbox survival game, the Narrator soon remarks: "This is far more open-ended than I had in mind. I'm looking for something more narrow and linear, something that makes you feel utterly irrelevant. This won't do it at all" ("Games" ending). In other words, through his commentary, the Narrator in this sequence draws explicit attention to video game genre characteristics and once more comments on the effects they have on the player's experience (in this case specifically on his or her feelings of agency). In contrast, Stanley's, the player's and the Narrator's arrival in *Portal* causes the latter to remark that "You... trapped in a glass box, with no way out, listening to me talk... Oh, it's inspired. I couldn't have done it any better myself." ("Games" ending). This time, the Narrator first references the similarities between *Portal* and *The Stanley Parable* (setting, tone, prominent voice-over narration) before moving on to discover the deviating and genre-defining puzzle-solving elements central to Valve's game and sarcastically rejoicing: "Critical thinking, Stanley. Your forte" ("Games" ending).

In the long run, however, the Narrator does not derive enough pleasure from watching Stanley and the player engage with other people's games. Therefore, he eventually almost petulantly encloses Stanley in a section of *Portal* he seemingly cannot leave and announces:

So, why don't you get cozy in this room, and if you have any grand revolutionary ideas for the perfect videogame, you can just sit there and let it ball up inside you for all eternity. I don't need your advice. I don't need your ratings. And I certainly don't need the validation of a man whose job is to push buttons. I think I'll just go about my business making meaningful cultural contributions to the world. And perhaps every now and then, I'll think back to a man named Stanley who was objectively wrong in every decision he ever made. The thought won't last long. ("Games" ending)

Thus, having already parodied beta-testing and game-reviewing processes, *The Stanley Parable*'s "Games" ending finally also metareferentially tackles the topic of developer responses to criticism. The commonplace rebuttals of "if critics have so many great ideas why do they not execute them" and of "players just press keys while developers are true artists" are both implicitly referred to within the Narrator's short monologue, accompanied by the

expressed belief that due to this inferiority of both critics and players game developers (in this case represented by the Narrator himself) do not really need either of these groups to exist.

Whilst the Narrator, at least in this moment of frustration, seems to be completely certain of the opinion he is voicing, the pouty tone of his delivery triggers images of a sulking child in the player instead of visions of a declaration of independence. This idea is further reinforced by the metareferential context provided by the rest of *The Stanley Parable* (especially throughout the “Museum” and “Escape Pod” endings), which establishes on multiple occasions beyond any reasonable doubt that the Narrator is in truth nothing without Stanley and the players. Through this context, the Narrator’s postulation that developers and their games can exist and, more importantly, can fulfil any kind of purpose in a vacuum is immediately revealed to be short-sighted and utterly lacking in self-awareness.

The longer the player remains within the enclosed *Portal* space without restarting the game, the more and more stubborn and infantile the Narrator’s monologue gets, eventually culminating in the following trailing-of speech: “He’ll understand soon what I was trying to tell him. [...] Oh, yes. Yes, I’ll be back. There’s no other way. Once this ends, after it all comes to a close, then I’ll be back. The end will be here soon. Very soon. I can wait. ...” (“Games” ending). Yet of course, if a creator fully isolates him- or herself from his or her audience, no understanding can ever happen for there is in fact no communication which could initialise it. Therefore, as long as Stanley and the player are stuck in the *Portal* world, the Narrator is equally stuck, waiting, in a personal narrative which cannot progress without interaction.

6.3.3 Conclusion: Metareferences in *The Stanley Parable*’s True Ending

The final ending of *The Stanley Parable* which deserves further analysis is one I have, in fact, already mentioned before. The ending in question is the “Choice” ending, which does not actually end in the parodistic instructional video my examination of it finished with. In fact, two separate paths open up for the player as soon as the instructional footage ends. First, however, upon regaining sight of the office building environment in which Stanley is standing, the player is confronted with the circumstance that, as the Narrator observes, “this room has begun to deteriorate as a result of narrative contradiction” (“Choice” ending). More specifically, the extradiegetic player’s metaleptic intrusion into the story – or rather the Narrator’s sudden awareness of it – is depicted as having caused a breakdown of textures, code-elements are suddenly exposed as visible lettering, objects begin to randomly merge and

clip with each other, etc. In short, the Narrator's sudden awareness of the presence of a "real person" is shown to have resulted in his quite literal inability to uphold the immersive illusion and to keep the mediated and constructed nature of the environment hidden. Instead, the medium-specific skeleton of all components suddenly rises to the surface, to the quite literal, physical and visual forefront of the player's and the Narrator's attention.

Upon seeing this deteriorated state of the environment, the Narrator explains that "this place is not well-equipped to deal with reality" and urges the player to return to the story so that "the story will have resolution once again, and you'll be home free in the real world!". In other words, the Narrator invites the player to re-immense him- or herself back into the narrative, by drawing attention to the captivating nature of an unresolved story. After all, unless they actively dislike and therefore abandon a game or narrative for good, most players (or recipients in general) will feel invested in and therefore bound to that game or narrative until they have mastered all obstacles, tied-up all loose ends, and thus can truly proclaim that they have "beaten" the game and are now "home free".

As is typical of *The Stanley Parable's* gameplay loop, the player at this point has to choose whether or not he or she wants to heed the Narrator's urgings. If the player refuses to follow the Narrator's instructions, the environments throughout the building deteriorate further and further and the Narrator cannot stop the process even through attempted restarts. As his frustration grows he eventually exclaims "What did you think was so special about seeing the game undone? [...] You – who thought you were so clever. [...] What, did you think it would be funny? You just had to see?" ("Choice" ending), thus once more exposing and discussing possible motivations behind deviant player behaviour.

If, instead, the player chooses to follow the Narrator's instructions, the latter leads the player and the protagonist back to Stanley's boss's office where they should be able to resume the story. However, the layout and features of the office are slightly different this time around compared to those present in the direct "Freedom" ending. Most significantly, instead of being controlled by a keypad, the door to the secret Mind Control Facility now sports a voice-activated lock. Accordingly, the Narrator's description of the door-opening sequence is also different and goes as follows: "Stanley had been trained never to speak up, but now he would draw from within himself the courage to face the unknown. He drew a sharp breath, and then spoke the code" ("Choice" ending). Yet Stanley, as discussed before, of course does not actually have a voice with which to speak the code (arguably symbolic of the fact that Stanley the fixed construct cannot suddenly develop courage just because of the *player's* deviant behaviour), thus the player cannot do anything but stand in front of the door in silence.

Furious, the Narrator verbally attacks the player for once again boycotting his narrative and shouts “Speak! Say something to me! Explain yourself! You coward!!” (“Choice” ending) – but, of course, the player cannot. Despite the Narrator being able to seemingly transgress diegetic boundaries by addressing the player directly, the player him- or herself cannot talk back. He or she can neither physically enter the narrative world to activate the lock nor can he or she answer the Narrator. Thus in contrast to the “Choice” ending’s earlier focus on the player as a “real person” capable of affecting meaningful change within the narrative across diegetic levels, this late section of the ending specifically exposes the limitations of the player’s transgressive potential. In this moment of the story both the Narrator and the player thus become arguably the most aware of the exact framework of the medial and narrative systems at work in *The Stanley Parable* – and on this realisation the screen fades to black.

A few seconds later, the game resumes yet the (physical) perspective from which the player is observing events has changed dramatically. Whereas up to this point – in true first-person-game fashion – the angle of the virtual camera has always suggested that the player is looking out through Stanley’s eyes, in these final moments of the “Choice” ending the virtual camera is floating above what seems to be the suddenly translucent ceiling of the game’s offices. Upon looking down, the player for the first time since the opening cutscene can actually see the figure of Stanley, standing far beneath the player in front of the two open doors which, according to the “Museum” ending, constitute the heart of *The Stanley Parable*’s metareferential story. Furthermore, the player can also hear the Narrator’s respective instructions again – though only quietly since the Narrator’s voice also originates from a lower (in this case physical as well as diegetic) plane and thus is muffled by the ceiling.

With the player now separated from the protagonist by a physical fourth wall (or ceiling), Stanley of course cannot move, not to mention make a choice. Eventually, witnessing his protagonist’s utter inactivity, the Narrator’s voice begins to grow increasingly sadder and sadder as he keeps trying to convince Stanley to walk through one of the doors.

I... I need you to make a choice. [...] the story needs you. It needs you to make a decision. It cannot exist without you. [...] Whatever choice you make is just fine, they are both correct; you cannot be wrong here. We can work together; I’ll accept whatever you do. [...] Please? Choose? Do something? Anything. This is more important than you can ever know. I need this. The story needs it. [...] That’s alright. I’ll wait for you to decide what is the right thing to do. Take as much time as you need...

With this, the Narrator’s voice slowly trails off and the words “The end” appear in floating text on the screen, followed by “Thank you for playing” and a classic credits roll.

This floating text, only present at the end of this specific ending, makes it clear that the “Choice” ending – whilst leaving the Narrator in limbo – is the one meant to serve as the ultimate conclusion (or “true ending”) for the player. This in turn identifies the Narrator’s final plea and the sequence’s visual focus on the player’s external and superior position as the last words, or moral, of *The Stanley Parable*. Through them, Wreden’s game summarises its main metareferential ideas one last time: it emphasises the existentially double-coded importance of choices; it draws attention to the medial, diegetic and interactive structures at work in video games; and, finally, through the Narrator’s emotional appeal, it foregrounds the fact that without players interacting with them and engaging with their worlds, games would, essentially, be deprived of their life force.

7. Metareference in Contemporary Narrative Online Video

With vlogs, web-series and online video in general being such a young medium, in-depth theoretical studies on the subject are still a comparative rarity⁷⁶. Consequently, this introductory chapter will be very brief. The formats have, however, been around for long enough to develop their own themes and language⁷⁷, as well as to become aware of these themes and language – thus making metareferential works possible.

Andreas Mahler has argued that “[t]alking about what you are doing (instead of simply doing it) seems to have become increasingly fashionable throughout the last couple of decades” (52). And while Mahler is talking specifically about contemporary writing and art, the popularity of social media, blogs and vlogs through which people continuously commentate their own lives certainly confirms his thesis for the online world as well. In addition, as Wolfgang Funk has pointed out, the transitions between fiction and reality are often particularly fluid in online media (cf. 127). This can be seen, for example, in the virtual reality premises of sites such as *Second Life*, in the supposedly “authentic” whilst still highly produced nature of YouTube and Instagram content, or even just in the most generic of online features, the anonymous internet handle, which allows users to pretend to be whoever they want (cf. Funk 127). This combination of established “talking about doing” patterns, of conscious self-stylisation and of fluid boundary transitions makes online content a perfect medium for metareferential discussions, which is why I have included it in this study despite its still comparatively limited corpus of fully metareferential works.

For my analysis, I have chosen the YouTube series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-2013) as a prime example for the metareferential potential of online media⁷⁸. On the one hand, YouTube itself by way of being the “fastest-growing site in the history of the Web” (Snickars and Vorderau 11), the “very epitome of digital culture” (Snickars and Vorderau 11) and part of the “cultural *zeitgeist* around the world” (Lange, “(Mis)conceptions” 87) is arguably the perfect platform to be examined in a study like mine which is interested in the role media are

⁷⁶ For first studies trying to define YouTube as a medium in more detail, especially in regard to its place amongst other media and to its future cf. Hillrichs; Jenkins, “Nine Propositions”; Marek; as well as the readers edited by Snickars/Vonderau and Lovink/Niederer, respectively.

⁷⁷ For an analysis of how these themes and language are now even packaged into specific instruction manuals on how to do YouTube right cf. Müller.

⁷⁸ By choosing a web-series for my analysis I am, of course, neglecting a variety of more medially complex types of digital fiction. The main reason for this is that I consider it impossible to do those complexities any justice within one single chapter. For studies which provide a much better introduction to the subject matter than I would be able to cf. e.g. Bell, *Possible Worlds* and “I Felt like I’d Stepped out of a Different Reality”.

portrayed to play in our society. On the other hand, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* in particular are a highly metareferential work.

Firstly, by being an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the web-series delivers implicit commentary on the differences between its own medium and Austen's, as well as on the differences between the role of online content in our society and the role of literature in the early nineteenth century. Secondly, by combining elements of traditional scripted series with features of online vlogs, the web-series explores additional intermedial parallels whilst also discussing defining characteristics of its own medium. Thirdly, by surrounding their web-series with an entire network of additional online content, the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* provide metareferential commentary on more than just one section of the worldwide web. Finally, in an age in which studies report strikingly high numbers of teenagers in particular consuming, creating and sharing online media content (cf. e.g. Jenkins 3), metareferential online content aimed specifically at these teenagers, portraying these teenagers, and attempting to raise their self- and medium-awareness carries additional significance.

7.1 Metareference in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*⁷⁹

My name is Lizzie Bennet, and this is my [vlog].
(*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, signature opening phrase)

Created by Hank Green and Bernie Su, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are mostly a fictional YouTube vlog series, in which a modern-day American version of Austen's heroine shares her life with the world as part of a university project required for her advanced degree in mass communication. Over the course of exactly one hundred short episodes, the series subsequently tells its adaptation of the *Pride and Prejudice* story through typical vlog-style narration and re-enactments by Lizzie, as well as through guest appearances by other characters. Using Rainer Hillrichs' terminology, the episodes include a large variety of vlog sub-genres from "public diary clips" (Hillrichs 100) to "subject clips" (Hillrichs 102) to "parodic performance videos" (Hillrichs 103).

These core vlogs are further supplemented by fictional twitter and Facebook accounts for most characters, by a homepage for modern-day Darcy's company Pemberley Digital, by a LinkedIn profile for Mr. Collins, a Lookbook profile for Jane, a This Is My Jam account for Georgiana and by several additional short vlog series by other characters such as Lydia⁸⁰ or Charlotte's sister Maria⁸¹, all of which provide viewers with additional perspectives on events. Which character followed which when on social media, what web design elements were chosen by the different characters for the layouts of their respective homepages and channels⁸², what types of videos the different characters are making – all these elements are used in a creative, meaningful and highly metareferential manner by Green, Su and their team to contribute to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' narrative.

This narrative, meanwhile, strives to incorporate all iconic elements of Austen's classic work (incl. finding an ingenious way to keep the famous opening sentence despite the change of narrative voice and perspective) and to translate the novel's core ideas into a modern-day setting, demonstrating their continued relevance in the process. In accordance with recent

⁷⁹ For a previously published essay of mine on this topic with a slightly different focus cf. Baeva, "My Name is Lizzie Bennet".

⁸⁰ Cf. *The Lydia Bennet*.

⁸¹ Cf. *Maria of the Lu*.

⁸² This aspect of Green's and Su's creative web of course mirrors the meaningful use of design in Austen's original portrayal of Mr. Darcy's estate, thus suggesting a parallel between the role homes played in the early nineteenth century and the role homepages play today.

theories of what constitutes a “good” adaptation⁸³, the focus of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* throughout all this lies not only on the factual transposition of early-nineteenth-century plot-elements into an early-twenty-first-century setting but on finding the modern-day emotional as well as cultural equivalents of the original issues depicted through the plot.⁸⁴

Specifically, this means that just like *Pride and Prejudice*⁸⁵, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* aim to portray the society of their time and to expose the social conventions at work. Even more specifically, just like Austen’s novel, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* focus on the societal expectations placed on both women and men, on the norms governing social interactions and communication, and on what constitutes socially acceptable behaviour. What makes this focus particularly interesting from the perspective of a metareferential study is the fact that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* suggest that in addition to the (economic) status and gender considerations described by Austen⁸⁶, “new media” – and social media in particular – are one of the main factors shaping our social lives today.

This belief is what makes *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* so highly metareferential. It transforms the vlog series from a merely heteroreferential new media work about social norms to a *metareferential* new media work about (amongst other things) the impact of new media on our society. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* consequently discuss that very impact both by implicitly portraying and thus exposing the new media tropes which shape our societal conventions and by depicting explicit conversations and monologues which in turn analyse those tropes, curtesy of Lizzie’s degree in mass communication. In addition, the aforementioned tweets, Facebook posts, comments and websites expose further influential new media tropes by mimicking real-life linguistic and visual features of online self-stylisation and communication.⁸⁷

⁸³ For introductions to such theories of adaptation as ‘translation’ or ‘appropriation’ cf. e.g. Emig; Leitch; Nicklas; Lindner.

⁸⁴ For the purposes of this chapter, I will restrict my analysis as much as possible to the specifically metareferential features of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. For a more detailed analysis of the web-series as an adaptation cf. Baeva, “My Name is Lizzie Bennet”.

⁸⁵ Cf. e.g. Deresiewicz as well as McMaster for Austen as a “social commentator” (McMaster 114); Tanner for Austen’s writings as “detailed analyses of social manners” (xiv); Todd for Austen’s depiction of women and society (cf. 139, 142).

⁸⁶ For a study which, from a feminist perspective, focuses much more in-depth on these first aspects of the adaptation cf. Kostadinova.

⁸⁷ Since I am neither a linguist nor a scholar of design, I will focus my analysis predominantly on the metareferential elements of the core web-series – especially so since my study aims to examine narrative media, and twitter, Facebook and company websites do not really qualify as such, even if as demonstrated by Green and Su they certainly can be used for narrative purposes. For more detailed analyses of the transmedial aspects of this adaptation I therefore recommend Jandl; Seymour; Tepper.

7.1.1 The Medial Features of Web-Video

On a highly implicit level, already the most basic stylistic and medial changes made to the *Pride and Prejudice* narrative in the process of the adaptation can be seen as double-coded, metareferential demonstrations of certain new media features. For example, Austen's characteristic narrative voice is replaced with Lizzie's own highly characteristic and yet typical of vlogs first-person narration directly into the camera, thus exposing the new medium's inherently different "narrative" structure and seemingly stronger focus on a more personal (and arguably more intimate), immediate communication of thoughts. Furthermore, the entire narrative is broken down into thematically self-contained, three-to-five-minute-long audio-visual chunks which utilise further vlog-typical elements such as medium close-up framing, blurred backdrops of cosy and orderly rooms, and perfectly yet softly lit faces⁸⁸. In short, every cinematographic choice made in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is firmly guided by established vlog formulas. The professionally produced, fictional web-series aspect of the show merely shines through in the strikingly high production quality of each of the copied elements.

What is metareferentially striking about all these copied elements, meanwhile, is the fact that they are exactly those which help create the aforementioned feeling of immediacy and intimacy whilst at the same time also constructing a highly stylised image of what immediacy and intimacy are. In other words, the elements adopted by *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* strongly contribute to the in-between fiction and reality position of online media such as vlogs previously described by Funk. Specifically – taking the idea that television brought anchors and entertainers right into people's living rooms one step further – through their choice of setting and backdrops, vlogs suggest that they are taking the audience directly into the content creators' most private and personal space. Combined with the fact that online videos are frequently consumed on mobile phones and home computers within the audience's private space as well, vlogs are thus firmly built upon the idea of unique levels of intimacy.

At the same time, however, the medium close-up framing and blur filters commonly used in vlogs and consciously mimicked by *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* make sure that the audience is still kept at just the right level of distance: they restrict the view of the private space to just what the creators are comfortable sharing and they place the camera just far enough from the

⁸⁸ For more in-depth introductions to the audio-visual and performative conventions of video logs in general as well as to their general functions and effects cf. Hillrichs, especially 9-10, 128-150, 214-259; also Broeren, especially 158-159; Harley and Fitzpatrick.

vlogger to mask any potential “imperfections”. Similarly, the soft-lighting and warm colours further contribute to the creation of a homely and inviting atmosphere whilst – sometimes unnoticeably – enhancing, polishing and thus stylizing and constructing the vlogger’s seemingly personal and “authentic” space.

Notably, however, the fictional narrative and professional production quality of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* make sure that none of these elements really go unnoticed. They move Green’s and Su’s creation just enough towards the blatantly mediated side of the fiction / reality spectrum to expose the series’ constructed nature whilst still remaining in close enough proximity to traditional in-between vlogs to encourage viewers to draw parallels and thus to notice the constructed nature of the latter medium as well. The same effect is further achieved by *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*’ inclusion of additional medium-specific yet also actively medium-revealing features such as jump-cuts, signature openers, and floating text, all of which further remind viewers that what they are watching is a constructed piece of art.

Whilst all these referenced vlog features are so extremely implicitly metareferential that viewers could easily miss their metareferential message – after all, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* do not even reference the tropes by breaking them and thus making them stand out – other increasingly explicit metareferential elements of the web-series incessantly contextualise their implicit brothers and sisters, thus aiding the latter’s salience. On a small scale, already the repeated number of times in which Charlotte (the initial camera operator of Lizzie’s videos) is portrayed to enter the frame only to soon return to her usual position behind the camera (cf. e.g. ep. 1 1:22; ep. 42 2:12-2:38) continuously remind viewers of the presence of that very same camera. Similarly, the always visible script pages for the costume theatre sequences (cf. e.g. ep. 1 1:30), through exaggeration, draw the audience’s attention to the fact that not all that happens on a web-camera is improvised. Most importantly, however, due to her pursuit of an advanced degree in mass communication, Lizzie herself is portrayed as a protagonist who is very aware of the different features and components of web-video, as well as of the specific audio-visual and narrative tools she herself employs in her vlogs. The few times she is not, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* specifically use these cases to portray their protagonist’s development *into* becoming aware, thus mirroring the motif of personal growth through increased (self-) awareness already central to Austen’s original narrative.

Lizzie’s more common state of full awareness is usually depicted in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* in the form of either monologues by Lizzie or dialogues between her and Charlotte, in which the protagonist (and her friend) explicitly discuss(es) the videos the two are making. The web-series portrays debates about the right way to open (cf. e.g. ep. 5 0:27) and end (cf.

e.g. ep. 3 2:58-3:03) a video as well as about how many subjects should be addressed (cf. ep. 11 2:31); there are references to viewers (cf. ep. 21 0:46-0:56, 1:16) and playlists (cf. ep. 27 0:27); there are honest admissions that certain things, such as cute cat videos, are shown to boost view numbers (cf. ep. 10 0:04-0:20); there are elaborations on how copyright issues prevent Lizzie from singing Christmas songs on camera (cf. ep. 75 0:49-1:08); there is an entire episode filmed at Vidcon⁸⁹ (cf. ep. 25 2:25-3:00); there is a discussion between Lizzie and Charlotte as to how polished a video should be since viewers demand a feeling of “authenticity” (cf. ep. 8 0:00-0:14); there is even an almost academic conversation between Darcy and Lizzie on the concept of hyper-mediation and the function of costume theatre in her videos (cf. ep. 80 1:37-2:20).

In short, throughout their one hundred episodes, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* refer to a wide range of medium-related features and considerations. Whereas the discussions about openings, endings and subject matter focus on matters of content and demonstrate that there are more complex issues at work than merely whether a scene is scripted or not, conversations about viewers, viewer numbers and viewer demands expose the constant audience-awareness of creators and already hint at the highly controlled and calculated mercantile aspects of content creation. Furthermore, references such as the one mentioning playlists even draw attention to the external, technical features of the platforms which host the actual content. Finally, the narrative implementation of Vidcon further acknowledges external elements which have grown as part of a new medium-surrounding industry.

7.1.2 The Social Significance of New Media

As this short summary shows, many of the series’ in-character conversations about web-video often centre around fictio-metareferences which discuss the medium’s components, goals and identity. Yet *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* also contain additional explicitly metareferential exchanges which provide commentary on the moral, ethical and social implications and effects of the medium’s features – especially as they relate to the topics of social interactions and norms, of public and personal perception, central to both *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and Austen’s original text. Throughout these exchanges, the web-series portrays the potential pitfalls of new media as well as their ultimate strengths.

⁸⁹ The biggest annual convention for online video content, originally conceived by Green and his brother John Green. Designed as both an industry and a community event, Vidcon provides opportunities for networking, for learning about content production and marketing, and last but not least for interactions with fans.

Implicitly exaggerated through *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' high production quality and explicitly discussed by Lizzie and Charlotte, already the visual polish-providing elements typical of a lot of web-content can be seen as ethically significant. After all, it is highly important for (especially young) viewers' own self-esteem, as well as for their view of content creators and people in general, that they are aware that what they see in vlogs and other new media is, on average, only the best part of a person's life. No matter how more immediate and "authentic" online content appears to be in comparison to, for example, movies or television series, it is still as mediated and constructed as any other artform. To use a concept already existing in Austen's time and purposefully evoked by *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, what creators choose to show in their vlogs is the twenty-first century equivalent of their 'public face'. This public face does not need to be a fully disingenuous mask yet more often than not it is a person's most presentable, most accomplished, most composed and thus far from truly "authentic" persona. Being conscious of this fact and knowing how to engage with it appropriately is thus a central skill in regards to mature and mindful media consumption, and to mature social interactions in any public setting as well.

In addition to this intricate relationship with the medium's perceived "authenticity", the constructed nature of web-video can, as with every medium, also become ethically and socially relevant through its effect on the objectivity of the content. As argued before, the perceived intimacy of the seemingly received access to a creator's life and thought processes constitutes one of the most appealing qualities of new media content. Vlogs, blogs, a variety of social media – they are all built upon the premise that viewers (or readers) want to hear (or read) a certain creator's opinion on a given subject or even just want to see this particular creator document his or her life and review his or her personal experiences. Yet while new media platforms really do provide unprecedented opportunities in this regard, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* also make sure to point out how detrimental it can be if audiences forget that what they are consuming is a highly personal, subjective and accordingly edited view of those experiences.

In the web-series' twelfth episode, Lizzie introduces this topic of subjectivity by exclaiming about her own content: "Of course I'm *biased*, it's *my* video blog!" (ep. 12 0:45) – and this exclamation is highly indicative of the means through which matters of perception and objectivity are approached throughout the entirety of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. For this very bias inherent to Lizzie's vlog is what Green, Su and their team use as the metareferential focal point for the two eponymous traits of Austen's novel to expose how 'pride' and

‘prejudice’ – encouraged by new media – still thwart our perception of our surroundings till the present day.

Austen frequently depicts her characters’ biases by constructing a narrative which, at least initially, incites readers to make the very same wrong judgements. For this purpose, she often introduces new characters and situations through the limited perspective of another character first rather than through an objective description given by an omniscient narrator⁹⁰. The introduction of secondary characters in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* through Lizzie’s highly biased vlog commentary directly continues this stylistic tradition. Throughout the web-series, viewers are repeatedly encouraged to laugh along with Lizzie’s costume-theatre-parodies and biting narration and to thus participate in her acts of ridicule directed against her mother, Darcy (as Mr. Darcy is referred to in this adaptation) or Bing Lee (the modern-day Asian American version of Mr. Bingley) for quite some time before they ever catch an on-camera glimpse of the objects of this mockery and thus receive an opportunity to form their own, less biased opinions⁹¹.

While Austen’s novel presents proud and prejudiced behaviour in the early nineteenth century as a personal flaw unintentionally nurtured by societal norms (cf. e.g. Deresiewicz 504-505), *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* metareferentially suggest that in the twenty-first century this particular flaw is also very much enabled by social media. In the web-series, Lizzie’s highly sarcastic commentary on her social surroundings is (at least initially) presented as *the* main defining feature of her vlog and the basis for her quickly increasing popularity and channel growth. The idea of gossip as a form of communal entertainment, established in *Pride and Prejudice*, is thus shown by *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* to be still alive and well in present-day society, and to have, in fact, even been elevated into an actual medial art form with thousands of online followers. Furthermore, just like the original Elizabeth is frequently shown to imbue her gossip with extra wit in an attempt to entertain and impress the people around her, Lizzie is shown to grow increasingly “witty” – which considering her style of observational comedy more often than not translates into increasingly nasty – in her commentary throughout her early vlogs, arguably for the main purpose of impressing her viewers and attracting new ones.

⁹⁰ A good example is the scene in chapter three of the novel, in which Mr. Darcy is introduced through the way he is perceived by the Longbourn society: first as “*pronounced* [...] to be a fine figure of a man”, soon “*discovered* to be proud” (Austen 12, my emphasis).

⁹¹ (Mr.) Darcy, for example, only fully appears on-screen in the sixtieth episode of the web-series while the first detailed on-screen description of him by Lizzie occurs as early as episode six.

To give some examples, Darcy is first described in an episode titled “Snobby Mr. Douche” (ep. 6), and this is, actually, one of the nicest things Lizzie has to say about him at this point. Similarly, the web-series’ protagonist unabashedly calls Mr. Collins a “narcissistic”, “self-absorbed” “dick” on camera (cf. ep. 25 2:25-3:00). Finally, Lizzie repeatedly reduces her young sister Lydia to the butt of a joke, calling her a “humps the neighbour’s leg, never know where she sleeps puppy” (cf. ep. 2 1:11), a “stupid whorey slut” (cf. ep. 2 0:11) and a “boy-crazy, completely irresponsible substance-abuser” (cf. ep. 23 3:23) throughout a number of different episodes. Engulfed in her desire to produce appealing content, Lizzie thus demonstrates an ever-growing disregard for the feelings of the people she ridicules and, more importantly, for the damage her very public shaming – shaming that she would never be able to fully remove from the internet – could do to their reputations. In other words, for the sole purpose of entertainment, Lizzie is shown to engage in typical internet “troll” behaviour – and, most strikingly, she seems to do so entirely unwittingly. For all her academic engagement with the subject, the early Lizzie is portrayed as strikingly unaware (or at least as strikingly in denial) of the consequences which come from the strong societal impact potential of her chosen medium.

The ethically highly problematic nature of this behaviour is the next core element of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*’ metareferential message. Ultimately, the web-series makes sure to confront its protagonist with the full extent of new media’s impact potential, raising both the protagonist’s and the audience’s awareness of the issues involved at the same time. In particular, Green, Su and their team achieve this goal through their adaptation of Lydia’s plotline. In the weeks leading up to the release of the relevant episodes, the comment sections of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (as can be seen till the present day) were filled with real-life YouTube commenters discussing what the appropriate modern-day version of Lydia’s story should be, seeing how elopement and/or pre-marital sex generally do not carry quite the same social stigma today as they did in the early nineteenth century. The two most common assumptions suggested that the young Bennet sister would either get pregnant or raped (or both). Instead, however, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*’ presented a much more metareferential adaptation of the narrative which further established the web-series’ overall theme of ‘the effect of new media on our society’: in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the psychologically abusive Wickham manipulates the by then, thanks to her older sister, internet-famous Lydia into making a supposedly private sex-tape which he subsequently announces he will post on the internet in exchange for subscription fees.

This metareferential plot change combines the novel's portrayal of Lydia's socially frowned-upon, supposedly too sexual behaviour with references to new-media-specific, adjacent phenomena such as revenge porn sites and leaked sex tapes and/or nude pictures. By doing so, the web-series draws attention to some of the dark corners of the internet as well as to the still existing judgemental societal norms which give these dark corners their power. Throughout their portrayal of Lydia's medium- as well as society-induced downfall, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* furthermore particularly emphasise the emotional impact such a development can have on a (young) woman by depicting their late-stage Lydia – unlike Austen's – as fully aware of the potentially disastrous consequences of Wickham's manipulations for her future. Web-series Lydia does not need her sister to tell her that “the internet is forever” (ep. 85 3:34-3:44) and so the audience is forced to witness the young girl's otherwise high-energy spirit nearly being broken by the events. This darker and more disturbing approach to Lydia's story increases the plotline's emotional impact on both Lizzie and the audience, shocking both parties into a fuller awareness of the medium (and society) they are dealing with.

In the case of Lizzie, the web-series admittedly contains several earlier examples of a slowly awakening medium awareness when the protagonist, for instance, realises and explicitly comments that Darcy could actually sue her for some of the things she has said about him (cf. ep. 61 1:41-1:50); or when she is visibly shaken by the fact that Georgiana, at their first meeting, is already familiar with her videos (cf. ep. 77 1:45, 2:50). Still, it ultimately takes Lydia's tape for Lizzie to fully realise just how extreme the potential consequences of “exposing” one's self (cf. Austen 222) and one's life on the internet can be, as well as the consequences of exposing others. After all, whilst they are never explicitly acknowledged by Lizzie on camera, the parallels between the tape-based sexual shaming of Lydia by Wickham and Lizzie's own shaming portrayal of her younger sister in earlier episodes are glaring.

In other words, one of the main themes of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' metareferential message is a discussion of just what and how much one should share on the internet, and for what purpose⁹². The demeaning of others for the sake of entertainment, views, money or fame is unmistakably criticised – yet the potential for good inherent to a certain amount and certain types of openness is also immediately presented. For example, both Lydia (cf. e.g. ep.

⁹² For an analysis of the importance of these questions for vloggers and in the context of YouTube and social media in general cf. Lange, “Publicly Private”; as well as Strangelove, especially 4, 75.

94 0:26-0:36, 3:49-4:04) and Georgiana (cf. e.g. ep. 82 0:36-1:12) – like so many real-life vloggers (cf. Lange, “Vlogging” 298) – are eventually shown to express not only a desire but a need to appear on camera to publicly share their experiences with Wickham as a way of proving their own strength, of having their voices heard, and of hopefully helping others who might have had similar experiences. The importance of visibility and public discourse when it comes to difficult issues is thus addressed, as is the catharsis which can be achieved by sharing bad experiences, finding people who have had similar ones, realising that one is not alone, and consequently seeing that things can and *will* get better. And new media, according to Lydia and Georgiana, are a particularly well-suited platform for all these processes.

In addition to the two topics of gossip and (self-)exposure through new media, both of which correspond to questions of reputation, public perception, pride and prejudice raised in Austen’s novel, the next Austenian theme *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* tackle is that of interpersonal communication. In *Pride and Prejudice* the still rigid social norms of the period regarding cross-gender and cross-class interactions (cf. e.g. Russell) are portrayed as the source of many misunderstandings and are therefore subjected to criticism. In contrast, in our current society, social media has seemingly opened up an unprecedented amount of communication channels across all societal boundaries. Whether these channels, however, are utilised for good and to the full extent of their potential is an entirely different question, and one which *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* discuss in detail⁹³.

For this purpose, the web-series is full of examples of modern-day media-based communication. Whereas Austen’s neighbourhood women, for instance, still needed to meet up on the street to exchange the latest news, Lizzie explains that her mother and the latter’s friends are using Facebook to exchange information about the newly arrived Bing Lee (cf. ep. 4 0:32). The young generation’s new means of communication, meanwhile, are portrayed to be even more versatile when in the same episode Lydia explains her own method of learning more about Bing Lee with the words “I talked to Marie, who texted Ben, who called his--” (ep. 4 1:53) – at which point Lizzie cuts her off.

Notable throughout all these examples is the fact that all the new technological means of communication, at least in early episodes, are thus shown to be predominantly used for the exchange of gossip rather than to facilitate serious interpersonal exchange. This motif is expanded upon in later episodes of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* when the web-series further

⁹³ For an analysis of these very same questions in regards to YouTube’s general potential as a social platform cf. Harley and Fitzpatrick.

suggests that new and social media might, in fact, not be well-suited for important conversations at all as these types of media seem to tend to encourage people to talk *at* each other rather than *with* each other. For example, just like in Austen's novel and despite the modern communication channels at his disposal, Bing Lee never talks to Jane about his impending departure from Netherfield – he *does*, however, publicly *tweet* how much he is looking forward to spending time in Los Angeles (cf. @bingliest as well as on-screen mention in ep. 47 3:33-3:43). Jane, who Bing knows is following him on the platform, thus still receives the news from him – yet in one of the most impersonal ways possible. In addition to this twitter example, each and every instance of characters following and unfollowing each other on social media can be seen as a further illustration of characters publicly yet indirectly voicing their opinions about each other without actually having to express their thoughts and feelings face-to-face. Finally, and even more blatantly, the core web-series itself repeatedly portrays Lizzie and Lydia as – instead of just sitting down and talking *with* each other – spending large portions of their respective vlogs either talking *about* each other or talking passive-aggressively at the camera for the sole (sometimes even explicitly acknowledged) purpose of having their respective sister hear what they have to say when the latter watches the video (cf. e.g. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* ep. 74 1:07-2:40, ep. 76 3:05-3:20; *The Lydia Bennet* ep. 24 2:29-3:22).

In other words, time and time again throughout the series, instead of presenting new media as a means of bridging the communicational divides of Austen's early nineteenth-century society, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* depict entirely new divides created or at least facilitated by the new technology. In contrast, all deep, meaningful and life-changing communication between characters is shown to happen in the form of two people talking to/with each other, face to face, either in front or more often even away from the camera. The only instances in which serious communication is depicted as happening through the medium of the internet are the aforementioned videos of Lydia and Georgiana addressing the audience, as well as the later and thus more mature and self-aware videos of Lizzie addressing her audience to share what she has learned through her experiences. In those instances, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* notably acknowledge new media's powerful potential for sharing important (and/or entertaining) insights and ideas with others and thus learning from each other's experiences. Still, when it comes to complex interpersonal communication, the importance of a non-mediated, direct, two-way exchange is emphasised.

7.1.3 The Business versus the Art of Online Content Creation

The final theme of Austen's novel metareferentially incorporated into *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is the theme of money. Whilst the adaptation also addresses many not media-related economic facets of contemporary life, it goes into particular detail when it comes to the portrayal of the monetary aspects of web-video creation. The first character to bring up the subject and to thus put it in front of the camera in form of an explicit metareference is Mr Collins, who in this version of the story works for Mrs De Bourgh's venture capitalist company, which in turn is looking to expand its web-video department. Throughout his two main episodes, Mr Collins gives several speeches on the "untapped market potential" of web-video and describes the new medium as a "progressive new frontier" for which the young generations are leaving traditional media (cf. ep. 25 1:20-1:40; ep. 36 2:41-2:53). Thus dropping marketing buzzwords left, right and centre, Mr Collins furthermore explicitly lauds the market value of Lizzie's emotional connection to her audience (cf. ep. 36 3:38-3:44) – much to the latter's indignation.

In addition to the protagonist's own objections, Mr Collins' highly mercantile approach to Lizzie's content is eventually most strongly juxtaposed with Darcy's praise of Lizzie's vlogs, which in contrast focuses on the protagonist's ability to create works which "resonate" with viewers (ep. 83 1:49). In the process, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries'* metareferential twist to the function of both Collins and Darcy is revealed. Whereas in *Pride and Prejudice* the two men serve as representatives of the two arguably opposing early nineteenth-century marriage ideals of, on the one hand, financial security above all, and on the other self-fulfilment through love, the web-series uses the two characters to portray these very same ideals – only now in the context of content creation as a profession.

Metareferentially transformed into a representative of the financial stability which can come from working in a booming industry, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries'* Mr Collins does not offer first Lizzie and then Charlotte his hand in marriage but instead he offers the women a job at Mrs De Bourgh's company⁹⁴. There, they would be paid a comfortable salary to produce, according to Lizzie, "corporate videos, bad reality TV and pointless commentary vlogs" (ep. 42 3:12) – or in other words, to create shallow and market-oriented web-content which has no artistic, social or cultural value but simply generates a lot of money for different companies.

⁹⁴ For a more detailed analysis of this focus shift from love and marriage to career throughout the entirety of the web-series cf. Zerne.

Appalled by the idea, Lizzie, just like her literary predecessor, immediately declines Mr Collins' offer for ideological reasons. Her best friend Charlotte, however, burdened by debilitating debt and pressing familial responsibilities (cf. ep. 42 1:23-1:36), adopts a more realistic approach and accepts the job. This results in a dramatic on-camera argument between the two friends during which Lizzie vocally criticises Charlotte for giving up her passion, for abandoning her artistic pursuits and for outright "selling-out" (ep. 42 2:54). And with these final words, the web-series traces the most famous insult thrown at content creators today all the way back to Austen's ideas of passion above money and combines both ideas into one cohesive metareferential package (cf. Austen 120, 123; *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* ep. 42 1:54, 2:54-3:28).

This package is further enriched by additional less explosive yet equally explicit metareferential conversations between the two friends, all of which demonstrate Lizzie's and Charlotte's radically different approaches to the medium-based work they have chosen to do for a living. Whereas Lizzie is repeatedly shown to daydream about her friend's future fame (cf. ep. 16 1:21-1:31, 2:34) and about how she herself will "save the world [and] change the culture" (ep. 97 1:56; cf. also ep. 21 2:27-3:17), Charlotte is portrayed as someone who believes this type of success and idealistic dreams to be far too unpredictable to serve as a sustainable goal in life (cf. ep. 16 2:52-3:18). And throughout the entirety of the web-series, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* never resolve this dichotomy. With Lizzie calling Charlotte's approach "robotic", "cynical" and "clinical" (ep. 16 3:22, 3:27, 3:29), and with Charlotte defending her own position as "practical" and "sensible" (ep. 16 3:26, 3:28), *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* leave it to the audience to decide who of the two friends is in the right – or rather to realise that there might actually not be a 'right'.

Just as Lizzie – even more so than Elizabeth – eventually needs to become aware of her own naivety and to realise that she is judging her friend too harshly, so the web-series' viewers are encouraged to become aware of the fact that, in the end, just like every other medium (cf. e.g. Sorkin's metareferential elaborations on the topic), online content as an art form will always be torn between artistic and/or ideological considerations on the one hand, and material ones on the other. Rather than blindly ignoring this reality as Lizzie initially does, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* suggest that web-content creators and audiences should instead try to find ways to make the best of this situation. Eventually, Lizzie – just like Austen's own heroine – is shown to be lucky enough to experience both creative freedom and financial security through personal as well as professional support from Darcy. Charlotte's choice, however, is portrayed to be equally valid as she, with time, steadily (if very slowly)

begins to gain influence and thus regain her freedom in Mrs De Bourgh's company (cf. e.g. ep. 55 0:55-1:17, 2:25-2:38).

7.1.4 Conclusion: *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a Fully Metareferential Adaptation

As this chapter shows, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* – the last work I chose to analyse for my study – take *Pride and Prejudice*'s portrayal of a young woman's journey to self-awareness through a minefield of early nineteenth-century social norms and conventions and adapt it into a web-series which focuses specifically on the minefield of social *media* norms and conventions which impact our present-day society. In other words, while Austen's work itself already includes a variety of references to the role different artforms played in the author's society – from Elizabeth's reading habits, to Mr Darcy's art collection, to Georgiana's music, etc. – *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* through their fictional vlog setting and mass communication studying protagonist position their own references to new media entirely in the foreground of both the web-series and the viewers' attention. Their heroine's growth and increased self-awareness are thereby portrayed to go hand-in-hand with an increased medium-awareness which makes Lizzie a better, more compassionate and less judgmental person as well as a better content creator who uses her medial reach not merely to ridicule others but to address important issues and promote (self-)reflection and understanding⁹⁵. Combined with an overall increase in the frequency, explicitness and scope of the metareferences found throughout Green's and Su's work in comparison to Austen's, these changes to *Pride and Prejudice* made during the adaptation process make *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* a fully metareferential work.

Finally, as is typical of the genre, this fully metareferential work also contains a variety of medium-related messages for its viewers. Firstly, just as Elizabeth and her early nineteenth-century audience were encouraged to abandon their 'pride' and 'prejudice' to achieve happiness, Lizzie and her modern-day audience are encouraged to step beyond the use of social media as a gossip disseminator and mouthpiece for their opinionated selves, and to instead use the new technological means at their disposal to express their creativity and to connect with others. Secondly, the web-series' viewers are also urged to at least from time to time let go of what Jane in one episode refers to as the "safety-blanket" (ep. 33 0:28) of new

⁹⁵ Cf. e.g. the difference in Lizzie's initial use of costume theatre to mock Mrs Bennet (ep. 4 0:52-1:30) vs. her much later and much more sincere use of the same technique to try and imagine what Charlotte would say and do in a specific situation (ep. 96 2:33-3:08).

media and to enter into meaningful, real-life social interactions – for in the end, in the words of Lizzie herself, “[t]alking to the internet [is] not the same as talking to people” (ep. 96, 3:36).

8. Comparative Analysis and Resulting Conclusions

All theoretical considerations regarding the typology, functions, effects and topics of metareferences collected throughout this dissertation can eventually be subsumed into the following schematic:

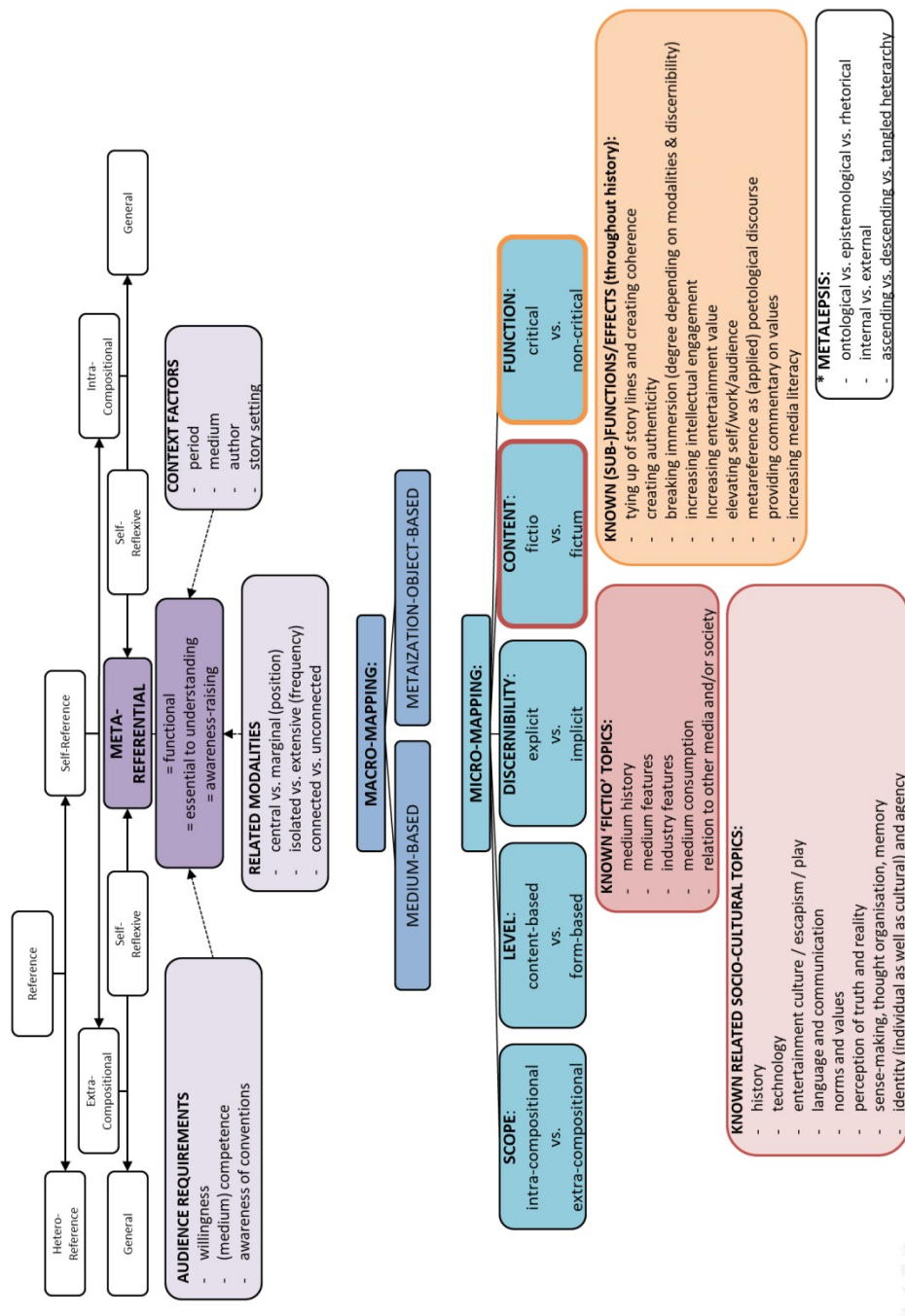


Fig. 2: Aspects of Metareference

If this schematic is then applied as an analytical template onto all the different works examined in this dissertation, a large number of similarities as well as several differences are revealed. Considering the focus of this dissertation, it is no surprise that the metareferential

elements in all works discussed are highly functional as well as essential to the understanding of the works at hand. Yet exactly how this essential role of metareferences is established and to what purpose, those are the questions which deserve a concluding comparative study.

8.1 Types of Metareferences Used in Contemporary Narrative Media

Starting from the top with Wolf's modal distinctions, a look at the different case studies included in my study shows that the metareferences in all works discussed are fluently connected to the non-metareferential parts of the respective narratives. The frequency of metareferential elements in all works is furthermore so extensive that metareferences can be found in all possible positions. Even in works such as *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and *Atonement* in which the ultimate revelation of the narrative's metareferential message is presented as a highly marginal final twist, there is always a lengthy build-up of smaller metareferences leading up to these endings. In *BioShock*, questions of agency, choice and personal freedom are central to every chapter of the game from the very first moment the protagonist and player encounter one of Andrew Ryan's slogans. In *SpecOps: The Line* the portrayal of the hardships of war interferes with the players' shooter-game power fantasy long before the ending exposes the full extent of Walker's trauma. Finally, the power and potential of narratives and their function are discussed continuously throughout *Atonement* long before the revelation of Briony's fictional authorship exposes the/her narrative's particular purpose.

It is, however, interesting to note that despite these similarities between the structure of the three works in question, one of the three final twists still has a particularly strong impact on the salience of the metareferential message of its respective narrative. Namely, whereas *SpecOps: The Line* and especially *Atonement* can be easily recognized by their respective audiences as metareferential works from very early on, *BioShock*'s build-up to the "would you kindly"-revelation is much subtler and thus needs the final twist to fully communicate its metareferential message. On the 'most obvious' end of this spectrum, *Atonement* contains so many content-based, explicit, both intra- and extra-compositional discussions of metareferential topics that the ultimate twist merely contributes one final part to an already clearly established whole. Similarly, *SpecOps: The Line*, while having much fewer explicit, verbalised references to video game violence and trauma, still breaks so many content-based and form-based narrative conventions so dramatically that only the most emotionally hardened of players would be able to resist the self- and metareferential impact.

In contrast, on the ‘least obvious’ end of the spectrum, *BioShock*’s early metareferences are so highly double-coded that without the narrative twist the parallels between the game’s themes and the player’s reality could easily be missed by recipients not particularly skilled in metaphor extrapolation. After all, on the content level, the game’s existential and philosophical debates about agency and individual freedoms could easily just be commenting on the in-game world, or at best on real-life politics in general. An application of these concepts onto *player* experiences, specifically, is in no way required for the narrative to make sense. Similarly, on the form level, the game’s metareferentially charged dynamic between Atlas’/the game’s instructions and the protagonist’s/player’s obedience is so perfectly in line with traditional medium conventions that very few if any players would automatically question it. In fact, *BioShock*’s eventual twist relies on exactly this lack of awareness for the “would you kindly”-revelation to have its desired dramatic, worldview-shattering effect.

As a result, more than any other work discussed in this paper, *BioShock* arguably warrants a second playthrough for a full, detailed understanding of all metareferential elements present in the game to take place. And yet, the extent of explicitness within the revelation itself, as well as the fact that the twist is not placed in a fully marginal final position but is still followed by multiple chapters in which the player and protagonist get to directly engage with the consequences of their newly acquired self-awareness make sure that the core of the game’s metareferential message is still blatantly clear by the end of the very first playthrough. While it might take longer for the different metareferential elements of *BioShock* to come together, in the end, the game follows the same pattern which can be observed in all works discussed in my study: it relays its final message through a calculated and precisely balanced unification of explicit and implicit metareferences.

In addition to providing different examples of how implicit and explicit elements within an extensively metareferential work can be combined to increase each other’s salience, the works discussed throughout my study furthermore all show how intra- and extra-compositional metareferences as well as content- and form-based metareferences can be equally intertwined to achieve the same effect of a heightened salience.

In regards to Wolf’s category of ‘scope’, the more established narrative media of literature, film and television have it particularly easy to refer back to a large number of classic predecessors. As a result, the number of the extra-compositional metareferences in the works from these media is especially high: most notably in *Atonement*, but also in the latter two Sorkin series, and of course in both *Shadow of the Vampire* and *Hugo*, in which – thanks to the narrative focus on the fictional versions of Murnau and Méliès – two specific extra-

compositional metareferences play a particularly central role. Still, this is not to say that new media are incapable of extra-compositional metareferences. Already *SpecOps: The Line* demonstrates through its adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* that video games are equally capable of referencing works from a variety of medial traditions; and *The Stanley Parable* even finds a way to incorporate two external games within itself. Finally, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' extra-compositional metareferences to the web-series' own medium admittedly restrict themselves to mere mentions of Vidcon and of general new media genres and features – yet even those few elements already acknowledge the forming of a tradition and thus hint at the ever-growing metareferential potential of this youngest medium.

What is particularly noteworthy about these uses of extra-compositional metareferences in all works discussed is the fact that in addition to providing commentary on predecessors, traditions and the respective medium in general, these metareferences are eventually almost always linked back to provide direct, intra-compositional commentary on the work at hand as well, or at least on the work-within-work present in so many of the covered narratives. For example, the discussion of classic narratives in *Atonement* says as much about the classic narratives as it does about Briony's and McEwan's narrative(s). *Shadow of the Vampire*'s statements about the Gothic nature of the film medium and industry as well as *Hugo*'s statements about the magical potential of both apply to the referenced films of Murnau and Méliès as much as to those of Merhige and Scorsese. Sorokin repeatedly uses extra-compositional references to predecessors to exemplify and explain his own characters' (and famously his own) goals behind their (and his) medial works. And finally, *Spec Ops: The Line* and even more so *The Stanley Parable* only reference external works and media to compare them to their own: *Spec Ops: The Line* implicitly demonstrates how video games can uniquely contribute to the discussion of the topics of Conrad's novel and Coppola's film, and *The Stanley Parable*'s Narrator explicitly comments on the similarities and differences between *Minecraft*, *Portal* and his own game. In short, as was the case with the implicit and explicit metareferences examined before, the extra-compositional and intra-compositional metareferences in the works at hand are all constructed to work together, constantly referring back and forth to each other and thus creating a metareferential whole.

This same approach is also taken by the works discussed in my study in regards to their use of content- and form-based metareferences. Both types are once more continuously combined to carry the individual works' respective messages. And it is particularly important to note that it really is *all* discussed works, no matter the medium, which contain meaningful metareferential commentary provided through both form *and* content. Traditionally, as seen in

chapter one, ‘form’ in this context is usually associated with the level of the narrative in literature. Yet as the works discussed in this study show, this is not the only viable option. Firstly, literature itself – as demonstrated by *The Book Thief* – can of course be metareferential on an even higher formal level outside the narrative, for example by using font and layout features to evoke the hand-written nature of Max’s book and contrast it with the print format we usually associate with the medium today. Secondly, the works discussed in chapters four through seven further show that film, television, video games and web-video all equally have their own unique ways of being metareferential on a form level.

The most common method of form-based metareference in all these audio-visual media is the functional and salient play with medium- and/or genre-typical audio-visual devices such as lighting, framing, editing or sound-design for the specific purpose of bringing the use of these devices to the audience’s attention. Video games, however, as seen in all three examples discussed in this dissertation, have an additional level through which they can transmit metareferences (and meaning in general), namely that of the game rules and mechanics. Located on a diegetically fascinating intersection between the player and content levels, these mechanics are uniquely well-suited to have a simultaneous effect on both the story world and the player’s real-life experience, and to therefore blur diegetic boundaries in a traditionally metareferential manner. In other words, rather than needing to *break* a fourth wall to directly address their audience, video games thus already have a unique feature natively built-in the whole purpose of which is to facilitate and simulate communication across the fourth wall. This feature, utilized meaningfully and metareferentially in all three games discussed in this paper as well as in all games mentioned at the end of the medium’s introductory chapter, makes the study of metareferential video games particularly fruitful and warrants a much more in-depth analysis in the future.

Finally, moving on to Wolf’s category of metareference ‘content’, a comparison between all works discussed in my study suggests that, unlike their Postmodern predecessors, contemporary metareferential media contain far more fictio-metareferences than they do fictum-metareferences. True, *Atonement*’s final part calls the “authenticity” of the narrated ending of Robbie and Cecilia’s story into question; true, *Shadow of the Vampire* includes several conversations on the topic of realism in cinema; true, *The Stanley Parable* destroys any chance of Stanley’s world being considered a ‘real’ one already at the game’s first narrative crossroads; and true, the mental states of the protagonists in *BioShock* and *SpecOps: The Line* lead to repeated misinterpretations of reality and even to the full mistaking of hallucinations for reality. Still, in the entire metareferential complex constructed by each of

these works, those fictum-metareferences constitute only comparatively minor parts. In fact, within their respective strongly fictio-centric contexts – contexts created by the much more central, extensive and connected use of medium-discussing metareferences in the respective works – even these fictum-metareferences provide double-coded commentary on the different media as much as they do on questions of fiction versus reality.

In *Atonement*, for example, the final narrative twist and open ending can be seen as just another literary tradition (in this case a Postmodern one) which has influenced both Briony's world view and her written work. In *Shadow of the Vampire*, the focus is similarly not on whether there is such a thing as 'reality' in the first place but on the much more pragmatic question of how 'realism' can be achieved and constructed within the specific medium of film. This idea is also picked up by other works from different media discussed in this dissertation, for example through conversations about 'authenticity' in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* or debates about the role, significance and even definition of 'facts' in *The Newsroom*. Finally, the metareferential portrayal of confused mental states in *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and *The Stanley Parable* never suggests that the developers believe players themselves to be prone to mistaking game worlds for the real world. Instead, all three video games simply draw attention to the fact that both protagonists and players can be unaware of the rules of the "game" they are playing (both literally, meaning the rules of the medium, and figuratively, meaning the rules of life) and of the impact those rules have on their respective selves.

In short, unlike their prototypical Postmodernist predecessors, many contemporary metareferential narrative works – based on the cases analysed in this study – seem to be less interested in a discussion of the general existential question of whether reality exists or whether all our experiences are mere fiction, and more concerned with the far more practical and functional question of how exactly our realities *can* be and *are* influenced by fiction. Having seemingly accepted the Postmodernist revelation that our lives are guided and/or constructed by/according to media-transmitted narratives, the works discussed throughout this study all move on to examine precisely how their respective media impact which aspects of our lives, and what we as recipients can and should do to make the best out of this media-shaped reality.

8.2 Topics Discussed through Metareferences in Contemporary Narrative Media

In their respective narrative examinations of these topics, the different media under discussion noticeably focus on different features of their own medium and its relation to our real-life experiences. Both novels, for example, almost entirely ignore industry-related aspects and instead focus on the crucial role narratives – literary or not – play in our lives. Birgit Neumann has pointed out that literature picks up cultural repertoire, depicts it, and in the process influences it in turn; and that by doing so, “[l]iterary works actively participate in the formation of individual as well as collective versions of the past, and of concepts of identity” (*Erinnerung* 5, my translation). This idea lies at the core of both *Atonement*’s and *The Book Thief*’s metareferential discussions.

Especially *Atonement* with its extensive metareferences to literature’s history – both to the medium’s ideological and to its aesthetic and stylistic developments – is a perfect fictional portrayal of Neumann’s statement. Time and time again, the novel depicts how the cultural repertoire contained in the books Briony, Robbie and Cecilia read and have read directly influences the characters’ thinking, their language, their behaviour, and in the case of Briony even her own writing – thus directly shaping the contributions those characters themselves in turn make to society and culture. This same idea is also picked up in *The Book Thief*. For even if Zusak’s use of predominantly fictional instead of real-life books to impact Liesel makes his portrayal of literary influences less concrete and detailed, the depicted effect of those influences remains the same. In fact, by its additional focus on oral traditions and the communal sharing of stories, *The Book Thief* portrays one further way through which narratives become part of our collective cultural repertoire.

In addition to examining the influence of literary narratives on our lives, both novels furthermore portray the idea that, writers or not, we *all* create narratives for ourselves every day. As Ansgar Nünning has pointed out with reference to Paul John Eakin, “we remember and become who we believe to be by means of the stories of self we have learned to tell, the latter being as much based on socially constituted and fictional models of self and identity provided by the respective cultures we inhabit as on facts” (“Editorial” 4). In other words, according to Nünning and Eakin, we all sort our memories – reliably or unreliably (cf. Neumann, “Der metamnemonische Roman” 308) – and construct our identities in accordance with narrative traditions. Or as Briony, Max, Liesel and even Zusak’s Death show, we process our experiences as stories and create stories to process our experiences and to make sense of them. In both *Atonement* and *The Book Thief*, in other words, the metareferential portrayal of

characters writing novels goes beyond mere commentary on how writers write stories and instead provides insight into how we all “write” stories. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, “[d]aily we create worlds for ourselves – that is, ordered visions of our lives (real or fantasy)” (48). Consequently, as Hutcheon continues, “the novelist’s act is basic to his human nature” (48) – and to all humans’ natures in general.

While the two novels analysed in this paper thus focus closely on their medium’s narrative core, the two films under discussion approach their medium from a noticeably different perspective. Firstly, both *Shadow of the Vampire* and *Hugo* emphasise the technological aspects of their medium and the magic-like quality of films, especially for audiences unfamiliar with the technological tricks at play. Both films furthermore suggest that even knowledge of those tricks, of the medium’s language and aesthetic, however, does not fully dispel cinema’s power. After all, Murnau and Wagner still show an almost fanatic appreciation for their medium, and both Hugo and Tabard only become even more enamoured with cinema once they get a glimpse behind the curtain, or rather behind the screen and camera. Just like being able to repair automata by understanding how they work only seems to make Hugo and his father more fascinated with the craftsmanship and creativity involved in their construction, a more medium-aware, questioning and potentially critical engagement with cinema – so the two movies suggest – does not need to end in a disillusionment with the medium, quite the opposite, in fact.

Still, film’s magical nature is not only portrayed as something positive and limitless in the two films analysed in this dissertation. After all, even Méliès is shown to question the strength, potential and significance of cinema as a predominantly escapist medium in a world shaped by so many “real” impactful events such as wars. Meanwhile, *Shadow of the Vampire* in its entirety seems to, at least at first glance, present a very critical view of the medium of film as a dark and Gothic mechanical vampire. Yet a closer look at Merhige’s work soon shows that – in a typically Gothic manner – what is actually criticised throughout the film is not so much the thing, the medium, itself but what people make of it.

In the end, it is the industry’s arrogant, reckless, decadent and obsessive nature as well as the even more arrogant, reckless, decadent and obsessive nature of certain individuals (stardom and god-complexes, for example, are portrayed as both systematic and personal defects) which lead to all the horrors which descend upon Murnau and his crew. Cinema or film itself, meanwhile, is portrayed in *Shadow of the Vampire* at its purest in the scene in which Schreck uses a projector to watch footage of the sun. That is to say, for all its creators’ flaws and all the pitfalls of production, the magical and awe-inspiring potential of the final

product is never negated even in Merhige's Gothic work. Meanwhile, Scorsese's film outright extols the wonders and beauty of that very same product's potential as Méliès' (self-)deprecating and dismissive views of his own work are proven wrong by Tabard, both Cabrets, Isabelle and an entire theatre full of people acknowledging film as a medium worthy of preservation.

Many of the topics addressed in the context of both literature and cinema reappear in Sorkin's metareferential work on television. Due to the more extensive format of his chosen medium, Sorkin furthermore has the opportunity to go into much more detail on a large number of these topics. Across the nearly hundred episodes of all three series combined, Sorkin's work provides many in-depth discussions of industry features such as production and marketing, of aesthetic and technological features, of creative features such as writing and performing, and last but by no means least of receptive features such as the impact of television both on individual viewers and on society in general.

In regards to the cultural impact of their medium, both *Sports Night* and *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* focus predominantly on the escapist and inspirational potential of television in a manner highly reminiscent of the portrayal of cinema's effects in *Hugo*. The joy and elevation which illuminate the faces of the *Sports Night* team during the African runner's world record, for example, are exactly the same which can be witnessed, at one point or another, in the eyes of all of *Hugo*'s protagonists when they are mesmerised by a film or a functioning automaton. Similarly, in both Sorkin's and Scorsese's works, these very same joy and elevation are depicted as a force capable of inspiring their respective viewers to believe in themselves and to follow and fulfil their own dreams. Inspiration, in other words, is portrayed not merely as a temporary positive feeling or mental state but as a functional force which can lead to actions which shape our real world and in turn serve as inspiration for future generations.

In addition to thus lauding the power of inspiration, *Studio 60* in particular also explicitly advocates for the positive effects of escapism. While *Hugo* never directly contradicts fictional Méliès' belief that his films were of limited importance during the war, Sorkin's portrayal of Tom's proclaimed esteem for his medium's ability to take people's minds off their troubles clearly supports the character's views on the matter. With the help of this scene, *Studio 60* explicitly defends escapist media against derogatory dismissals by critics who share disillusioned Méliès' and Tom's parents' beliefs.

Finally, through his third metareferential series of *The Newsroom*, Sorkin furthermore advocates for the potential of television to positively shape our public socio-political and cultural discourse. Admittedly, current industrial machinations are presented as often

preventing the medium from reaching its fullest informative and debate-encouraging potential. Yet Sorkin's exposure of these machinations and his depiction of what the medium could be without them serves as an appeal to audiences, creators and to industry financiers to be wary of the pitfalls and to help fix and subsequently elevate television to the force for good it could be. For even during the most medium-critical metareferential segments of his series, Sorkin always foregrounds the inspirational function of television by using his own television work to hopefully inspire both producers and consumers of television to do and be better.

While the three media discussed up to this point can be considered comparatively established within our society and culture, the remaining two of video games and web-video are still relatively new additions to the medial and cultural landscape. Consequently, it is not surprising that metareferential works from these two media, in addition to examining their medium's (potential) impact on society, also spend a particularly large amount of time discussing their own medium and its characteristics as such.

Starting with video games, a first medium-specific trait and related debate with which all three games discussed in this dissertation engage is the topic of whether games are capable of telling as multifaceted and "sophisticated" stories as other media. Already through the complex nature and existential themes of their own metareferential narratives, all three analysed games demonstrate beyond any shadow of a doubt that the medium of video games is perfectly capable of portraying "serious" topics and of triggering (self-) reflection in the players. While a decade ago Marie-Laure Ryan still proclaimed that unlike literature which "seeks the gray area of the ambiguous" games thrive in a world of black and white since "if players [especially of shooter games (cf. *Avatars* 197)] had to debate the morality of their actions, the pace of the game, not to mention its strategic appeal, would seriously suffer" (*Avatars* 196), *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and *The Stanley Parable* all show that intermittent moral (self-)reflection does not have to be detrimental to the overall gameplay experience but can in fact exist in perfect synergy with it. Similarly, whilst Ryan expressed the worry that extreme emotions might not be suitable for in-game experiences, arguing that "[t]he personal experience of many fictional characters is so unpleasant that users would be out of their mind – literally as well as figuratively – to want to live their lives in the first person mode" (*Avatars* 124), *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line*, but also games such as the now repeatedly mentioned *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* and many others have by now repeatedly proven that many players are perfectly capable of not being overwhelmed by their first- or third-person interaction with dark, difficult content.

A second medium-typical argument addressed by all three analysed games is the question of whether video games are better suited for narratological or ludological analyses. Rejecting this dichotomy, *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and *The Stanley Parable* all demonstrate that narrative and mechanics do not need to be treated as separate or opposing entities. Instead, they can work together to create one meaningful whole. From the metareferential and symbolic use of player instructions to the equally double-coded play with player choices and player-control, the case studies in chapter six contain many examples. With the help of these examples, all three games demonstrate that contrary to certain prevalent theories on the topic (cf. e.g. Rapp, *Selbstreflexivität* 42; Ryan, “Beyond Myth”; Walton), narrative (and metareferential commentary for that matter) in video games does not need to be transmitted exclusively through film-like cutscenes which forgo interactivity and thus barely constitute gameplay. In the process, the three games also prove that, contrary to Espen Aarseth’s suggestions (cf. “Playing Research” 2-3), it makes no sense for games to be segmented and analysed separately by scholars from different disciplines who are only interested in individual aspects such as the mechanics, the narrative or player psychology because the meaning of complex, ambitious games such as the three discussed in this study can only be understood through the consideration of all these elements and their interplay.⁹⁶ In fact, *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and *The Stanley Parable* all position their metareferential discussions exactly at these intersections.

For example, in *SpecOps: The Line* the discrepancy between the characters’ and the players’ psychological responses to violence is one central metareferential topic which the game addresses both through explicit conversations on heroism within the narrative and through mechanical elements deconstructing the classic power-fantasy trope. Similarly, in *BioShock* as well as in *The Stanley Parable* existential questions regarding the psychological and social significance of choice are raised both on the mechanical and on the narrative level of the game: who is in (figurative as well as literal) control of a person’s/character’s actions; what roles do participants and rules play within a game(-like) system (cf. e.g. Juul, *Half-Real* 23, 28; Neitzel, *Gespielte Geschichten* 195, 229, 244-251; Ryan, *Avatars* 100, 108-120; Wilhelmsson 63); how meaningful are any made choices; what are the consequences of a lack of repercussions for choices and what does that tell us about players’ moral codes within and outside the game (cf. e.g. Penny) – all these metareferential questions are exposed by

⁹⁶ For a first analytical template of possible element interactions cf. Ryan, *Avatars* 200-202.

BioShock, *The Stanley Parable* and by *SpecOps: The Line* as highly relevant to our everyday lives and our sense of self and agency.

The three games further suggest that their medium is particularly well-suited to make recipients engage with all these topics since the interactive nature of video games allows for a direct simulation and thus for a first-hand experience of the psychological dilemmas at hand. Simulation, of course, is commonly used in psychotherapy as a means of helping patients experience different situations, face their fears and discover the rules which govern both the situations and the fears (cf. e.g. Bateson 191; Frasca, “Videogames of the Oppressed” 87-88; Neitzel, “Involvierungsstrategien” 87; Penny 74) – and video games, according to *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and *The Stanley Parable*, can achieve a similar effect due to the medium’s unique interactive nature. When the metareferential elements embedded in the narrative of all three games expose the game’s rules and encourage players to look at them and their own motivations for following them critically, the three games thus simultaneously, through simulation, also show players how to question *all* their motivations and *all* rules they follow in their everyday lives as well.

This successful promotion of self-awareness and self-reflection becomes particularly significant in the context of video games when one considers the exact type of criticism which, on a regular basis, is directed especially towards violent video games. After all, even scholars who do not wish to condemn the medium in its entirety frequently suggest that the killing of an enemy in a video game is *uncomfortably* (and arguably dangerously) closer to being a reference to a “real” killing than to being a mere speech act due to the fact that the mock-killing of an enemy in a game really triggers the depiction of a death and the subsequent potential satisfaction in the player for causing and watching an enemy “die” (cf. Nöth et al. 161; cf. also e.g. Bonfadelli 288; King and Krzywinska 22; Ryan, *Avatars* 190-191). And, certainly, this triggering power of video games is impossible to deny since it is exactly what makes simulations a functional psychotherapeutic tool in the first place (cf. Murray, Janet H. 170). Yet why do scholars consider this feature dangerous in video games whilst they clearly acknowledge it as useful in the context of psychotherapy? In addition to aspects such as the professional supervision and construction of the latter type of simulation, one central answer relates to the presumed difference in player versus patient awareness.

Janet H. Murray pointed out already two decades ago that the removal of “anti-social” gameplay and material is not required if the material is presented in a form “in which it can be engaged, remodelled, and worked through” (173) just like it would be in the context of psychotherapy. And while there are many different ways in which such an improved

presentation could be achieved, the use of metareference in games such as *SpecOps: The Line* certainly provides one great example.

Without withholding the challenge-related and tactical aspects which drive many players to shooter games (cf. Vorderer 73-74), and without even fully withholding the agency-, control- and power-fantasies which drive many others (cf. Klimmt 247; Murray, Janet H. 99; Neitzel, “Frage nach Gott” 61; Newman 16; Ryan, *Avatars* 99), *SpecOps: The Line* through its use of metareferences succeeds to expose the moral and ethical complexities of exactly these player drives and to vehemently encourage players to “engage with” them and “work through” them. The inherent potential of metareferences for double-coded communication is what makes this possible – just as it makes it possible for *BioShock* to raise awareness regarding the pitfalls of ultimate personal agency and individualism (both in video games and in real life) and for *The Stanley Parable* to explore the spectrum between mind-numbing routine on the one hand and extreme disregard for any type of order(s) on the other (once more as related to video games as well as to real life). In other words, the three games’ use of metareferences is what answers Winfried Nöth’s question of whether computer games are merely “play for play’s sake, as [is] chess” or whether “they create virtual realities with the potential to subvert the conventional values of culture and society” (“Self-Reference”, 23) with a clear ‘the latter’.

Finally, the last medium touched upon in this dissertation is that of web-video; and a comparison between my analysis of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and the preceding case studies shows that the web-series’ use of metareferences is very similar to that of the other works discussed up to this point. Just like the novels and video games under discussion, the web-series spends comparatively little time on the portrayal of industry aspects. Furthermore, just like *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and *The Stanley Parable* it also barely refers to its medium’s history, as can be expected from a medium this young. Instead, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* focus on the exploration of new media features and aesthetics, both through implicit exposure of conventions through imitation and through explicit verbal conversations between characters. In addition, the web-series – once more similar to the video game examples just discussed – also demonstrates that web-video is capable of tackling complex and important issues and narratives. After all, the web-series is an effective, clever and thoughtful adaptation of a literary classic, and can also stand on its own two feet as a complete and multifaceted example of new media art. Lastly, just like all works discussed up to this point, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* also once more particularly focus their metareferential commentary on those

features of web-video, online content and social media which most directly impact our society and our everyday lives.

A large number of contemporary studies have shown that new media play an increasingly important role, especially in the lives of young adults. According to multiple studies, new media are the ones teenagers spend most time consuming, with YouTube and social media forming the pinnacle of this development.⁹⁷ Consequently, teenagers increasingly cite vloggers and bloggers (or “influencers” as they are called in the marketing world) as their main role models and list the latter’s “relatability” and, most importantly, (perceived) “authenticity” as the main reasons for this (cf. SCHAU HIN!; Wasshuber). This explanation, however, demonstrates that the amount of meticulous pre-selection, planning, staging, and post-production which goes into each video or picture posted online is often neglected – and it is exactly this lack of awareness in viewers which makes “influencers” so good at “influencing” their young audiences (namely at often more or less secretly and/or manipulatively professionally marketing products to them). This lack of awareness is also what, in the worst cases, can lead to feelings of inferiority and even depression in teenagers whose looks and life are unable to fulfil the completely unrealistic standards of the supposed “everyday” set by online videos and Instagram pictures. To combat these issues, it is therefore absolutely crucial to help teenagers gain and develop their missing media-awareness – and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, through their metareferential approach, do exactly that.

In addition to acknowledging and directly portraying the constructed nature of web-video and promoting media competency in the process, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* furthermore focus their metareferential attention on the question of how social and new media in general shape our everyday culture as well as our communicative skills. Similar to the way in which *Atonement* and *The Book Thief* portray the crucial role narratives play in the forming of our world views and perception, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* suggest that social media are changing the way we talk with – or often rather *at* – each other. They, however, also depict the ways in which new media can help widen our social circles, raise the number of our potential communication partners and thus increase the number of different views and ideas accessible to us. In addition, in a manner resembling the approach observable in works such as *Hugo* or Sorkin’s television series, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* furthermore emphasise the creative and artistic potential equally inherent to new media if they are used meaningfully and (self-

⁹⁷ For exact numbers from Switzerland and Germany cf. e.g. Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung; Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (mpfs); Zürcher Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften (ZHAW), Department angewandte Psychologie.

)consciously for purposes such as self-expression, public discourse or pure heart-felt and joy-filled entertainment. In short, just like all works discussed in this dissertation, while they present an undeniably critical view of some aspects of their own medium, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* also always pay homage to that very medium and place a metareferential spotlight on its strengths and potential as well as on its latent pitfalls.

8.3 The Functions and Effects of Metareferences in Contemporary Narrative Media

Moving on from this comparative summary of the main topics which the analysed works explore metareferentially, the last aspects which need to be examined are the functions and effects to which the different metareferences are deployed. If one compares the works under discussion not only amongst each other but also to their classic Postmodernist predecessors, one big difference in effect is immediately noticeable: namely, the use of metareferences in the newer works is far less violent and narrative disrupting than it used to be in traditional Postmodernist metafiction. The main explanation scholars have brought forward for this change in effect assumes that by now metareferences have simply been used so often and have become so commonplace that they have been naturalised even in popular culture and have thus lost a lot of their shock value (cf. e.g. Butler 313-314; Dunne 189; Kukkonen, “Metalepsis” 13). Yet while there certainly is a basis to this general observation, in the case of the works discussed in this dissertation, the real explanation is arguably much more specific and closely linked to the exact types of metareferences used in the works.

Most striking in this regard is the fact that there are markedly fewer metalepses within the new works, and that the few that exist are (1) mostly rhetorical, and (2) are portrayed within the medium of computer games in which the hierarchical boundaries between game, protagonist and player are already inherently more porous than in any other medium. In other words, the most common transgressive metareferential device so popular throughout Postmodernism is barely utilised in the works discussed in this dissertation. Furthermore, the contemporary works’ extensive incorporation of explicit, verbalised metareferential discussions between characters further integrates many metareferences *into* the narrative rather than predominantly using them to destabilise said narrative.

In fact, even the most dramatic metareferential twists and revelations discussed throughout the last five chapters never fully disrupt the narrative of their respective work for the explicit story-level metareferences surrounding them serve as fluent transitions between the purely fictional story elements and any potentially illusion-breaking metareferential ones.

As a result, audiences are continuously encouraged to naturally and softly fluctuate between immersion and (self-)reflection rather than to be thrown out of the first by a sudden, isolated and unconnected intrusion of the second. The possibly most striking example of this is *Atonement*'s seemingly open ending to Robbie's and Cecilia's story. For where Postmodernists traditionally would have just let loose ends dangle, in *Atonement* the revelation of the uncertainty surrounding the "true" ending of the couple's story is immediately followed by an explicit explanation of the reasons and meaning behind said uncertainty by the fictional author.

Such attempts to *explain* through metareference rather than to violently destroy illusions and shock people into existential realisations are a core characteristic of all works discussed in this dissertation. Without wanting to suggest that this is the case for all contemporary metareferential novels, films, (web-)series, video games, etc., there at least seems to be a clear subset or sub-genre of metareferential works on the rise which – despite being undeniably critical and not merely interested in inside-jokes and fourth-wall-breaks for the sole purpose of comedy – focus on relaying their metareferential messages more gently, more concretely and less abstractly. In chapter one I referred to the seeming discrepancy pointed out by scholars between the high "intellectual" demands posed on audiences by metareferential works and the increasing inclusion of metareferences in pop-cultural works. All different media analysed in the last five chapters, however, demonstrate that the accessibility of metareferential works can be increased based on the types of metareferences used, thus dissolving or at least reducing the discrepancy at hand.

Working off the previously established idea that metareferences do require a certain degree of (medium) competence from their audiences but that they simultaneously are also a tool capable of raising the competence in question, all analysed works employ a variety of metareferential elements which appeal not only to audience members with an already strong medium awareness but also to any readers, viewers and players willing to widen their horizons. In fact, throughout the works, there often even is a noticeable build-up towards increasingly complex metareferences, which thus helps ease less medium-savvy audience members into the respective topics: *Atonement*, for example, opens with light-hearted, humorous commentary on the nature of child Briony's first play before eventually arriving at the existential commentary provided by Briony's ultimate work; *Shadow of the Vampire* opens with Murnau's comparatively straightforward artistic manifesto as well as with more humorous asides about "natives" walking into frames and only slowly uncovers more and more of cinema's uncanny nature; *The Newsroom* initially advocates for the seemingly

absolute ideals of facts and integrity before carefully introducing related moral ambiguities; *SpecOps: The Line* has characters voice thoughts on violence and its effects long before confronting the players with the full PTSD-based disintegration of their own power fantasy; *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are merely a fun class project for Lizzie before they become her platform for serious social commentary; etc. In short, by slowly introducing more and more complex medium-related topics into their narrative, the works discussed in this dissertation purposefully yet very carefully introduce their audiences to a variety of metareferential issues whilst simultaneously always encapsulating those issues in strong, unbroken, immersive narratives which provide further appeal and thus make the issues even more accessible to recipients.

During the “Apartment” ending of *The Stanley Parable*, the Narrator at one point voices the following worry: “How can I tell him *in a way that he’ll understand*, that every second he remains here, he’s electing to kill himself? *How can I get him to see what I see? How can I make him look at himself?*” (my emphasis). These questions are exactly the questions which lie at the core of the metareferential works discussed in this paper. Through their choice of metareferences, they all try to help their audiences “understand”, help them see what the professionals in the respective media industries see, and ultimately, help audiences examine not just the medium they are consuming itself but also the way in which it is impacting their lives and selves. All the while, the metareferential communication of relevant information through that very same medium the audiences are already consuming serves as the answer to the Narrator’s “how”s. For as Sam Waterson, the actor portraying Charlie Skinner, points out in the DVD audio commentary to *The Newsroom*’s apology speech “it’s all very well to be speaking to the converted in a school somewhere” but to be really effective metareferential conversations belong out in the open and in the hands of actual audience members (1x03 06:12). After all, very few teenagers will voluntarily read a study on the effects of new media, very few gamers will engage with another fatalistic editorial proclaiming that computer games are making their players violent, and very few people in general have access to or even interest in academic discourse. They do, however, consume narrative media – and through metareference, those media can bring the discourse straight to the audiences it most directly concerns.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ In fact, I found at least one instructional essay discussing practical ways for teachers to use *The Book Thief* to teach the importance of literacy to reluctant teenagers (cf. McCulley).

In the process, as further demonstrated by the works discussed in this dissertation, creators can fight the potential public scapegoating of their medium as well as the dismissal of their medium by critics and/or by competing media (cf. e.g. Starre 199, 205). In contrast, creators can metareferentially advocate for their own (most likely chosen for a reason) medium's strengths and show how these strengths can be utilised to their full potential as long as certain equally metareferentially acknowledged pitfalls are avoided. The avoidance of such pitfalls, meanwhile, the analysed works further suggest, can be facilitated by an increase in media competency, to which a targeted use of metareferences by creators can directly contribute.

Finally, in addition to promoting a critical yet appreciative and productive engagement with their respective media, all the works discussed in this dissertation furthermore promote the same critical yet appreciative engagement with metareferential art in general. All analysed works make it very clear that them talking about their respective art forms has nothing to do with "art for art's sake" or with self-absorption. Instead, all works discussed in the last five chapters univocally emphasise the fact that we live in a highly media-saturated and medialised society, and that therefore any metareferential encouragement to constructively engage with a medium is also automatically an encouragement to constructively engage with our society.

In the end, *Atonement* and *Hugo* are not merely novels portraying novelists, they are narratives portraying the ways in which narratives shape our world and in which everyone of us can therefore consciously use narratives to do the same. Similarly, *Shadow of the Vampire* and *Hugo* do not simply portray how movie magic is created but how that magic can impact our lives, be it by enriching or by grotesquely distorting them. Aaron Sorkin's three series are not a hundred-episode-long self-centred complaint about television executives suppressing talent and creativity but are a multifaceted discussion of television's power to make us all better people by informing, inspiring, entertaining and – when needed – by distracting us. *BioShock*, *SpecOps: The Line* and even *The Stanley Parable* are not merely proof of their medium's potential for self-reference and complex narratives but they specifically address the important roles agency, independence, choice-making and consequences play in our everyday lives. Finally, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are not just a mock-vlog using metareferences solely for parodistic purposes but they also thematise the effect of social and new media on our socio-cultural reality.

Marion Gymnich and Ansgar Nünning with reference to Hubert Zapf have argued that literature (and by extrapolation arguably every medium) has a unique potential to expose and

consequently regulate both societal and cultural deficits as well as blind spots (cf. 19) – and the works analysed throughout my study all suggest that metareferences are some of the best tools media have at their disposal to realise this potential: firstly, because metareferences are exceptionally well-suited to draw attention to blind spots since the raising of awareness through exposure is one of their most basic functions; and secondly, because the specific style of metareferences used in the works under discussion can stimulate regulation particularly well by getting large audiences involved in the discourses which shape our society and culture. The use of these types of metareferences is therefore, according to the works discussed in this dissertation, a lot more than the mere “narcissistic”, (wannabe-)“high-brow”, feelings-of-superiority-encouraging game which critics, as seen, keep making it out to be. It is a way of directly equipping every-day people with the knowledge and tools required to overcome certain societal and cultural deficits and to thus improve their and all our lives. It is, in other words, a public service.

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