

WILL SPOOK YOU FOR REAL.

strategies of inspiring societal anxieties
in popular forms of fiction

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Strategies of Inspiring Societal Anxieties
in Popular Forms of Fiction

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Dedicated
with boundless love and gratitude
to Gertraud Teiche,
who taught me that

kein Weg ist umsonst.

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PART ONE

1. Introduction: “Will spook you for real”

The back cover of my paperback edition of Max Brooks’ *World War Z* has favourable book reviews printed on it, as is custom. One of them is a quotation from the *New York Times Book Review* which says, “Will spook you for real” (Brooks 2006: fourth cover). These promotional statements, also called blurbs,¹ have been generally viewed with disdain by authors and literary critics ever since the term was coined in 1906.² Gérard Genette points out that “blurb” means “blah-blah” or “blabber” (2001: 31, my translation), and the general question of style, dignity, sincerity, and credibility of these endorsements has been raised by a number of people.³ The purpose of blurbs is strictly marketing; they help publishers in their attempts “to position a book” and “to get the books on the shelf” (Morris 2011). In addition, a blurb could also influence the interpretation of a book, or communicate a sense of affiliation-in-taste between the reader and the

¹ N.B. This term is used here in reference to promotional statements and reviews only and does not comprise plot summaries, author biographies or other texts possibly found on the cover pages of books.

² Levinovitz 2012

³ Levinovitz sums up criticism voiced by George Orwell, Camille Paglia, Stephen King, William F. Buckley et al. For a discussion of the problem of sincerity q.v. Morris 2011 and Miller 2010. The “benevolent blurbster” is also mentioned in Roger Ebert’s *Little Book of Hollywood Clichés* (Ebert 1994: 12), for example; and the phenomenon was poignantly illustrated in 2010, when all-too-flowery commercial support for David Grossman’s novel *To the End of the Land* (2010) was met with a good amount of ridicule, at the height of which there was an appeal on the Guardian books blog to “outblurb” (Flood 2010) David Grossman’s admirers by coming up with the most over-the-top endorsement of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

reputable people or institutions quoted.⁴ Figures or statistics showing the effectiveness of blurbs as marketing tools for works of fiction are hard to come by,⁵ but their ubiquity seems to prove that publishers believe in their magic.

Regardless of their power as a marketing tool, and despite their notorious insincerity, promotional statements on the covers or back covers of books are of interest when the focus of analysis is shifted. Not *who* let their name be put in the blurb is relevant but *what* they say, i.e. what the publishers pick as the core message. In the case of *World War Z*, we can ignore the source of the quote as well as the question of whether the book does actually spook readers for real. The interesting aspect is that this is what they put forward as an incentive for the public to buy the book. The idea is that you will want to spend money on a piece of fiction which puts you in the emotional state, or state of mind, of being *spooked*; and the unique selling proposition of this paperback is that the text is powerful enough to trigger these real emotions. This is the publishers' message: not every author can move you like this one can; he achieves what others fail to do; not every book will spook you for real – so this is the one you want to buy. For all the research that has been done in the field of the emotional impact of fiction, and assuming that the marketing department of Broadway Paperbacks, New York, are good at their job, the promotional statement on the back cover of *World War Z* is convincing evidence that (a) the reading public wants to be moved emotionally by the books it reads; (b) some members of the reading public want to be spooked, or frightened, or scared: they want to experience emotions when reading fiction which are not (exclusively) positive; (c) these negative emotions can be experienced as pleasant (to a certain extent), so the two concepts are not mutually exclusive; and (d) being able to evoke these feelings requires a certain skill

⁴ Levinovitz 2012

⁵ Miller (2010) states that “[o]ne British publisher claims to have seen research showing that as many as 62 percent of book buyers choose titles on the basis of blurbs”, yet fails to give any indications as to her source.

in the author which not everyone possesses. Based on these premises, the textual means applied in order to achieve this effect shall be explored.

For the purpose of this investigation, it is also interesting, however, to look at texts which do not apply these strategies. If one were to compare China Miéville's *Kraken* (2010) to *World War Z*, for example, one would find a series of structural similarities tempting enough to assume that the two texts work in the same ways. Both are set in a world that is exceedingly similar to ours. Neither one of the authors is vague about their novels' geography: they purposefully give locations, place names, street names, landmarks etc. which their readers will recognise and be able to (or even supposed to) relate to. Yet both texts are set in a world which is not quite the readers': the action could be assumed to unfold either in a parallel universe strikingly close to ours, or (in the case of *Kraken*) in a world which is ours with additional layers of reality, or (more likely in *World War Z*) in the very near future. In both cases the biggest difference is made by the supernatural elements which are planted into the respective worlds. As is the convention for fantastic texts, both Miéville and Brooks present the action to us from the point of view of 'normal' people to whom the fantasy and supernatural material is explained and who thus serve as a guide for the reader. In fact, one might suspect that Miéville ties the reader even more strongly to his protagonist because there are not as many different narrating voices and points of view in the text as in *World War Z*. Finally, both works of fiction create environments which are not alternative worlds in the sense that protagonists (or the immersed reader) could choose to travel back to the real universe. There is only one world in the reality of the respective stories, and in each, the world is threatened by apocalyptic scenarios. Miéville and Brooks both use their arcs of suspense to keep the reader going, and a different study with a different focus could probably prove that both texts succeed in provoking emotional reactions of some kind in their readers. However, out of these two works of fiction, only *World War Z* uses tools to trigger societal anxiety, or anxieties, in its readership.

This says nothing about the quality of the writing, and just as little about the actually achieved effect of the text. It simply means that despite their similarities, only one of these texts seems to be intended to inspire societal anxiety, which shows that this element is not an intrinsic part of a specific kind of text, or plot, or genre. The opposite is the case: this study intends to illustrate that strategies of inspiring societal anxieties can be – but do not have to be – implemented in virtually any text. For this reason, quite diverse works of popular fiction will be reviewed.

Text analysis will be confined to the second half of this bipartitely structured study, however. In part I, Chapters 2 through 6 are devoted to developing ‘the recipe’, a basic guideline for the inspiration of societal anxieties in popular forms of fiction. This requires extensive theoretical groundwork, starting with definitions of the terms *anxiety*, *societal anxiety*, and *to inspire*, and an attempt to determine criteria for demarcations of the field of popular fiction. It will be argued that with a view to societal anxieties, the inclusion of contemporary legends in this study is expedient. The subsequent two chapters contain the list of ingredients for the suggested recipe: in Chapter 3, three areas of research from outside the field of literary studies are outlined which are of immediate relevance to the subject matter: philosophy, folklore theory, and political & socio-political theory. The ‘big bag of ingredients’, i.e. the broad field of theories concerning the emotional impact of reading fiction, and approaches to creating a character-reader relationship, are explored in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 discusses a range of perspectives pertaining to contemporary forms of popular fiction, notably the adaptability to new technology and the categorisation of contemporary legends as fiction. On the basis of the sum of these theoretical deliberations the recipe is formulated and explicated in Chapter 6. In the second part, the practical applicability of the rule previously developed in the abstract is examined. For this purpose, texts from the spheres of each of the key genres, and one new genre, of popular fiction have been chosen for analysis in Chapters 8 through 12. The short

concluding chapter then provides a suggestion for further research: a range of different possible purposes of societal anxiety in fiction, from the storyteller's point of view, which could serve as the basis of investigation into connections between underlying motives and the choice of textual means to inspire the respective emotion.

It is important to note that this study deals solely with the evidence provided by the text itself. This means that the recipient side has to be excluded completely, as we cannot make valid deductions based on a work of fiction:

Reading and listening are not passive activities but active constructions of information and meaning. All of us have selective hearing, and we retain what fits our individual psychic patterns, which makes it difficult to generalize about the impact of [literature]. (Hearne 2011: 214)⁶

There has been research on the emotional reaction to art in general and works of fiction in particular, and attempts have been made to measure the quality and intensity of the emotions experienced by the recipients.⁷ The findings, however, have not been compelling. Measuring anxiety and fear may just prove to be impossible.⁸ Our bodies' reactions can be misleading as, for example, "[p]hysiologically, the difference between fear and anger may be only at the level of marginally higher recordings of adrenal action for the latter, but subjectively they are very different emotions" (Munday 1973: 19), and non-physiological tests are often disputed for their theoretical basis as well as leaving a lot of room for subjectivity, distorting the findings and making the results hard to reproduce.⁹

⁶ Hearne makes this case for children's book folklore; it can, however, be expanded to include any kind of fiction.

⁷ Cf. Silvia and Brown 2007; Dijkstra, Zwaan, Graesser and Magliano 1994; Oatley 1994 et al.

⁸ Cf. Gymnich 2012: 8f

⁹ Munday 1973: 27. James H. Geer, on the other hand, claims to have found "correlations [which] indicate a relationship between traditional verbal measures of fear and observable behavioural measures of fear that is greater than might have been expected" (1965: 52) in his study. His research was restricted to fear (rather than anxiety) reactions to a specific stimulus.

2. Definitions and demarcations

2.1 Societal Anxieties

In order to clarify the meaning of the term *societal anxieties*, the constituent parts have to be defined separately. The first task then is to determine what anxiety is and how it can be demarcated from related terms. *Fear, anxiety, scare, dread, horror, terror, panic* etc. are often used synonymously; yet at the same time they have been defined in detail to distinguish between them many times and for many different purposes, and therefore with sometimes very different results. There seems to be a long-established consensus that there are (at least) two different, if related notions: the ancient Greeks and the Romans each had two gods for fear and anxiety respectively, Deimos and Phobos, and Pallor and Pavor.¹⁰ Criteria for the distinction between the two emotions could be the “major components” according to Gower, viz. “sensations, feelings, cognitions and behaviors” (2005: vii); this list, however, is quite vague. Even more concrete criteria which have been suggested, such as “time duration, surprise effect, intensity and plausibility” (Bartikowski 2007: 2, my translation), are hard to measure and compare.

¹⁰ Delumeau 1985: 22f

Scare, fear and anxiety

A threefold classification is suggested for the study of these emotions as evoked by works of fiction: scare, fear, and anxiety. Out of these three, scare is the most ephemeral emotion – if that is even the right term to use. It could be argued that it is more of an impulse than a mental state, and one argument for this is that it is inescapably connected with a physical reaction to something sudden and unexpected. We shudder, wince, or even jump out of our seats. Elements triggering especially the latter kind of reaction are more commonly found in film, where in some genres they are used so frequently that these *jump scares* have become cliché¹¹ and, for an experienced cinema audience, even ineffective.¹² In fiction, this sudden and acute emotional reaction to an unanticipated threat is much harder to produce, probably because it relies on sound and visual effects, which in a printed text are unfeasible or too obvious and foreseeable respectively. Graphic novels might be able to deliver something akin to a jump scare with the help of unexpected images, especially after the turn of a page. Electronic texts could arguably have a text or image pop up suddenly to scare the reader. More traditional texts have to find other ways to produce a scare effect. As it cannot be as sudden and invasive as in a film or audio drama, these endeavours often play on other, related feelings such as repulsion. Passages designed to scare the reader are therefore short episodes within a longer text in which something unexpected, frightening and/or unpleasant is happening. A classic example of this can be found in chapter 3 of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, when Jonathan Harker sees the count climbing down the outside castle wall "face down, with his cloak spreading out around him like great wings [...] with considerable speed, just as a lizard moves along a wall" (Stoker 1994: 47). This scene is one of the best-known ones in the novel, arguably because of its emotional impact. Like in

¹¹ "[T]he jump scare is used by unimaginative filmmakers as a cheap method of frightening the audience [...] because the directors have forgotten how to actually scare people." ("Urban Dictionary: Jump Scare") Q.v. "Feline Fright" (Ebert 1994: 39).

¹² Cf. "Jump Scare – TV Tropes"

films, the effect is intended to cause a physical reaction, e.g. a shudder or goose bumps, and to set the mood for, prepare the reader for, or enhance a feeling of fear or anxiety.¹³

The other two categories – fear and anxiety – shall be distinguished with the help of two criteria: the immediacy of the threat, and the intensity or level of occupation. Both fear and anxiety are “expectant emotions” (Ngai 2005: 210), but the threat which produces fear is immediate and physical. A rather mundane example would be the psychopathic murderer wielding a blood-stained axe, who almost lazily walks after (yet still easily catches up with) the running and stumbling young victim-to-be. An anxiety-inducing threat is more diffuse, or further away from the person. It can be something concrete and tangible but it will not be as urgent. The terrorist with the bomb in their hand or their finger on the red button will¹⁴ instil fear, whereas the existence of global terrorism networks and terrorist training camps in which innocent children are brainwashed into becoming suicide bombers would rather cause anxiety. These categories do not have clean, smooth borders, and regarding the examples given, a warning should be issued of making statements about other people’s emotions and minds. Different people react differently to even objectively threatening scenarios. This is especially highlighted in appraisal theories of emotions. They emphasise the role of feelings as an intermediary between a stimulus (e.g. a perceived threat) and the behavioural reaction: “emotions consist of patterns of perception, or rather interpretation, and their correlates in the central and peripheral nervous systems” (Ellsworth and Scherer 2003: 572). An important point is that individual differences as well as social contexts affect these appraisals. The emotional reaction to a stimulus is

¹³ The Gothic and the Victorian sensation novel were at times reproached for eliciting physical reactions in their (female) readers, which was seen as morally objectionable as well as a ‘cheap trick’, not unlike the jump scare in films (cf. Gymnich 2012: 14).

¹⁴ This means ‘is intended to’, of course. Whether the image or the writing actually does evoke the intended emotion depends on a number of factors both inside and outside the text.

influenced by a wide range of factors: how quickly and how thoroughly the individual is able and prepared to analyse the situation, how optimistic or pessimistic the person is in general, but also which cultural values and social norms shape their world view.¹⁵ There are situations in which the immediacy of a threat leaves little to no space for interpretation. However, even under such circumstances is it important to be cautious with assumptions about what causes an individual to experience fear. The film *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil*¹⁶ is a humorous exploration of how social determinants factor into these appraisals, or rather in the fallibility of the process: a stereotypical horror-film setting in the woods and other genre clichés make a group of upper-middle class teenagers misjudge the actions of two altogether harmless hillbillies, and “as the misunderstanding grows, so does the body count” (“TUCKER AND DALE VS EVIL”).¹⁷ Although they are certainly exaggerated for comedic purposes, the flawed appraisal processes presented are just plausible enough for the plot not to appear entirely absurd. With this range of restrictions and possible pitfalls in mind, the example of the terrorist who one is confronted with in person versus the global threat of terrorism serves to illustrate the difference between fear and anxiety in terms of immediacy.

The second criterion will make the distinction between the two mental states even clearer, although it is closely linked to the first one. Fear and anxiety differ in how much of our focus they occupy. An immediate physical threat is likely to demand our full attention; the emotion is prone to block out any other feeling. Other, less specific or less urgent threats will rather

¹⁵ Ellsworth and Scherer 2003: 581ff. Culturally “‘learned’ emotions, such as disgust at the thought of eating pork [can even] trigger apparently ‘innate’ mechanisms, such as nausea” (Ellsworth and Scherer 2003: 589). In other instances, the appraisal of a situation can conflict with the emotion experienced, which does not negate the connection, however (cf. Taylor 1988: 100f). Zoltán Kövecses, quoting Shweder, adds another layer by pointing out that even the experience of a feeling itself triggers emotions in turn, based on the subject’s cultural background (Kövecses 2003); cf. Walby and Spencer 2011: 107.

¹⁶ Craig 2010

¹⁷ The contemporary legend “The Bikers and the All-American Boys” (Craughwell 2005: 370) works in a similar way.

make you “continually consumed by the persistent feelings of anxiety that gnaw away at you, destroying your sense of security in the world” (Panksepp 2005: 206). Anxiety can make one lie awake at night but will not push aside every other emotion all day every day. This is one difference which can even be measured in the body: “adrenalin often overwhelms individuals afraid of being attacked, while individuals terrified of contracting tuberculosis experience no such physiological response” (Bourke 2006: 6f).¹⁸ This is why fear fits Nico H. Frijda’s definition of emotions as “changes in action readiness” (1986: 5) much better than anxiety. An interesting definition of the German word *Furcht*, which is usually translated as *anxiety* when a distinction is made between *Angst* and *Furcht*, stresses that its source is the perceived likelihood¹⁹ of a change for the worse. Anxiety then stems from not being able to sustain something good (i.e. a state which is perceived as good) or not being able to avert something bad.²⁰ This definition moves it closer to *worrying* than *being afraid*: “fear [is] an innate response to imminent danger, and anxiety [is] a more complex interplay of emotions resulting in worry and a sense of uncontrollability” (Wenzel and Finstrom 2005: 2). All this suggests that when fear is experienced, the threat or object of fear is much more easily identifiable. In the case of anxiety, the actual source of the emotion can lie hidden to the person experiencing it;²¹ anxiety is “less embodied” (Hanich 2010: 254) than fear. It is one of a number of “affective states, often of relatively long duration, not elicited by an external event or *outlasting such an event*, or disproportionate to such an event in intensity and duration” (Frijda 1986: 252, emphasis added).²² Another way of illustrating the difference is in their vocal expression: anxiety does not make you scream, shout or howl; rather,

¹⁸ Q.v. Panksepp (2005: 212) on the neurological difference between panic and anxiety.

¹⁹ Likelihood, not certainty: if something bad is going to happen *inevitably*, the emotion experienced is despair rather than anxiety (cf. Slaby 2007: 95).

²⁰ Cf. J.H. Zedler, quoted in Bartikowski 2007: 4

²¹ Taylor 1988: 48

²² Frijda categorises these states as “moods” rather than “feelings” or “sentiments and passions” but also states that these “are not sharply separate classes of experience” (1986: 253).

it is much more expressed with silence.²³ Fear and anxiety remain related emotions, however, and not only is the boundary blurred but the two states can also influence each other,²⁴ or even be actively turned from one into the other.²⁵

Finally, the term *anxiety* can be elucidated with the help of its antonyms. On the one hand, there is *hope*: the anticipation of a positive state to endure or a negative state to cease. The other, possibly at first glance not as obvious, antonym is *contempt* as defined by Hobbes:

the object of Hobbesian contempt, like that of its close relations, pity and disdain, is relatively harmless. Too weak or insignificant to pose any sort of danger, the object of contempt is perceived as inferior in a manner that allows it to be dismissed or ignored. (Ngai 2005: 336)

This opposite stresses the feelings towards a threat rather than the assessment of its probability. The negative development or situation may well present itself, but we are, or expect to be, unaffected by it: “If desire says ‘Yes’ and disgust says ‘No,’ the contempt described by Nietzsche^[26] and Hobbes says, ‘Whatever’” (Ngai 2005: 336). What this does not imply is ignorance. The (supposed) threat is indeed known, but not perceived as dangerous or not taken seriously. The most appealing aspect of this concept is that it allows for some fluctuation compared to a dichotomous approach in which unawareness is the counter piece. There is much more space on the spectrum of ‘anxiety – (Hobbesian/Nietzschean) contempt’ in which one can move or be moved back and forth, and this is the very space which is discussed in this analysis of strategies of inspiring anxieties in fiction.

²³ Cf. Slavoj Žižek in Fiennes 2006

²⁴ Cf. Wenzel and Finstrom 2005: 2; Frijda 1986: 253; Furedi 2011: 91f

²⁵ Bourke 2006: 190f

²⁶ “There is indeed too much carelessness, too much taking lightly, too much looking away and impatience involved in contempt, even too much joyfulness, for it to be able to transform its object into a real ... monster” (Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Ngai 2005: 336).

Societal anxiety

When discussing societal anxieties as a subcategory, it is important not to confuse them with *social* anxieties, which pertain to interaction with other people or one's conduct in the company of others and its external perception. Neither does the term mean that society itself suffers from "traumatic anxiety" because it is "under chronic duress" ("ShrinkWrapped: Societal Anxiety" 2010). It is important to be cautious with statements about society as a whole since it is highly questionable whether it can be defined satisfactorily (so as to include and exclude groups of people precisely) and even if so, whether any kind of emotion can be uniformly ascribed. There is such a thing as collective emotions: feelings which are experienced, at least to some extent, by all members of a certain group or community.²⁷ We also 'learn' anxieties and fears from parents and other influential people in our lives,²⁸ and it has been said that, especially in a social context, emotions are also influenced by fashions, or trends: "anxieties oscillate up and down; they are traded high or low at the stock market of emotions, [and] are quasi subject to economic cycles and crises" (Flohr 1994: 120, my translation). In the realm of 'common knowledge', there are anxieties assumed to be prevalent in a certain segment of society, and there are definitive threats which concern a larger number of people than other ones. However, the idea that any community or group holds, or even 'owns' a particular feeling is erroneous. "It is not the case that members of the working class [fear] the same thing, or that women or members of an ethnic community [share] emotional experiences. Fear 'bunches' individuals in different ways" (Bourke 2006: 354).

²⁷ Emotional states can even be 'contagious', as mass panics prove for example (cf. Bandelow 2004: 102f; Delumeau 1985: 22, 24). For a broad collection of examples of 'contagious' mass emotions, see Evans and Bartholomew 2009. Hilge Landweer emphasises that we not necessarily mirror the emotions of others but "interact emotionally", i.e. react to emotions according to our socialisation, which she calls a "culture of emotions" (2007: 11f, my translation).

²⁸ Bourke 2006: 95

In order to avoid a struggle with vague and unscientific terms and weak data, the emphasis will be put on a second facet of the term *societal anxieties*: their object or their substance is related to society, i.e. the world the subject lives in with its structures and its order. Personal concern about possibly having contracted an STD after having unprotected sexual intercourse with a stranger is not a case of *societal* anxiety. Discrimination against people suffering from AIDS or against homosexuals as the ‘target group’ of HIV; hospitals not being able or prepared to exercise the care required to ensure that nobody is given blood carrying the human immunodeficiency virus in transfusions; or HIV-positive people infecting others on purpose, on the other hand, are worries that concern a larger group of people, even a whole segment of society, and may affect the structures and order of the world we live in. Thus, societal anxieties are closely connected to social cultures in an ambivalent way: social cultures produce societal anxieties in individuals yet in turn can help people cope with them.²⁹ And, on the infamous third hand, feelings also serve a purpose in a community: “they structure social situations and relationships” (Burkart 2007: 159, my translation). The role of emotions in relation to social groups is explored in more detail in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3.

To inspire

Finally, a note on the verb: what is it that is done with emotions, or *to* the reader’s emotions in fiction? Different verbs are used in this text not only for stylistic reasons but also to express semantic nuances. The vaguest (and possibly therefore most convenient) thing one could say that literature does with anxieties and other emotions is *influence* them. At the other end of the spectrum, there are the words *to produce* and *to generate*, crediting a text with the power to create an emotional state from (next to) nothing. While this is not entirely inconceivable, depending on a number of factors including the reader’s susceptibility, it could still be considered a

²⁹ Flohr 1994: 124

slight overestimation of the power of the written word. In the case of societal anxieties, it will be argued that a latent emotional tendency at least is a prerequisite for a work of fiction to *produce* a feeling effectively. This basic tendency towards, or latent existence of, emotion is implied considerably more strongly in the following terms: *to incite*, *to evoke*, or *to elicit*. What works along similar lines is *to activate*; this verb signifies without a doubt the pre-existence of the feeling which is then *triggered*. One of the many metaphors used for fear and related mental states³⁰ are animals,³¹ so literature can also *feed* an emotion of this sort. In other cases, it is the text for which the animal metaphor is used; then, it can *feed on* or *feed off* the recipients' feelings. Apart from its potential aesthetic appeal, the image of mutual nourishment is useful because it emphasises the interrelations of works of fiction and the emotional world of the reader.

While all of the terminology mentioned above can and should be used in this context, and none dismissed straight away, it is the verb *to inspire* which has been chosen for the title of this study. Its allure lies in the many gradations and connotations of the term *inspiration*, ranging from the physiological act of drawing breath all the way to 'divine inspiration'. The *Dictionarium Britannicum* defines the verb as follows: "to breathe in or upon; to prompt, to put into ones Head, to endue or fill with" ("inspire" 1969). Something which inspires a feeling leaves you in the *spirit* of this emotion, which is arguably an enduring state that cannot be 'switched off' easily:

Most emotions [...] are events over time and are felt as events over time. They not only have a beginning and an end, but also an initiation and a resolution, or an explicit nonresolution. Fear not merely ends; it is overcome; or not needed any longer, or assured that nothing will happen, or left dangling, unresolved. (Frijda 1986: 249)

³⁰ Cf. Kövecses 2003: 23f

³¹ Sometimes the comparison is quite explicit, e.g. Clay Riddell's 'panic rat' in Stephen King's *Cell* (2006).

The same applies to fear in works of fiction. Fear and/or anxieties being overcome in the end is typical of children's literature, for example, where this serves an educational purpose.³² In lowbrow fiction, the reader is assumed to expect, even demand, an absolute happy ending devoid of any complications or emotional conflict: fear/anxiety is, as mentioned above, 'not needed any longer, or assured that nothing will happen'. The happy ending is not even impeded if the reader knows that some monsters are simply unkillable, or that the evil baroness will keep on trying to destroy the prince and princess's happiness, or that the world will have to rely on James Bond to save it again soon. These are simply promises of sequels, because it is made obvious that these new obstacles will be overcome as well. Thus there is no need to be afraid. Finally, there are works of fiction in which anxiety is explicitly *not* resolved. Fear is 'left dangling,' and so is the reader to a certain extent. They are made to stay anxious or at least to keep thinking about the problem they were faced with in the text. This is the intended effect of a text inspiring societal anxiety. The feeling of anxiety does not disappear with the reading of the ending; it lingers on or is even intensified.

2.2 Popular Fiction

The field of popular fiction, which is the focus of this study, is so expansive that the term itself becomes blurred, almost useless, unless defined more precisely. A series of sub-categories are required for the number of different genres, and for the wide spectrums of seriousness, meaningfulness and depth that the texts categorised as *popular fiction* cover. However, with hardly any neatly defined borders to work with, further sub-categorisation is difficult and may just turn out to be futile. One does

³² Another factor is that "[t]he publishing industry tends to play it safe and follows a fairly Romantic view of childhood. Children [...] are to be protected from the chaos or nihilism of irony and the sadness of tragedy, however inspiring" (Cadden 2011: 306).

not even have to go deeper into the genre to find oneself in a “theoretical minefield” (Ashley 1989: 2): using the term *popular fiction* usually requires the use of a second term, denominating the ‘other’. Only if one is willing to make a value judgement, and only if one feels that this kind of judgement is justified as well as justifiable, is it easy to put a label on the opposite of popular fiction. You just call it *art* – a label which writers of fiction had to struggle and fight for in the late 19th and early 20th centuries³³ when the novel was still “widely considered to display a lack of seriousness” (Goody 2010: 139).

Serious fiction is one of the few options of differentiation which implies comparatively little depreciation. The problem it poses, however, stems from the ambiguity of the word *serious*. Even if it refers to books that are ‘to be taken seriously’ rather than those which are exclusively serious in their content matter, there remains a hint of the notion that humorous or comical works of fiction cannot be *serious* literature.³⁴ This can lead to an unacceptable distortion. The term non-genre fiction comes with similar complications: it refuses to acknowledge that there may be popular fiction which is not easily classified in terms of genres, and marks specific genres as ‘unsuitable’ for anything worth considering for its ‘artistic value’. Another rather problematic label is *Literature*, with a capital L. It may seem like an elegant way to imply superiority without having to be too blunt about it. In addition, it does not make any statement about what it is that distinguishes it from popular fiction. Literature-with-a-capital-L simply *is*, its vagueness presumably also hoped to provide immunity to attack. The previous sentence highlights one of the more practical downsides of this term: simple rules of capitalisation can make it hard to use or require awkward sentence structures to avoid the problem. In spoken language, *Literature* as a term is entirely useless unless marked with specific gestures which would not be easy to make repeatedly without seeming ridiculous. *Non-popular*

³³ Cf. Matz 2012

³⁴ Cf. Eagleton 1992: 191ff; Anz 1998: 18

fiction seems to be the least controversial alternative.³⁵ However, it is very vague and unattractive in its tautology. Even ‘the literary canon’, as opposed to popular fiction, is not entirely applicable, as popular fiction has become a field of study in most renowned institutions of literary studies. The suggested reading list for students of English literature at Heidelberg University, for instance, includes works that tend to be considered ‘popular’, such as John le Carré’s *A Perfect Spy* (1986) or Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986);³⁶ and the 2012 *Cambridge History of the English Novel*³⁷ features chapters on thrillers, science fiction and fantasy. These genres, which are usually seen as belonging to popular fiction, are not central to the 900-page overview of the history of the novel, but they *are* a part of it. This inclusion of popular fiction is the result of an arguably positive development, and yet it makes life harder for those seeking to define *popular fiction* and its ‘other’ in two ways. As mentioned before, the other cannot be simply called *the literary canon* anymore. What is more, a definition of popular fiction becomes more difficult without this once so reliable opposite. The canon was the only category which offered an explicit list of works. Although it has always been subject to change, before works of popular fiction were taken seriously in literary studies the literary canon (in its shape and form at any given time) could be used as the simplest way to define the field. Popular fiction was “a residual concept” (Bennett 1986: 238) – it meant whatever was not on the list. Now it has become necessary to return to less clear-cut criteria.

Bestsellers

Popularity is often thought to express itself in terms of sales figures. These numbers alone are, however, not the most reliable criterion for a

³⁵ The term *unpopular fiction* has been suggested in an informal conversation with a colleague, and while intriguing to a certain extent, it might not be received with much appreciation in the world of literary studies.

³⁶ “Studienführer Neue Prüfungsordnungen”: 109, 117

³⁷ Caserio and Hawes 2012

definition of popular fiction. In fact, it can be argued that the only way in which they are helpful in this context would be to mark the other ‘other’ – truly *unpopular* fiction, as in fiction that is not in favour with the reading public. At any rate, the terms *popular fiction* and *bestsellers* are often used synonymously. Clive Bloom’s 2002 book on the genre is called *Bestsellers*. He does point out, however, that the works he discusses are not simply chosen on the basis of their sales numbers for different reasons, the main one being that the figures are not as clear and definite as one might think. The seemingly simple definition of a bestseller as “the work of fiction sold in the most units (books in a given price range) to the most people over a set period of time” (Bloom 2002: 6) requires definitions of

units (hardback; paperback; serialisation) and period of time (month of publication; a year; the twentieth century), the importance of the price at which it is sold (significance of cost of hardback or paperback) and the definition of fiction itself... (Bloom 2002: 6)³⁸

In addition, there is the question of why a certain book is sold in high numbers. The influence of “the Booker and other prizes” (Humble 2012: 88) or book clubs with a high media profile³⁹ are not to be underestimated. Bestseller lists are also places where classic authors such as Jane Austen or Charles Dickens can be found, who

remain bestsellers, often outselling modern authors, either because of their popularity (boosted by films, television serialisations, etc.) or because of special circumstances (being required school or college reading). (Bloom 2002: 7)

In the case of the Bible, there is a wide range of reasons for acquisition, including the tradition of many hotel rooms around the world being equipped with a copy, but there is reasonable doubt whether many of these copies will actually be read. But even without taking the Bible into account, sales figures are “crude because the purchase of a book by no means guarantees the reading of it – think of the case of Stephen

³⁸ The sociologist Robert Escarpit suggests three categories: “fast-sellers”, “steady-sellers”, and “best-sellers”, with the latter being a combination of categories one and two (McCracken 1998: 22).

³⁹ Humble 2012: 90f

Hawking's bestselling but notoriously unread *A Brief History of Time ...*" (Humble 2012: 87).⁴⁰ Another example is Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), whose sales were impressive when the media attention was high after its publication but remained "one of the great *unread* but heavily purchased books of the century" (Bloom 2002: 227, emphasis in original).⁴¹

One way in which commercial success is relevant, however, to the concept of popular fiction is its potentially negative effect on the classification of a text or a writer. John le Carré can be named as an example: despite the literary awards he has received, he "has never been quite accepted as a writer of 'literature' by literary critics. This may come from his extraordinary success [...]" (Bloom 2002: 218). Elitist thinking in literary circles cannot be denied. Some writers of fiction have been known to shy away from too much popularity lest it hurt their reputation as a 'serious' author of proper 'Literature'.⁴² In its review of David Nicholls' *One Day* (2009), *The Times* addressed the assumption "that the 'more literary' will snobbishly gratify themselves that they never read "commercial" romantic comedies with cartoons and squiggly writing on the cover" ("*One Day* – Wikipedia", original article not publicly accessible). Commercial success seems to be a dirty thing that goes against the romanticised image of the artist, the 'proper' artist, "whose creative genius drives them unerringly on" (Humm, Stigant and Widdowson 1986: 3) and who should

⁴⁰ The mathematician Jordan Ellenberg has devised a way – for entertainment purposes, as he emphasises – of measuring 'unread books' based on a feature called 'Popular Highlights' on the website of online bookshop amazon.com. He calls it the *Hawking Index* (Ellenberg 2014).

⁴¹ Maybe other statistics are more useful for measuring popularity: for example, "[i]t has been reported that Terry Pratchett is the most shop-lifted author at W. H. Smith's" (Bloom 2002: 223). In a 1936 article, George Orwell suggested that only in "a lending library [do] you see people's real tastes, not their pretended ones", as "it is always fairly easy to *sell* Dickens" (2008: 12, emphasis in original) in a bookshop while hardly anybody borrows Dickens' novels from a library.

⁴² Humble 2012: 93f

ideally be struggling financially as well as remain unconcerned by such worldly things as money.⁴³

Key characteristics of popular fiction

Even though sales figures have been dismissed as a statistical means to define popular fiction, there is no doubt that it is in fact read by a large number of people. Still, a different, non-numerical approach towards defining the field will turn out to be more useful. The first key characteristic which marks popular fiction is its target group. Popular fiction is not written for an élite. This minimal definition may sound simple enough, yet it requires some clarification because people tend to be tempted to use it in reverse. It is not true that these texts cannot – or even must not – be read and enjoyed by readers with a high level of education or social status. Their target groups may include élites but are not restricted to them.⁴⁴ Popular fiction, quite simply, refers to “those books that everyone reads” as they have “an impressive ability to reach across wide social and cultural divisions” (Glover and McCracken 2012: 1).⁴⁵

The second key characteristic is certainly related to this. It refers to the purpose of these texts, by which both the goal intended by the writers and the function in the lives of the readers are meant. The primary purpose of popular fiction is entertainment. It is first and foremost read for fun. Whether a specific text is found entertaining by a specific reader is not ours to say. However, a number of features found in popular fiction show that the text is written mainly for entertainment purposes rather than education or enlightenment. The language and style of these texts are easily accessible. A piece of literature that is hard to read, for example one that

⁴³ Botting (1996: 46f) gives a brief overview of the 18th century development of writing, away from “a pursuit associated with those who could afford leisure” to a “more professional activity”.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kelly 1988.

⁴⁵ “... with remarkable commercial success” – sales figures are a relevant part of Glover and McCracken’s definition.

requires the average reader to use a dictionary even though it is written in their mother tongue, will not be read purely for fun. There is a high degree of satisfaction to be gained from reading, and finding access to, a challenging text, and of course it would be not only wrong but also foolish to claim that 'serious' literature is by definition not entertaining.⁴⁶ However, accessibility is a criterion that clearly divides the two different kinds of fiction. This is also part of the reason why so many texts were considered 'popular' in their time yet have become part of the 'serious' literary canon. As Terry Eagleton remarks, "[e]ven the most 'prosaic' text of the fifteenth century may sound 'poetic' to us today because of its archaism" (1992: 5). As languages, political systems, social frameworks, technological standards, and world views change, pieces of fiction become less easily accessible to the contemporary reader.⁴⁷ Therefore, "there can be no transhistorical, immutable popularity" (Ashley 1989: 3). Other factors which can mark a text as entertaining, i.e. *intended* to entertain, are pace, suspense, humour, etc.

In pejorative definitions of popular fiction, a kind of fast-food quality is attributed. These texts are said to be consumed, devoured and then forgotten at high speed and with little effort,⁴⁸ always leaving you not quite satisfied or feeling slightly sick from over-consumption. There is no doubt that a large body of popular works of fiction of this sort exists, but it would be wrong to make this general statement about the wide spectrum of texts subsumed as popular fiction. This becomes especially evident when

⁴⁶ Christopher Lane points out that "[f]rom the earliest decades of the eighteenth century, novels were written as much to entertain as to inform and instruct. Many works aimed at some combination of the three, even playing up their didactic potential to counter allegations that the genre overall was 'inferior' to poetry" (2012: 454). Tzvetan Todorov states that from the late 18th century on, "the beautiful" was one of two "great definition[s] of literature": "'pleasing' wins out over 'instructing'" (1990: 5).

⁴⁷ Yet it has been remarked that, at least in some cases, an "*active* appropriation and redefinition" of certain material (e.g. Shakespeare's works) by the elite took place: "it was moved from entertainment to education" (Storey 2007: 34, emphasis added).

⁴⁸ Cf. Classen 2013a: 7; Roth 2009: 105. Aleida Assmann speaks of "numb consumerism" (1983: 190, my translation).

considering that popular fiction has been defined as the opposite (or the residue) of the literary canon. Of course there is no *one* canon, but one could imagine a collation of all the required or suggested reading lists of all departments of literature of the world-wide “apparatus of education” (Bennett 1986: 237). Even then the result would be such a small fraction of everything which is fiction that it is obvious how little sense it makes to say that rest is all of the same kind or quality. There is terminology available to denote differences among this vast field. *Trivial literature* or *pulp* are names of sub-categories, triviality being “more intimately associated with notions of lack of originality, creativity, and meaningfulness than with popularity, great publicity, and wide dissemination” (Classen 2013b: 93). However, these terms are sometimes also used as synonyms of *popular fiction*.⁴⁹

High-, middle- and lowbrow fiction

For a more differentiated approach, again a three-way classification can be of use: high-, middle- and lowbrow literature. The respective categories are equally difficult to define precisely, and of course any division into ‘high’ and ‘low’ is never free of value judgement,⁵⁰ as unfortunately is the gender bias that *middlebrow* literature has been ascribed.⁵¹ Bob Ashley warns of the construction of an “alternative canon”, which could undermine “the earlier insistence that the popular and the serious are shifting and overlapping categories” (1989: 5). Yet the advantages of the three-way classification outweigh these objections.

⁴⁹ See McCracken’s book title, *Pulp: Reading popular fiction* (1998). In the German language, there is an (almost) neutral term: *Unterhaltungsliteratur*, “entertainment literature”, set apart from the derogatory term *Trivilliteratur*. The Dutch word *ontspanningslektuur* (“relaxation/recreation literature”), as opposed to *triviale literatuur*, works in a similar way. Unlike in English terminology, the purpose or intent of the work of fiction is eponymous here.

⁵⁰ It is interesting to note, however, that in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (11th edition, 2004), “middlebrow” is marked “informal” (“middlebrow” 2004), while both “lowbrow” and “highbrow” carry the label “often derogatory” (“lowbrow” 2004; “highbrow” 2004).

⁵¹ “Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that [...] a predominantly female readership very often automatically consigned a text to the category of the middlebrow.” (Humble 2012: 93)

Firstly, its appeal lies in the very fact that there are three categories, softening the stark opposition inherent in a dichotomous classification. Secondly, it gives a name to the works of popular fiction which have “enough ‘meat’ for discussion” (Humble 2012: 90). These texts have a wide popular appeal but do more than touch the surface; they do not simply “confirm, affirm, and support specific value systems” (Classen 2013b: 95) or “specifically [leave] aside all questions pertaining to problematic issues, contradictions, and the need for individual protagonists to develop and grow through trial and error” (Classen 2013b: 96). On the contrary, popular middlebrow fiction⁵² is most apt to raise questions, doubts, and anxieties in the reader. As the fool is allowed to speak the truth more frankly, popular fiction can deal with some issues more directly and thus evoke emotions more effectively. It can catch us off-guard, seemingly being nothing more than entertainment yet confronting us with distressing, grave or horrifying topics or situations.⁵³ Moreover, it fulfils a function as

the principal, perhaps only, fictional reading of the majority of the population of modern industrialised societies[:] it is widely assumed to influence lives profoundly; and it is surely of major significance in the understanding of those lives, particularly the processes by which meanings are constructed and exchanged. (Ashley 1989: 3)

These texts do give insight into the world and the social context of their readers. Popular fiction appeals to a large number of people, meaning it is accessible to them in terms of language as well as themes. All this makes it predestined for research in the field of societal anxieties. However, there are two major pitfalls which must be avoided: firstly, drawing conclusions about society from works of fiction is seemingly easy and therefore a dangerous thing to do. There are too many other factors that play a role when it comes to a text’s significance or popularity, and a text can be successful despite not reflecting a society’s anxieties correctly,

⁵² To facilitate readability of this text, I will use “popular fiction” interchangeably for “popular *middlebrow* fiction” henceforth. Whenever lowbrow, or pulp, fiction is discussed, it will be explicitly stated.

⁵³ Cf. Frank 2010: 151. Q.v. Alice Sebold’s blurb on Fowler 2013: fourth cover.

or fail to appeal to the public even though it deals with the very thing the majority of the people are concerned about. The second pitfall is to look at popular fiction only as a playing field for social experiments and observations.⁵⁴ Such devaluation only helps for a tautological elitist categorisation of works of fiction: a text can only be examined in terms of its social content because it is not 'high' literature, and it is not 'high' literature because the only way in which we will examine it is regarding its social content.

Popular fictions, then, need to be read and analysed not as some kind of sugar-coated sociology, but as narratives which negotiate, no less than the classic texts, the connection between 'writing, history and ideology'. (Humm, Stigant and Widdowson 1986: 2)

One thing that cannot be denied is that popular fiction has its conventions from which writers do not often, or at least not excessively, deviate. Thus there are certain key genres of popular fiction which make up by far its biggest parts: (Gothic) horror, fantasy, detective and spy stories/thrillers, science fiction, and romance.⁵⁵ These genres are so strongly connected with the field of popular fiction that it is very hard, if not impossible, for a novel in one of them to be recognised as highbrow literature.⁵⁶ Therefore, in the case of science fiction, for example, "some authors from outside the genre are eager to disassociate their works from the label" (James and Mendlesohn 2012: 874). A demanding, difficult and intricate work of science fiction is much more likely to be labelled 'nerdy' than categorised as highbrow literature. This is especially true for contemporary works of fiction. As has been mentioned before, a text has a much better chance of being considered highbrow when some time has passed since its first date of publication. With all these complications in mind, the range of texts discussed in this study includes representatives of

⁵⁴ This would mean falling prey to the same mistake which, according to Tony Bennett, all Marxist schools of criticism have made, with 'serious' literature seen as above ideology and "relatively autonomous in relation to it, whereas popular fiction is ideology and reduced to it" (1986: 249).

⁵⁵ Cf. McCracken 1998, Glover and McCracken 2012: 2

⁵⁶ Cf. Thompson 1993: 4f et al.

the key genres and works traditionally categorised as popular fiction as well as borderline cases. The latter have been chosen because of the interesting role they play in negotiating boundaries. Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, for example, is a text on the edge of more than one category and will therefore prove valuable in analysis.

Internet-based popular fiction

No study of popular contemporary forms of fiction could afford to ignore the internet. As a medium (still) relying mainly on the written word, it has become an immensely important source of reading material for the public. It has not replaced the book but has added a whole new world of genres, conventions, styles and forms of presentation. Strategies of inspiring societal anxieties, along with a vast number of other aspects of the novel, have been implemented and modified in new media and new ways of storytelling.

On the internet, a number of traditional text forms have found a new environment in which they flourish and to which they have (been) adapted. If these new-yet-old text types are examined with an eye on the key genres of popular fiction, one form stands out distinctively. Crime, sex, love, personal relationships, technological advance, the supernatural and corporeal horror are the central topics of an internet-based⁵⁷ text form which also shares a large number of other criteria with the popular novel: the contemporary (email/internet) legend. Most obviously, the target group is the same. The texts are written for everybody, not for an élite or a group of dedicated fans, as is the case with fan fiction, for example. In the shape

⁵⁷ This is not to ignore the origins of contemporary web legends, which go back to a time long before the internet has been widely used or computers were even invented. In its present-day form, however, the genre can be called internet-based, appearing only very rarely as printed text in its own right outside of specialised reference books. Legends passed on exclusively *orally* are not the subject matter of my research. The internet as part of the oral tradition of storytelling is discussed in Chapter 3.2.

of email chain letters, they usually include the request to the reader to forward the text to all their other email contacts, which makes at least the intended target group quite obvious. Language and themes make the texts easily accessible, and in terms of narrative style there are hardly any deviations from the conventions also observed in the popular novel. The biggest formal difference is the length of the text. In this respect, the novel and the contemporary legend⁵⁸ are at opposite ends of the spectrum. This has a major effect on how elements and methods of inspiring societal anxieties are applied. It will be illustrated, however, that the strategies used in the respective forms of fiction are in essence identical and only differ in terms of implementation.

Like the popular novel, contemporary legends are meant to resonate the world and social context of their readership. As “unique, unselfconscious reflection of major concerns of individuals in the societies in which the legends circulate” (Brunvand 2003: xii), they are the ideal object of investigation regarding societal anxieties. The same restrictions as in the case of popular fiction apply: the conclusions that can be drawn about society with certainty and validity are limited. Like popular novels, “[t]hese texts hold a mirror – *a distorted one* – to the social and economic conditions of modern, Western, industrial society” (Fine 1992: 2, emphasis added). For this study, however, contemporary legends are highly relevant, and what marks their main difference from other forms of popular fiction makes them especially interesting. When compiled in print or on websites, these legends are simply read for fun.⁵⁹ ‘In the wild’ as it were, on the internet and in electronic messages, the stories are told as truth. Whether this works, i.e. whether the audience receives the legends as true stories, is not of relevance. Yet the implications of this pertaining to the storytelling and the application of strategies of inspiring societal anxieties are worth

⁵⁸ For the sake of simplicity, *contemporary legend* will be used to denominate internet-based contemporary legends unless otherwise stated.

⁵⁹ Specialised printed edition and internet sites also function as reference material, in which case the texts are looked up or read *about* rather than read.

looking at. The presentation of a text as fact rather than fiction, and assuming that the readership will accept it accordingly, influences attempts to evoke emotions.

3. Theoretical underpinnings

Even in this rough sketch of the object of this investigation, its width has become manifest. It therefore needs broad theoretical support to rest on. If the aim is to suggest a 'recipe' for inspiring societal anxieties in popular forms of fiction, these building blocks make up the list of ingredients, and the first three of them contain the components which come from outside of literature studies in a stricter sense – philosophy, folklore theory, and political & socio-political theory. In this chapter, a brief overview of each of these fields will be given, particularly focusing on their import on societal anxieties.

3.1 Philosophy of anxiety

Sigmund Freud

Fear and anxiety appear to be the most interesting of the emotions generally considered the 'basic emotions', which are experienced by every human being with a standard emotional capability. Almost every theoretical and philosophical text aiming to explore the basic make-up of the human mind, or soul, and what it means to be human, deals with fear and/or anxiety. One of the best-known and best-established approaches is Freud's psychoanalytical theory of fear and anxiety. While psychoanalysis is of little

to no relevance for this study, what is interesting in Freud's writing is the way in which he distinguishes quite clearly between different kinds of fear or anxiety respectively. The German word he uses is *Angst*; the term commonly used in English translations and discussions of Freud's works is *anxiety*:

Freud preferred the term *anxiety* to that of *fear* because fear is usually thought of in the sense of being afraid of something in the external world. Freud recognized that one could be afraid of internal dangers as well as external ones. (Hall 1955: 43f)

His famous model of the human psyche is the basis for the categories of anxiety he uses: the id, the ego and the super ego are the location of their respective distinct types of anxieties. Freud's *reality anxiety* or *objective anxiety* (*Realangst*) corresponds to the definition of *fear* in this study: it is triggered by a real, known threat. Only the ego can experience this kind of anxiety, which is biologically useful and important. It triggers responsive action suited to avert the danger: fight or flight.⁶⁰ The kind of anxiety devoid of a concrete object is inexpedient; it is of no use, at least biologically. This second category, according to Freud, is *neurotic anxiety* (*neurotische Angst*). It arises from the id, linking it closely to libidinal drives, and can, pursuant to Freud's prevalent line of argument, be cured by tackling the problem of unsatisfied libido.⁶¹ The third kind of anxiety stems from the super ego. It is called *moral anxiety* (*moralische Angst*): the moral conscience is what threatens the ego.⁶² Thus its expression is close to guilt or shame.⁶³ According to Freud, all three levels of the psyche are invariably influencing the person. Similarly, all three categories of anxiety are constantly being negotiated in the ego,⁶⁴ and may even become mingled in the perception of the person experiencing them: "He may think that he is afraid of something in the external world

⁶⁰ Freud 1926: 275f; 302

⁶¹ Q.v. Düsing 2006: 185f

⁶² Q.v. Hall 1955: 44

⁶³ Q.v. Hall 1955

⁶⁴ Düsing 2006: 186f

when in reality his fear stems from an impulse danger or a superego threat” (Hall 1955: 44).

It is at this point that the categories introduced for the purpose of this study diverge most obviously from Freud. The existence of what Freud called *neurotic* and *moral anxieties* seem plausible. However, reducing the wide range of anxieties to these two kinds, and especially negating the possibility of external threats as a source of anxiety which the subject is unaware of, could be considered negligence. Freud’s discussion of the object of fear, and its location in reference to the subject, has been picked up by theorists following his school of thought.⁶⁵ However, the emotional state defined as societal anxiety in Chapter 2.1 is not discussed by Freud (or his successors) at all. In his work on cultural theory, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930), the described struggle is not the one negotiated in an experience of societal anxieties either. Again, the individual’s needs are reduced to basic sexual and aggressive drives.⁶⁶

Søren Kierkegaard

Western philosophy has always been shaped by Christian belief. This also applies to philosophical approaches to fear and anxiety, of course. In his book on the history of fear as a ‘political idea’, Corey Robin points out that fear is the first emotion mentioned in the Old Testament.⁶⁷ Indeed, Christianity (as well as Judaism), at least in its organised form, is commonly criticised for nursing a culture of fear in order to make believers obedient, even submissive. “According to Christian mythology, fear is a consequence of the Fall of Man. Hence the only way to counteract fear is to live a true and truthful Christian life” (Bartikowski 2007: 4, my translation). It

⁶⁵ Cf. Lacan 2010: 198ff; Žižek 1991

⁶⁶ “Anxiety | Dictionary of War” 2006 – 2007

⁶⁷ Robin 2004: 1

is in this vein that Søren Kierkegaard defines⁶⁸ anxiety as the self in a state of being “afraid of itself as the initiator of free actions, i.e. afraid of setting itself in a state of guilt” (Düsing 2006: 190, my translation) and as the “key to being human” (Grøn 1999: 10, my translation).⁶⁹ Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety (Begrebet Angest)*, which was published in 1844, is a discussion of philosophical questions in relation to the religious concepts of sin, especially original sin, and guilt.⁷⁰ He too emphasises the difference between anxiety and fear, anxiety being both the more unfocused and the more comprehensive concept.⁷¹ Kierkegaard illustrates this with the image of a person standing on the edge of an abyss. This person feels fear, the object of which is that he or she might fall, but at the same time they experience anxiety as well, due to the fact that they have the option to *leap* into the abyss. The latter, according to Kierkegaard, expresses itself in a feeling of dizziness. He finds that the object of anxiety is *nothing*, “‘nothing’ as understood as the nonactual, the possible whose actualization lies in the future” (Magurshak 1985: 173). It is indeterminacy which makes us afraid and forces us to reconsider ourselves in relation to the world we live in, and the situation we find ourselves in.⁷² “The other that is nothing both attracts and repels the innocent spirit, which both hopes and fears that it might lay hold of itself in the other, thereby finding and losing itself simultaneously.” (Dunning 1985: 14) Even a person’s relationship with him- or herself is fragile and requires constant attention and care.⁷³ Anxiety stems from the ability, the *possibility*, the freedom to make choices. It is rooted in the space between possibility and reality, which means the possibility and reality of *sin*. This state is characterised by the ambiguity of its passivity and a

⁶⁸ For a discussion of how difficult it is to actually *define* anxiety with Kierkegaard, see Tsakiri 2006: 19.

⁶⁹ Cf. Magurshak 1985: 169

⁷⁰ “The full title of the book significantly reads *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin.*” (Tsakiri 2006: 20)

⁷¹ Grøn 1999: 13

⁷² Cf. Grøn 1999: 16

⁷³ Cf. Grøn 1999: 21

person's active behaviour in anxiety, "which gives them the opportunity to discover themselves" (Grøn 1999: 34, my translation).

Kierkegaard makes this important observation about the function and purpose of anxiety, that it is closely connected to the self-reflection that is essential, even imperative, to our very human spirit: "to learn what it is to be in anxiety ... is an adventure that every human being must go through ... Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate" (Søren Kierkegaard, quoted in Magurshak 1985: 171); and they who have not ever experienced anxiety are quite "spiritless". The focus of Kierkegaard's anxiety, like Freud's, is virtually exclusively inwards. A person's own motivations, thoughts, temptations, desires and drives are the source of the emotion, and thus the inner life is also where the conflict is negotiated and potentially resolved. The outside world is only relevant in as far as it provides the background to a human being's mental state. Kierkegaard does not deal with *societal* anxieties specifically. For a study concerned with this kind of emotion, the most interesting point in his writing is the function Kierkegaard ascribes to experiencing, or having experienced, anxiety. "Anxiety is *self-disclosure* in an eminent sense: disclosure of what it means to be a self" (Grøn 2013: 276).

Martin Heidegger

The above quote continues in the following manner: "This is only disclosed as an experience of *oneself* in – relating to – *time*" (Grøn 2013: 276, emphasis added). This leads over to a third important work: Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), which is unquestionably influenced by Søren Kierkegaard. In fact, it has been said that "when one turns to *Being and Time*, one finds existential analyses, now secularized, exactly parallel to those of *The Concept of Anxiety*" (Magurshak 1985:

171).⁷⁴ 83 years after Kierkegaard posited divinity as the one thing to release human beings from their anxiety, Heidegger not only refuses this objective but goes even further: according to him, the very concept of any aim or a goal in human existence is irrelevant.⁷⁵ Despite this major difference, the parallels are indeed quite obvious. Heidegger's definition of the difference between fear and anxiety leans on Kierkegaard's.⁷⁶ Again, fear is an emotion experienced when faced with a specific, tangible threat, whereas anxiety stems from being thrown into this world and struggling – or failing – to make sense of everything in it. For Heidegger, anxiety works in two directions.⁷⁷ It is directed inwards into the person experiencing it, as it is their (inner) being which is perceived as being in danger, as well as outwards to the world, where the threat arises. It is when we fail to comprehend and define the world around us, and thereby to comprehend and define ourselves in relation to it, that we experience anxiety. We feel “alienated, homeless, unsettled” (Polt 1999: 77), and “the everyday familiarity of our surroundings collapses” (Düsing 2006: 198, my translation). This threat, unlike the object of fear, is neither approaching, nor is it imminent. Instead, it is ‘there’ and nowhere at the same time. It is “so close that it constricts and takes one's breath away – and yet nowhere” (Heidegger 1953: 186, my translation). It is this quality of indeterminateness, indeed indeterminableness, of a perceived threat towards one's self, or one's being, which triggers a kind of ‘emotional background state’.⁷⁸ Two important elements of the definition of anxiety (as opposed to fear) established in Chapter 2 play a role here: firstly, anxiety

⁷⁴ For an analysis of the various other influences on Heidegger, see Polt 1999, chapter 2.

⁷⁵ Düsing 2006: 189

⁷⁶ A note on the terminology used is necessary for this English discussion of the work of a German philosopher who, in the words of Richard Polt, “has probably introduced more terminology than he needs” (1999: 54). In this study, the English diction used by Polt will be adopted, based mainly on the translation of *Being and Time* by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1962), with single marked alternative translations by Joan Stambaugh (1996). For an analysis and discussion of the merits and faults of the two translations, see Polt 1999: 23.

⁷⁷ Slaby 2007: 98

⁷⁸ Cf. Slaby 2007: 99; Polt 1999: 77.

being closely related to worry,⁷⁹ and secondly the aspect of it not occupying all of our attention for the whole duration of the experience. As mentioned above, one of the directions in which anxiety works according to Heidegger, is outwards into the world surrounding the subject. In fact, he goes considerably further, saying that *Being-in-the-World* itself is what causes anxiety,⁸⁰ which in turn makes it an existential state of the human mind. Anxiety calls into question the world I am in, the life I have been thrown into and cannot get out of.⁸¹

Heidegger adds an important dimension to his concept of Being: as humans we are always part of a social structure. Being is inevitably Being-with (*Mitdasein*), as we are thrown into this world *with* others of our kind.⁸² Therefore, we cannot, according to Heidegger, escape the perception and reflection of other humans, or their influence on our Being.⁸³ “Personal existence is always communal existence.” (Slaby 2007: 99, my translation) Unlike Freud or Kierkegaard, he thus widens his reflections on anxiety to include societal anxieties. Our selves cannot be viewed as isolated entities because “[o]ur world is the context in terms of which we understand ourselves, and within which we become who we are” (Polt 1999: 30). This emphasis on communal existence in turn has at least two dimensions. On the one hand, we can experience anxiety when our world, i.e. the social structure we are placed in, or our position in it, are threatening to change in a way which is detrimental to us. On the other hand, our *being-with* other people means that their being threatened can inspire anxiety in us because what endangers them is necessarily also a danger to our being in relation to them. According to Heidegger, only what affects us in our being –

⁷⁹ According to Heidegger, anxiety is “founded on worry” (Düsing 2006: 188, my translation).

⁸⁰ Heidegger 1953: 186

⁸¹ Polt 1999: 79

⁸² Heidegger 1953: 118. “[Heidegger] calls the Being of other people, insofar as I encounter them as belonging to my world, their *Dasein-with* (Stambaugh: *Mitdasein*).” (Polt 1999: 60)

⁸³ Heidegger 1953: 123

directly or by proxy – can move us emotionally. Jan Slaby illustrates this notion with the help of a simple example: a vandalised bike whose tyres have been slashed.⁸⁴ He argues that it qualifies as a vexation to us because the bicycle was supposed to aid us in the effort of getting from one place to another. As the vandalised bike cannot fulfil this function anymore, it affects us, therefore moves us, i.e. is able to trigger an emotion. Slaby elaborates on this example to make a different point; however, we can transfer it to the wider context of societal anxiety. Slaby argues that feeling annoyed in view of a vandalised bicycle is inappropriate if the bike belongs to somebody else or if we have another (even better) bike at our disposal, because in neither case we are restricted in our mobility. Yet even the situations described can arguably provoke an appropriate feeling of vexation, distress, or anxiety: it affects the person in as far as the act of vandalism sheds light on their social environment, i.e. the world they have been thrown into, which in turn affects their Being. The relevance of the collective existence is also emphasised in Heidegger's *temporality*, a concept he uses to point out that

we are historical: we are rooted in a past and thrust into a future. We inherit a past tradition that we share with others, and we pursue future possibilities that define us as individuals. As we do so, the world opens up for us, and beings get understood... (Polt 1999: 5)

Heidegger not only warns us of ignoring our historicity but also stresses again how community is necessary for understanding. Everything we experience and every way in which we process these experiences is shaped by our tradition, our languages, our communal being: our culture.

Having explored Heidegger's definition of anxiety and the importance of the socio-cultural dimension for human existence, the third facet that has to be examined is *das Man*. It is the concept which confronts us with the least satisfactory English translation options: "The German pronoun *man* means 'one', as in 'One simply doesn't do such things'. Maybe 'the Anyone'

⁸⁴ Slaby 2007: 107f

would be a better translation of *das Man* than ‘the “they”’ (Polt 1999: 62). The main objection to *the ‘they’* is that there is no opposing *us*; the fact that ‘they’ in the sense of Heidegger’s *Man* includes the speaker seems paradoxical. ‘Anyone’ seems like the best option to illustrate the inclusion: “I normally behave and understand my world just as anyone would” (Polt 1999: 62). This sentence is also a neat summary of the negative aspect. *Das Man* embodies the agglomeration of mostly unreflected conventions and norms of socio-culture. The criticism is not directed at these practices per se but at the way they are adopted, acted out and acted on without any deliberation: it is not a conscious decision which determines a course of action. Instead, one simply does what everybody else does in a given situation. The alternative concept is what Heidegger calls authenticity: an authentic self which finds its own definition and place *within* the framework of the ‘they’. It is thus “complete in its self-disclosure; it unifies its dealing with things and other people, its choice of historical engagement, and its understanding of being in general” (Magurshak 1985: 188). This idea of inauthentic versus authentic being is not only relevant because it again stresses how much our lives are shaped by our social and cultural settings. The most significant point is how, according to Heidegger, one can reach the state of authenticity. Richard Polt uses a little story in order to point out the difference between inauthentic and authentic being, and what enables the transition from one to the other:

Suppose that an auto mechanic is repairing a transmission. His attention is consumed with performing this familiar job ... without [him] questioning [his] role or explicitly choosing it. [...] Suddenly, the man feels a sharp pain in his chest. It is gone in a minute, but he is alarmed. This frightening experience becomes the occasion for an episode of anxiety; he is not merely afraid of dying, but feels anxiety in the face of his own mortality. He remembers that his life is his own, and that at each moment, it is up to him to make something of himself. He remembers that his job does not define him. Instead, *he* defines what his job will mean to him [...] In this moment he recalls “what it’s all about” and reaffirms it. When he returns to working on the car, he does so as a choice and not as a mere routine. (Polt 1999: 98f)

Anxiety is what makes us reflect and deliberate. Blissfulness may sound like the preferable option but it means ‘inauthentic’, i.e. vacuous, being. Real life in all its mundaneness does not disappear in anxiety. On the very contrary, it is both the setting and the trigger for this emotional state. The world one took for granted, or at least accepted without reflection, turns into something threatening. An every-day situation is changing into something unfamiliar and thus forces the person experiencing it to look at everything with which they are confronted in that specific moment from a different point of view. In this moment there is a chance of leaving the state of being which Kierkegaard labelled ‘spiritless’ and Heidegger specified as ‘inauthentic’. And, like Kierkegaard, Heidegger “asserts that the possibility of such wholeness is first disclosed to a human being through the fundamental mode of affective self-discovery that he, too, calls anxiety” (Magurshak 1985: 172).

3.2 Folklore theory

We are folk, and we live in folk groups

The second box of ingredients used in this study holds folklore theory. A study of the connection between fiction and societal emotions, especially one using Martin Heidegger’s concept of anxiety, is perfectly suited, if not predestined, to make use of the findings of this area of research. Yet it is a field which is often neglected or even ignored in literary studies, despite the fact that folklore has been called “the birthplace of literature” (Hearne 2011: 210).⁸⁵ One of the reasons for this is that it may be seen as being too removed to be relevant or, if perceived as close enough, considered an opposing, incompatible approach. Bruce A. Rosenberg calls folklore and

⁸⁵ For an overview of how “[l]iterary works and mass media productions make use of folklore”, see Georges and Jones 1995: 2ff. For this study, it is particularly noteworthy that “William Thoms [...] coined the term folklore in English in 1846 to replace ‘popular antiquities’ and ‘popular literature’” (Islam 1985: 2).

literature “rival siblings” (Rosenberg 1991) and points out that a divide has always existed between them despite the fact that in many cases, folklore scholars come (or came) from the field of literary studies.⁸⁶ He makes an argument for literature and folklore to “be studied as contiguous and symbiotic subjects” (Rosenberg 1991: 270).⁸⁷ However, folklore studies have not always been taken seriously as an area of academic research and are still struggling to find recognition outside their own discipline.⁸⁸ One symptom of this is that concepts long-established in folklore studies are being re-invented by researchers belonging to other fields: “Ellis (2001)^[89] has stated that the existing term ‘folklore’ adequately described the phenomena for which Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’” (Main and Hobbs 2009: 211); another symptom is a shift in the assumed target group away from adult recipients to children.⁹⁰ At the root of the problem is a common misconception of the very nature of folklore. You do not have to delve deep into the space between the lines to read some resentment when Whatley and Henken point out that folklore is “neither quaint nor cute and certainly not the trivial fluff so often assumed” (2000: ix). The same point is made by the same authors in a much more positive and self-confident way in the title of chapter 1 of their book – “Yes, We Are Folk and We Do Have Folklore” (Whatley and Henken 2000).

The statement that ‘we are folk’ is an important assertion and a starting point for clarifying what folklore is. It is probably not too bold an

⁸⁶ Rosenberg 1991: chapter 1; Flanagan and Hudson 1958: xii

⁸⁷ Cf. Assmann 1983: 183, who points out that any text is in principle mobile on the sliding scale between literature and folklore.

⁸⁸ Cf. Aguirre 1998: 240 – “[Gothic fiction’s] vagaries, its ‘poor quality’ will very often be found to result from the fact that Gothic represents a compromise between literature and folklore and that a large part of its poetics ultimately stems from a popular, oral tradition.”

⁸⁹ “Ellis, B. (2001) *Aliens, ghosts and cults: Legends we live*. MI: University of Mississippi Press.” Reference given in Main and Hobbs 2009: 216.

⁹⁰ “These works are not just adult texts that have become popular with children, these are adult books that become so predominantly the reading fodder of children that they are perceived by adults as children’s literature.” (Stevenson 2011: 181)

assumption that most people living in cities would reject the term *folk* in reference to themselves; *folk* tends to be equated with *countryfolk*. Folk culture, folk dance, folk songs, folk festivals, and similar terms all evoke images in one's mind which involve rural settings and old-fashioned and/or peculiar practices and rituals. One of the crucial aspects of this stance is a view from outside, often even from a considerable distance.⁹¹ The most positive notion in this context would be a kind of nostalgic attraction. The contemporary legends analysed in this study are often referred to as *urban legends*, a term which reflects exactly this conception that legends are something belonging to rural *folk*, making it necessary to add 'urban' in order to bridge this gap.⁹² However, we *are* folk, and "folklore is part of every individual's life, no matter how 'civilized,' westernized, urbane or mainstream" (Whatley and Henken 2000: 5) they may be. In keeping with Heidegger, our folk are the people who we are 'being-with' and who influence our perception and interpretation of the world; as "Dasein's^[93] Being essentially involves Being-with, [...] it is ontologically impossible to exist as Dasein without depending on some shared, communal norms" (Polt 1999: 63). The aspect of a (however loosely) structured group is therefore essential to any definition of folklore.⁹⁴ There is considerable

⁹¹ Cf. Whatley and Henken 2000: 4f. The most disdainful expression of this notion is the concept of "*gesunkenes Kulturgut*", "[t]he idea that noteworthy cultural materials originated among the elite (or upper stratum of society) and subsequently descended to (were copied by) the lower stratum, or folk" (El-Shamy 1997: 419f), which was infamously adopted into Nazi ideology.

⁹² This is one of the reasons why "contemporary legend" rather than "urban legend" is used in this study. Main and Hobbs (2009: 208) state that in "the scholarly literature, the terms are now used interchangeably", albeit with a distinct tendency towards "urban legends" not least owing to the degree of popularity of Jan Harold Brunvand's books on the subject. For a discussion of Brunvand's use of the term see Ellis 1997. Fine (1992: 1f) points out that ever since its founding, the very name of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research has served as a guideline. For a list of other synonyms see Barber 2007: 313.

⁹³ "This word is usually left untranslated. In everyday German it parallels our word 'existence', but etymologically it means 'Being-there'." (Polt 1999: 29)

⁹⁴ Ben-Amos 1975: 5

intersection with definitions of culture,⁹⁵ and indeed folklore is “both a part and manifestation of what we call *culture*” (Georges and Jones 1995: 153). The main difference is that the term *culture* is usually used more extensively, referring to much bigger groups of people, which are usually also clearly defined, whereas folklore is something (also) pertaining to small circles.⁹⁶ It is important, too, to note that we do not belong to just one folk group, and that the different groups vary considerably not only in size but also in classification criteria and degree of influence on our daily lives, or our (inauthentic *and* authentic) selves. Among the criteria which can define folk groups are ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, kinship, gender, age, occupation, and avocation.⁹⁷ Sometimes we immediately recognise members of our group, in other cases we are subconsciously aware of them, and at times we do not notice a fellow member of a folk group at all. What plays into this is that, depending on the situation, the groups we belong to are of differing levels of importance. A simple example would be nationality: when you are in your home country, nationality does not serve as a strong bonding factor. When you are abroad, the further away from your home country (and overcrowded tourist resorts) you are, the more you are likely to respond emotionally to meeting a fellow countryman. Likewise, gender bonding may be much stronger in a setting (e.g. a workplace) in which other genders far outnumber one’s own, even for individuals who do not usually perceive this as a criterion when it comes to socialising.

In the realm of (popular) culture, there is also a wide range of folk groups whose identifying factor is fandom. Members of these groups are the people who ‘get’ cryptic references or in-jokes; some groups observe

⁹⁵ “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Edward B. Tylor, quoted in Georges and Jones 1995: 159)

⁹⁶ For a more elaborate discussion of (possible) criteria for the distinction between culture and folklore, see Islam 1985, chapter 1.

⁹⁷ Cf. Bauman 1975: 31 & 35; Whatley and Henken 2000: 5

their own 'holidays', such as Star Wars Day (4th May), Towel Day (25th May),⁹⁸ or Bloomsday (16th June). These interest-based communities highlight how one can actively choose to be a member of a folk group in some cases, and that these folk groups are arguably gaining importance. It has been stated that, in the Western world today, there is a "shift from a social organisation around class to a social organisation around lifestyle" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 35). At the other end of this spectrum are groups one is not even aware of belonging to, or groups whose folklore one cannot escape even though one has left, or tried to leave. For example, a lapsed believer may find that some of the religious or religion-based values and customs they were brought up with are still ingrained in them. People migrating to another country sometimes experience similar dynamics with their 'homeland folklore'.⁹⁹ This is one of the crucial characteristics of folklore: it permeates our lives to such an extent that "we are not aware of our own folklore any more than we are of the grammatical rules of our language" (Brunvand 2003: 1). Withdrawing from the lore of our folk group(s) is virtually impossible because it is a part of us or, as Bauman puts it, "*folklore is a function of shared identity*" (Bauman 1975: 32, emphasis in original).

A mistake to be avoided in this context is the assumption that this shared identity makes all members of a folk group identical. The lore of a body of people can be expressed individually; there are varying degrees to which a single person is influenced by it, and different ways of understanding aspects of lore.¹⁰⁰ Every person has their own individual folklore repertoire.¹⁰¹ One instance in which a person can become aware of their own folklore and its importance is when they *unexpectedly* find themselves in "a culture different from the one in which [they are]

⁹⁸ Celebrating Douglas Adams and his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979)

⁹⁹ Georges and Jones 1995: 204

¹⁰⁰ Bauman 1975: 38

¹⁰¹ Georges and Jones 1995: 269

accustomed to operating” (Goodwin 1989: xi). Someone travelling to a foreign country needs no high level of cultural awareness to know that they have to expect a set of folk genres different from their own: language, clothing, behaviour codes, etc. The encounter described in the above quote, however, was not the experience of a person who had travelled far or visited a remote tribe. He had gone to a gay bar for the first time in his life. Goodwin stresses that it was not homophobia which made him feel uneasy in this unfamiliar setting, but simply cultural alienation: “it was no wonder that I was disoriented” (1989: xi). It can be assumed that many of the gay men frequenting that bar found it easy to slip in and out of this world with its specific lore, i.e. they would behave, speak, and possibly dress differently. They knew the lore of each of the different groups they moved in. The reason why Goodwin felt out of place was not that he was inherently different in any way but because he was aware of the fact that the lore of the people around him was not his.¹⁰² Another potentially problematic issue is external ascription. Visible, audible or in other ways obvious common denominators, which appear most apt to make two individuals count as members of the same folk group, can be misleading and give rise to “misclassifications of those who do not feel affiliative bonds to a group they belong to in the eyes of an outside observer” (Zillmann and Cantor 1996: 96). This is more likely to happen with folk groups whose membership we (in most cases) cannot choose, for example gender or ethnic groups. It is not always the case that people do in fact see themselves as belonging to ‘their’ group emotionally, and they may therefore reject the respective lore to the extent to which it is possible.¹⁰³

¹⁰² The experience described led Goodwin to reflect on, and consequently study gay folklore. Somebody less disposed to contemplate on the origins of their emotions, however, could conceivably misinterpret this feeling of anxiety and project it onto gay people or gay culture in general.

¹⁰³ Cf. Zillmann and Cantor 1996: 96f

Defining folklore

Academic definitions of the term folklore are manifold. On the one hand, this is because the concept comprises such a wide variety of phenomena and genres. Another reason is that they have been devised by people from different backgrounds, sometimes even with specific agendas: “Twenty-one definitions given by different scholars as quoted in the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore* edited by Maria Leach (New York, 1949, 398-408) prove the gravity of this disagreement” (Islam 1985: 3).¹⁰⁴ Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones’ definition shall be used as a starting point here. According to them,

[t]he word *folklore* denotes expressive forms, processes, and behaviors (1) that we customarily learn, teach, and utilize or display during face-to-face interactions, and (2) that we judge to be traditional (a) because they are based on known precedents or models, and (b) because they serve as evidence of continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief, and feeling. (Georges and Jones 1995: 1, emphasis in original)

This aspect of traditionality is recognised as a key criterion by other folklorists as well, albeit with restrictions, as “too much dependence on tradition in the search for and research on folklore, arrests folklore within a small compound of traditional heritage” (Islam 1985: 30). This does not make Georges and Jones’ definition less valid and shall serve as a basis from which two other, rather shorter explanations of what folklore is can be considered: “wisdom, knowledge, [and] accepted modes of behavior” (Brunvand 2003: 1), and “expressive practices that shape our understanding of the world as a shared, social reality” (Valk 2010: 161). For a more tangible concept of folklore and its various components, Mazharul Islam suggests four categories: “1. folk literature,^[105] 2. folk practices (day-to-day and occasional), 3. folk arts or artistic folklore

¹⁰⁴ As an interesting instance of ‘metafolklore’, Jan Harold Brunvand cites the story of a “scholar [who gave] up in the definitions game and simply describe[d] our subject in these terms, ‘Folklore is what folklorists study’” (1999: 474).

¹⁰⁵ He compiles an expansive list of items belonging to “folk literature”; see Islam 1985: 8f.

(performing and non-performing), 4. folk science and technology” (1985: 11). It is worth singling out one aspect implicit in the mentioned definitions of folklore which is relevant for a study of societal anxieties and which again harks back to Heidegger: the premises Alan Dundes called “folk ideas” (Dundes 1975). These are the collective perceptions and views a folk group has “about the nature of man, of the world, and of man’s life in the world” (Dundes 1975: 95) and which pervade different categories and genres of folklore – even “nonfolkloristic materials” (Dundes 1975: 95). The outstanding feature is that these ideas influence and even determine the way people understand and rationalise the world they have been ‘thrown into’. Consequently, they also affect how people act and react – physically, mentally and emotionally – in a given situation. Dundes’ folk ideas are part of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls “collective structures of (making) sense” or a “storage of social knowledge” (1983: 160, my translations). The term non-folklorists may find more easily accessible is *worldview*: folk ideas are “units of worldview” (Dundes 1975). For an investigation of societal anxieties, knowledge of that society’s respective worldview is indispensable, for “if one is seriously interested in studying worldview, one will need first to describe some of the folk ideas which contribute to the formation of that worldview” (Dundes 1975: 96). It is beyond the scope of this study to examine these ideas in detail but their fundamental influence is acknowledged as the basis of this work. As mentioned above, the ideas of our folk group are also the rules which govern our behaviour to a certain extent, even though, in most cases, we may not be aware of this. They “align” (Gumbrecht 1983: 160, my translation) our actions. Not always is the force of these guidelines as manifest as in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld novels, in which the ‘rule of lore’ is the highest authority and much more acknowledged than the law (yet still subverted by the protagonists often enough), or in China Miéville’s *Kraken*: “*That*, as a message above the door in one hideaway had it, *is the Loar*. [...] Law or lore it may be – ‘Loar’ a superposition of those two homophones – but let’s not be idiots” (Miéville 2010: 284).

However, even when they are not consciously perceived, folk ideas exert powerful influence on us: as they shape our understanding of the world in a certain way, they bar us from alternative impressions and viewpoints. Depending on an individual's ability and disposition to reflect on their worldview, this can mean that a perspective deviating from the socially accepted ('normal') rule cannot be imagined,¹⁰⁶ let alone accepted. In this way, folklore can limit or restrict a person.

Folklore and emotions

One aspect of folklore which has not yet been discussed in this chapter but should not be overlooked is (folk) group emotion. As stated in Chapter 2.1, there is such a thing as culturally-learned emotions. The folk ideas which make up our worldview also shape how we feel about certain events, actions, objects, and even emotions themselves. Some have indeed made feelings a hook to hang their definition on: "Folklore can be defined as the collective objectifications of basic emotions, such as awe, fear, hatred, reverence, and desire, on the part of the social group" (Joseph Rysan, quoted in Ben-Amos 1975: 7). Like other genres and facets of folklore, emotions and their expressions reflect back on folk groups in different ways. They help maintain the group and its structure; sharing an emotion and recognising its expression in others fosters a sense of community.¹⁰⁷ Anxieties play a major role in this function: "Folklore, from this point of view, is the aggregate of simple formal expressions that have persisted (or become traditional) because they have helped to control the recurrent anxieties of the community" (Abrahams 1975: 18). Furthermore, anxieties are always a reflection of a group's self-perception. They draw a picture of what is important to the respective body of people and, at the same time, they reveal insecurities and what may be considered a community's 'weak spot'. In this regard, again, *societal* anxieties are

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Gumbrecht 1983: 161

¹⁰⁷ Fine 1992: 31

particularly relevant. As has been pointed out before, this study will not attempt to draw conclusions about the psyche of people(s), but it is worth keeping this aspect in mind.¹⁰⁸

The significance of orality

One essential criterion for the definition of folklore is its root in orality – or it might be more accurate to say that one essential criterion *used to be* orality. There were, and still are, different attitudes towards this issue. In the beginning was the spoken word: academic literature suggests that, until the middle of the 20th century, scholars agreed that for something to be considered folklore, “it has to pass through time at least partially via the channels of oral transmission. Any other medium is liable to disqualify the material from being folklore” (Ben-Amos 1975: 9).¹⁰⁹ Oral narrative has been called “the chief basis of culture itself” (Niles 1999: 2). Some even went so far as to say that the distinction between folk, i.e. oral, and modern, written literature was clear enough to demand that all folk tales be excluded from its category immediately when they appear in written form.¹¹⁰ What may motivate this judgement to at least some extent is the fact that transcribing oral culture is not an easy task, and has in the past not always been done with the appropriate care. In 1969, Dundes stated that “most printed collections of folklore [were] spurious” because they had been “edited and rewritten to conform to written rather than oral style”, which meant that “the expletives, meaningful pauses, the stammers, not to mention the eye expressions, the hand movements and all the other body gestural signals [were] totally lost in the translation from oral to written

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Main and Hobbs 2009: 209f

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Brunvand 1993: 11

¹¹⁰ Islam 1985: 1. There has been much debate about terminology as well: can oral culture be called ‘literature’ at all? According to Walter J. Ong, “it appears quite impossible to use the term ‘literature’ to include oral tradition and performance without subtly but irremediably reducing these somehow to variants of writing. Thinking of oral tradition [...] as ‘oral literature’ is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels” (1982: 12).

tradition” (2007: 59). Others have blamed the bowdlerisation which occurred in the transcription process on the material being “accommodate[d] to middle-class readers,^[111] or to the medium of writing, or both” (Burke 1987: 10).¹¹² Another factor that has been mentioned is that scholarly interest in folklore, at least in a systematic fashion of research, developed late because of uneasiness and/or the simple fact that the area was not taken seriously enough to merit investigation and analysis. Oral culture was not studied except, maybe, if it was put into a ‘proper format’ first.¹¹³ Yet there have been folklorists who do not insist on orality as the ultimate mark of the ‘purity’ of folklore material:

The prejudice that folklore materials cannot be composed, practised, painted, patterned, constructed, made, manufactured, designed, prepared, invented, shaped, or sculpted by modern man has to be shunned from the study of folklore. (Islam 1985: 19)

The key to a study of folklore without prejudice or animosity – at least in this respect – is the combinatory view: oral and written cultures are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they not only coexist but also interact with one another¹¹⁴ as “much of what we learn in this technologically dense culture derives from the orality that swirls around us at every social moment” (Rosenberg 1991: 270). In addition, the advent of new media in the 20th century changed the boundaries between them substantially. As early as in 1969, Alan Dundes spoke of how

the mass media, radio, television, motion pictures, etc. have, by discouraging or impinging upon time formerly spent in reading, made us an oral rather than a written culture.

¹¹¹ In Burke’s text, “ordinary people” are identified as the source of oral culture, as opposed to the middle class, which seems to be identified as the mere ‘consumers’ once it has been put into writing. In contrast, Fine finds in 1992 that a large number of contemporary legends reflect the concerns and values of the middle class rather than a lower class, with “[t]he majority of Americans, up to 80 percent in some surveys, defin[ing] themselves as middle class” (1992: 8). A 2011 survey found that the figure for the UK is 71% (“Speaking Middle English” 2011).

¹¹² Cf. Goody 2010: 41

¹¹³ Cf. Rosenberg 1991: 10

¹¹⁴ Hearne 2011: 210; Fischer 2009; Schenda 1976; Todorov 1990; Bottigheimer 2009

Actually, one should say, has made us an oral culture *again*. In evolutionary terms, pre-literate society which was orally oriented became literate, but now we have 'post-literate' man who is influenced by oral communication once more. (Dundes 2007: 58)

The term which Walter J. Ong coined for this phenomenon was *second orality*.¹¹⁵ With this wording, he emphasises that it is not an entirely new stage, and that the similarities between the two levels of orality are vast, while the main difference, according to Ong, is that second orality has a stronger sense of its own purpose and design as it is aware of its roots in the written form. The reason for this is that the printed word is "essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well" (Ong 1982: 136).¹¹⁶ Ong then continues to stress one aspect which will strike a chord with the attentive reader of this study:

Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience [...] But secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture – [Marshall] McLuhan's 'global village'. (Ong 1982: 136)

With its emphasis on groups, group cultures and their influence on how an individual perceives his or her world, folklore theory is in many ways related to Heidegger's views as presented in *Time and Being*. However, folklore theory pertains to this study's key questions and issues on other levels, as well. The concept of folk groups is essential for any research in the field of societal emotions; it will, for instance, come into play as a principal part of the foundation of the notion of categorial identification, which is discussed in Chapter 4. Whenever societal anxieties are examined, individuals' worldviews obviously play a major role: that fact that folk ideas have been called 'units of world view' highlights that they are, in

¹¹⁵ Ong 1982

¹¹⁶ Klaus Roth, however, stresses that internet narratives, which are still strictly verbal, lack paraverbal and nonverbal dimensions: "despite the occasional use of certain symbols or verbalisation for paraverbal and nonverbal messages, internet narration is always ultimately one-dimensional; it can therefore never achieve the depth and emotionality of direct oral communication" (2009: 109, my translation).

fact, the very subject matter of analysis. And finally, the genre of the folk tale will have to be discussed in more detail. It is the literary expression of folklore and, in the shape of contemporary legends, it is a very prominent and interesting form of popular fiction dealing in and with anxieties.

3.3 Political & socio-political theory

As a third source of ingredients, aspects of political theory and sociology pertaining to this study are briefly outlined and reviewed in this chapter. One may argue that this is yet another step further away from literary analysis. Nevertheless, they should not be left out completely as these elements complete the picture and aid the appreciation of the extent to which social groups, be they called folk groups or not, influence societal structures. In addition, they throw a light on how anxieties can be used for political ends, which is highly relevant to texts aiming to inspire these feelings. Finally, even in cases in which this is not the explicit goal, the insight gained from political and socio-political studies can explain why threats are so differently perceived at different times, and by different groups of people.

Group pressures and cross pressures

There are obvious connections within the vast field of political theory to folklore studies. One of them is that belonging to a certain folk group (albeit the groups are differently termed in this context) influences voting behaviour. This import of folk groups is now considered established knowledge about what motivates a person to vote for a certain party or candidate. However, it came as a surprising result¹¹⁷ when it was first found in the 1940 study *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind*

¹¹⁷ Cf. Bartels 2008: 3

in a Presidential Campaign.¹¹⁸ In this study, the focus was supposed to be on the significance of media presentation and its effect on voter opinion over time. Instead, the researchers found that “voters’ choices [...] seemed to be based upon strong ‘brand loyalties’ rooted in religion and social class and reinforced by face-to-face interactions with like-minded acquaintances” (Bartels 2008: 3). Folk groups are therefore the ‘political home’ of the person to some extent, and like all homes they can be complicated. Problems arise, for example, when “two or more folk ideas in a single worldview system [are] in opposition. One need not assume that all the folk ideas of a given culture are necessarily mutually reconcilable within a uniform, harmonious worldview matrix” (Dundes 1975: 99). Folk groups have also received attention in the context of terrorism studies. According to political scientist Louise Richardson, diaspora communities whose members experience cultural alienation and marginalisation can become a breeding ground for radicalisation, turning against the respective surrounding society:¹¹⁹ one of the vital issues is a folk group’s (perceived) position within a larger social structure. Along similar lines, as all people belong to more than one folk group, a conflict of interest can arise from one’s various different affiliations. In voting research terminology, this problem is called cross-pressure. This area has been studied extensively,¹²⁰ and in recent years, the focus has been on “the micro-mechanisms of social influence, including the impact of group cues or heuristics, the salience or importance of group identities, and communication of agreement or disagreement through social networks” (Brader, Tucker and Therriault 2009: 3). The parallels to this study of texts dealing with societal anxieties are evident. One of the genres which will not be discussed in detail but deserves to be mentioned in this context is post-

¹¹⁸ “Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.” Reference given in Bartels 2008.

¹¹⁹ Richardson 2006: 69f

¹²⁰ Cf. “A Brief History of ‘Cross-Pressures’” in Therriault, Tucker and Brader 2011: 3ff

colonial literature. The negotiation of cross-pressures stemming from the affiliation with different folk groups, especially among second-generation immigrants, is one of its central themes. These novels discuss different dynamics which can, for example, “cause a young educated Briton to identify not with his neighbors, teammates, or school friends but with Palestinians in a country he’s never seen” (Richardson 2006: 68).

Social trust

A second aspect of political theory which is highly interesting for our purposes is the function which (communal) emotions fulfil for the stability of a political construct, such as a nation. Benedict Anderson famously called a nation “an imagined political community”: “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2006: 6, emphasis in original). On this basis, it is quite plausible that something which is shared, or at least perceived to be shared, by the members of the community is necessary in order to sustain it:

Common experiences, emphatically including the common experiences made possible by the media, provide a form of social glue. [...] As preconditions for a well-functioning democracy, these requirements hold in any large country. They are especially important in a heterogeneous nation, one that faces an occasional risk of fragmentation. (Sunstein 2007: 6)

Among these common experiences are shared feelings or commonly experienced expressions of feelings. One of the key emotions in this respect is trust, more precisely social trust. Social trust is essential for all democracies, which would collapse without it.¹²¹ It has been argued that without social trust, there can be no political trust in democracy.¹²² What makes it especially interesting is that it is not based on an individual

¹²¹ Cf. Taylor 2002: 59

¹²² Offe 2001: 262

judgement of the trustworthiness of a person. Instead, it is an abstract faith in strangers, a “generalised assumption of trustworthiness” (Offe 2001: 248, my translation). *Generalised*, it is important to note, does not mean *general*. For the ‘generalised assumption’ to apply, a signal is required: something which communicates that the person in question belongs to a group of people which is deemed trustworthy, either customarily or in a given situation. There are culturally standardised and accepted signals, for example pertaining to a profession:¹²³ you can trust the person in the white coat with the stethoscope – she is a doctor. In most social contexts, however, the signals and groups are not as clear, or at least the people involved are not as aware of them. In these cases, we tend to trust the person who is most like us, which means that consciously or subconsciously, we turn to somebody who (we think) belongs to our group.¹²⁴

It has been mentioned that social trust is one of the basic prerequisites for a functioning democracy. It helps maintain the functionality of a democratic state, enhances its efficiency as well as actionability, and furthers the legitimacy of the political construct.¹²⁵ In addition, it has a stabilising and safeguarding effect on society because it promotes a communal identity.¹²⁶ For the maintenance of a democratic system, endeavours to build up this feeling in a populace appear quite sensible. Having established this, it is tempting to wonder whether this function cannot be inverted to achieve a contrary effect. Converse arguments can be a precarious affair; however, they may be worthy of consideration at times. Can the opposite, i.e. a destabilisation of democracy, be achieved by creating an atmosphere of mistrust, anxiety and/or fear? In the history of

¹²³ Cf. Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 49

¹²⁴ More precisely, we assume them to belong to one of our groups; the appraisal of strangers is a situation in which a wide range of different group memberships can become relevant.

¹²⁵ Offe 2001: 243

¹²⁶ Taylor 2002: 59

political theories and philosophies, fears and anxieties have often been treated as a means to gain or maintain absolute power. Corey Robin's book entitled *Fear* carries the subtitle, *The History of a Political Idea*.¹²⁷ What is stressed here is an aspect of intentionality and deliberation: he speaks of reason rather than emotion. Yet Robin does not deny the fact that it is an actually experienced feeling he is talking about. The emotion is real, but it is deliberately triggered, influenced, changed, or geared towards a specific direction by a person or persons. The umbrella term he uses for the mental states in question is *political fear*.

By political fear, I mean a people's felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being – the fear of terrorism, panic over crime, anxiety about moral decay – or the intimidation wielded over men and women by governments or groups. What makes both types of fears political rather than personal is that they emanate from society or have consequences for society. Private fears like my fear of flying or your fear of spiders are artifacts of our own psychologies and experiences, and have little impact beyond ourselves. Political fear, by contrast, arises from conflicts within and between societies. (Robin 2004: 2)

The first kind of fear he describes is almost congruent with the definition of societal anxieties used in this study, and Robin goes on to describe how this collective emotion can have an impact on the dynamics within a group of people.¹²⁸

Anxieties as political instruments

Societal anxieties can be used as a means of political influence. A feeling experienced by a large proportion of the people in a given community, if it is durable and intense enough, can impact public life and politics, and even change power structures.¹²⁹ Ways of manipulating a community's or society's state of mind are therefore a very powerful and much-sought tool. "Every tyrant knows that it is important, and sometimes

¹²⁷ Robin 2004

¹²⁸ Robin 2004: 6

¹²⁹ Robin 2004: 2

possible, [...] to constrain people's actions [...] partly by making people fearful, partly by putting certain options in an unfavorable light, partly by limiting information" (Sunstein 2007: 123), and fears and anxieties have always played a role in the history of political theory and philosophy. In the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes wrote about the necessity of creating fear in the people in order to build and maintain the power structure for his Leviathan. Montesquieu, writing in the first half of the 18th century, also "turned to fear as a foundation for politics. [...] [I]n the same way that the fear of the state of nature was supposed to authorize Leviathan, the fear of despotism was meant to authorize Montesquieu's liberal state" (Robin 2004: 53). For Alexis de Tocqueville (1805 – 1859), modern men and women did not have to be made afraid of anything as "anxiety was [democracy's] natural psychic state" (Robin 2004: 29), and people were "already prepared, with no encouragement, to hand over [their] freedom" (Robin 2004: 77). The 20th century then saw new political mass movements in which skilful demagogues enkindled the anxieties of the people, thus creating an atmosphere which made the masses turn to their ideology. A linguistic analysis of a selection of Joseph Goebbels' essays,¹³⁰ for example, shows how Nazi propaganda endeavoured to impose a world view marked by anxiety with the help of a language "neither designed to persuade nor to convince its recipients but rather to overwhelm them" (Beißwenger 2000: 67, my translation). According to political theorist Hannah Arendt, it was "mass anxiety" that enabled both Hitler's and Stalin's rise to power:

Men and women, Arendt argued, were not drawn to ideologies like anti-Semitism or communism because they offered attractive ideals of a new world – a classless society – or promised concrete benefits – that German Aryans would one day rule the earth. Rather, it was the act of believing in ideology, she argued, not the content of the ideology itself, that mattered. It wasn't what the ideology said, but what it did: relieve the mass of its anxiety. (Robin 2004: 103)¹³¹

¹³⁰ Beißwenger 2000

¹³¹ Here, remarkable parallels can be found to Louise Richardson's analysis of the goal of terrorist movements (2006: 85ff). She points out that it is not the creation

The political atmosphere in the second half of the 20th and the early 21st centuries was a quite different one, yet fears and anxieties have remained a central issue with political theorists and sociologists. For almost fifty years, the Cold War dominated international relations, and it dictated many people's perception of the world as strictly divided into categories of good and evil. As "mutual misjudgement, anxiety and distrust let international tensions escalate" (Hindersmann 1995: 147, my translation), a black-and-white view helped make sense of complex issues.¹³² After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Western world was lacking an enemy¹³³ until Islamic states were given this role, "whereby the 'Clash of Civilizations' was used as a ready-made replacement for the power struggle between Soviet communism and Western capitalism" (Lewis 2012: 265). In this context, American neoconservative politicians have been accused of promoting the idea of 'noble lies', i.e. falsehoods which are told to the people in order to keep them in a certain state of mind for their own – or the greater – good, which in this case is one of anxious belief in a threat from outside.¹³⁴ As Joanna Bourke puts it, "[t]he Red Menace was followed by the Terrorist Monster" (2006: 364).

Moral panics

At the same time, scholars focused on anxieties, their expressions and effects *within* a society. Sociologist Barry Glassner, for example, has diagnosed the United States with a "culture of fear" (Glassner 1999), in which people are perpetually and inescapably exposed to

of a specific new society or social order which is in the foreground but rather just an escape from, or destruction of, the old one.

¹³² Hiimäe 2008: 251

¹³³ "The end of the Cold War left military elites (and their political allies) casting around for a new rationale to justify high levels of public spending." (Lewis 2012: 265)

¹³⁴ Cf. Hersh 2003; Curtis 2004. The notion of the 'noble lie' is said to stem from political philosopher Leo Strauss, who in turn was inspired by Plato.

scaremongering.¹³⁵ Popular prejudices can be turned into more powerful mental states and exploited in order to distract from other issues.¹³⁶ When the anxiety thus evoked pertains to the values which make up the structure of a community, the result is often a collective state of mind for which sociologist Stanley Cohen coined the term *moral panic*.¹³⁷

There are three main elements of a moral panic which make the concept relevant for the study of societal anxieties in fiction. First, the perceived threat is to the normative framework of a society.¹³⁸ In popular parlance, it is simply 'order' which is said to be under attack. However, this always refers to *moral* order.¹³⁹ Deviance from the social moral norm is understood as dangerous, and the emotional response is one of alarm, fear and hostility.¹⁴⁰ "The primary emotions that panics comprise [...] speak to the way that normative breaches touch on matters of safety, security and certainty. Panics are expressions of doubt and danger" (Knight and Roper 2011: 212). The second element is that the origin of the threat is identified as a specific person or group of people: the *folk devils*. The blame can be, and in fact usually is, laid on them entirely and unquestionably. Thirdly, in order for these persons to fulfil this role, they are made to fit a certain stereotypical image in the public perception. Jean Delumeau, writing about Europe in the time between the 15th and the 18th centuries, said that "the society *at that time* did not differentiate between outsiders and criminals" (1985: 269, my translation, emphasis added). To some degree, this is still true today.¹⁴¹ "The folk devils [...] tend to be tightly constructed, that is, they

¹³⁵ Cf. Engelhardt 2011

¹³⁶ Cf. Lähnemann 2008: 54

¹³⁷ Cohen 1980

¹³⁸ Frater (2009) speaks of a "depraved and decadent society" which is at risk of further degeneration and therefore needs protection; however, this aspect is not necessarily part of other definitions of moral panics. A somewhat comparable approach is Rohloff's tracing back moral panics to a "perceived weakening" of the state (2011: 75).

¹³⁹ deYoung 2011: 121

¹⁴⁰ Knight and Roper 2011: 212; Furedi 2011: 99; Lähnemann 2008: 55

¹⁴¹ Cf. Chebel d'Appollonia 2012: 15f

are quite easily identifiable, whether by appearance, behavior, or social location” (deYoung 2011: 122). The stereotypical presentation in turn lays a social stigma on them “again affecting the self image of the group into the limelight” (Alver 1999: 199). DeYoung’s ‘social location’ is a very significant cue in characterising folk devils. On the one hand, this refers to spatial proximity: the offending individual(s) are not remote from society, and it is this very closeness of the “folk devils, their victims and their audience” (Knight and Roper 2011: 212) which causes such intense negative feelings. Remedying the proximity is therefore a favoured and seemingly simple solution: “it is not incidental that in its original sense scapegoating involved geographical expulsion” (Knight and Roper 2011: 212). Symptoms of this which can be found in modern cities are extensive video surveillance, gated communities or high-security shopping centres, malls, and school or university campuses.¹⁴² The other aspect of this concept is the folk devils’ hierarchical location: as a rule, the aversion experienced and expressed in a moral panic is directed downwards on the social scale. The people put in the role of folk devils are generally regarded as lesser in class and rank.¹⁴³ This makes it not only easier to look down on them, but their social position usually also implies less financial, political and intellectual resources which could be used to avert being pushed into this role. The ‘ideal’ folk devils are those “who are the most vulnerable and have the fewest resources to ward off efforts to malign them” (Ungar 2011: 194).¹⁴⁴

The identification of ‘dangerous’ individuals and their negative portrayal serve an important function for the society which perceives the threat. The basic assumption is that the enemy is the antonym to oneself, or one’s group; “the enemy’s qualities are always the mirror opposite of

¹⁴² Zinganel 2010; Minton 2009; Bourke 2006: 334ff

¹⁴³ Knight and Roper (2011: 212) make this point about moral panics, as opposed to scandals, which “tend to target those at or close to the top of the social hierarchy.” For an analysis and summary of different theories on the social marginalisation of folk devils, see deYoung 2011.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Burton 2013

those in one's own culture" (Victor 2006). Therefore, the more dangerous, frightening and/or disgusting the folk devils are in the minds of their 'audience', the more an ideal image of society without these disruptive elements can be produced. This image can then be used to stress the importance of protecting such a perfect living environment.¹⁴⁵ Not only in the case of folk devils can linguistic means be used to make a group of people appear as terrifying and reproachable as possible. This is illustrated in the following example from the search for an apt label, i.e. one that is deemed appropriately deprecative, for public commentators, especially ones with a scientific background, who reject or make light of global warming:

'Skeptic' of course was an inept designation to begin with, as scientists ought to be sceptical and, once upon a time, could don that label as a badge of honor. Advocates have assayed other unfavorable appellations [...]; they ultimately settled on climate 'deniers', a label that draws unseemly associations with holocaust deniers. (Ungar 2011: 201)

This case also underlines how closely connected fear mongering is to the business of raising awareness. The rather sarcastic differentiation is that "we raise awareness' but they 'play the fear card'" (Furedi 2011: 99). As a more serious criterion for distinction, one could point out that awareness-raising campaigns are rarely carried out clandestinely, with their agenda hidden, whereas "[f]ear mongering [...] should be as close to invisible as possible" (Ungar 2011: 194).

Ungar's rule probably also applies to inspiring anxiety through works of popular fiction. It would be wrong, however, to assume that all of the societal anxieties inspired by the texts analysed in this study qualify as potential triggers of moral panics, and neither would a dichotomous classification of 'raising awareness' versus 'fear mongering' do justice to the spectrum of motivations and dynamics involved. However, these

¹⁴⁵ Walby and Spencer 2011: 115. This perception of one's community is all the more misleading as moral panics have, at least partially, a "decivilizing" effect (Rohloff 2011) and have been linked to abuses of power (Victor 2006).

theories are interesting and of relevance for a number of reasons. They emphasise the importance of people's perception of a society's structure and its values. Moral panic theories also highlight how different folk groups react in different ways, each according to their individual views of what is deviant behaviour and which deviant behaviour poses a threat to the moral setup of their community. As an example, "[i]n the UK, traditional folk devils (e.g., the paedophile and the anti-social youth) still excite the public imagination" but overall, large proportions of society unifying in opposition to "traditional folk devils" is an uncommon phenomenon because of "the pluralisation of competing lifestyle-based moral identities" (Furedi 2011: 94). It could be argued that traditional folk devils have been supplanted by folk group devils, emphasising the wide range and large number of different criteria which may define such a group and, in turn, their concept of devilishness. Yet the underlying emotional and intellectual processes have remained the same. It has been claimed that contemporary legends can create moral panics,¹⁴⁶ which would be further proof of their immense emotional power as well as the fact that these legends can be utilised strategically to a specific political end. If one endeavours to initiate a moral panic on purpose, one has to be smart and competent: "Moral panic creation is [...] an artful enterprise" (Ungar 2011: 194). Irrespective of whether or not this particular kind of skilfulness is desired, the emphasis on the accomplishment is reminiscent of the blurb praising *World War Z* because it 'will spook you for real'.

¹⁴⁶ Frater 2009

4. Literature & emotions

Ranging from an aesthetically appealing cover design to feeling obliged to show appreciation for a present one has received, or even the wish to signal unwillingness to communicate verbally, the motivations to open a book (or access an ebook or a website, etc.) are manifold and quite diverse. However, in order to make people keep on reading, a text has to spark something else in them: the main motivation to read a work of fiction, it has been argued, is curiosity.¹⁴⁷ This rule does not apply to situations in which one is required to read a text for educational or other purposes (although it is the hope of educators worldwide that required reading does not preclude curiosity), but in all other scenarios it seems to be true, even if curiosity may not be what makes one *pick up* a work of fiction. This may seem so obvious that one might feel foolish to point it out. Yet at second glance, the matter presents itself as rather more intricate. If curiosity is defined as the desire for information, it does not explain why works of fiction are sometimes read multiple times. Even detective and mystery stories, which could be considered the epitome of works whose appeal is lost once the ending is known, can offer something which makes people read them again. Curiosity is more than not knowing; readers' curiosity involves "a genuine interest in the emotions that the act of reading produces" (Lahn and Meister 2013: 161, my translation). It is obvious that feelings play an important role. The findings of neuropsychological

¹⁴⁷ Lahn and Meister 2013: 161

research suggest that our first reaction to a text we read is, in fact, emotional. Cognitive processes occur simultaneously but more slowly, so that a reader's intellectual appraisal of a text is influenced – guided – by the emotional reaction to the written word.¹⁴⁸ Even a recipient who knows the account to be fictional, or knows the whole plot and thus the fate of the characters beforehand, can be moved emotionally by the atmosphere created.¹⁴⁹ How and why literature triggers, affects or even manipulates a recipient's emotional state, and also whether this effect is desired, has been discussed since the beginning of literary time.

In his *Poetics*,¹⁵⁰ Aristotle stresses the importance of mimesis in order to stir the audience's emotions. He presents two fundamental ways in which drama, in its capacity as a kind of mirror of reality, influences what a person watching the performance feels: "comedy evokes amusement by portraying the actions of protagonists 'worse than real'; tragedy evokes *eleos* [pity] and *phobos* [fear] by portraying the actions of protagonists 'better than real'" (Howe 2010: 47). If this effect is achieved fully, a person watching becomes *the* person watching: the audience is unified in its collective mental and intellectual state produced by the play.¹⁵¹ This is not the only aspect which has been taken up and debated time and again by theorists. Aristotle discussed how the emotions of the character are not *mirrored* by the recipients. A character feeling, i.e. an actor portraying, fear and sadness can trigger an amused response or *schadenfreude*, while a character blissfully unaware of their impending doom will not show any signs of the fear the audience may experience. For literature's capacity to inspire anxiety, this means that, according to Aristotle, the protagonists do not necessarily have to be anxious themselves. Another aspect which should be mentioned here is the Aristotelian *function* of feelings which are

¹⁴⁸ Anz 1998: 22

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Lichterfeld 2012: 265f

¹⁵⁰ Aristotle c. 335 BCE

¹⁵¹ Howe 2010: 47

evoked by literature. Plato, his teacher, was convinced that poetry, being able to rouse images and thus emotions which are too close to reality, could be harmful to a person's mind because of these emotions' seductive qualities.¹⁵² However, in Aristotle's view, not only do feelings not have an adverse effect on the human mind; they are even essential to it: they are one gateway to knowledge and insight. Like court or assembly speeches, tragic drama "aim[s], by placing events before the eyes, to create emotions that support right judgments" (Staley 2010: 15). Aristotle does not see the emotional appeal as part of a seduction away from real life. Quite on the contrary, he argues that only through art are we able to cope with the reality of our existence. One facet of this approach is the cathartic effect which tragedy can have: to cleanse recipients by purging them of troublesome feelings.

The Roman *officia oratoris*, the tasks of an orator, also reflect an acknowledgement of the effect which the emotions evoked in the audience can have. According to Cicero, the three duties of the rhetorician are to inform, to delight and to *move* (*docere, delectare, movere*), the latter being so important he even advises that "it is often useful to digress from the subject one has put forward and is dealing with, for the purpose of arousing emotion" (1967: 435). The two fields of (political) rhetoric and literature/art do have blurred boundaries here, and indeed, in this study, we will find that this is sometimes the case in contemporary works of (popular) fiction attempting to inspire societal anxieties as well. The philosopher Seneca "talks of orators and actors who imitate emotions to lead others to their point of view" (Staley 2010: 92). He discusses the effect which seeing a play or reading a book can have on our mental state, asserting that "we discover what we think about these events partly by noticing how we feel" (Lucius Annaeus Seneca, quoted in Staley 2010: 92). Another Roman rhetorician to stress the importance of inciting the audience's emotions was

¹⁵² Staley 2010: 15

Quintilian, who very much followed Cicero's school of rhetoric. The task which, according to him, defined the work of an orator was to incite the audience's imagination in a way that stimulated the creation of mental images. If an attempt was made skilfully enough, the images designed would be real enough to trigger emotions comparable in intensity to those of a person actually witnessing the events related.¹⁵³ The best speaker would be he who excelled at evoking feelings by "vividly represent[ing] to himself things, voices, actions, with the exactness of reality [*verum optime finget*]" (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, quoted in Greenblatt 1998: 122). It cannot be denied that emotions have always played an important role in the written and verbal relation of information of different kinds. The exact quality of the feelings evoked, as well as their implications and consequences, however, are issues which are not by any means undisputed.

Beneficial or harmful emotional effects of literature

Catharsis is not the only positive effect of literature inspiring emotions. As mentioned above, listening to or reading stories has long been seen as a means of gaining self-awareness. How we feel about a given situation or character can tell us something about ourselves, if we are prepared to invest the required amount of self-reflection; and "giving visible form to inchoate emotions is exactly the task of the dramatist" (Greenblatt 1998: 122), or the author of fiction. Especially in the case of negative feelings, literature can be beneficial to the psychological well-being of the recipient "by allowing individuals to ponder [the source of the respective feeling] from a safe distance" (Gymnich 2012: 12). The emotional dimension of literature can also make it serviceable as a help or guide in coping with the concerns of people's everyday lives, including societal anxieties. One way of achieving this is the portrayal of a variety of

¹⁵³ Greenblatt 1998: 123

approaches and reactions to unsettling events.¹⁵⁴ “Horror [...] offers us a chance to exercise (that’s right; not *exorcise* but *exercise*) emotions which society demands we keep closely in hand.” (King 2012: 47, emphasis in original) Furthermore, feelings are the proxy, as it were, through which the literature one has read can guide one’s decision-making processes. Patrick Colm Hogan makes this point about the power of literature in his book *Affective Narratology* (2011). He bases his argument on two premises. Firstly, a large number of important decisions are not made, in fact cannot be made, based on facts alone. Especially when it comes to personal life choices, objectively assessing the points in favour or against can be well-nigh impossible. In addition, even a seemingly objective weighing of arguments is often influenced by one’s emotional state at a given time. Feelings are therefore “profoundly consequential” (Hogan 2011: 239). The second premise states that human emotions are fallible in as far as they do not necessarily abet making the decision from which the subject will benefit the most. The crucial characteristics here are the changeability and *suggestibility* of mental states. It follows that influencing a person’s emotions means subsequently influencing a person’s choices, even their general conduct. Hence, according to Hogan, the feelings it triggers make literature quite powerful:

literature bears on our emotions, and emotions are – fallibly but inevitably – bound up with our thought and action in the world. At least in principle it seems possible that, if art can affect our emotions, it can thereby benefit the way we live our lives. Of course, it could also harm the way we live our lives. But either way, art has potential for affecting the real

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Baumann 2012. However, literary scholars disagree about this function. Andrea Rummel, for example, points out that “in 1964 Richard Alewyn argued that the immense popularity of terror and horror as an aesthetic category in eighteenth-century discussion was indebted to a process of compensation. The aestheticisation of the horrible for Alewyn is due to the fact that fear and terror were no longer sufficiently present in real life”, and counters that “it appears [...] that fear in some of the literature/theatre of the time in fact mirrors and instrumentalises fear in real life, rather than substituting it aesthetically” (Rummel 2012: 88). Gisliind Rohwer-Happe (2012: 99) makes the same point about Victorian dramatic monologue, which, according to her, “fosters and maintains society’s anxieties by expressing deviant viewpoints and by showing the results of a thorough examination of those troublesome themes.”

world beyond the satisfaction and enjoyment it provides during the time we are experiencing it. (Hogan 2011: 239)

The potentially harmful effect of literature includes emotions which, when triggered by a work of fiction, can be so strong that they interfere with readers' rational judgements to an extent which makes their behaviour seem illogical, even absurd. One striking example of this phenomenon is detailed by Blakey Vermeule in her 2010 book:

Consider the case of *The Bridges of Madison County* (1993), the bestselling novel by Robert James Waller later turned into a movie. The hero of the story is Robert Kincaid, a handsome photographer for *National Geographic* who travels to Iowa to take pictures of the famed covered bridges. He meets a lonely and repressed Iowa wife, formerly an Italian war bride, and they fall passionately in love, but she chooses in the end to stay with her husband and children rather than run away with her lover. What made this book astonishing, in part, was that its readers simply refused to accept that it was fiction. *National Geographic* was so inundated by requests for interviews with Robert Kincaid that they were forced to print a statement denying that the "handsome and sinewy" Robert Kincaid had ever worked for the magazine. (Vermeule 2010: 19)¹⁵⁵

When attempting to explain the intensity of the book's emotional impact, two factors should be considered. Firstly, the story is made more believable with the use of real-world details. The magazine the fictional journalist works for, the places he travels to, and the bridges he photographs do exist in the readers' reality. It can be assumed that these details were used intentionally in order to diminish the distance between readership and the work of fiction. This is a method of enhancing the readers' emotional involvement: the barriers between the real world and the fictional world are made as bridgeable as possible. Little effort has to be made by the readers to enter the reality of the book because there is so little that is new or different which they have to get used to; there are

¹⁵⁵ "... But perhaps sensing a marketing opportunity, [*National Geographic*] also put together a lush documentary about the lives of its photojournalists, with glowing references to the fictional character. Meanwhile Madison County, Iowa, features the novel prominently on its website as a tourist draw." (Vermeule 2010: 19)

no new concepts, places, species or the like which a recipient has to learn about and which could have an alienating effect on some readers. The second aspect is the very human trait that we *want* to believe that what pleases us is real, just as much as we tend to attribute credibility to information and stories which support and reaffirm our view of the world. It is contended that there are many women and men who want to believe that there are handsome photojournalists out there ready to sweep them off their feet and rescue them from the rut of their everyday lives. The most likely explanation of the *Bridges of Madison County* phenomenon is, therefore, a combination of real-life details in the novel and wishful thinking on the part of the readers. Together, when exercised in works of fiction, these two factors can make for a very powerful emotional influence. Some scholars may be tempted to look down on the readers of the Waller novel who let themselves be drawn in to such an extent. Indeed, here again we find a divide between high- and middle-/lowbrow fiction: the former “loves to distance itself from popular culture, which thrives on immersion, by promoting the more cerebral experiences of self-reflexivity and critical distance from the fictional world” (Ryan 2007: 250). Criticism of the emotional effects of fiction has a tradition of focussing on women, who have been labelled as considerably more susceptible. In the past, this criticism tended to stress the alleged physical ramifications,¹⁵⁶ presuming “that fiction, whether moral or licentious, can infiltrate the reader – get beneath her very skin to shake her nerves and upset her physiology” (Murison 2011: 5).¹⁵⁷

‘Aesthetic’ v. ‘real’ emotions

In stark contrast to this argument stands the discussion about the quality of the emotions evoked by art in general and by literature

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Chapter 2

¹⁵⁷ In this sentence, the pronoun *her*, innocent enough, as it has become custom to use the female form for both genders in academic writing, seems to stress the gender bias in an awkward way.

specifically. Literary scholars do not agree on whether feelings experienced when reading can be categorised as, or compared to, 'real' feelings, and a consensus is unlikely to be reached within the foreseeable future. In many theories, the two approaches in question are not treated as mutually exclusive. *Aesthetic emotion*, which a person experiences in response to art, does not have to be a counterpart to 'real' emotion. It can be seen as one class, one of the many varieties on the wide spectrum of mental states. Sigmund Freud, for example, spoke of the uncanny as "an explicitly real emotion that is nevertheless constituted aesthetically" as it "marks a sphere of indistinguishability between fantastic and real stimulation, expectable artistic effect and true surprise" (Howe 2010: 43). Others have introduced new labels for this kind of emotion in order to explain the phenomenon of a feeling which they see as not belonging to the 'regular' spectrum of human experience. Yet other theorists have argued that no distinction has to be made at all, not even to the extent of classifying one as a sub-kind of the other.

In regard to the emotional effects of fiction, fear stands out as the one feeling that is most often and most elaborately analysed and theorised on. Despite the differences between fear and anxiety, as pointed out in Chapter 2.1, the following short summary of influential theories concerning fear will provide relevant information and points of view for our discussion of societal anxieties. Especially in the discussions involving fear and anxiety, one of the main arguments in favour of a clear distinction between 'aesthetic' and 'real' emotions is as follows: based on the etymology (Latin *e(x) + movere*), the concept must include a movement of some kind, i.e. a motivation for action. In the case of fear and related feelings, this would mean a 'fight or flight' reaction. As the recipients of art, the argument goes, generally do not attempt to fight, or flee from, the source of their fearful sensation, what they experience does not qualify as an emotion. In fact, a person having what this approach would characterise as a 'real' emotional reaction would very probably be diagnosed with a psychological, mental or

neurological disorder. Therefore, one has to either doubt that the feelings experienced in response to art are real feelings, or one has to question the connection between emotion and action.

The former proposition has notably been supported by Kendall L. Walton, who argues that a work of fiction cannot, for example, trigger genuine fear because the reader would have to recognise an actual threat in the story's (literal or figurative) 'monster'.¹⁵⁸ There may be a physical reaction showing signs of fear, but there is no motivation to action. Walton contends that the reason for this is that the reader is aware of the fictionality of the material they are presented with. Acknowledging that they are not in danger of being harmed, they find themselves in a "physiological-psychological state [which] does not constitute genuine fear" (Walton 1990: 196). Walton calls this state *quasi-fear*. It is deceptively close to real fear; as has been mentioned, it is usually accompanied by physical signs of being afraid. Quasi-fear may also be a very intense experience for the subject, but for Walton, this is not relevant.¹⁵⁹ He stresses that it all happens in the world of 'make-believe'¹⁶⁰: both the threat and the emotional response take place in the world of fiction.

Noël Carroll, one of Walton's most famous critics, argues that one fault lies in the lack of explanation for "why beliefs about what is make-believable only give rise to quasi-fears and pretend emotions rather than genuine fears and emotions" (Carroll 1990: 79). Carroll accuses Walton of simply being at a loss for an explanation for the emotional reaction of readers (or a cinema audience). As a counter-approach, he suggests his "thought theory of emotional responses to fiction" (Carroll 1990: 79). The key idea behind this theory is that our thoughts strongly influence our feelings. We can frighten ourselves, or make ourselves

¹⁵⁸ Walton 1990: 197

¹⁵⁹ Walton 1990: 197

¹⁶⁰ Walton 1990: 4ff

anxious, by thinking about suitable scenarios for a certain length of time, or in sufficient detail. Carroll stresses that the negative emotion is not triggered by the fact that one's mind is occupied with a frightful or unpleasant event,¹⁶¹ but by the very images and scenarios which the person thinks about. In addition, it does not matter whether the subject knows the content of their thoughts to be fictional or even implausible.¹⁶² We accept fictionality, and experience a real emotion. And in response to horror fiction, this emotion is, according to Carroll, *art-horror*. It is "the emotion that the creators of the genre have perennially sought to instill in their audiences, though they, undoubtedly would be more disposed to call this emotion 'horror' rather than 'art-horror'" (Carroll 1990: 24). The definition of art-horror includes a physical reaction, such as a shudder, a wince or goose bumps, which qualifies it as a real emotion.¹⁶³ Since the object of this feeling is "a thought" (Carroll 1990: 29), one of Carroll's central points is that "not every emotional response requires existence beliefs" (1990: 77).

There are a number of literary and film scholars who disagree with Noël Carroll. According to Julian Hanich, Carroll "overemphasizes the cognitive pleasure and thus overintellectualizes a rather somatic experience" (2010: 5) and errs in his insistence that the experienced feeling is unpleasant, and something which the recipients put up with in order to derive pleasure from other sources. Hanich finds fault in Carroll's assumption that pleasure is not, and cannot, be a part of fear.¹⁶⁴ Others criticise the very fact that Carroll needs the new category of 'art-horror' for

¹⁶¹ The example he uses is that of a person "[s]tanding on a precipice, though in no way precariously, [who] might fleetingly entertain the thought of falling over the edge. Commonly, this can be accompanied by a sudden chill or a tremor which is brought about, I submit, not by [their] belief that [they] are about to fall over the edge of the precipice, but by [their] thought of falling..." (Carroll 1990: 80). The allusion to Kierkegaard is interesting, and it can be assumed that it was not made unintentionally.

¹⁶² Carroll 1990: 79ff

¹⁶³ Carroll 1990: 24

¹⁶⁴ Hanich 2010: 4f

the mental state he describes. While he stresses that it is not an artificial affectation, it is still not the same thing as *horror*, which we experience in the presence of real monsters.¹⁶⁵ In contrast, Derek Matravers argues that, depending on the quality of the representation and the level of attention on the part of the reader, it is possible for a work of fiction to evoke a feeling which is not different from the one the person would experience if they had to face the event, person or creature in real life.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, no sub-category is needed. The basis of Matravers' argument is that imagination can perform in the same way as belief in as far as both can evoke emotions:

we do not have to believe that Elizabeth Bennett has accepted Mr Darcy in order to feel compassion for them; we only have to imagine that she has. In other words, the fact that quasi emotions are felt within a game of make-believe does not mean they are not emotions. [...] The fact that we do not believe what we encounter in fictions does not preclude our responding with genuine emotion. (Matravers 2001: 57)

Matravers also attends to the 'definitional problem' of feelings aroused by fiction not triggering any action: for him, this is not a valid argument at all. He demonstrates his point in this respect with the example of a documentary. Well-made documentaries can inspire emotions in the viewers – and, at the same time, fail to call them into action. For Matravers, this proves that “the beliefs [these emotions] embody need have no connection to action” (Matravers 2001: 72). Thus both beliefs and the imagination can evoke feelings; and both what is believed and what is imagined may not motivate one to action; and “[o]nce again the conclusion follows: emotions can be felt towards fictional characters and situations. [...] [T]here is no ‘definitional problem’” (Matravers 2001: 72f).

Another theory to avoid this problem is presented by Patrick Colm Hogan. He speaks of “emotional memories” (Hogan 2011: 5). Like “skills

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Carroll 1990: 15

¹⁶⁶ Matravers 2001: 90

memories”, he says, they are “implicit memories”. In Hogan’s comparison, the feelings evoked by a work of fiction are like riding a bicycle, in as far as one does not think about the process. The reading experience reminds the subject of an event which is associated with a specific emotion or mixture of emotions. However, this recollection of the event in question does not have to happen consciously; the emotional memory is stimulated irrespectively.¹⁶⁷ This theory supports the proposition that the societal anxieties inspired by a text have to pre-exist, at least to a certain extent and on a certain level, in the minds of the readers.

It has been pointed out repeatedly that this study does not explore actual reader response, i.e. finding out whether anxiety is indeed inspired in the recipients is not the object of investigation. Therefore, one might question the relevance of the theories outlined above. There are two main aspects which are important for our purpose: on the one hand, the basic assumption that a work of fiction can have an impact on a reader’s emotional state will have to underlie any strategy of influencing feelings through that channel. On the other hand, and this will prove especially significant, the theories as outlined above all include an element of believability of fiction, fictionality in general, or imaginability. For any attempt to trigger a feeling in a reader regarding society, or even just to make them ponder a societal issue, these features are essential. The plausible connection to the recipient’s real-life experience and their social settings is indispensable for this purpose.

“How to write something scary”

If we stay with fear, rather than anxiety, for one more moment, we can use another sizeable source, or rather group of sources, to gather insight into how writers try to influence their audience’s emotions. Horror

¹⁶⁷ Hogan 2011: 5

fiction is one of the genres for which one can find the highest number of 'how to write' guides.¹⁶⁸ How helpful these guides actually are for aspiring authors remains to be identified. They are, however, undeniably useful in as far as they supply information on what established writers, among others, consider the most important ingredients in fiction which is equipped to evoke a feeling of horror or terror. Emotional impact is their declared aim. A range of definitions of additional goals and varying degrees of importance of these other goals have been expressed. For instance, Robert R. McCammon stresses that good horror fiction is more than "writing that socks the bejeezus out of the emotions while leaving the intellect untouched" (1987: 68), and Douglas E. Winter proposes "standards of excellence" which include the "power [...] not only to scare, but also to disturb, a reader, to invoke a memory that will linger long after the pages of the book are closed" (1987: 161). Yet the core idea is universally acknowledged – "[k]eep the emotions high" (Michaels 2012) – and this is why these guides can serve along the way to defining the strategies of inspiring societal anxieties in fiction.

As this study is not intended to help ambitious new writers, it can be mentioned first of all that with the whole of the instructions and recommendations listed below, the essential ingredient is *good* writing, difficult to define as it may be. Some subtlety is important; stories which bluntly attempt to instruct the readers how to feel about something will meet resistance and refusal.¹⁶⁹ Derek Matravers defines immediacy and vivacity of presentation as two criteria which have to be met in order for the reader

¹⁶⁸ Google.co.uk finds vast numbers of 'how to write' guides (articles as well as books) for the main genres of popular fiction, which emphasises their popularity, as well as the fact that they are often seen, and treated, as formulaic genres. (Google.co.uk search results for "'how to write' [genre]": "horror" – about 1,900,000 results; "fantasy" – about 2,760,000 results; "science fiction" – about 1,910,000 results; "romance" – 2,430,000 results; "spy *" – 858,000 results; "detective *" – 8,950,000 results; "thriller" – about 586,000 results. Compared to 18,600 results for "magical realism", for example. Google search carried out on 26 August 2014.)

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Wendig 2011

not to be able to resist the emotional effect.¹⁷⁰ While these are plausible enough, they are still slightly vague. It seems more practical, therefore, to look at more concrete elements. The guidebooks and articles give advice on how to create suspense as the basis for fear (or anxiety), for example by not giving the reader too much information. “Horror thrives in part on the unknown” (Vaux), and “[a]nticipation is nine tenths of the horror story battle” (ZiggyKinsella 2012). The perfect balance of foreshadowing, a range of arcs of suspense of varying lengths, and satisfactory resolutions, is one of the keys.¹⁷¹ The reader must not see the ending coming from afar if they are supposed to stay in a state of suspense.¹⁷² *Mise en abyme*, the telling of stories within a story (within a story...), is a strategy which was very popular in the traditional Gothic novel, used to draw the reader in. They become more actively involved in piecing together the units of information of varying sizes which the layers of the text provide.¹⁷³ Furthermore, *mise en abyme* can aid another aspect of creating suspense. In horror fiction, the reader should not know the threat exactly, i.e. not ‘see’ the monster, but sense the danger: a shadow can be considerably more frightening than “a Thing” (Grant 1987: 66). The same applies, in fact, to the sources of societal anxieties. Analysing a problem, tracing the roots, and highlighting all the facets and different points of view, is arguably not a suitable way of making readers worried or even anxious. Having all the important information means being in a much better position to find a solution, or maybe a way of relieving the situation. Partial information and deliberately vague wording,¹⁷⁴ on the other hand, in combination with the prospect of potentially catastrophic consequences, has the opposite effect.

¹⁷⁰ Matravers 2001: 87

¹⁷¹ Cf. Cane 2010 and Daniels 1977: 72f

¹⁷² Cf. Williamson 1987b; Vaux; Dennard 2012; D. Taylor; Cane 2010, Michaels 2012 et al.

¹⁷³ Aguirre 1998: 238f

¹⁷⁴ Baumann 1989: 126

The right setting is acutely important for an endeavour to “put the ‘fear’ into atmosphere” (Gilbey 2010). In her article on “Romanticism, Anxiety and Dramatic Representation”, Andrea Rummel gives an overview of the “strategies of staging fear” applied in George Colman the Younger’s *Bluebeard* (1798): “various Tombs”, “a sepulchral building”, “ghastly and supernatural forms”, “a large Skeleton seated on a Tomb” (*Bluebeard* I.3, quoted in Rummel 2012: 85) are mentioned in the stage directions, and in good Gothic tradition, there is little chance of good weather: “[t]hunder and lightning complete the scene” (Rummel 2012: 85). For a 21st-century audience, these elements are probably too well-known, even cliché, to work. In addition, such settings are the ones in which the recipient expects something unpleasant or horrible to happen, and this anticipation diminishes, if not defeats a story’s power to shock, scare, or frighten.¹⁷⁵ Instead, the guide books and articles unanimously recommend familiar settings: towns and cities similar to the ones in which the average person in the intended target group lives, ordinary workplaces, eateries and shops or malls they may frequent regularly in their daily lives. Discussing American horror films of the 1950s, Stephen King remarks that

[t]he setting for most of these films was small-town America, the scene the audience could best identify with [...] but all of these Our Towns looked eerily as if a eugenics squad had gone by the day before production actually began, removing everyone with a lisp, birthmark, limp, or potbelly ... (King 2012: 57)

To some extent, this is still the case today, almost entirely so in lowbrow fiction, yet human environments which are less than picture-perfect can be found as well, for example in Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s “Strain” trilogy (2010 – 2011) or in Stephen King’s *Cell* (2006). In fiction as well as in films and TV shows, this concept has also been inverted, with a (superficially) ‘perfect’ setting being the source of danger. Examples of this would be Dave Egger’s *The Circle* (2013), or the Tim Burton film *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), in which a stereotypically Gothic – yet in many ways

¹⁷⁵ Castle 1987: 31

more pleasant – setting is used to contrast the seemingly perfect world of American suburbia and thus to emphasise this inversion even more strongly.

Still, both euphemised and more realistic depictions of ordinary, familiar surroundings can be used effectively to make the threat or the unnatural event even more menacing. Winter advises the inexperienced writer of horror fiction to “[e]schew exotic locales and the lifestyles of the rich and famous [...] in favor of all that is mundane in your world” (Winter 1987: 159) for two reasons. Firstly, there is a bigger chance of the result being realistic if one writes about what one knows, and secondly the effect of horror or terror is more likely to be considerably stronger if one writes about what *the readers* know. The ordinary being disturbed by the extraordinary, like something unnatural or preternatural invading a natural environment, is highly likely to instil horror or terror.¹⁷⁶ This argument is just as valid for the situations and events in which the characters find themselves. They, too, have to be plausible and relatable for the recipients – especially if one wants to achieve a long-lasting effect. For horror fiction, the effect to aim for, according to Robert Bloch, is “the truly chilling notion that ‘This *could* happen in real life – and worse than that, it could happen to *me*’” (1987: 10, emphasis in original). Besides relatable settings and events, such an effect requires characters who the recipients care about¹⁷⁷ and who we as readers stay close to.¹⁷⁸

This too is a cue which can be found in almost every single article on the subject. The main characters have to be “complex, convincing, and appealing” as well as “well-drawn and likeable” (Koontz 1987a: 60), and ideally they evoke both empathy and sympathy.¹⁷⁹ The author and the

¹⁷⁶ Day 1985: 30f; Tudor 1989: 123ff; Baumann 1989: 71ff et al.

¹⁷⁷ Frank 2010: 33

¹⁷⁸ Dennard 2012

¹⁷⁹ Koontz 1987b: 102

reader have to see them as “a, for the moment, living, real human being, not just a character – a spear-carrier whose sole purpose is to die when the author’s ready” (Grant 1987: 65). Or, in the words of Stephen King: “You have got to love the people” (quoted in Winter 1987: 158). Theories of character identification are discussed below; for this overview a note of the importance ascribed to the emotional connection between reader and character will have to suffice.

The routine recommendation to write about what one knows is generally extended to fear itself. One facet of this is that using personal emotional experience can help avoid merely repeating or copying other people’s writing.¹⁸⁰ Another reason is that it can be assumed, or at least hoped, that drawing from personal experience makes the portrayal more authentic. Stephen King has remarked that this is the reason why autobiographical material can frequently be found in his writing,¹⁸¹ and Ray Bradbury suggests that new authors of horror make notes in situations in which they themselves experience fear so that they can use them for their writing.¹⁸² Others recommend exposing oneself deliberately to the objects of one’s own fears in order to be able to convey the feeling compellingly.¹⁸³ The idea that it is only possible to write convincingly about horrors and anxieties which one knows from one’s own experience is not implausible at all. Yet this is probably a bit of an over-simplification. An additional layer shall be suggested here: its basic assumption is that a person does not necessarily have to have experienced an emotion in order to convey it successfully in writing; they merely have to be able to understand it and relate to it to some extent. There are primal fears which we all share; but beyond these, every human being possesses a different emotional repertoire, so that not every fear or anxiety will be understandable or

¹⁸⁰ Campbell 1987

¹⁸¹ King 2012: 26

¹⁸² Bradbury 1987

¹⁸³ Vaux; ZiggyKinsella 2012

relatable for everyone. This is especially – but not exclusively – true for slightly irrational dreads and worries. For the sake of illustration, I propose to compare these feelings with food: I personally like Brussels sprouts but at the same time I can see why other people do not. They have a very distinct taste, can be slightly bitter, and usually stand out from a *mélange* of different flavours in a dish. On the other hand, it is hard for me to comprehend that somebody dislikes the taste of pasta, which I find not only pleasant but also unobtrusive. Along the same lines, there are objects and scenarios which do not frighten me personally but which I can comprehend having this effect on other people; yet I will fail to relate to particular fears or anxieties of a different kind. As I can empathise with the former feelings, I should, if I were an author of fiction, be able to convey them satisfactorily, and my lack of empathy should keep me from doing so in case of the latter. There are always exceptions to a rule, of course, just as there are people who have not developed, or lost their sense of taste, and people with a heightened sensibility, who will react much more strongly than the average person to even a slight stimulus. However, this does not necessarily invalidate this theory.

Finally, another piece of advice is worth discussing briefly. Blogger ZiggyKinsella tells aspiring authors of horror fiction to mind their choice of words, and to be particularly cautious with terms which are outside the standard vocabulary of their intended readership. Having to look up words, or even just having to think about the meaning of a particular word for a moment too long can break the atmosphere one has tried to create.¹⁸⁴ As a recommendation for effective writing, this seems sensible enough. However, it is interesting for another reason: it connects accessibility, which has been defined as a criterion of popular fiction, with creating a suspenseful atmosphere in general. This emphasises the strong relation between the two genres. One might argue that not an entire work of fiction

¹⁸⁴ ZiggyKinsella 2012

would have to follow this rule but merely the passages intended to scare, frighten, or inspire anxiety. Yet according to these guidelines, any text which is entirely dedicated to this purpose (and not intended for a small target group) would have to stay within a fairly standard vocabulary.

What we do or do not suspend willingly

The *willing suspension of disbelief* is one of the most well-known, yet not the least controversial, concepts in literary theory. The phrase was coined in 1817 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In his autobiographical work *Biographia Literaria*,¹⁸⁵ he used it to describe the state of mind which readers or members of a theatre audience find themselves in. It is the state which allows them to savour the work of art and accept what is presented to them, including propositions which are outside the norm or outside of what is usually deemed believable. The restriction to this is defined by certain limits, e.g. of probability or coherence; it does not mean that the author can produce anything they like and assume that their audience/readership will just smile and nod. It is the author's task to give us a chance to adopt the described mental state by observing "his responsibility to the beliefs and prepossessions of our common experience, common sense, and common moral consciousness" (Abrams 1958: 28). Abrams' wording is striking here; it makes apparent that again the shared values and views which define a folk group come into play. The other facet of Coleridge's famous concept I should like to point out is the central importance of the main characters of a work of literature. Indeed, humanity is stressed as a key criterion: the recipients are said to require "a human center or reference on which the imagination can rest" (Abrams 1958: 29), and writers who fail to activate our willing suspension of disbelief are cited to have produced texts which are "too inadequately human to engage our continuing interest" (Abrams 1958: 28).

¹⁸⁵ Coleridge 1817

As previously mentioned, this concept is not an undisputed one. The various approaches to feelings evoked by literature as sketched above highlight that belief, or disbelief, is seen as an essential factor. However, these debates can seem laborious as there is little evidence pointing towards actual disagreement in terms of content or substance. Instead, it is mostly terminology or definitions which are disputed, so the argument seems to stay on a rather superficial level. The fact that readers and audiences achieve what Coleridge called 'that willing suspension of disbelief' is not doubted, even by scholars who express distinct disaffection toward the terminology. One of these is Noël Carroll. Following his argument that the emotions experienced by a reader or member of an audience are real, he insists that there are two reasons why they cannot cease to be convinced of the fictionality of the presented material. The first one is that it is not possible for a human being to control what they believe in: "[w]e cannot will our beliefs" (Carroll 1990: 65). While this statement stands to reason, Carroll may be accused of undue generalisation at this point. 'Suspension' does not mean a permanent cancellation or elimination, and it is arguably not valid to deny humans any power of influence on their convictions. Carroll's second argument pertains to the element discussed previously: according to him, belief would have to lead to action. Therefore, real emotion, a suspension of disbelief, and "the normal and appropriate pleasures of fiction" (Carroll 1990: 68) are incompatible. As before, Derek Matravers's objecting argument can certainly be applied here.

The theories and analyses of scholars who have found some middle ground are probably most useful for our investigation. Rather than speaking of belief as something which can be switched on or off, an admittedly difficult concept, Robert Yanal suggests varying degrees of inactivity of one's belief.¹⁸⁶ The ideal degree accommodates emotions inspired by a

¹⁸⁶ Robert Yanal, quoted in Sklar 2013: 14

work of fiction as well as appropriate intellectual distance to recognise the border between fiction and real life. This sketch is intriguing because it excludes some problematic issues and includes phenomena at the edge of what would be considered common, or socially acceptable, reactions to art. However, Yanal's approach could definitely be criticised for its vagueness. It does not require any precise definitions and lets everybody find their own place on an endless spectrum. In addition, it could be used to associate any strong emotional involvement with lack of intellectual engagement (or even lack of intellectual capacity). In the original concept of the willing suspension of disbelief, the connotation is arguably a more positive one. There seems to be a general divide among those who see a person's disposition towards an emotional response as something negative or positive, even something healthy or unhealthy. Stephen King, who describes himself as one of the people who "the Bureau of Genetics supersize[d] [...] in the imagination department" (2012: x), is quite outspoken about this subject. He insists that disbelief is something heavy, something leaden,¹⁸⁷ which cannot be suspended haphazardly. It takes considerable effort and strength, "a sophisticated and muscular intellectual act" which some people fail to perform because they "can't lift the weight of fantasy. The muscles of imagination have grown too weak..." (King 2012: 121). This metaphor is suitable because it comprises two facets: firstly, people come with different prerequisites; they are not all equally 'muscular' by nature. Secondly, muscles can, and *have to* be trained, regardless of one's basic constitution.

Another approach circumnavigating the issue of whether or not disbelief can be suspended has been put forward by Howard Sklar. In his model, rather than a basic state of the mind being changed, an additional layer is added:

a reader who engages deeply with a work of fiction – who becomes absorbed, for instance, on an emotional level –

¹⁸⁷ King 2012: 120

may simultaneously disengage his awareness of the work's fictionality. He may have the fictionality at the back of his mind, but the front of his mind, so to speak, is occupied by the *sensation of realism* that the work produces. This is not so much a question of the "suspension of disbelief" as the *generation of temporary belief*. (Sklar 2013: 14, emphasis in original)

Sklar rejects a debate about the genuineness of the belief which is created by the work of fiction according to his theory. He regards this question as irrelevant.¹⁸⁸ The recipients may not be convinced (or may not be able to convince themselves) that the fictional world interfuses or even substitutes their real worlds. However, there is something which Sklar calls "the experience of belief" (2013: 15), which can be a very intense one. He compares it to dreaming, and draws parallels to the emotional reactions one can have to a dream, even if one is to some extent aware of the event happening only in a dream.¹⁸⁹ A profound experience of belief, like a great emotional experience, is in essence real *enough* so that the question of genuineness appears immaterial.

Wayne C. Booth presents yet another approach which situates itself more in the middle of the road, and which is very interesting with regard to societal anxieties. At first, he follows his famous model, explaining that the recipients' minds, "no matter how unsophisticated or opposed to analysis" (Booth 1988: 125) they may be, function on (a minimum of) three levels. At the same time, they are a) completely immersed in the universe of the fiction and therefore willing and able to accept what they are told as truth, and b) aware of the artificiality and ephemerality of this world, at least to some extent, *and* c) deeply rooted in their lives outside the fictional world and therefore never able to free themselves entirely of the influence of their real-life thoughts, preoccupations, moods and emotions.¹⁹⁰ However, Booth

¹⁸⁸ Sklar 2013: 14

¹⁸⁹ Sklar 2013: 19

¹⁹⁰ Booth 1988: 125

subsequently finds that the distinction between these levels can be blurred to such a degree that the ‘implied’ and the ‘real’ reader merge into one as

[a]ny ironic or metaphoric shaping required of me as I play the role of implied reader will become *mine* insofar as I genuinely engage with the text; I may repudiate it later, but for now it has become part of me. Whether the gift offered by this would-be friend is nourishing or poisonous, I have already imbibed. (Booth 1988: 190, emphasis in original)

Booth’s quintessential point is that we do not, and we do not *have to*, suspend our disbelief in every respect. This state, let us still call it willing suspension of disbelief for a moment (*pace* the scholars who have objected to the terminology), is not required for all levels and layers of the experience when reading or listening to a story, or watching a play or film. Booth remarks that it is the intention of an author to produce works of fiction which make the reader recognise something which is either similar or relevant to their personal lives.¹⁹¹ As readers, we have to willingly suspend the disbelief as far as, for example, the existence of the protagonists is concerned. This enables us to absorb the elements which we do not have to, or should not, meet with disbelief in the first place – notably, “the many serious moral norms [a work of literature] depends on” (Booth 1988: 151), the values and ideas the author tries to convey, and their relevance for our lives. It could be argued that this is the main reason, if not the only reason, why this system works. The recipients suspend their disbelief (or activate their temporary belief) willingly in order to receive something which does not require this act. What can come into play then is what Abrams called “the ungrudging ‘yes’ that we grant to masterpieces” (1958: 29).

In this sort of contract¹⁹² which the participants enter, the two sides have to meet half-way. The reader “approaches a fictional work *as fiction* – in other words, with the intention of inducing an (aesthetic) experience”

¹⁹¹ Booth 1988: 15

¹⁹² “a socially constructed commitment to believe what we see and hear rather than to suspend a natural inclination towards scepticism” (Tudor 1989: 121)

(Sklar 2013: 14, emphasis in original) and “already motivated to believe, prepared to be drawn into their worlds, wanting to be excited, moved, absorbed and captivated” (Tudor 1989: 121). The creators of fiction, on the other hand, have to make this experience possible. Stephen King stresses that it is not an easy feat for the author to move their readers in such a way that “the ossified shield of ‘rationality’ [is] temporarily laid aside [...] and [a] sense of wonder is again within reach” (2012: 109). Especially when a text is intended to inspire anxiety or fear, it has to be frightening enough, and at the same time plausible and coherent enough so as to not slip into ridiculousness.¹⁹³ This is part of the reason why, in the 21st century, for example a play featuring supernatural elements, such as *Macbeth*, is “an extraordinarily difficult play to stage effectively” (Millman 2011). The supernatural is not easily sold to a contemporary audience, and “when the staging isn’t terribly effective [...] the play is limp when it needs to terrify” (Millman 2011). Regarding a possibility to inspire societal anxieties, the aspect of belief or disbelief plays an important role. A text aspiring to evoke such a mental state has to speak to the readers and strike a chord with them in a very effective way. Wayne C. Booth’s argument seems to be most applicable here. We do not need to believe in the authenticity of the reported events or the actual existence of the people and creatures in the story. Yet there has to be a believable layer of meaning, one which does not require the suspension of any predisposition, and which refers to our selves, the society we live in, and our position in it. The elements which do require overcoming a hurdle of disbelief (or unbelievability) can obscure these other layers and make them less easily accessible, even render them ineffective, if they are out of balance. It would follow that the more plausible and closer to the real-life experience of the readers the content is, the stronger the impact of the component which transports the values and morals. In some cases, especially with contemporary legends, the writers’ tactic is to deny the fictionality completely. A successful suggestion of

¹⁹³ Cf. Castle 1987: 29

truthfulness obviously means that no gap has to be bridged; nothing in the minds of the audience has to be added, or activated, or suspended.

Character-reader relationship

One very important way to draw a readership or audience in is with the help of your fictional characters, as has been pointed out previously. Likeable, round characters activate a connection to the recipient (or make them suspend their indifference, if you will). Ideally, the recipients are concerned about the fate of the characters; and this does not only apply to the heroes and heroines. “The best villains are those that evoke pity and sometimes even genuine sympathy as well as terror.” (Koontz 1987a: 63) It has been argued that it is quite simply in our nature to care for other human beings and the circumstances they find themselves in,¹⁹⁴ and that the connection to a character felt by a reader or viewer is one of the most pleasurable aspects of the reading or theatre experience. One is granted insight into the inner workings of the minds of these characters, and a kind of bond can develop, so one might even feel close to them and enjoy something like a relationship to the character.¹⁹⁵ In addition, the findings of research on the way we as readers perceive, record and comprehend stories suggests that we need the characters as our main focus point. A plot is coherent to us if we can “attach [ourselves] to mind-bearing entities and take their perspective” (Vermeule 2010: 41). The fact that these characters are fictional apparently does not play a role in this process. Howard Sklar argues that we respond “emotionally to fictional characters we intuitively regard as real people” (2013: 9)¹⁹⁶ and that this natural response is important for our mental and psychological development:

¹⁹⁴ Carroll 1990: 61

¹⁹⁵ Lahn and Meister 2013: 232

¹⁹⁶ The findings of research suggest that we are not able to *not* think of an entity as human if it presents itself ‘human enough’, as it were – if it looks, feels or sounds human (cf. Fisher 2013).

these emotions may possess ethical implications beyond the experience of reading itself. [...] [A]lthough these emotions may be directed towards imaginary individuals, they may lay a foundation for emotional and ethical sensitivity in real life. (Sklar 2013: 9)

Of course some differences remain, as Sklar points out referring to Susan Feagin; for example, “we sometimes ‘pretend to care’ for people we meet in real life, whereas, in response to fictional characters, this would make no sense” (Sklar 2013: 13). This restriction has to be endowed with another restriction, however, for instance when it comes to the popular reception of a work of fiction. For example, readers who found they did not ‘like’ the well-loved protagonist of a highly popular book may find themselves ‘pretending to like’ the character in public in order not to fall out of their social in-group. It has to be noted that this scenario is only conceivable for a very low number of books, namely the ones which are exceedingly popular, at least at a given time, and qualify to serve as a point of cultural/folk identification, such as the *Harry Potter* series. At a different level, a situation which may require a pretension of sympathy towards a fictional character is the case of a reader finding a central character in a story unlikeable, while at the same time recognising that the intended effect is different – the reader feels they ought to like them. In such a case, the recipient may decide to give them the benefit of the doubt for the time being, as it were, and thus ‘pretend’ to care for them in a way. All of this suggests that

the meaningful distinction between fictional and nonfictional characters is not ontological but technological. Our social brains are just as capable of being stimulated by fiction as our sexual selves are capable of being stimulated by pornography. We mostly overlook the fact that something is a representation unless the representation itself is a spur to greater stimulation. (Vermeule 2010: 17)

Yet at some level (at the back of the head, at the basic layer of awareness, etc., according to the respective theoretic model) the awareness of the fictionality continues to exist. Walton’s comparison of the theatre audience who *enjoy* watching the performance of a tragedy, i.e. the sad and

disastrous story of the character they supposedly care for, with “a person watching a bullfight whose selfish desire to be entertained overcomes his natural compassion for the bull” (1990: 194) therefore seems to go too far.

There are two different kinds of emotional connections between readers and characters, which are commonly conflated. The characters a reader likes, and the characters a reader identifies with are two groups which are highly likely to overlap considerably in most cases; however, they are not identical. This is especially evident in the case of authors designing their characters so that as many different people as possible will be able to identify with them. These characters can end up being quite bland; they are then not much more than a canvas for any reader to project themselves onto. This gives them too little substance to be truly likeable. For instance, while Bella Swan is clearly the main protagonist of the *Twilight* series,¹⁹⁷ she is hardly an interesting or complex character, as even fans of the novels will grant. A different category would be anti-heroes, some of whom offer very little indeed for the (non-sociopathic) readers to identify with, yet they root for them and are eager to see their stories unfold. Sherlock Holmes has been suggested as belonging to this group of characters. With this difference in mind, it is obvious that the two possible kinds of relationships require different tools and strategies to be employed.

Making a character likeable

In his analysis of the presentation of likeable and unlikeable characters in drama, Manfred Pfister remarks that the audience’s attitude towards the *dramatis personae* is to a certain degree determined by their involvement and identification with the events portrayed on stage. The aesthetic attitude towards the plot influences the reaction to the characters, with the latter including moral judgements and intellectual moments. The

¹⁹⁷ Meyer 2005 – 2008

more the audience is engaged in the play, the more they like or dislike the characters.¹⁹⁸ Pfister's model echoes the previous elaborations on the concept of the willing suspension of disbelief. Mutual interference of the two aspects is conceivable: an audience may also be drawn into the action even further by an exceptionally likeable character. These observations, however, are only of little help in discerning specific features or methods which make a fictional person winsome.

As mentioned above, humans tend to treat as human any entity similar enough in appearance and/or behaviour. As a general rule,¹⁹⁹ it seems to suffice for the recipient to be reminded of real people in order to evoke feelings accordingly. Following this dictum, it seems plausible that a character's circumstances can work in a similar way: an emotional response can be elicited from the audience by positioning the protagonist in "basic situations of human existence which in [the recipients'] experience of life also attract feelings of sympathy, affectionate admiration, compassion, etc" (Clemen 1978: 18, my translation). This notion is corroborated by the range of stock situations which are used to sketch the personalities of characters quickly and effectively – and to let the audience know who to root for. Protagonists who have to overcome obstacles on their way to finding happiness are often introduced in settings which have them bullied or oppressed, without anybody to defend them: Jane Eyre or Harry Potter come to mind. The other kind of protagonists, those who enter the story already in the role of the hero, are usually given the chance to shine in every scene. Sherlock Holmes, for example, baffles his audience (both Watson and the readers) with his powers of observation and deduction from the very first encounter onwards.²⁰⁰ The recipients can feel sympathy or compassion with the former protagonists, and admire the latter. These

¹⁹⁸ Pfister 1978: 21

¹⁹⁹ Results may vary, as advertising disclaimers say – i.e. as has been mentioned before, different people have different emotional ranges and capacities, in regard to real people as well as fictional characters.

²⁰⁰ Doyle 1887

two sentiments have been named the basic approaches to making a character likeable.²⁰¹ Such stock situations are so effective that they are frequently used in a rather blunt way in lowbrow fiction, corresponding to unrefined stereotypical characterisations. Physical attractiveness is a feature which is employed in comparable ways sometimes, although it is arguably more double-edged. On the one hand, readers are to some extent conditioned to recognise the good and the bad guys by means of their appearance, especially in formulaic genres. The villains in the James Bond novels are typical of this, with their monstrosity invariably manifesting itself in the way they look.²⁰² Attractiveness is a serviceable way of influencing the readers' attitude as they are said to subconsciously equate beauty with nobleness and moral superiority.²⁰³ In rather more subtle works, however, physical flaws have also been mentioned in order to make a character more likeable, when they are used to mark their position as 'underdogs' or outsiders to society. This is usually accompanied by a portrayal of more attractive characters as arrogant or morally deficient. These two ways of rendering a character likeable again reflect that either admiration or sympathy is intended to be evoked in the readers. What makes this element more double-edged is that the description of physical beauty can be used to deceive readers. Dunker remarks that this is a strategy employed in crime fiction in order to mislead the audience so that the identity of the perpetrator is kept a secret for as long as possible.²⁰⁴

Another external feature is a character's language. Aristotle's and Quintilian's lists of requirements which an orator has to fulfil in order to be able to convince their audience includes physical appearance, origin and lifestyle, but also speech. A successful orator has to win the audience's favour and confidence by the way they speak, amongst other things. These

²⁰¹ Lahn and Meister 2013: 164

²⁰² Cf. Fleming 1997 et al.

²⁰³ Dunker 1991: 141

²⁰⁴ Dunker 1991: 141

classical lists of criteria are not only deemed still valid today but have also been translated to apply to literary characters.²⁰⁵ Pfister likewise mentions “a language which is poetically particularly densely structured” and “persuasive rhetoric” (1978: 29, my translations) as means of making dramatic characters likeable. Additional factors are dialects and sociolects.²⁰⁶ They are especially effective vehicles for conveying folk group membership, which means, of course, that they can form a very strong bond with some people while at the same time alienating other readers or listeners. How (dis-)likeable a dialect or sociolect is considered to be is highly subjective; depending on one’s personal history, one may for example regard the language of a group one used to belong to with nostalgic fondness or contempt. However, there is also a perceived social hierarchy of dialects and sociolects, again conditioned by one’s own group(s). A hierarchy of dialects is arguably more arbitrary than one of sociolects but more often than not also reflects political power structures and wealth. In addition, attitudes among people belonging to the same language group towards speakers of a dialect or sociolect considered inferior will vary; ranging from disdain to a condescending ‘finding it cute’. The same applies vice versa: a speaker of a ‘superior’ sociolect or dialect may be thought of as impressive and enviable, or haughty, or both. One more aspect worth mentioning is that some sociolects do not age well: within a small number of years, the very much group-distinct lingo of a fictional character can sound awkward, perhaps even ridiculous, and may over time create more and more distance between the audience and the fiction, which in turn weakens their emotional connection to the character.

On a textual level, the information the reader gets in respect to the characters is decisive for how likeable they appear. The element of the distribution of information comprises three aspects: first and foremost, how much the reader learns about a character is of significance. For example,

²⁰⁵ Steinhoff 2009: 111

²⁰⁶ Cf. Lahn and Meister 2013: 164

characters who are travellers through strange or fantastic worlds are often limited to the function of transporting information about their environment and other characters in it, yet they themselves remain quite empty vessels and thus do not provide anything the readers can connect with. The other two aspects of information distribution pertain to how much information the characters have about their own position and the events: on the one hand, as compared to other characters in the story, and on the other hand in contrast to the reader.²⁰⁷ “As a general rule, readers are favourably disposed to those characters that are given an outstanding position in this hierarchy of information distribution.” (Lahn and Meister 2013: 164, my translation) To some extent, the expression of inner thoughts and opinions is part of this: of course the reader is given considerably more information about a character whose reasoning and intentions are communicated to the audience. Being given insight into a character’s mind is more than information distribution, however. The readers get to know the fictional character more quickly and more easily; they can relate to them more readily:

Among the features that are considered most likely to contribute to [an empathic] response, narratologists have pointed particularly to *focalization*, ‘seeing’ from the perspective of a character; *homodiegetic narration*, having direct access to the self-reported thoughts and/or feelings of a character; *free indirect discourse* (FID), entering the thoughts and/or feelings of a character through narration [...]; and in some cases, *omniscient narration* [...] may report on a character’s state of mind, feelings and other experiences. In each of these cases, the operative dynamic is one of *diminished distance* between the reader and character... (Sklar 2013: 48f, emphasis in original)²⁰⁸

A very noble mind may stimulate admiration, and certain character traits expressed in thoughts will enhance the recipient’s perception of a character as amiable. On the other hand, perfection can put some readers off. It has been argued that it is especially a character’s uncertainties and anxieties

²⁰⁷ Lahn and Meister 2013: 164

²⁰⁸ Sklar distinguishes between narrative empathy and sympathy, and argues that the latter “ultimately requires greater distance” (2013: 49).

which make them “appear ‘human’ and accessible for a modern audience” (Lichterfeld 2012: 270), and thus render them more likeable. Another way in which the expression of thoughts and feelings on the part of the character can have an effect on the recipient is by the special status which is conferred: they become confidants, in some cases even accomplices, as it were. By letting the audience in on their intentions, even their sinister ones, fictional characters can include them into their in-group. This creates a bond which invariably fosters positive feelings towards them. A simple first-person *plural* pronoun, used in the right place, can have this effect: the mere implication that the recipient feels the same way as the narrator may suffice.²⁰⁹ A character famous for making the audience his accomplice is Shakespeare’s Richard III. He interacts with the spectators in a way that draws them in so they find themselves in the position of a co-conspirator of sorts. This experience of intimacy commonly makes the audience like the protagonist despite his malice. Yet the highest form of this focused distribution of information can arguably be found within the genre of the novel: to a higher degree than any other, the epistolary novel conveys a “sense of the reader gaining a privileged peek into the psychology of the protagonist” (“Epistolary Literature” 2007).

As likeability is not necessarily universal, and drafting a likeable character can therefore be a demanding endeavour, a different strategy can be applied: presenting them as ‘generically good people’ who are faced with extremely unpleasant, disagreeable, and/or repulsive antagonists. This seems to be an easier goal to achieve; at least this is the impression a number of works of (especially lowbrow) popular fiction give. Dean Koontz, who has given the valuable piece of advice previously quoted, instructing aspiring writers that “[t]he best villains are those that evoke pity and sometimes even genuine sympathy as well as terror” (1987a: 63), seems to

²⁰⁹ Cf. Nünning 2002: 293. In her analysis of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is narrated by a distant third-person narrator, not homodiegetically, Nünning finds that the narrator uses this strategy amongst others.

have paid no heed to his own wise words when he was writing *Prodigal Son* (2005) with Kevin J. Anderson. In this book, much more space is dedicated to showing how unpleasant and vile the antagonist, Victor Helios a.k.a. Frankenstein, is than to portraying well-rounded characters. Their Frankenstein is so one-dimensionally, irrevocably and thoroughly heinous that he almost gives the impression of a parody villain. His admiration of Hitler and history of working for Josef Mengele and Joseph Stalin described in the second instalment of the series, *City of Night*,²¹⁰ seems like an ungraceful exercise in 'evil name-dropping'. This is arguably done to make the heroes of the series even more likeable in comparison. Depending on the readers' disposition and mood, however, this might not work, or even backfire, if they find that the author is too obviously trying to manipulate their emotional reaction. It is a delicate question of how far the writer can go, as well as how far they *have to* go; and the subjective judgements of a range of different readers will vary considerably. The concept of poetic justice, which describes one level of emotional involvement of a reader of fiction, is closely connected to the characterisation of protagonists and antagonists. It is based on "the conception that the fate of fictional characters has to conform to established values and norms" (Lahn and Meister 2013: 164, my translation). The likeable protagonist, endowed with the highest morals and of a noble nature, when faced with danger, makes the reader worried about their fate; the idea of the reprehensible antagonist going unpunished, possibly even profiting from their immoral actions, enhances this anxiety.²¹¹ Poetic justice is a theme especially prominent in contemporary legends, and as these texts are relatively short in length and thus leave little space for subtle characterisations, it is one genre in which rather blunt ways of presenting people as (un-)likeable can be found.

In fiction, especially – but not exclusively – in contemporary legends, not only single characters but also groups are presented in ways which are

²¹⁰ Koontz and Gorman 2005

²¹¹ Lahn and Meister 2013: 164

designed to influence the readers' opinion and emotional bond. Groups of people representing social ranks often signify specific values and traditions, and they are characterised accordingly. Whether a certain social/folk group is portrayed as likeable or unlikeable in turn affects how the beliefs and norms they stand for are perceived.²¹² This is especially relevant for works of fiction intended to convey a political message. An interesting analysis is Paul Goetsch's essay on the specific practices employed in war films in order to make the audience root for or dislike the respective groups.²¹³ These strategies can quite easily and effectively be translated to apply to literature. For Oliver Stone's *Platoon*,²¹⁴ Goetsch finds that the soldiers are presented with a focus on both the collective and the individuals, which allows the film to portray them as "disoriented, exposed to strange environments, removed from their homeland as well as their military leaders, consumed by their struggle for mere survival, and exhausted mentally" (1997: 150f, my translation). The audience can experience their individual distress, and relate it to the collective at the same time. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*,²¹⁵ two adverse groups which do not necessarily behave differently are depicted. Goetsch states that the French soldiers are consistently shown as a troop of people, whereas among the ranks of the German soldiers the audience gets to know individuals. The fact that the same miserable position the German soldiers find themselves in also applies to the French is not concealed. Yet the viewers are made to feel much more for the Germans, whose different personal stories are told.²¹⁶ There is a very distinct hierarchy of information distribution. In war stories, in literature as well as in cinema and TV, group identification is easy and usually of high significance: those not belonging to my group are not only outsiders, they are the enemy. This can be used to reinforce positive or negative emotions of the audience towards a group of people. Another

²¹² Cf. Clemen 1978

²¹³ Goetsch 1997

²¹⁴ Stone 1986

²¹⁵ Mann 1979

²¹⁶ Goetsch 1997: 151

phenomenon which helps this process is the tendency of the human mind towards generalisations. We organise the information stored in our brains with the help of categories, and do not seem to be able to refrain from doing so even against better knowledge. Part of this mechanism is our filling in of any gaps which may appear, in order to be able to match items with categories. “[H]unches, ideas, feelings, or impressions based on our experiences with people, our sense of places, and other relatively intuitive factors” (Sklar 2013: 11) are used to complete the pictures where needed. It has been pointed out that in this regard, fictional characters are treated exactly like real people, about whom one likewise cannot have all the information theoretically available. As in both cases the partial information is embedded into what we know from real-life experience, the character or person is connected to one’s reality: “we respond to characters that are primarily ‘real’ in their essences, however much the object of our reflection has been ‘made up’ by an author” (Sklar 2013: 11). The objection which could be raised is that a reader will draw not only from real-life experience with actual people but also from their reading experience and therefore apply different information, at least to some extent.²¹⁷ It is true, however, that even in the case of fantasy or science fiction, “we imagine those characters and their worlds by placing them within the context of things that we know” (Sklar 2013: 12).

Howard Sklar says that readers intuitively treat fictional characters like real people. His point can be supported with theories so far outside of literary studies that they may seem an odd choice at first glance: consumer and advertising psychology. Interestingly, the same basic ideas can be found there when it comes to presenting somebody as likeable. The aim is different: a character from literature arguably only wants to ‘sell’ something in the figurative meaning of the phrase. Yet the approaches and methods are alike. In a guidebook on how to influence and convince your

²¹⁷ Cf. Baeva 2012 on established emotional reactions to certain elements in fiction.

audience,²¹⁸ a section can be found on how to make oneself likeable in order to win over consumers. The six crucial factors stated are similarity, physical proximity, degree of self-disclosure, impression of being liked (in return), association with positive phenomena, and physical attraction.²¹⁹ Some of these points do have equivalents in literature: for example, the “normally proportioned” historical figure of Richard III was changed in written dramatic accounts, “raising his shoulder to deform simultaneously person, cultural response, and the possibility of objectivity” (Cohen 1998: 204). The influence physical attraction can have on readers has been discussed above. The same applies to the degree of self-disclosure, which corresponds to the amount of information the recipients get about a character, especially the ones whose thoughts and feelings are told in the story. The advertising tactics say that the perfect degree of self-disclosure has a disarming effect without becoming obtrusive,²²⁰ which is reflected in fiction when one character’s point of view clouds other possible perspectives.²²¹ An interesting point is the “impression of being liked (in return)”: “we are rewarded with positive, friendly feelings by those whom we can give a credible impression of us liking them” (Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 51, my translation). This aspect harks back to characters making the audience side with them by confiding in them. It is not just the amount of information one is given but also the kind of information. Privileged information is likely to leave the recipient feeling privileged in turn. The term used by Walter J. Ong (in reference to Ernest Hemingway’s narrators) is “you-and-I-know-even-if-others-don’t ploy” (1975: 15), and he too points out that the reader is thus given a “flattering role” (1975: 13), a role which promotes high self-esteem in the reader. Finally, the first two factors in the list echo the concept of folk groups. Both physical proximity and similarity in this context mean efforts to show that one belongs to the

²¹⁸ Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007

²¹⁹ Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 50ff

²²⁰ Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 51

²²¹ Cf. Frank 2010: 32

same group(s) as the target person. The distance between oneself (or the character) and the audience is shown to be small, both literally and figuratively. Händel, Kresimon and Schneider give a list of examples of aspects which can be used to stress similarity and proximity. It includes “values, attitudes, political and religious views, [and] parlance” as well as “fashion sense, preference regarding a certain car brand, diet, or thousands of other minor things” (Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 50, my translation). Group identity is again a key concept, both in consumer and advertising psychology and in the creation of likeable and relatable fictional characters. It also plays an important role regarding character identification.

One of the disadvantages of breaking a phenomenon down and analysing its constituent parts is that it may appear simplified and seem too easily explainable and clear-cut. The likeability of a character in particular is the exact opposite: it is subjective, inconstant and can be influenced by a large number of factors beyond the control of the storyteller. It has been argued that there is a certain timelessness to it. Shakespeare’s dramatic characters have been mentioned as proof that emotional reactions based on general, basic human experience outlive the likeability of characters which is based on political or moral values and norms of a certain time. The audience does not like a character on the stage because of their profound knowledge of social history. Quite the contrary is the case. Without some ageless element in the way they are portrayed as human beings, Shakespeare’s heroes, heroines, villains and villainesses would leave a 21st-century audience utterly untouched.²²² Yet there are unquestionably determinants outside the text, and one of them is the set of views, ideas and notions shaping the recipients’ minds through their historical and social context. For drama, the “theatre production’s quality and underlying interpretation” (Clemen 1978: 14, my translation) is crucial. The same

²²² Clemen 1978: 18

applies to the reproduction of contemporary legends. Novels are not generally considered as changeable, yet the presentation of the characters may also be influenced by the 'production': cover illustration and design, font, quality of the material (paper as well as gadget), etc. In addition, there are of course new editions and reprints of novels for which changes are made to the text for various reasons. Like the exact emotional reaction of readers, however, these outside factors cannot all be easily observed and analysed. A different aspect will prove more relevant to the purpose of this study: the lack of stability when it comes to likeable or unlikeable characters within the text. "Most members of the audience will experience *mixed* feelings. Moreover, their reactions will change from scene to scene, be blended, crisscross, or start to develop in an entirely new direction." (Clemen 1978: 13, my translation, emphasis in original) As mentioned above, presenting a character as likeable at first and then revealing them as despicable (or at least guilty of a crime) can be a very useful technique to mislead the readers of a crime novel. It can help to maintain the arc of suspense or add an element of surprise. In attempts to inspire societal anxieties, such a course of action can underline an unsettling feeling in the readers. The lack, or loss, of certainty is a significant element of anxiety. A protagonist who does not stay either likeable or unlikeable, or does not develop gradually from one end of the spectrum to the other, means that the readers are denied stability and robbed of an emotional 'anchor' they can rely on. Lionel Shriver is taking this to an extreme level in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. The portrayal of all three central characters (mother, son and father) in terms of likeability is highly inconstant, which suggests that the intended effect is exactly to leave the readers undecided, uncertain, and unable to come to terms with their ambiguous emotions.

Character identification

An emotional response can be triggered in the audience by making them either like *or* identify with a protagonist. The best case is presumably

a character with whom the recipients can find a connection on both these levels. Depending on the specific nature of the feeling the author is aiming at, however, the emphasis may have to be put on one or the other. Regarding anxieties, character identification is arguably the stronger, more effective factor. A reader who feels that the protagonist resembles them regarding specific attributes such as their social standing,²²³ or their views, philosophies and attitudes is in turn not unlikely to feel disturbed or frightened by the same issues as the fictional person.²²⁴

The phrase which is commonly used in this context is *to identify with the character*. Like the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, this phrase is both popular and well-known – and fiercely challenged by a number of scholars. There is certainly what could be called the phenomenon of communicable emotions, which can for example often be found utilised in pornographic texts. Writers aiming at triggering their readers’ sexual lust usually do this by *portraying* sexual lust: “pornographic texts seem to depend entirely on the depiction of the characters’ great sexual desire, which is then hoped to transmit itself onto the readers” (Anz 1998: 226, my translation). Yet even if this strategy works, one can debate the terminology used. Noël Carroll remarks that some scholars protest against the concept of character identification because in the original sense, ‘identification’ means ‘being made identical’, and to speak of character identification is to assume the recipients are under the “illusion of being identical with the protagonist” (1990: 90). Even if I am sexually aroused by a perfect description of a character’s arousal, and even if the detailed insight into a character’s mind troubled by anxieties can cause me to experience similar worries or fears, I do not necessarily identify with them in the sense that I am convinced I *am* them. In any case, it should be noted that this is not, and has not been, the

²²³ It has been pointed out that especially regarding social status, a slight incongruity between reader and protagonist can help this effect; ‘the public’ is assumed to prefer fiction set in social (or for example income) strata slightly above their own (Schenda 1976: 36f).

²²⁴ Gail Finney finds that the same applies to drama (2005: 472ff).

common definition of 'to identify with', neither in general linguistic usage, nor according, for instance, to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. There we can find the following definition: "regard oneself as sharing the same characteristics or thinking as (someone else)" ("identify" 2004), which arguably corresponds to the way it is used regarding fictional characters. Semantics aside, the more interesting, and presumably more fruitful, question to be discussed is whether a recipient does indeed 'copy', as it were, the feelings of the character they read about. For developing strategies of inspiring any emotion in a reader, this is highly significant.

Carroll finds that it is usually not the case that readers adopt the feelings which the characters in a text are portrayed to experience. "With many of the best known types of relations between audiences and protagonists – such as pathos and suspense – there is an asymmetry between the emotional states of characters and those of audiences." (Carroll 1990: 91) However, in as far as the recipients care about the characters, they are moved by the emotions portrayed and/or expressed in some manner. According to Carroll, this happens through a process of assimilation: the reader perceives the fictional situation and the character's emotional response as described in the text. Rather than mirroring the mental state depicted, they assimilate the character's position, and this absorption of the situation is what they then respond to emotionally.²²⁵ The important distinction is that the recipient's view of the events and circumstances differs from the character's for a number of possible reasons, for example their disparate levels of information, or different cultural backgrounds. The reader's and the character's assessments of a situation therefore cannot overlap completely. The audience inevitably has two points of view: the character's, as provided by the text, and their own, which is one from outside. "I [the reader] see it as a situation involving a protagonist who has the viewpoint she has" (Carroll 1990: 95). Thus, there

²²⁵ Carroll 1990: 95

is no replication of feelings but instead parallelism, with the mental states possibly, but not necessarily, converging at some point.²²⁶

For Noël Carroll a pivotal point is that our feelings towards the characters and plot of a work of fiction are *always* from outside – we are observers, not participants. This is his reason to reject, for example, simulation theory, according to which “people read other minds not by having a theory about what those minds are like but by running in their own minds the mental states experienced by the person who is the target of their mind reading” (Vermeule 2010: 39). Margit Sutrop’s approach, in which she

divides the relatively controversial notion of our ability to place ourselves inside the reality of another (in this case, a fictional character) from the still speculative but more imaginable possibility of imagining what it might be like to be another (Sklar 2013: 51),

would meet the same objection. A possible solution as suggested by Blakey Vermeule is the pluralist approach of Amy Coplan’s. She asserts that not only does the reader experience empathy and their own feelings and thoughts at the same time, they are also able to move back and forth between the realm of experience of the character and the role of observers, as well as merge these two aspects to a certain extent.²²⁷ “We no longer have to choose between simulating a character’s state of mind and simulating the perspective of somebody who knows more (or sometimes less) than the character possibly could. We simply go along for the ride.” (Vermeule 2010: 43) For this study, the clear distinction is not the most important point. Having established the two levels of emotional response, we can assume that societal anxiety could in theory be triggered on either one. However, it seems plausible that a more intense and more enduring effect can be achieved if the emotion can be evoked closer to the readers’ real lives. A parallel can be seen to the discussion of the willing suspension

²²⁶ Carroll 1990: 18

²²⁷ Vermeule 2010: 42

of disbelief: again, the work of fiction is more likely to affect a reader's mental state the more it pertains to their social and cultural reality.

Categorial identification

Having established this, the next step towards formulating a strategy to inspire anxiety would have to be finding a way to forge this connection between the audience and the character. What criteria does a fictional person have to meet in order for the real person to identify with them? Why do readers report that they identified with a person whose situation is completely different from their own? And how can anybody find themselves identifying with somebody living in a fantastical world, who may not even belong to the human race? One of the most compelling concepts in this context is *categorial identification*. It means “an individual's definition of himself or herself in terms of an in-group based on a category such as race, nation, or religion” (Hogan 2011: 248). This list of categories is a very brief and therefore crude one, and should ideally be extended to include the wide spectrum of factors which can also serve to determine folk groups as sketched in Chapter 3.2. A recipient's “emotional involvement with [characters] depends to a large extent on the degree to which the narrative manages to diminish the sense of distance that readers feel towards those [fictional] strangers” (Sklar 2013: 21), and it stands to reason that a sense of belonging to the same group in one or another respect would have exactly this effect. As mentioned before, everybody belongs to more than one social (or folk) group; in fact the number of groups can be substantial. The perceived importance or salience of the single groups is perpetually subject to change, and being immersed in a work of fiction can affect this significantly.²²⁸ For the analysis of strategies of inspiring societal anxieties in fiction, categorial identification is a most apt tool to explain the

²²⁸ In fact, there seems to be a case of mutual influence and interaction: the closer the connection one feels towards a fictional character, the more likely one is or the easier it is to become engrossed in the fictional world, and vice versa.

phenomenon of the reader-character relationship and its influence on the recipients' mental state. In order to experience anxiety in response to a work of fiction, we may not even have to imagine being in the position of the protagonist. We do not have to mirror or mimick their emotions. Instead, if we recognise them as belonging to our in-group, their feelings are relevant to us. Thus, the concerns of a fictional extraterrestrial being struggling with gender inequality on a desert planet in a distant star system, for example, can trigger categorial identification in a feminist human earthling. Patrick Colm Hogan uses the term *emotion contagion*,²²⁹ and argues that categorial identification is not to be equated with empathy in general. It is a perception which intensifies two parallel tendencies: firstly, being 'infected' with the feelings of somebody belonging to the same group, and secondly 'immunity' to somebody outside of it. "This is due to a mental set that biases our emotional response toward being parallel with that of in-group members and complementary to that of out-group members." (Hogan 2011: 248)

Hogan also finds that specific genres can promote categorial identification considerably more effectively than others, even to the extent that the work of fiction serves primarily this purpose. He remarks that this is, for example, "the main ideological function of heroic plots" and in many cases of "sacrificial narratives" (Hogan 2011: 248) as well, and defines this as a negative aspect quite explicitly. Its danger lies in the fact that these stories "tend to encourage harmful forms of blame assignment in case of communal distress" (Hogan 2011: 249). Hogan speaks from the point of view of an educator. His book on "the emotional structure of stories" (Hogan 2011) can certainly only be used indirectly for the development of anxiety-inducing storytelling tactics. Hogan promotes works which teach and encourage empathy. For the purpose of inspiring societal anxieties, however, empathy with 'outsiders' is not required; it would surely be

²²⁹ Hogan 2011

counterproductive. Instead, what has to be promoted is concern, even preoccupation with one's own group. In some cases, in order to succeed in evoking the emotions in question, one *must not* make the readers empathise with people outside their in-group. An author writing with a view to inducing societal anxiety obviously will not attempt to make the audience more open-minded at the same time – at least not at first instance. The possibility of using this mental state to teach tolerance, for example, is not excluded; yet this can only work if the emotion has been evoked successfully in the first place.

It is important to keep in mind that the concept of categorial identification is only one of a wide range of possible ways of making a reader identify with a fictional character. The reason it is singularised at this point is that its focus on in-groups (or folk groups) arguably makes it predestined to be used when societal anxieties play a central role. In addition, categorial identification can conceivably be achieved within the space of few words, for example with a skilful, subtle use of stereotypes: “The stereotype functions as an important point of introduction, in that it provides readers with the impression of ‘familiarity’ and thereby enables them to enter into the reality of the story quickly” (Sklar 2013: 66). This property makes categorial identification a tremendously valuable tool for use in very short texts – for example, in contemporary legends.

5. Contemporary forms of popular fiction

When researching contemporary popular fiction, it will not do to disregard texts which are not printed on good old paper. It has been reported, for example, that *keitai shousetus*, Japanese mobile telephone novels, are so popular in their home country that “they accounted for half of the ten best-selling novels in 2007” (Perez 2008).²³⁰ Klaus Roth finds that today, “[a]s far as we are able to tell, all traditional narrative genres can be found on the internet” (2009: 110, my translation). This proposition of Roth’s is an apt (albeit certainly not exhaustive) summary of how much, and indeed how little, the advent of this medium has changed the art of narration: if all traditional genres have been adapted to their respective online formats, no sphere of the literary world has been left untouched. At the same time, Roth’s statement clearly indicates that all traditional narrative genres are still existent, and recognisable in their respective forms, which suggests that the adaptation to the internet did not require radical changes.

²³⁰ The success of this specific text type appears to be restricted to Japan (cf. Perez 2008), however, it is one symptom of a global trend. In the Western world, there are fewer examples of this kind of literature. One instance, although arguably with a more commercial slant than most *keitai shousetus*, is *Treehouse*, “a True Life E-mail Love Affair Published in Four Appisodes™ [sic] for the iPhone”, for which you can buy an additional “soundtrack of music recommendations [...] also available through the iTunes’ iMix system” (“Treehouse” 2009).

The one aspect in which the highest level of consistency can be found, however, is how people (over-)react to the emergence of a new medium: neither the “apocalyptic” nor the “enthusiastic scenarios” depicted by the “media critics and fetishists” (Gentz and Kramer 2006: 9) are unprecedented. “Generalizing, we may say that the introduction of each new medium is accompanied by a discourse which dramatizes the contrast to the preceding media culture.” (Assmann 2006: 11) In addition, the purport of the reservations does not seem to vary to a considerable extent either. This applies to praise and criticism in equal measures. Both the invention of the printing press and the emergence of the internet, for example, were hailed as the means to bring about, or advance, democracy – and in both cases much disappointment was voiced when the respective impact was not considered significant enough.²³¹ The phenomenon of a dramatising discourse is generally more evident in the pessimistic, or distrustful, opinions voiced. A brief retrace of the criticism highlights the recurring themes. About 90 years ago, Heidegger warned of the harmful influence of the radio: according to him, this “process of bringing the world nearer”, this “frenzy for nearness” (Martin Heidegger, quoted in Polt 1999: 59) must lead to an erosion of our sense of space and time.²³² Much the same concerns can be heard today regarding the use of the internet or computer games, usually in reference to children and teenagers. Both film and television were vilified as the medium which is “destined to replace literature” (George Orwell, quoted in Murphet 2012: 776); although it could be argued that this anxiety has not been superseded in the 21st century but rather expanded to include electronic media. Early-20th century complaints about “[t]he appearance of the countryside and historic towns [being] ruined by wires” (Briggs and Burke 2009: 147) are repeated 100 years later in eruptions over erections of mobile telephone network masts. When (landline) telephones became more and more common in households, they

²³¹ Cf. Briggs and Burke 2009; Palfrey and Gasser 2008; Watson 2003; Schönhagen 2004; Morrison 2007; Schmidt 2006 et al.

²³² Polt 1999: 59. Polt suggests that it was a blessing for Heidegger not to have lived to “experience fax machines, cellular phones and the Internet” (1999: 60).

were seen as a threat to literature²³³ as well as to law and order. “‘Telephone crime’ was linked with other forms of crime, anticipating articles almost a century later dealing with the Internet...” (Briggs and Burke 2009: 147) Besides, some people were afraid of the harm home telephones would do to the art of conversation: phone chats were the stumbling block in oral communication of the time.²³⁴ The equivalent in written communication was *telegraphese*,²³⁵ which is certainly an ancestor of, or at least belongs to the same family as, *txtspeak* or *textese*, the language of text messaging and online messaging, which is said to affect the literacy of today’s youth.²³⁶

In fact, one can go even much further back and still find astounding parallels:

Most persons are surprised, and many distressed, to learn that essentially the same objections commonly urged today against computers were urged by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (274-7) and in the *Seventh Letter* against writing. Writing [...] is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind. It is a thing, a manufactured product. The same of course is said of computers. Secondly, [...] writing destroys memory. Those who use writing will become forgetful, relying on an external resource for what they lack in internal resources. Writing weakens the mind. Today, parents and other fear that pocket calculators provide an external resource for what ought to be the internal resource of memorized multiplication tables. Calculators weaken the mind, relieve it of the work that keeps it strong.^[237] (Ong 1982: 79)

²³³ “The challenge telephony set literature was that of grasping the values implicated in a remote exchange of shudders. Telephony threatens literature’s existence.” (David Trotter, quoted in Murphet 2012: 779)

²³⁴ Briggs and Burke 2009: 147

²³⁵ This was said to have an impact on literature as well: “The novelist Ernest Hemingway confessed the influence of telegraphese on his own style, calling it ‘the lingo of the cable’” (Watson 2003: 25).

²³⁶ For an overview of the findings of empirical studies on this subject, see Verheijen 2013.

²³⁷ Since Ong wrote this in 1982, the ubiquity of mobile phones with their range of secondary features has also robbed teachers and parents of the argument that you do not carry a pocket calculator everywhere you go.

Reading on, it is interesting to note that the third and fourth items on the list are in point of fact shortcomings which could be remedied with the interactivity which 21st-century technology allows:²³⁸

Thirdly, a written text is basically unresponsive. If you ask a person to explain his or her statement, you can get an explanation; if you ask a text, you get back nothing except the same, often stupid, words which called for your question in the first place. [...] Fourthly, in keeping with the agonistic mentality of oral cultures, Plato's Socrates also holds it against writing that the written word cannot defend itself as the natural spoken word can: real speech and thought always exist essentially in a context of give-and-take between real persons. Writing is passive, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world. So are computers. (Ong 1982: 79)

A reviewer writing about a Twitter novel in 2012 that it was “[p]roof, if proof were needed, that stories really aren’t what they used to be” (Crown 2012) – without having read the story in question – thus in turn only serves as further evidence that such responses seem to be a natural human reaction to change. The “alleged demise of narration” (Schneider 2009: 4, my translation) is not a new lamentation at all. In terms of quality, no judgment shall be made here. The internet has certainly had an impact on quantity, however: there has been an “explosion of narrativity” (Mark Poster, quoted in Watson 2003: 237) online. Yet printed texts have not been ousted.

For it must be remembered that the arrival of a new means of communication does not replace the earlier (except in certain limited spheres), it adds to it and alters it. Speech adds to gesture, writing to speech, the electronic media to writing. (Goody 2010: 155)

The novel has a history of adapting to new technologies, and of incorporating them successfully. In a similar way, it has been able to not merely withstand throughout, but indeed develop alongside, social changes.²³⁹ Even if time is running out for “communication systems predating the widespread use of technical apparatuses”, the new media

²³⁸ Cf. Crane, Bamman and Jones 2007

²³⁹ Cf. Murphet 2012

“have also provoked a boom in the print market, which, at the same time, also strongly influences the aesthetics and the reception of these new electronic communications” (Gentz and Kramer 2006: 9).

The epistolary novel – a case example

The epistolary novel is a genre which is very much suited to illustrate the scope and nature of the mutual influence of traditional printed and bound fiction, and new technologies. In addition, it is a genre for which emotions, both the characters’ and the recipients’, play a central role. It is no coincidence that many texts containing strategies of inspiring societal anxieties take the epistolary form. These are the two characteristics which make it relevant as a case example: the way it has adapted, and adapted to, new media landscapes; and its (intended) emotional impact. The latter has always been one of the most intriguing aspects of this genre, as Denis Diderot’s account of reading Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) demonstrates:

In the space of a few hours I had been through a host of situations which the longest life can scarcely provide in its whole course. I had [...] seen the secret springs of self-interest and self-love operating in a hundred different ways: I had become privy to a multitude of incidents and felt I had gained in experience. (Denis Diderot, quoted in “Epistolary Literature” 2007)

The epistolary form allows for a very short distance between reader and character, and the insight into the thoughts and emotions of the epistler has the potential to create a very close and even affectionate bond between them. In short, all techniques of emotionally influencing the reader with the help of a character which have previously been described in this study can be found in epistolary novels. The one distancing aspect is that a person’s reflections have to undergo some kind of clarifying, ‘de-muddling’, process and must be verbalised in order to make their way into a letter.²⁴⁰ Stream of consciousness arguably conveys an even stronger sense of immediacy and

²⁴⁰ Doody 1980: 10

intimacy because these processes are not required. On the other hand, the clearer and therefore more accessible form of the epistolary novel may give the reader more room for immersion into the text. Samuel Richardson has indeed been credited with having “invented a new way of reading”, namely “absorptive reading” (Brean Hammond in “Epistolary Literature” 2007), when he published *Pamela* in 1740. This kind of reading is “based on empathy, based on extremely close identification with the character to such an extent that you lose the boundary between the real and the fictional” (Brean Hammond in “Epistolary Literature” 2007).²⁴¹ By virtue of such close reader-character relationships, a strategy of evoking categorial identification can certainly be seen as secondary. However, it has been pointed out that it can play a vital role in epistolary novels because letters “tend to emphasize kinships, relationships and class relationships” (Karen O’Brien in “Epistolary Literature” 2007).

Following its initial prominence, the epistolary novel experienced a decline in popularity after 1790. Yet it managed to reappear time and again in new shapes and forms throughout the centuries to come, because its form could be adjusted beyond the “epistolary habits and private couriers of the eighteenth century” (Murphet 2012: 774). Mary Shelley, having read Richardson’s novels and being familiar with the form,²⁴² uses a variation of the epistolary novel in *Frankenstein* (1818): the conventional letter form is diffused in the course of the story and eventually becomes a journal, albeit still addressed to the original addressee. Epistolary forms and *mise en abyme* play an important role in the Gothic tradition, again due to their capacity to convey and conjure emotions, helping to create suspense and draw the reader in by “making them feel more directly involved” (Lodge

²⁴¹ This level of immersion, as well as the fact that *Pamela*’s immense popularity at the time spawned a frenzied fan culture – including merchandise such as paintings and fashion accessories, or the production of *Pamela*-themed operas, plays and parodies (Lodge 2013; Vermeule 2010: 18 et al.) – highlight once more how difficult it is to draw a clear line between popular and ‘serious’ literature, and how much our perception of these categories is influenced by temporal distance.

²⁴² Hindle 1992: xxiii

2013). If the text succeeds in this, it is partially because it employs a range of different contemporary techniques and technologies:

Dracula's narrative fragments are of a distinctly modern cast. Though alluding to the Gothic devices of lost manuscripts and letters, *Dracula's* fragments are recorded in the most modern manner: by typewriter, in shorthand and on phonograph. There are other indicators of modern systems of communication: telegrams, newspaper cuttings, train timetables are all signs of contemporaneity as are the medical and psychiatric classifications, the legal documents and the letters of commercial transaction. (Botting 1996: 147)

Furthermore, despite the lack of one central character who the reader can connect or even identify with, it can be argued that again an intimate bond is created for the reader – not necessarily (exclusively) with the characters composing the letters and text fragments, but (also) with the invisible instance which in this case would have to be called the collater rather than narrator. They give the reader privileged insight; sometimes they even seem to prefer the audience, in this respect at least, over their heroines and heroes.

The epistolary novel was not a prominent genre throughout most of the 20th century – *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* notes that it was then “often used to exploit the linguistic humour and unintentional character revelations of such semiliterates as the hero of Ring Lardner’s *You Know Me Al* (1916)” (“epistolary novel”). It was the increasing presence of computer-mediated communication in everyday life which gave it more prominence again in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. One of the very first instances is Matt Beaumont’s novel *e* (2000). It consists exclusively of emails sent within an advertising agency and is grounded squarely in the established humorous practice of the 20th century. This sort of email novel is quite traditional: letters have been replaced by emails; apart from this, the dynamics and techniques are merely updated but not significantly changed. There are missent messages, private notices made accessible to the reader, instances of discrepant awareness, etc. The fragmentary, torn

up letters of Richardson's *Clarissa* recur as unsent email drafts, for instance in David Llewellyn's *Eleven* (2006). Spelling mistakes and awkward wording, which have always been used to impart an air of genuineness,²⁴³ to characterise the speakers and to help distinguish between the different voices, are supplemented, not supplanted, with (over-)use of emoticons, and indications of ineptitude in dealing with the technology.²⁴⁴ The most significant innovations are arguably in terms of pace, as emailing allows for considerably more rapid exchanges; the use of mailing lists and messages to multiple recipients (although they, too, are not entirely unprecedented) influencing the plot and sometimes leading to a separation of narrative strands; and so-called 'blind carbon copies', which facilitate arguably even more intricate intrigues, and can further enhance the perception of a privileged position on the part of the (novel's) reader. One notable shift that has happened since the early days of this novel genre is in its gender ascription: while mostly authored by men, "[t]he 18th-century epistolary novel was, and still is, considered a feminine genre par excellence, with its often-sentimental depictions of courtship struggles, marriage, and damsels in distress" (Brandtzæg 2013). Writing emails or other forms of electronic messages seems to be a less explicitly female thing to do than writing letters; there are considerably more male characters in 20th- and 21st-century epistolary novels than previously.²⁴⁵ It is commonly believed that most men find it harder to identify with female protagonists than vice versa. If this is correct, it certainly has implications

²⁴³ "Epistolary Literature" 2007

²⁴⁴ Technological sophistication seems to have replaced cultural sophistication to some extent. It appears that previously established defining boundaries, for example 'urban/rural', are dissolved. In their stead, an age divide, associated with different levels of technological skills, is often used to mark the distinction in the early 21st century; cf. Palfrey and Gasser's concepts of "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (Palfrey and Gasser 2008). Q.v. Kvideland 1999.

²⁴⁵ There are certainly still exceptions to this rule. Young adult novels written in emails or instant messages, for instance *ttyl* by Lauren Myracle (2004), seem to be a market only for girls as protagonists and intended readership. In addition, as soon as pen and paper are involved again, the gender shift also seems to be reverted. Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea* (2001), one of the very few 21st-century epistolary novels to be written in actual *letters*, features almost exclusively female voices.

for strategies of inspiring societal anxieties: there is a new 'target group' of substantial size which could previously not be reached with this genre, and whose anxieties could only now be tapped into. On the other hand, the comparative brevity of the individual messages in 'electronic epistolary novels' may diminish the immersive effect, which is one of the hallmarks of the genre.

21st-century technology has been integrated successfully into the novel, as previous advances in the field had been. Moreover, this integration process has not been unidirectional; the genre has in turn entered the new media. Literature finding its way into electronic media may quite simply be an inevitable development, with electronic publishing being so much quicker and cheaper, the potential audience being so vast, and the attraction of the new spectrum of available techniques – from hypertextuality to multimediality and interactivity. Remarkably, however, a distinct divergence can be found regarding the genre of the epistolary novel: while electronic forms of communication appear to have given the printed epistolary novel a new boost, there is not a comparable number of instances of novels-in-letters, or –in-electronic-equivalents-of-letters, published in actual electronic form.

In 2004, an effort was made to establish an entirely new kind of electronic platform for the novel-in-letters: American author Eric Brown published both software designed for what he called a *DEN (digital epistolary novel)*, and the first novel, entitled *Intimacies*,²⁴⁶ to be read with its help.²⁴⁷ Readers could download both from the website greatamericannovel.com, or buy the CD version for \$5, at the time. The idea was to create an environment which looked as authentic as possible; the messages looked like real-life emails, and other types of files were

²⁴⁶ The story was "partially inspired by *Pamela*" (Picot 2005).

²⁴⁷ Picot 2005, Sutherland 2004

integrated.²⁴⁸ An effect of reality thus achieved could arguably have a much stronger impact on the reader. They would be reading ‘real’ emails; the distancing aspect of the readers’ awareness that they are holding a book (or an ebook reader) could be reduced to nothing. The notion is one of “embedded fiction” (Jay Bushman, quoted in Shaer 2008), i.e. snippets of fiction inserted into the streams of a person’s everyday nonfiction electronic reading material. A narrative could thus ‘feel’ considerably more real, and demand very little effort of suspension of disbelief on the readers’ part.²⁴⁹ Eric Brown, in 2004, gave the impression that he was confident that his *DEN* would be a success with both readers and fellow authors, and the way forward for the genre: the term was trademarked,²⁵⁰ and Brown was “also planning to market a DEN authoring tool [...] for about \$150 a copy, thus allowing other writers to create new DENs without any particular new media skills” (Picot 2005).²⁵¹ Yet, as of 2015, there is no evidence of another novel published with the help of this software, nor is it still available for download.²⁵² The reviewers at the time identified three key issues, which may have contributed to the lack of success of Brown’s concept: firstly, the look and feel of computer software can become outdated very quickly, as new versions of other computer programmes change in design and layout.²⁵³ An application which looks antiquated could arguably create a significantly bigger distance in the readers’ minds than an ‘old-fashioned’ book. A second flaw, according to another, admittedly highly critical reviewer, was that he felt ‘bombarded’ by the stream of emails and other files provided by the software in real time as the story unfolded: “You don’t turn the pages; they, in a sense, turn you” (Sutherland 2004). Finally, the

²⁴⁸ Picot 2005

²⁴⁹ Cf. Baer 2004.

²⁵⁰ Sutherland 2004

²⁵¹ The concept of authoring software for electronic texts is not a new one. One of the best-known ones, the hypertext writing programme *Storyspace*, predates Brown’s software by some 20 years; cf. “Storyspace”.

²⁵² An internet search of the novel carried out on 23 February 2015 only found websites featuring reviews.

²⁵³ Picot 2005

novel's insistent linearity was criticised for "giv[ing] it, for a new media work, a peculiarly conservative feel" (Picot 2005).

It seemed that the epistolary novel would have to adapt to other electronic environments, not specifically designed for the creation or consumption of literature. With the introduction of web 2.0²⁵⁴ applications came a wide new range of tools and options for authors to use. In view of these, one may suspect that the epistolary novel is the very form which lends itself naturally to computer-mediated communication: many aspects which distinguish new-media literature from its paper-based predecessors, for example most modes of interactivity, are based on messages. The epistolary novel could be presumed to adapt easily to the new structures, styles, and patterns on the internet. For instance, "many writers see blogs as a natural way to update/extend the traditional fictional diary" (McClellan 2004). Blogs are not able to convey the same level of intimacy (and, arguably, voyeurism) because they are usually meant to be public rather than private. Yet there is still a level of almost intimate communication between the writer and the reader: Jan Schmidt calls them "instruments of identity, information and relationship management" (2006: 172, my translation), and Aimée Morrison finds that "[t]he weblog as a writing form is fundamentally about fostering personal expression, meaningful conversation, and collaborative thinking" (2007: 369). Accordingly, its language is usually not formal, but personal and direct, far from the characteristics of the "meagre, stereotypical and formulaic everyday language of information" (Ryszard Kapuscinski, quoted in Möller 2006: 131, my translation). Looking at Morrison's list of typical features of a blog, it is evident to what large extent this form combines 'the best of both worlds', as it were:

the discrete post as fundamental organizing unit; date- and time-stamping of posts; the appearance of posts in reverse chronological order; hyperlinking to external sites; the

²⁵⁴ For a discussion of the term, see O'Reilly 2005.

archiving of posts and references to posts with permalinks and trackbacks; the reference to other likeminded or otherwise interesting blogs through the provision of a blogroll; the capacity for reader comments on posts; and the organization of posts by keywords into separate browsable categories. (Morrison 2007: 370)

For the writers of fiction, this opens up a wide range of new possibilities of storytelling – “[i]magine a fictional blogger who left comments in other people’s blogs, chatted with people, and responded to reader comments as the story unfolded” (Jill Walker, quoted in McClellan 2004) – and ways of approximating their readers. The latter certainly applies to temporal proximity, as blog fiction does not suffer from lags caused by printing and distribution processes.²⁵⁵

Social-networking websites such as Facebook can be used as an electronic host for literature as well. They offer similar advantages to blogs, including “an ongoing sense of an ever-present ‘now’ that bridges the asynchronous gap between the time of narrative production and narrative reception” (Page 2013: 41). In addition, it is the networking and socialising aspects which create an emphasis on a sense of belonging to a group: on Facebook, essentially everybody who I communicate with is ‘a friend’, or a ‘friend of a friend’, or interested in – ‘likes’²⁵⁶ – the same things as I. It has been said that texts on online social networks “serve the purpose of maintaining solidarity with groups of people with whom we have an affinity” (Mills and Chandra 2011: 35). Maybe this statement should be expanded: solidarity and the shared affinity are not only maintained but also suggested, initiated, possibly even contrived at times. This is potentially of high relevance to epistolary narratives on Facebook, as a way of

²⁵⁵ A blog novel written for, and published, in print, for example *An Opening Act of Unspeakable Evil* (Munroe 2004), does not enjoy these advantages; it is basically a conventional diary novel, arguably with added timeliness, but less intimacy (which may equal a weaker bond between protagonist and reader).

²⁵⁶ In fact, the website deliberately uses emotional language. In the early years of its existence, its users would, by clicking on a button, ‘become fans’ of actors, musicians, brands, etc. In 2010, this was changed: the respective button now says ‘Like’ instead.

effortlessly creating a bond between the character posting their messages, and their readers. It appears, however, that Facebook is not exactly in favour with authors of fiction. One of the reasons for this may be that the platform has a strict policy of not allowing duplicate accounts or ‘regular’ user accounts for fictional characters. There are texts, mostly humorous ones, written in the style of Facebook updates, but they can usually be found outside the network itself, on other websites or even as printed books.²⁵⁷ One example of a Facebook novel published on Facebook (in German, however) is *Zwirbler* (2010 – 2014) by TG.²⁵⁸ It is not an epistolary novel and does not require a ‘fake’ user account for its protagonist: the project is categorised as ‘Public Figure’ on Facebook.²⁵⁹ As readers could contribute to the story by posting comments, it is a form of crowdsourced fiction, although TG maintained control over the process.²⁶⁰ This example of a Facebook novel raises two issues relevant to this study: firstly, the collaborative element of *Zwirbler* seems to have fostered a strong emotional bond with the fans,²⁶¹ although they may experience these feelings towards the joint writing effort rather than the protagonist. On Julian Hanich’s spectrum of how individual or collective certain activities are, with “the extreme individuality and solitude of reading” at one end of the continuum and “the strong collectivity and conformity of mass sports events” at the other end, and cinema somewhere in between (Hanich 2010: 249), this sort of collaborative internet fiction would probably have to be

²⁵⁷ For instance the retelling of *Hamlet* as “Facebook News Feed Edition” (Schmelling 2008), or books such as *The History of the World According to Facebook* (Overstreet 2011), or *Let There Be Facebook. Status Updated from God, Gaga, and Everyone in Between* (Harmon and Shockley 2011).

²⁵⁸ TG is the pen name used by Gergely Teglas.

²⁵⁹ TG 2010 – 2014

²⁶⁰ In an interview, he said he “only delete[d] posts that [were] not directly related to the topics, entries which are advertising, for instance. Everything else [was] permitted” (Schaefer 2010).

²⁶¹ Cf. “Kladde Buchverlag – Zwirbler”. It should be noted that this is a publisher’s website promoting the book. Overall, it is not easy to determine the popularity of online literature precisely; it poses the same problem that sales figures do as a criterion for popular fiction. Indicators such as a high number of hits, even high numbers of ‘shares’ or ‘likes’, are too easily fabricated to be taken seriously as an entirely reliable factor.

positioned to the ‘collectivity’ side even of cinema. Secondly, the apparent success of *Zwirbler* resulted in the novel now being available in print²⁶² as well, which can be seen as an indicator of the prestige a printed book still holds in comparison. It is hopefully safe to assume that the author will now not be asked in another interview whether he considers his work “a substitute for real literature” (Schaefer 2010).

Another online community has had a considerably bigger impact on the world of literature so far: *twitterfiction*²⁶³ is one of the most prominent examples of new media fiction in the first decades of the 21st century. This is fiction written in a series of short messages each not exceeding 140 characters, the limit stipulated by the microblogging service, and published on Twitter. Again, the message character of the medium makes this platform a seemingly obvious choice for the epistolary form. The example which has received the highest level of public attention in recent years is Jennifer Egan’s *Black Box* (2012), although some may contest this genre classification. Still most Twitter novels are related by a narrative voice rather than fictional characters ‘tweeting’. In a number of cases, notably including the works claiming to be the very first Twitter novels, this may be to do with the fact that they were not originally written to be published on this specific, or indeed any internet platform.²⁶⁴ However, Twitter has proven to be quite versatile, and thus able to accommodate a wide range of different texts. Its appeal as a medium for literature also lies in two important factors: the different options of interactivity it provides, and the prescribed brevity of each tweet. The latter has made people remark that “the novel by tweet is really a digital extension of flash fiction, an established literary genre which relies on constrained word counts and a florid style to convey often complicated narratives” (Shaer 2008). The idea

²⁶² TG 2014

²⁶³ Other terms most commonly used include *twitterature* and *twiction*; an alternative not focussing on this specific platform is *microblogging fiction*.

²⁶⁴ *The French Revolution* (Stewart 2009a) and *Small Places* (Belardes 2008 – 2010). Cf. Stewart 2009b; Siegler 2009; Shaer 2008.

that restrictions can be conducive to creativity and artistry is certainly not new, but in the early 21st century, Twitter seems to have reaffirmed it.²⁶⁵ In 2012, *The Guardian* invited established authors of (traditional) fiction to write a 140-character novel: their specific form of ‘Twitter fiction’.²⁶⁶ Poetry has also been published, or promoted, on Twitter. Ben Okri,²⁶⁷ for example, has used the site to post his poems, one line a day; and it can be assumed that the number of (yet) unpublished poets on Twitter is vast. Still it may be found baffling that the number of successful, or high-profile epistolary Twitter novels is not larger. The other feature mentioned above, the web community’s interconnectedness, can be used to unite different narrative voices in order to tell a story together – a ‘novel-in-tweets’. Yet these kinds of literary undertakings with multiple tweeting voices so far have mostly taken on a different shape: the website turned into a stage for performances of electronically mediated plays. Examples of this are a 2009 performance of one chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* for Bloomsday, or the 2010 Twitter adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* by the Royal Shakespeare Company. The techniques used were different: for *Ulysses*, 54 user accounts were registered by the two ‘directors’ for characters in the novel, and the chapter “Wandering Rock” was

adapted [...] in large series of 140-character or less first-person statements, using a specially created software to automate a performance. On [the day], these characters all sent tweets about what they were doing at the correct fictional times. (“Twitter Goes Literary with Ulysses performance” 2009)

²⁶⁵ It is also, however, one of the most prominent reproaches voiced regarding this kind of literature, which is seen as “ideal for people with short attention spans” (Flood 2009); cf. Armitstead 2013.

²⁶⁶ “Twitter fiction – 21 authors try their hand” 2012. The term *twister* has also been used for this kind of text; cf. Tharakan 2009.

²⁶⁷ “Ben Okri (@benokri) | Twitter”. It does appear that the Twitter page is used mainly for promotional purposes: “The official page for Ben Okri. Ben will be here from time to time to share his poetry and writing, but otherwise this page is maintained by Rider Books”.

The RSC, on the other hand, cast human actors in the roles of their Twitter adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Such Tweet Sorrow*.²⁶⁸ The performance took place in the course of five weeks, “taking in audience responses and real events” (Kennedy 2010) and featuring YouTube videos in addition to tweets.

Unfortunately, this is not the place for a lengthy examination of the possible reasons for the divergence described above. It may be true that readers of electronic material prefer shorter texts, although there are a number of examples of online literature of substantial length. Another factor could be an intentional deviation from the standard message format of the respective communities in order to mark the text as fictional narrative; maybe some writers feel that readers should only have to get used to one potentially alienating alteration at a time. This brief outline of the development of one novel genre and of literary forms in electronic media is far from providing an exhaustive overview; it gives but a glimpse of the latter. The purpose of this sketch was to give an impression of how adaptable the novel has proven, of how big the mutual influence of electronic and traditional forms has been, and of why popular literature today cannot be seen as confined to printed texts. Proposing a strict dichotomy of internet-based versus paper-based literature would certainly be reductive; instead it will be wise to concentrate on the “‘family resemblances’ among the modes [...] that in some respects set [online] storytelling apart from earlier forms of narrative but in other respects highlight areas of commonality” (Page 2013: 35). What has been left out entirely in this section are more daring literary experiments, many of which make more, or quite different, use of the technological innovations of the 20th and 21st centuries.²⁶⁹ As this study concerns popular forms of fiction,

²⁶⁸ “Such Tweet Sorrow”

²⁶⁹ Cf. Crane, Bamman and Jones 2007; Van Hulle 2007 et al.

the focus is on texts and media many readers²⁷⁰ can be expected to find accessible. Literary experiments can have a distinct alienating effect, and a narrative which comes with a suggested reading strategy for people who “find themselves daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure” (J. G. Ballard, quoted in Van Hulle 2007: 139) can in all likelihood not be classified as popular fiction.

Genre characteristics of the contemporary legend

Another genre with a very successful history of adapting to technological and social changes is the contemporary legend.²⁷¹ It seems to thrive on the synergies of second orality to an unrivalled extent. As noted in Chapter 2.2, there are striking convergences in the themes and topics of these legends and popular fiction. For this study, these two genres have been chosen because similar structures can be found with regard to inspiring societal anxieties. Of course there are obvious and ample differences between the novel and the contemporary legend, for example regarding length, authorship, canonicity, or indeed the (self-)identification and labelling as fictional material. “More than is true for most literary productions, contemporary legends are decentered, unowned, poststructural, and continually transformed.” (Fine 1992: 28) On the internet in particular, however, these differences seem to decrease in apparentness, maybe even in relevance. About 30 years ago, Aleida Assmann compiled a list of characteristics which mark the distinction between folklore and literary narratives.²⁷² Today, Klaus Roth claims, the

²⁷⁰ It is assumed that a great number of people in the Western world use electronic media, although the limitations of the reach of digital literature are acknowledged as well: apart from the above-mentioned age divide, social and financial inequalities certainly play a role (q.v. Assmann 2006: 15; Palfrey and Gasser 2008: 16f; Sunstein 2007: 17).

²⁷¹ It also shares a history of strong, possibly exaggerated, negative criticism for this: “[t]he technological media which transmit mass culture was often viewed by folklorists and other students of culture as ‘destroyers of folklore’” (Selberg 1999: 239). Cf. Handoo and Kvideland 1999; Dégh 1994; Nicolaisen 2008.

²⁷² Aleida Assmann, cited in Roth 2009: 103

five items on this list can all be found reflected in essential properties of online narratives:²⁷³ firstly, the story is an ‘open unit’; it can be compiled from a wide range of sources. Roth points to the “much-favoured method of copy-and-paste” (2009: 103, my translation) of computer users in this context.²⁷⁴ Secondly, like folkloristic material, and unlike traditional printed narratives, online fictions are said to be considered variants rather than fixed texts. The third item on the list is a diminished importance of the author, with an amplified focus on creditable, authoritative sources in its stead.²⁷⁵ Fourthly, these texts are said to belong to a ‘series’ rather than stand alone: “subsequent texts extinguish their predecessors; fundamental characteristics of the texts are repetition and multiplication, their massive, yet short-lived spread” (Roth 2009: 103f, my translation). The final criterion is the narrative’s purpose: folklore texts, popular fiction and online literatures are to be ‘used’ (possibly even ‘used up’) in everyday life.²⁷⁶ Some of these statements could be debated, but Roth’s analysis, based on Assmann’s, highlights the close relationships as well as the blurred lines demarcating the respective categories.

It has been mentioned that of all folklore genres, legends are seen as a window to a community’s collective soul: “Traditional folktales reveal much about how society wants to see itself, how it wants to maintain its order and safeguard its continuation” (Dégh 1994: 90). However, this window is deceptive. It is not regular window glass that is being used. It is a lens, and what we see may be distorted, tinted, or appear closer than it is,

²⁷³ Roth 2009: 103f

²⁷⁴ Another parallel which has been noted was that “crowdsourced fiction bears similarities to the folklore that was once passed down orally, through generations – only, now the myths are minted online, in a matter of hours or days” (Manjoo 2014).

²⁷⁵ This point, while valid for contemporary legends, is disputable in many cases of computer-mediated literature, especially when established authors write internet fiction. On the other hand, new authors may be more likely to use pen names (usernames) online than for printed narratives.

²⁷⁶ Roth 2009: 104. This does seem to give ‘serious’ literature an air of evening wear, stored away in a wardrobe for special occasions.

and at times the surface reflects the outside world more than it reveals what is inside. On top of all of this, the window is a shape-shifting one, as this definition demonstrates:

A legend is a story or narrative that may not be a story or narrative at all; it is set in a recent or historical past that may be conceived to be remote or antihistorical or not really past at all; it is believed to be true by some, false by others, and both or neither by most. (Robert Georges, quoted in Fine 1992: 1)

This next section is an effort to collate the wide range of definitions of the term *contemporary legend* and highlight its different, sometimes even conflicting aspects. The features examined are form, sources, believability/plausibility, truthfulness, distribution, ‘shelf life’, emotions, target group, and finally the moral of these legends and their reflection of/on society. Not only are they necessary for a description of the concept but also will each element play a certain role in regard to societal anxieties and how they are influenced by these “true stories that are too good to be true” (Brunvand 1999: 19).

a) Form: the one thing everybody seems to agree on is that contemporary legends tend to be very short stories, which is one of the features aiding retention. The language is often colloquial as contemporary legends “exist primarily in an informal conversational form” (Smith 1997: 493).²⁷⁷ There is debate over structural characteristics. For some, they are defining features,²⁷⁸ others stress that contemporary legends “tend to be relatively formless, and, as a consequence definitions that examine formal characteristics of the text have little descriptive power” (Fine 1992: 2). One central feature of contemporary legends is their variability. Unlike written works of literature, they are ‘touchable’: the concept of a

²⁷⁷ Especially in internet and printed legends, however, sometimes the register is adapted to imitate a scientific or scholarly language in order to promote plausibility.

²⁷⁸ For an overview and discussion of the structural elements according to William Labov, see Nicolaisen 1987.

canonical text with unchallengeable wording does not apply.²⁷⁹ In fact, the very opposite is the case. In order to survive over time and to cross geographical and cultural boundaries, legends must be adaptable and flexible.

b) Sources: the 'classic' source of this traditionally oral genre is conversation, when the legend is related "in a believable style" (Brunvand 1999: 19) by a credible person, who was not present when the story 'took place' but knows an (equally credible) witness, or possibly even victim or culprit. This is where the term *foaftale* comes from: "The term 'foaf' was introduced by Rodney Dale (in his 1978 book, *The Tumour in the Whale*) for an oft-attributed but anonymous source of contemporary legends: a 'friend of a friend'" ("Foaftale News on-Line"). There are other (now) common sources of contemporary legends; they can be found in newspapers, tabloids and magazines (including advice columns),²⁸⁰ novels and short stories, radio or television broadcasts, and, of course, on the internet: as chain emails, blog entries, in forums and on message boards, on social networking websites, in chat rooms, etc. In all of these different media, they can come with a label saying 'contemporary legend' or be told as truthful stories.

c) Believability, or plausibility: contemporary legends are "presented as a *proposition for belief*; it is not always believed by speaker or audience, but it is presented as something that *could* have occurred and is told as *if* it happened" (Fine 1992: 2). In most cases, the events are related as having taken place recently and near-by. They are set in ordinary locations and situations. "This *mundaneness* gives contemporary legends a unique quality that sets them apart from legends per se."

²⁷⁹ Cf. Assmann 1983: 180

²⁸⁰ Brunvand 1999: 23

(Smith 1997: 493, emphasis in original)²⁸¹ Likewise, the people in these legends are ordinary – they are, after all, the friends of our friends. A common feature is the inclusion of details such as names, place names, institutions, etc. which the “audience will recognize, relate, and react [...] to” (Craughwell 2005: 14f)²⁸² or the naming of a source which the teller and/or the audience views as reliable. Especially online, “many legends are presented in the format of (fake) newspaper accounts, lending the reports greater apparent legitimacy” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 3).²⁸³ In 21st-century secular societies, in order to convince the largest possible number of people, contemporary legends rarely feature supernatural or religious elements.²⁸⁴ Some originally supernatural stories have been “updated for the present” (Brunvand 2004: 27) using

modern synonyms that sound more scientific[:] [...] sacred objects and places in nature, such as holy trees, groves or stones are re-interpreted as energy fields or energy columns; modern witchcraft and magical healing are understood as manipulation with energies. (Valk 2010: 166)²⁸⁵

d) Truthfulness: it is important to note that a contemporary legend, like traditional legends and myths,²⁸⁶ is not by definition false. In one of his collections of legends, Jan Harold Brunvand presents what he calls ‘true’

²⁸¹ Like *contemporary* or *urban*, the term *legend* has been discussed and is not unanimously accepted as the most appropriate one, with some scholars preferring *myth* and others pointing out similarities to rumours. Definitions vary and overlap sometimes to considerable extent (cf. Goody 2010: 41f; Smith 1987: 193; Fine 1992: 3). Jan Harold Brunvand says he “would never call them urban ‘myths’” (1999: 478). The German folklorist Wilhelm F.H. Nicolaisen (2008: 215) argues that while the term *legend* is not perfect, it still seems to be the most apt one in terms of content and style of the narrative. According to Bengt af Klintberg, Nicolaisen suggested “legend-like experience story” at another point “as a tentative term, while waiting for a more distinct term to be invented” (af Klintberg 2005: 269).

²⁸² Cf. Brunvand 1999: 19; Barber 2007: 14 et al. Apart from promoting believability, this also has the function of giving the extraordinary story “shock value” (Wachs 1988: 6).

²⁸³ The ‘author’ is negated, and ‘authority’ stressed in their stead (cf. Assmann 1983: 180).

²⁸⁴ Cf. Smith 1997: 493; Brunvand 1999: 450

²⁸⁵ Cf. af Klintberg 1999: 194

²⁸⁶ Cf. Walton 1990: 95ff

urban legends:²⁸⁷ accounts of events “that seem typically urban-legendary, but for which there is some actual truth component” (1999: 451). Mark Barber has described the tediousness of finding out the truth behind the legends, “leading to a dead end at every turn and the investigator around the bend” (2007: 14). There are a number of projects and publications dedicated to this kind of investigation, notably the website www.snopes.com.²⁸⁸ However, one might debate whether the factual truth of a legend is actually relevant, especially for research in the field of societal anxieties.²⁸⁹

- e) Distribution: as has been discussed in more detail in the section on orality, contemporary legends, “[l]ike all folklore, [...] are passed by word of mouth, or – in today’s world – e-mail” (Craughwell 2005: 13). The internet has definitely become the most important medium in this respect²⁹⁰ as it “gives the legends an instant global audience” (Barber 2005: 7). What has become especially apparent through this is how in quite different parts of the world, very similar legends exist and seem to have meaning for each society despite considerable cultural differences.²⁹¹
- f) ‘Shelf life’: one of the key characteristics of a contemporary legend is that it is enduring: it is “basically a story that is circulated around and refuses to die” (Wiebe 2003: 7). Not only are they told in different places but they also tend to “reappear from time to time [...] in slightly altered form” (Evans and Bartholomew 2009: 686). One example which highlights this perfectly is the well-known legend of the “Vanishing

²⁸⁷ Brunvand 1999: 449ff

²⁸⁸ “snopes: Urban Legends Reference Pages”

²⁸⁹ Cf. Hobbs 1987: 140; Whatley and Henken 2000: 5; Campion-Vincent 1999: 106; or Lindahl (2012), who argues that “[w]hether we believe them or not, legends tend to affect us personally; they are made at least part true by the twinge of revulsion that hits us as we hear them.”

²⁹⁰ Wiebe 2003: 8; Barber 2007: 13 et al.

²⁹¹ Cf. Barchilon 1999: 44; Whatley and Henken 2000: 13

Hitchhiker”,²⁹² in which “the mode of transport has changed over the years to adapt with the times; from horseback and horse and chariot in the early legends, to the horse and wagon, and eventually to a car in modern versions” (Barber 2007: 14).²⁹³ The reason for this longevity, which stands in sharp contrast to the (perceived) ephemerality of oral transmission and media like email,²⁹⁴ is the legend’s adaptability as well as its evoking of fears which are timeless and which many people can relate to.

- g) Emotions: it is an interesting observation that “even if people pass on a legend as the dumbest thing they have ever heard or as a joke, their very act of transmission shows that there is something about it that intrigues them, that makes them want to share it” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 15). It has been suggested that the “high-intensity emotions” triggered by contemporary legends are what makes them “tellable” (Rosenberg 1991: 233). Emotional involvement not only makes people want to share a story but also increases the likelihood of them remembering it – just like we are more likely to remember the joke which made us laugh more. In an empirical study carried out in 2001, psychologists found out that “[i]f a story invokes feelings such as fear, anger, hatred or disgust this will increase the chance that it will be retained in the listener’s memory and hence be accessible for retelling” (Main and Hobbs 2009: 212).

- h) Target group: as has been mentioned before,²⁹⁵ this can be summarised in one word – everybody. Certain sub-genres may have a special appeal

²⁹² This is one of the very few legends with supernatural elements to survive and live on in the 21st century.

²⁹³ Cf. Maranda and Köngas Maranda 1971: xiii

²⁹⁴ However, it has been argued that the new media of the 20th and 21st centuries have ‘eroded’ this criterion (cf. Wachs 1988: xii).

²⁹⁵ See Chapter 2.2

to certain groups,²⁹⁶ but the vast majority of legends aims at intriguing the largest possible number of people (so they become vectors for further dissemination).

- i) Moral & reflection of/on society: contemporary legends are among the most entertaining texts which at the same time serve as ‘cautionary tales’.²⁹⁷ They do “teach a lesson about what happens to people who disregard the taboos of Judeo-Christian civilization” (Craughwell 2005: 14) without lecturing but with the use of humour or a (pleasantly) grisly account.²⁹⁸ In fact, this is also part of what “provide[s] legends with social approval and validity” (Valk 2010: 162): their reinforcing what the recipients already know and are convinced of.²⁹⁹ It is part of their attraction. In an experiment carried out in 1999, researchers used different versions of the same legend to find out which one was more likely to be re-told by their test subjects. They found that it was not the version including “altruistic intention” and “positive outcome” but the “story with a moral conveyed in an ironic twist” (Main and Hobbs 2009: 211). For the legends to fulfil this function, again their adaptability is pivotal. This is what makes them truly *contemporary*.³⁰⁰ they are adjusted to reflect the “prevailing systems of thought, ideologies, and worldviews” and communicate them in the “modes of expression and distinctive rhetoric” (Valk 2010: 162) of the time. As part of this cultural reflection, negative emotions come to the fore. Apart from (societal) anxieties, common stereotypes and prejudices are thus expressed as well,³⁰¹ sometimes they are so closely connected that it becomes nigh

²⁹⁶ Most horror legends, for instance, appear to be geared towards an adolescent audience (cf. Craughwell 2005: 14).

²⁹⁷ Evans and Bartholomew 2009: 686

²⁹⁸ It has been said about children’s books that one of the key tricks is to educate without actually mentioning education (cf. Uther 2008: 513). Arguably, the same applies to adults – maybe even more so.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Wachs 1988: 7

³⁰⁰ Cf. Smith 1997: 494

³⁰¹ Cf. Craughwell 2005: 16; Evans and Bartholomew 2009: 688

impossible to make a clear distinction. In many contemporary legends, racism or homophobia are expressed more or less overtly.³⁰² Whether one likes it or not, these “folk fallacies” (Dundes 1975: 101) are an intrinsic part of folklore and therefore should not be ignored by scholars, whose job it is “to document traditional culture, irrespective of whether it is ‘nice’ or ‘nasty’” (Smith 1987: 183). This holds especially true as it is this ‘dark side’ which makes it possible to utilize contemporary legends in order to influence people purposefully and systematically, for example to political ends. During the Vietnam war, for instance, stories were spread of Vietnamese prostitutes who “put a razor blade sunk in gum inside their vaginas before intercourse with an American soldier”, the goal of these tales being “to increase the rage of the military against the Vietnamese, and to demonize even the women, so that there would be no sympathy with civilians” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 122). On the other hand, some contemporary legends also supply a temporary escape from the values of society.³⁰³ To hear, read, tell, or write stories of people breaking taboos or misbehaving “allow[s] us to break the rules vicariously” (Hobbs 1987: 142).

Contemporary legends as genre of fiction

For this study, contemporary legends are treated as works of fiction. “A ‘literary’ reading [is] imposed” on them – “the question of truthfulness will not arise because the text is literary” (Todorov 1990: 3). One of the consequences of this treatment is that in the case of the legends, the expansive realm of their paratexts concerning reception is disregarded. If

³⁰² Cf. Wachs 1988: 85; Whatley and Henken 2000: 96f; Smith 1987: 182f. Bengt af Klintberg points out an interesting connection between the perceived negativity of contemporary legends as opposed to the traditional ones which are seen as presenting a much more positive view: “The reason [...] is that the old legend tradition which has survived is the result of a selective process. Many legends reflecting fear and suspicion lost their socio-psychological function when the fears turned out to be unfounded. It is very likely that the contemporary legends [...] will go through the same process of filtration.” (af Klintberg 2005: 273f)

³⁰³ Cf. Dundes 2007: 59

one were to do an analysis of societal anxieties with a focus on the recipients, one could profit greatly from the vast number of message boards, discussion forums, newsgroups and the like dedicated to these texts. There, users express and discuss their opinions and emotions regarding the contents of the respective tales. It could be possible to observe the effects of a text inspiring societal anxieties (almost) first-hand. The most discussed issues on these platforms, however, seems to be the questions of truthfulness and origins of the individual legends. As has been argued before, these research questions of folklorists are not the goal of a literary reading, which treats the texts in question as “neither true nor false but precisely *fictional*” (Todorov 1990: 3, emphasis in original). However, what is of great significance for this study are the manifold ways in which the texts present themselves as truths, or at least as highly credible. One of the functions of fictionality is “both the constructive design and establishment, and the critical challenging and modification of reality” (Assmann 1980: 15, my translation). Contemporary legends are one genre of fiction which creates realities that, ideally, correspond to the recipients’ realities to an extent which makes a clear distinction impossible. They include facts and details which “not only are true, but which the reader is intended to realize he is supposed to treat as true” (Sainsbury 2010: 4). The presentation of fictional accounts as true stories is “possibly as old as literature itself” (Assmann 1980: 124, my translation), says Aleida Assmann and gives two examples of very early novels: both Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688) include claims that the presented material is fact rather than fiction.³⁰⁴ Assmann finds that these assertions of authenticity are part of the fiction and have to be appreciated as such. “Fiction legitimatises itself with the help of historic truth, factuality, and spatiotemporal topicality.” (Assmann 1980: 125, my translation) In contemporary legends, this is taken to some extreme. R. M. Sainsbury’s argument that they cannot be defined as fiction because they are “not

³⁰⁴ Assmann 1980: 123f

necessarily produced with fictive intentions” (2010: 7) may be debatable, but it is probably valid to say that in most cases, a big effort is made to camouflage any fictive intention from the recipients.

On the internet, this characteristic has earned contemporary legends some notoriety. The term *netlore* was coined for legends concerning electronic mass media, and to highlight the internet as the main medium where the stories can be encountered ‘in the wild’ in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.³⁰⁵ Problems can arise when this terminology is in fact not used: when these texts are not labelled for people who are not aware, or less wary of the existence of this kind of text, or in cases of netlore disguised all too perfectly. The most harmless things to happen in consequence may be that a person is confused, or that they annoy their friends and family by forwarding fake warnings, etc. to all of them. In some cases, the spreading of contemporary legends have lead to private persons or institutions being faced with a barrage of emails or calls offering support in answer to fabricated appeals for help. This can be much more than a nuisance; for organisations, this can mean increased labour costs and/or decreased productivity, if their staff have to spend hours dealing with fruitless enquiries from a well-meaning but misguided public – the American Cancer Society, for example, has experienced this when bogus calls for help for a child dying from cancer circulated.³⁰⁶ Viruses can do even considerably more harm, and they too are often ‘wrapped’ in texts which play on our emotions: the simplest yet most effective example of this was probably the virus often referred to as *love bug*, which sent itself from infected computers via emails whose subject line said, ‘ILOVEYOU’.³⁰⁷ One big reason for the severe damage the virus was able to do was certainly its

³⁰⁵ “Fears and anxieties over modern technology have always been a favourite subject matter for folklorists to discuss, but the introduction of the Internet and e-mails has forced the new category of netlore into prominence. Netlore is folklore on speed.” (Barber 2007: 236)

³⁰⁶ “snopes: American Cancer Society” 2009; Barber 2005: 212f

³⁰⁷ “‘Love Bug’ bites UK” 2000

very skilled programming; yet in addition, it can be assumed that the virus had a lot of human ‘helpers’ who could not resist opening an email carrying such a message. While “people are learning to accept information posted to the social Web with a large grain of salt” (Wortham 2012) and the average computer user is becoming more and more wary of fake news, warnings, and declarations of love, the people writing them³⁰⁸ seem to find it easy to keep up, and devise ever new ways of drawing unsuspecting recipients in. An extreme example is a different kind of tale which has gained some prominence due to its “international dimensions” and “disastrous consequences” (Roth 2005: 404, my translation): so-called ‘Nigeria scam’ (also known as ‘Nigerian scam’ or ‘419 scam’) emails. They are unsolicited messages in which great sums of money are promised (falsely) to the recipient if they pay a comparatively small amount of money in advance. This kind of confidence fraud has a long history,³⁰⁹ and it sounds so easy to see through in this short description, yet apparently manages to deceive a number of people. It has been reported that about one per cent of recipients respond to these scam messages,³¹⁰ with world-wide damage sums as high as \$ 9.3 billion in 2009.³¹¹ Notwithstanding the negative economical, social, and psychological repercussions, one has to acknowledge the ingenuity with which many of these texts manage, within comparatively few words, to speak to large groups of people and seemingly effortlessly find, and address their weak spots. For the ‘Nigeria scam’ emails, Klaus Roth finds that the two components which make them successful are “narrative techniques to produce credibility” in combination with “appeals to emotions such as greed and sympathy, helpfulness and

³⁰⁸ Alan Dundes uses the term *performer*, even for technology-mediated folklore, and it does seem apt: “One great advantage of xerographic folklore is that it allows virtually anyone to be a ‘performer’. The performing skills required for a ballad singer or a joketeller are not necessary for the communication of paperwork folklore. A person needs only enough manual dexterity to operate a Xerox machine!” (Alan Dundes, quoted in Smith 1987: 196)

³⁰⁹ Its precursor, the “Spanish Prisoner Scheme”, dates back “at least to the Peninsular War in the early nineteenth century” (Whitaker 2013).

³¹⁰ Roth 2005: 391

³¹¹ Chabris and Simons 2012.

religiousness” (2005: 394, my translation), and he admits to being impressed by the creativity and sophistication of their narrative techniques, as well as the apparent high level of interactivity among the writers.³¹² This makes them prime examples of characteristics they share with contemporary legends. However, these scam emails will not be analysed in more detail in this study because the emotions they try to evoke are not societal anxieties: while they do use current political crises or natural disasters to draw their readers in, the intended emotions inspired are, as mentioned above, mostly compassion and avarice.

If fictionality is viewed as a graded scale,³¹³ another neighbour of contemporary legends’ may be news media. This is a field in which the boundaries between fact and fiction can be too blurred to recognise, or which at least proves that “nonfiction can sometimes be highly plotted and be shaped around points of suspense and resolution” (Page 2013: 35). While the first and foremost function of news is information, they also serve other purposes including “providing support for established authority and norms”, “forging and maintaining commonality and values”, or “reducing social tension” by way of entertainment (Denis McQuail, cited in Watson 2003: 104f). “[N]o news production is independent of the values that shape and drive the players at all levels” (Watson 2003: 131); news is “a *social construction*” (Monahan 2010: 4, emphasis in original), and as such highly reflective of the way we mentally organise society in groups. “What happens to ‘us’ is considered the prime principle of newsworthiness...” (Watson 2003: 121) Tabloid journalism in particular is known for a strong emphasis on emotions.³¹⁴ There has always been some mixture of both

³¹² Roth 2009: 113f

³¹³ Page 2013: 35

³¹⁴ This is part of the reason why some critics find distinct parallels between news reporting and popular fiction: “[i]f the bestsellers are associated with any one media institution, it is the press” (Murphet 2012: 782). Blakey Vermeule identifies the fact that it is in the human nature to “prefer social to other kinds of information” as an explanation for the prevalence of emotional stories over “say, detailed analyses of budget deficits and trade imbalances” (2010: 33).

business and pleasure, as it were, and unintentional as well as deliberate misinformation has been presented as facts a number of times by traditional news media in the past. The histories of newspapers and contemporary legends do interweave. Not only have established news sources been named in legends in order to lend the latter credibility, but the former have also played a significant role time and again in spreading and/or 'substantiating' these stories.³¹⁵ However, in this field as well the public's focus has shifted onto electronic media³¹⁶ as "the historical process of mass communication has broken down traditional boundaries, like those between journalism and literature, to operate in an atmosphere of multiple knowledges and truths" (Hardt 2004: 139), or, in Mark Barber's words: "Not only is this the age of information, it is also the age of misinformation" (2007: 16f).

In addition to their intermediary status between (presented-as-)fact and fiction, an aspect which could be seen as speaking against treating contemporary legends as a literary genre is their changeable and fleeting quality. The association of contemporary legends with ephemeral literature in a post-literate society is one with a long history.³¹⁷ Today ephemerality, actual or alleged, has arguably become a challenge which needs to be faced by almost every computer-mediated genre. What is more, on the internet, this issue has an interesting double edge: while some critics point out that online information is not "actually stored", and that "[t]here is no equivalent to the easy delete function regulating the economy of remembering and forgetting in a culture of material writings" (Assmann 2006: 19), others warn that information is anything but short-lived on the

³¹⁵ Cf. Nicolaisen 2008; Brunvand 2003: 85, 96ff, 104f, 26f, 56ff, 66ff; Barber 2005: 37, 88, 89ff, 110; "The Great Moon Hoax"; Simanek; Frater 2009 et al.

³¹⁶ Cf. Schmidt 2006: 130f; Briggs and Burke 2009: 281; Wortham 2012 et al.

³¹⁷ "[F]rom the mid-fifteenth century to the nineteenth century many traditional tales appeared in ephemeral literature such as broadsides and chapbooks." (Smith 1987: 179)

internet,³¹⁸ and the ‘right to be forgotten’³¹⁹ has been a much-debated topic in recent years. Apart from the matter of online availability, another factor contributing to contemporary legends’ impermanent state has to be addressed when it comes to a literary reading: variability. In the case of the “American Cancer Society Hoax” (“snopes: American Cancer Society” 2009), the fake appeal for help previously mentioned, for example, it is obvious from one glance at the snopes.com page that the number of variations which have appeared over the years, some even within a short amount of time, is overwhelming. The question which arises is how to analyse such a transient text. One of the possible answers lies in a focus on the structure: it can be contended that while there are differences in the details given and the wording used, the underlying construction of the texts is the same. For example, the American-Cancer-Society legend needs a cancer victim with whom many people will commiserate: it is of no relevance whether they are a seven-year-old girl, or an 18-year-old boy, or a “nameless dying child” (“snopes: American Cancer Society” 2009) – anybody who does not have the chance to “live their life to the fullest” (“snopes: American Cancer Society” 2009) because of this horrible disease. If these texts are designed to inspire a particular feeling in their audience, they use the same basic ‘recipe’ in order to achieve this effect.

³¹⁸ Sunstein 2014: 3, 65ff

³¹⁹ Cf. Travis and Arthur 2014; “Factsheet ‘Right to be Forgotten’” 2014

6. The recipe

The term *recipe* has been chosen over *formula*, for example, because the latter may have a negative connotation in connection with literature, especially popular fiction; and unlike *directions*, or *programme*, *recipe* is thought not to imply one singular effective strategy but to allow more room to move and grow instead. This is key to the concept: there is not just one way to achieve the desired effect. What can be found instead is a basic recipe which encompasses the wide range of available approaches. A possible objection to the term *recipe* is that, not unlike the other suggested words, it has a quite distinct element of intent. It is conceded that in all likelihood there is no such thing as accidental cooking. Yet in the world of preparing dishes, as in writing a narrative, one may find that the final product's effect on the consumer is not in exact accord with the originally intended outcome. Byproducts, or by-effects as it were, may be manufactured in the process – a text can be found to inspire societal anxieties without the writer having set out with this intention.

The following is averred: in order to inspire societal anxieties in the recipients of a text, a character they feel connected with, or identify with, has to be confronted with a plausible societal threat. It cannot be stressed enough that this recipe spans a potentially infinite number of different specific strategies, for which it serves as an overarching principle. For illustrative purposes, let us compare this recipe with another very basic

axiom: if you want to increase the amount of money you own, you have to see to it that the earnings exceed the expenditure. This piece of wisdom does not tell anybody how they can actually achieve this; it comprises a vast spectrum of conceivable approaches. One could ask an employer for a raise, or opt for buying one's clothes in charity shops, or not go on an expensive holiday – or sell a kidney on the organ trade black market, or become a pirate and plunder rich merchant ships, or invent a time-travel device and go back in time to invest in today's top-selling companies and/or sell the patent to the highest bidder. Along the same lines, there are a myriad of different ways to pursue a) the creation of an emotional bond, with an element of identification, between fictional characters and readers, and b) the design of a believable menace to their social structures and/or their positions in them.

6.1 A character the readers feel connected with

Theories on how to make a character likeable, how to direct an audience's sympathy, and how to enhance their affection for a character have been discussed in Chapter 4. It has been stated there that in view of the nature of the intended emotion evoked, categorial identification appears to be the most potent strategy. Our processes of making sense of the world and the societal structures we have been thrown into play an important role in all aspects of our lives which involve human or communal interaction, from the choice of a partner³²⁰ to voting behaviour, and they are pivotal for the very functioning of democratic systems. In the case of fictional characters, there are several aspects in which this is important. Firstly, the recipients have to trust them to a certain extent. Even in the case of

³²⁰ This applies even to impulse decisions: "one writer found that it's not the quality of the photo but the signifiers it includes – messages about race, class and educational background – that is most likely to influence [spontaneous approval or rejection on the dating/matchmaking application Tinder]" ("#BBCtrending: Tinder photo" 2014).

unreliable narrators, the readers have to accept them as somebody in whom they can place confidence in principle, and the more they perceive the narrators as belonging to their folk group(s), the more trustworthy they appear. Cass R. Sunstein illustrates this with a very basic example: “Suppose that you are a Republican and you hear a devastating rumor about a Democratic official. If Democrats deny the rumor, you may not be much moved; but if Republicans do, you might well reconsider” (Sunstein 2014: 55). He uses folk group memberships which are easy to define, which are distinctly separate, even opposing, and about which the people in this example are quite outspoken. It is certainly not always the case that in- and out-groups can be this clearly asserted. Nevertheless the underlying argument is valid.

The second way in which the reader’s identification of a fictional character as a fellow folk group member is important, in as far as societal anxieties are concerned, is regarding the nature of the (perceived) threat. The connection is perspicuous: if the two of them share a defining feature which relates to their social position, then anything which endangers the surrounding framework of one can be discerned as a hazard to the other as well. If A and B are located in the same place, then anything pertaining to the position of A also pertains to the position of B. This is another simplification which could tempt one into thinking in absolutes. Even the term *social position*, in the singular form, is misleading: it must be noted that it is neither a static nor an absolute concept at all. Furthermore, the number of defining factors is so vast that it would prove very difficult to find two individuals who are in the exact same spot on all conceivable axes. For the reader-character relationship, this means that categorial identification requires a sufficient number, but even more importantly sufficient salience, of individual components.

The final perspective which should be mentioned at this point is the following: while it has been established that a likeable character and a

character one can identify with are two different concepts, it is obvious that they are not entirely independent from each other, as “people respond sympathetically to those they consider part of their ‘we group’” (Sklar 2013: 40). In regard to some emotions, such as compassion, this distinction may be overcome. It may be true that “stories [...] can ‘persuade’ readers to reevaluate and even to feel sympathy for those clearly, even radically, outside the boundaries of their ‘we groups’” (Sklar 2013: 40). However, the maintenance of these boundaries is of supreme importance when it comes to societal anxieties, as sympathy, including the notion of understanding, towards the ‘outsider’ diminishes their perception as dangerous. This is a central characteristic of some spy and terrorism novels, for example, especially after 2001: several texts recognisably try and give a glimpse into the states of mind of the ‘evil-doers’ in order to evoke empathy and make them appear less terrifying.

In computer-mediated forms of fiction, the same rules apply. Yet there is an additional element to consider: reading a text on an electronic device can have an alienating effect on new users of this kind of technology, thus weakening the emotional power of the text. On the other hand, for an audience used to the medium it can enhance the feeling of connectedness, in more than one sense of the word. References to the recipients’ everyday lives can be made easily and unobtrusively. This is evidenced in a review of the work of Twitter novelist Elliott Holt:

Holt appreciates Twitter’s pithy humor—she uses #hashtags galore—as well as its errors (“Can’t bloody type on this thing,” gripes one character), its shout-outs (“I’m wearing @alexanderwangny,” brags another) and its banality (“Why is it so hard to get a cab?” wonders a third). As a result, scrolling through the tweets will make you laugh with recognition ... (Waldman 2012)

Choosing the right medium is fundamental for successfully reaching the target audience.

Narrative habitus

Group identification is also important in another way. Many of the other theories and approaches which have been discussed in this study are reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu, according to whom “social space is a space of status groups which are characterised by different lifestyles” (Mahar, Harker and Wilkes 1990: 5), and in particular his concept of *habitus*. It is the socialisation a person experiences within their (folk) groups that decides to a great degree their perceptions, impressions and expressions, and behaviour. On the basis of Bourdieu’s habitus – “embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history [which is thus] the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (Bourdieu 1990: 56) – Arthur W. Frank defines *narrative habitus* as “the collection of stories in which a life is formed and that continue to shape lives” (2010: 49). Bourdieu remarks that one’s individual definitions and dispositions are structured by the practices of the circles one socialises with; Frank points out, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, that a person’s “social location” defines the “narrative resources” in a number of respects: “what stories are told where they live and work, which stories do they take seriously or not, and especially what stories they exchange as tokens of membership” (2010: 13).

Narrative habitus marks and makes a group because it consists of a certain collection of stories which binds people together. The members of the group all know these stories, or at least know of them. This is the irremissible criterion for belonging there. Yet it is not only the content which plays a decisive role here. Another important part is the processing: how one tells, reads, listens to, deals with, and reacts to the stories in question.³²¹ This notion gives stories more than one function and purpose: they “call individuals into groups, and they call on groups to assert common identities” (Frank 2010: 60). It is important to keep in mind that it is not

³²¹ Frank 2010: 53

merely the quality of the story, or the storytelling, which has this powerful effect. A tale which strongly calls on our narrative habitus gives us more than literary pleasure; it also promotes a feeling of being in the proper place, of familiarity and even security. It “affirms who I am and ought to be” (Frank 2010: 52) by summoning (unconscious) memories of other narratives and narrative situations. It is thus that one’s emotional response to fiction is “not only a matter of what is in the stories but also of how we think about what is in the stories” (Hogan 2011: 242).

Frank uses the concept of the narrative habitus “to understand how stories get under some people’s skin yet make no impression on other people” (2010: 54), a notion which is of course highly pertinent to inspiring societal anxieties. His argument is that it works as filter: a reader or listener automatically and inescapably categorises every story, and they find themselves attracted to the ones which pass the test and meet the criteria given by one’s narrative habitus. Those which do not are either rejected or discarded as irrelevant.³²² What is often thought of as personal taste is in fact to a great degree moulded by narrative habitus. Frank’s argument works along the same lines as Wayne C. Booth’s: “the value of works is still not in any real sense *in* them. Rather, it is conferred upon them by cultures and cultural institutions” (Booth 1988: 84, emphasis in original). Within a social/folk group, the same stories are therefore perpetuated and thus gain more and more importance and worth as a mark of group identification. Frank argues that all of this even allows reliable prediction of “which future stories a person will be open to” (2010: 53), although he qualifies this statement by stating that “habitus can be predisposing, but predisposition is never determination” (2010: 58). The same point has been made in reference to Bourdieu’s original concept of habitus: “Dispositions are neither mechanistic causes nor voluntarist impulses. They enable us to recognise the possibilities for action and at the same time prevent us from

³²² Frank 2010: 53

recognising other possibilities” (Codd 1990: 139). As with the lore of our folk groups, “a crucial aspect of habitus [is] its deceptive transparency. Looking out through that filter or grid, there seems to be only the world as it is, appearing as if unfiltered” (Frank 2010: 56). Frank likens this to Pierre Bayard’s concept of the *inner book*, which is also described as a filter, dictating the reception and interpretation of any unfamiliar text, and which also works without the subject being aware of it.³²³ What is especially highlighted is the origin of this inner book: according to Arthur W. Frank, it cannot be created “from anything other than shared cultural resources” (2010: 56).

Our group memberships, for example the social class we belong to, influence our susceptibility to specific texts. In addition, our groups have some bearing on the materials we consume or are exposed to. It is conceivable that a character which is theoretically qualified to appeal to people from various backgrounds still fails to have an effect on a large number of people simply because only sub-groups read the text, and pay attention to it, take it seriously or discuss it among peers. All of this suggests that the social location and group affiliations of a person have an important influence on them, and that this influence works in a multitude of ways; it also extends considerably further than one may suspect.

6.2 A plausible threat

For the second part of the recipe, a crucial factor is the extent to which a literary text can “obtain its reality through the reader performing along with the reactions offered by the text” (Iser 1970: 11, my translation). Wolfgang Iser stresses that an act of reading always involves the

³²³ Bayard 2007: 108

recipients' experience.³²⁴ experience is used to fill the *blank spaces* (*Leerstellen*) of meaning in the text; it is the only thing available to them for this purpose. It is then the scope of this process which is decisive. A text which does not offer any blank spaces must bore the reader: without them, the material lacks space for interpretation. In as far as the blank spaces are an invitation to participate,³²⁵ their absence can leave readers feeling excluded or at least unengaged, and "the world of the text will [...] be perceived as banal" (Iser 1970: 12ff, my translation). At the other end of the spectrum is fiction whose blank spaces overwhelm the recipients. Filling these gaps requires some effort, and if they are too big or too large in number for an individual, he or she will struggle to relate the world of the text to their own. This can be the intended effect, of course, as Iser points out for James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).³²⁶ For inspiring societal anxieties, however, Iser's theory can be seen as another appeal for the use of popular – but not pulp – fiction. The quality of a text which was in the introduction described as it having "enough 'meat'" (Humble 2012: 90) equals offering enough blank spaces; and the criteria of accessibility and potential for immersion reflect the necessity of limiting these voids at the same time. The middle ground is middlebrow fiction. In addition, the blank-spaces approach includes one more aspect which is highly relevant to the concept of a plausible threat: as mentioned above, by filling in the gaps readers participate in the act of making sense from the written words – rather than just witnessing it, or 'letting it happen to them'. They become contributors, which favours their perception of the contents as "not only probable but also realistic. For we are generally inclined to regard as real what we have created" (Iser 1970: 16, my translation).

³²⁴ Iser 1970: 12

³²⁵ Iser 1970: 16

³²⁶ "[T]he level of indeterminacy in Joyce's *Ulysses* seems to be out of control. [...] While the realistic novel of the 19th century was designed to convey an illusion of reality, the large amount of blank spaces in *Ulysses* makes all meaning ascribed to every-day life turn into illusion." (Iser 1970: 28ff, my translation)

In Chapter 2, societal anxieties have been defined as relating to the social structure a person lives in, its layout and order, as well as the subject's standing in relation to others. This means that a text inspiring such a feeling must depict something which puts this framework at some risk, and which is likely or credible enough for an audience not to dismiss it. One of the ways in which this has been found in fiction is as an abstraction, reflected in horror monsters and horror scenarios. In this genre, the "archetypical conflict between the principles of good and evil" stands for the wide variety of societal anxieties, from environmental issues to unemployment, as well as the people's "inadequacy in fighting their sources appropriately" (Baumann 1989: 340, my translation). For this reason, some critics have argued against a classification of Gothic fiction as escapist literature: "its attempts to come to grips with and probe matters of concern to the society in which that art-form or genre exists" (Punter 1980: 402) ties them closely to the every-day reality of the respective community. What is seen as confirmation of this assertion is the fact that horror tales both lend themselves to and call for 'updates' as worries and dreads change over time.³²⁷ This is demonstrated by the number of film remakes in the genre,³²⁸ and arguably by postmodern adaptations of classical Gothic material in novel form as well. The "corruption of morality", degeneration and presentation of "a self that in essence cannot openly exist within the conventional moral structures of society" (Beville 2009: 64f) of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), for example, is seamlessly transferred to the 1980s and put in context with the spreading fear of AIDS in the late 20th century in the 2002 novel *Dorian* by Will Self. These retellings can work in two ways at the same time: they can comment on current issues with the help of established material and simultaneously rejuvenate the latter by means of the former.

³²⁷ To some extent, this happens automatically if the text allows for it: Wolfgang Iser argues that every reading act means "updating the text" (1970: 6f, my translation) as the blank spaces are filled with the reader's personal experience.

³²⁸ Knöppler 2012

In other genres, societal anxieties have not necessarily been less present, but possibly less obvious, or at least not as much in the focus of critics. The same rules apply to them, however. There are timeless anxieties, those which arguably pertain to basic issues of human (social) existence,³²⁹ and others, which can become outdated as society changes. This is another set of categories which lacks clearly defined or impermeable boundaries. An additional crucial problem of this kind of classification is that the experience of anxieties, societal as well as others, is hardly universal – not even in the case of truly global dangers, which should, as one might argue, logically be relevant to every human being on the planet. Yet there are a number of reasons why an individual person may not be alarmed by them. They range from lack of information, or disbelief, to an occupation with other, more urgent worries and fears. This means that even if a writer finds a topic which potentially speaks to a large number of people, the text's effect on a particular recipient will be enhanced or diminished by their personal disposition: "All of us have selective hearing, and we retain what fits our individual psychic patterns" (Hearne 2011: 214). Tzvetan Todorov illustrates this phenomenon by explaining how "the author's narrative" only becomes "the reader's narrative" by passing through two other instances: first the "imaginary universe evoked by the author", and then the "imaginary universe constructed by the reader" (1990: 42). What happens in the reader's mind is not set in "the universe of the book itself but [in] that universe transformed, as it is found in the psyche of each individual" (Todorov 1990: 42).

This emphasises the premise that for an evocation of societal anxieties, a text must address a topic which the recipient already felt anxious or worried about before, at least to some degree. This does not mean that I, as a reader, inevitably lose all interest in a character's fate

³²⁹ Cf. Delumeau 1985: 19ff

otherwise. If the protagonist is ‘one of us’, and likeable at that, I am quite likely to find myself at the edge of my seat when I read about them fighting against the wicked schemes of greedy, un pitying rulers, for example, and I will cheer when justice is served in the end. It is not unthinkable that their adventures inspire me to ponder certain issues after I have finished reading the book, for example the importance of courage and my own capability of reacting appropriately in a dangerous situation. The thoughts and feelings the story has triggered in me could even lead to action – I might decide I need to acquire or improve certain skills so I would be able to stand my ground if I ever found myself in circumstances similar to the protagonist’s. Nevertheless, whether the text can inspire anxiety in me concerning the behaviour and practices of real-life politicians or tyrants depends on my basic attitude towards the issue. It is a question of me being prepared to feel anxious about the matter, with *prepared* not exactly meaning to imply a voluntary decision: the important component of the term here is the prefix. The decisive criterion is whether I am ‘made ready’ to be anxious in advance.

The indispensable pre-existence, even if only to a small degree, of societal anxieties is especially true for a narrative which is consumed as decidedly fictional. As discussed in the section on the concept of the willing suspension of disbelief, fiction has to overcome certain hurdles in order to obtain some import in the lives of the recipients beyond the duration of the reading experience. In the case of a fictional³³⁰ text, it might be argued, the threat has to be plausible in two different ways: it has to make sense within the logic of the story – a ‘*comminatio ex machina*’ can be assumed not to get under the recipients’ skins to an adequate extent – and it has to be credibly transferable to the lives of the readers. The latter is certainly more easily achieved by narratives set in worlds which do not differ significantly from the real world as perceived by the audience; familiar place names,

³³⁰ As discussed in the section ‘Contemporary legends as a genre of fiction’, fictionality is understood as ascribed from outside rather than an inherent quality.

allusions to historical or contemporary events, or the mentioning of well-known products or brand names, for instance, can facilitate this process. A story taken as fact does not have to perform this task in the same way: it could possibly even make more outrageous claims, shielded by its perceived factuality. However, even then is it important to base any attempt of emotional influence on the audience's predisposition. This is evidenced by advice given in the consumer and advertising guidebook on how to influence and convince a person which has been mentioned in Chapter 4. The authors' instruction for conveying a believable scenario to somebody is to start out with the collection of as much detailed information as possible regarding "which topics are on their personal agendas, i.e. where one can 'seize' them" (Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 46, my translation). It is only possible to 'seize' the people for whom my chosen topic is qualified to work as 'bait'. Regarding drama, Manfred Pfister comes to a very similar conclusion: the playwright's "persuasive strategies" are based on the audience's "assumed predispositions", which are "anticipated" and "built on" (1978: 25, my translations). It appears that there is little disagreement about the relevance of pre-existing feelings for the elicitation of emotions.

What this is not meant to imply is that literature cannot have a strong impact. In fact, it is argued that quite the opposite is the case: Händel, Kresimon and Schneider even claim that it is possible to dictate a person's feelings towards different issues if their respective disposition makes them receptive to emotional manipulation.³³¹ They do speak about more direct and personal interaction with a single individual or a small group of people. This limitation notwithstanding, their assertion points towards the fact that skilfully employed, strategies of inspiring certain mental states can make a text quite powerful in this respect. Douglas Bush pointed out that "in order to get sufficient purchase on our moral sensibility to accommodate it to the matters he presents, any writer must first take that sensibility as he finds it",

³³¹ Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 45f

and only if they can do this, they can become a “great writer [who] does not merely play upon the beliefs and propensities we bring to literature from life, but sensitizes, enlarges, and even transforms them” (1958: 30). The transformation aspect was also emphasised by Arthur W. Frank, who remarked that while they “do not invent” them, narratives undeniably “shape [people’s] fears and desires. They make fears more vivid, and they suggest appropriate and inappropriate objects of desire” (2010: 81). It is thus imaginable that stories can even set in motion something resembling a vicious cycle in the readers’ minds. Based on the proposition that “our beliefs are [in a sense] *motivated*” in as far as they “spring from our hopes, our goals, and our desires” (Sunstein 2014: 15, emphasis in original), negative emotions in particular appear to be able to put a person into a state of heightened susceptibility to information which favours the endurance of these feelings.³³² A series of texts or a single narrative of sufficient length can exploit these dynamics and use a plausible societal threat to amplify anxieties in an adequately responsive audience rather dramatically.

Another implication to consider, then, is that the concerns which people feel most anxious about do not have to equate to the facts,³³³ developments or circumstances endangering these people’s society structures and their positions in them in the most serious, most extensive or most urgent ways. For instance, “80 per cent of Britons [...] think that crime is rising, although it has been falling steadily since 1995” (Minton 2009: 132). One of the reasons is that some of the major threats are less prominently or more soberly discussed in the every-day lives of these people. This creates a slanted perception of the import and scope of dangers, overemphasising some and underrepresenting others. A prime

³³² Sunstein 2014: 15

³³³ When matters are discussed very heatedly, for instance “[i]n some moral panics, the threat can be entirely imaginary” (Victor 2006). Examples given by Jeffrey S. Victor are the Salem witch trials or the ‘satanic panic’ of the 1980s and 1990s.

example in the 21st century is the way terrorism is discoursed about in news media in comparison with other issues:

it is [...] true that most other forms of risk – many of which may be far more likely to occur – are simply not as newsworthy as terrorism. [...] [T]here is wide agreement on the ways that we might mitigate or reduce the threat of climate change (i.e. reduce our dependence on fossil fuels). The data informing these analyses is less speculative than the evidence used to inform assessments of the terrorist threat. And yet the contrast in the news narrative between the coverage of the two risks is striking: terrorism has received far more coverage and is treated with far more urgency and far less scepticism or scrutiny. (Lewis 2012: 260)

The resulting perception distortion is called *availability heuristic*³³⁴ in cognitive psychology. We assess a risk by using the information we have, and the emphasis on *availability* denotes that our conclusion concerning the likeliness and immediacy of a specific threat is based on how little time and effort it costs us to retrieve relevant information from our memories. Thus, “[p]resented with a survey that asks about the relative importance of issues, we are likely to give top billing to whatever the media emphasizes at the moment, because that issue instantly comes to mind” (Glassner 1999: 133).

Setting agendas

In socio-political theory and media communication studies, the term which is used for the public discourse’s influence is *agenda-setting*. It was coined by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in a 1972 study of the 1968 United States presidential campaign.³³⁵ They found that

[a]udiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it. For example, in reflecting what people say during a campaign, the mass media

³³⁴ Glassner 1999: 133

³³⁵ Dearing and Rogers 1996: 6f; a table giving an overview of the development of this field of research can be found on page 9 of the same book.

apparently determine the important issues. In other words, the mass media set the 'agenda' of the campaign. (McCombs and Shaw, quoted in Watson 2003: 129)

This term has acquired negative connotations with many, as for them it seems to imply ulterior motives, such as racial discrimination.³³⁶ It is indeed a powerful tool of social influence, as Dearing and Rogers have emphasised.³³⁷ At this point in this study, however, any political or strategic aspects are set aside. The fact that "public knowledge relies exclusively on media productions of reality" (Hardt 2004: 4) is acknowledged, as well as the consequence that everybody in the Western world is to some degree exposed to the media's agenda-setting. It is a relevant factor in the mechanisms which lead to a susceptibility to particular societal issues.

The facet which is central to this study is the *public agenda*, which was designed as an indicator of what issues the population is occupied with. It is determined with the help of surveys. The most prominent of them is the Gallup poll in which the key question is, "What is the most important problem facing this country [i.e. the USA] today?" (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 17). This open-ended question dates back to 1935,³³⁸ and has been asked at regular intervals since,³³⁹ it has also been adopted by polling institutions in other countries.³⁴⁰ The wording is crucial; Dearing and Rogers point out that changing the question to "What is the most important problem facing *you* today?" (1996: 47, emphasis in original) for example, or a stronger focus on the functions of the government, would yield quite different results.³⁴¹ The other aspects of agenda-setting can be measured more accurately, without opinion polls as elements of uncertainty. The number of relevant news items is used to measure *media agenda*; policy

³³⁶ Cf. "snopes: Keith Passmore" 2014 et al.

³³⁷ "Understanding how democracy works can be better achieved by studying the power of issues rather than the issue of power." (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 16)

³³⁸ Dearing and Rogers 1996: 45

³³⁹ Cf. "Most Important Problem | Gallup"

³⁴⁰ Soroka 2002

³⁴¹ Dearing and Rogers 1996: 47f

actions, budget allocations and US Congress debate time determine *policy agenda*; and *real-world indicators*, mostly statistical figures, are used in order to establish a factual basis for the respective issues.³⁴² The established consensus in this field of research, not quite surprisingly, is that “the issue hierarchy on the media agenda set[s] the issue hierarchy of the public agenda”, meaning that effectively, “*the media agenda sets the public agenda*” (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 49f, emphasis in original), with real-world indicators being of significantly little consequence to media and public agendas.³⁴³ Yet it would be wrong to assume an entirely unidirectional connection. Dearing and Rogers point out a “circularity of influence” (1996: 87) in agendas; others deem their model not to go far enough and contend that “the interactive nature of the agendas” (Watson 2003: 130) should be stressed even more. The concepts which have been devised by researchers in the field of agenda-setting mention, in addition, interference factors which can undermine the ‘influence monopoly’ of the mass media to some extent: “personal experience and interpersonal communication among elites and other individuals” (Figure 1.1 in Dearing and Rogers 1996: 5). Not only a person’s individual circumstances but also the exposure to the agendas of their respective folk groups can have the power to partially abrogate the agenda-setting effect of the news they read or hear. Our narrative habitus plays a role in this system, too; the groups we identify with, and socialise in, also direct us towards, or away from particular news channels or individual news sources. It is, for example, correct that internet media such as “[w]eblogs support a democratic-interactive community in which events and opinions not addressed in conventional journalistic [media] can be discussed” (Schmidt 2006: 119, my translation), but then it probably cannot be disputed that what has been created is a segmented public³⁴⁴ for individual networks, i.e. social groups. Only rarely will a person earnestly follow a particular political blog unless

³⁴² Dearing and Rogers 1996: 17ff

³⁴³ Dearing and Rogers 1996: 49f

³⁴⁴ Roth 2009: 107

they are already sensitive to its general political stance or the issues discussed.

Controversies, problems or dangers repeatedly brought up in public discourse influence what we think of as important and urgent, which can lead to a (latent) feeling of anxiety – a mental state which then makes us perceive a societal threat in a story as a plausible one. The question one could ask is whether narratives cannot play a different role in this process: can fiction set agendas? The answer would have to be an emphatic ‘yes and no’. Some may argue that with the blurred boundary between news and what we traditionally think of as fiction, and especially in view of the way computer-mediated fiction transcends boundaries, these narratives belong to media and their agenda in any case. This could be especially true for contemporary legends. Another point in favour of the notion is that a literary text can make use of the same “argumentative structures [as a] real speech situation” if they are “modified in a way specific to literature” (Steinhoff 2009: 111, my translations). In fact, a reader may even be more easily convinced by these structures in works of fiction because the awareness of fictionality can both “preclude [both] a rational examination of arguments” (Nünning 2009: 106, my translation) and the interference of one’s own personal values and interests.³⁴⁵ Furthermore, it is evident that political and social issues have always been important in literature, which thus has a tradition as a part of the public discourse of these matters. An example of this is given by Allardyce Nicoll, who outlines in historical analysis of English Drama³⁴⁶ how swift the reaction to the upheavals of the French Revolution was: “As early as 1789 a spectacular *Bastille* was in rehearsal at Covent Garden, while in August of that year the Royal Circus presented an entertainment entitled *The Triumph of Liberty, or the Destruction of the Bastille*” (quoted in Rummel 2012: 88). As it is employed

³⁴⁵ Nünning 2009: 106

³⁴⁶ “Nicoll, Allardyce. *A History of the English Drama 1600-1900. Vol. III, Late Eighteenth Century Drama 1750-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952. 54.” Reference given in Rummel 2012: 88.

to explore and cope with anxieties stemming from unsettling developments, literature can be part of the agenda-setting process. Dearing and Rogers say that “[t]he agenda-setting effect is not the result of receiving one or a few messages but due to the aggregate impact of a very large number of messages, each of which has a different content but all of which deal with the same general issue” (1996: 14f). This affirms the idea that as one of the ‘very large number of messages’, fiction can play a role in this mechanism. On the other hand, it also highlights that a single text is not in a position to achieve this effect without the benefit of the numerous other stories pertaining to the same matters. Therefore, a work of fiction cannot ‘set agendas’, it can merely be part of the process. Actually generating an anxiety in the readers from nothing, which would arguably mean having to first put the issue in question on their personal agendas and then, moreover, tapping into this worry or latent fear by putting a character they feel connected with in an adequate danger, is an impossible task.³⁴⁷ Consequently, for an individual reader, the reading of a text dealing with a societal issue which they could feel anxious about can only do either one of two things: it can be a part of the agenda-setting process, or inspire the respective emotion in them. It might accomplish neither, but never both.

The agenda-setting model is a very helpful one for understanding how ‘general’ communal anxieties can arise, and what role fiction can play in this context. It should not, however, be overestimated either. A particular issue may rate very high on the public agenda, yet still leave a particular recipient unmoved.

Textual content does not predict reader response or reader effect. Readers respond to and are affected by texts in ways

³⁴⁷ Looking at related media and related emotions, one finds single works of horror cinema which have been credited with producing *fear* of objects or situations one would not have considered dangerous before. Famous examples are the shower scene in *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960; cf. Baumann 1989: 83) or the effect which the film *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) had on the American public’s beach activities (cf. Lovgren 2005 et al.). Yet it has been argued that even in these cases, “existing fears [were] being taken and mirrored back to us, refractioned in multifaceted ways” (Baumann 1989: 83, my translation).

specific to each individual in the context of a particular time and place. Different people react to the same book differently. Furthermore, the same book may have different effects on the same reader at different times and under different circumstances. (Jenkins 2011: 451)

When reading for pleasure, the ‘bothersome’ human factor of our personal opinions and experience is most likely considerably more instrumental than when asked about socio-political matters in an opinion poll. As mentioned above, being immersed in a book is a state in which the focus is less on rational cognition than on intuition or emotion. Secondly, when a person is asked about the biggest problems facing their country, they may try and give a ‘good’, or even ‘the right’ answer. We may feel put on the spot when there is a person standing in front of us or interviewing us on the telephone, especially if they represent a reputable institution: our need to appear educated and urbane, or a feeling of having to provide them with ‘useful’ information, can supersede the imperative to answer truthfully and frankly.³⁴⁸ In addition, such a survey situation requires putting thoughts and feelings into words. Anxieties, with their strong element of diffuseness, probably prove a peculiar challenge in this respect. Availability can then be a factor again; one may simply give the answer one can most readily find words for. Again, a survey respondent’s aim to please may be a drawback, if it leads to them preferring to give any answer rather than none. Agenda-setting researchers in Japan and Germany have called attention to the fact that the media agenda has a “powerful impact on what individuals think that other people are thinking” (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 49) rather than necessarily on their own personal agendas. Especially if the interview situation is experienced as a social one, i.e. in a face-to-face interview, respondents may experience *emotional correctness*, the “pressure on an individual to be seen to feel the same emotion as others” (“emotional correctness” 2009). The ‘third-person effect’ identified by the German and

³⁴⁸ Survey specialists are aware of the problem, of course. They have strategies of minimising this error source, for example asking about the same issues multiple times in the course of an interview using different wordings, including reverse wording.

Japanese scholars is described as follows by Händel, Kresimon and Schneider: “the phenomenon that people regard the influence of certain media on third parties as substantially stronger than the influence of the same media on themselves” (2007: 54, my translation) because they think of themselves as unerring and imperturbable.³⁴⁹ For inspiring societal anxieties in readers of fiction, the duty to be ‘emotionally correct’ is mostly negligible; it can conceivably come into play in a reading situation which one experiences conjointly with others, but such circumstances probably impede immersion intense enough to have a strong emotional impact. However, the third-person effect is interesting because of its twofold implications: on the one hand, people can be influenced by many more different factors, and considerably more acutely, than they themselves believe or are able to anticipate. On the other hand, for writers it means that they may overestimate their texts’ influence on other people. The implied reader could be less easily swayed than they think.

There is a very fine line to navigate if one sets out to portray a plausible societal threat in a work of fiction. As mentioned before, a story can inspire anxiety against the writer’s intentions. However, if they aspire to evoke this emotion in readers, they have to find the perfect middle ground between subtleness and a sufficiently menacing scenario. Where exactly the line is located depends very much on the subject matter, and again on the intended readership. It can be wise to cloud the goal of emotional manipulation, for example by “dealing with fundamental philosophical issues in an appropriately complex form” instead of “enunciating an explicit statement concerning a concrete political situation” (Steinhoff 2009: 109f, my translations). Another piece of advice is to avoid preaching: “The various measures of rhetoric and psychological persuasion must [...] be dosed with the utmost care” (Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 53, my translation). If the reader is to be convinced of the threat one proposes,

³⁴⁹ Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 55

they must not feel patronised for even a single moment. Otherwise the text might even provoke defiance: once recipients get the impression that they are the target of manipulation attempts, they are likely to turn away and refuse to accept even completely different aspects of the narrative.³⁵⁰ Interestingly, this effect has also been observed in quite contrary situations: when worried people are told that their concerns are not justified, i.e. that they should not consider a certain threat plausible. “It is well established that when people are given information suggesting that they have no reason to fear what they previously thought to be a small risk, their fear often increases.” (Sunstein 2014: 56) It transpires that, irrespective of directionality, people simply do not enjoy being told what to believe or feel. This may not be an astonishing finding, but one worth taking seriously.

³⁵⁰ Cf. Händel, Kresimon and Schneider 2007: 52ff

PART TWO

7. The recipe in practice

The aim of this study was to attain a consistent theory, from a wide background of quite diverse academic fields, which is also applicable in practice. In this second part, the practicability will be examined on the basis of analyses of a range of texts. The novels and legends discussed are contemporary in language and themes: the novels stem mostly from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and for the legends, current examples or current versions of recurring classics are used. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which was published in 1968 and is the oldest novel analysed in this study, stretches the given value for 'contemporary' to some extent; and other texts too have been chosen for their borderline qualities: they can be used to construe the edges of categories rather than define the middle fields. For all selection criteria, the aim was to cover a wide range in order to demonstrate the versatility of the recipe as outlined in the previous chapter. The list of texts therefore comprises works with very different target groups. In addition, some of them will prove not to employ strategies for inspiring societal anxieties, or at least not to their full extent. These examples have been included to highlight the differences in textual designs and, arguably, intentions.

As pointed out in Chapter 2.2, popular fiction, as well as contemporary legends, can be categorised with the help of key genres. Therefore, these genres have been chosen to provide the structure for this

part of the study, and the foundation for the selection of texts. One addition has been made to the list: narratives dealing with terrorism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. It is not contended that this new genre will necessarily find its way into future classifications of popular fiction, yet its present pervasiveness demands that these novels and contemporary legends are taken into account as well. As a result, five groups of texts are discussed here: the new genre of post-9/11 fiction,³⁵¹ and the established central genres of (Gothic) horror, science fiction, romance, and thrillers. Each chapter consists of a brief examination of the main characteristics with pertinence to strategies of inspiring societal anxieties, followed by analyses of contemporary legends and novels. The texts' different ways of character presentation in order for the readers to make an emotional connection with them are examined, as well as the respective depictions of societal threats.

³⁵¹ For a discussion of the term *post-9/11 fiction*, see Pöhlmann 2010: 52. Issues of genre classification are debated in Holloway 2008: 107ff et al.

8. New genre: post-9/11 fiction

If there is one topic most closely associated with fear and related states of mind in the Western world of the 21st century, it is terrorism. The events of 11 September 2001, together with the way they have been processed, and their domestic and geopolitical consequences, have shaped the communal, even continent-spanning, experience of certain emotions. This is manifest in the way the terrorist attacks have provided new emblems of fear. For instance, the first, hardcover, edition of historian Joanna Bourke's book, quite simply entitled *Fear: A cultural History*,³⁵² featured an image of a mushroom cloud, presumably from a nuclear explosion, on its cover. The cover design of the paperback edition³⁵³ looks quite different: there is a blue sky with few clouds – and a single aeroplane flying across it. It can be assumed that this imagery would not have been used prior to the autumn of 2001. The plane does not stand for aviophobia but for terrorism.³⁵⁴ Post-2001, planes are irrevocably associated with terrorist attacks, and thus with an important part of contemporary culture of fear.³⁵⁵ What has been said about blurbs in the introduction also applies to

³⁵² Bourke 2005

³⁵³ Bourke 2006

³⁵⁴ There was, however, an increased disinclination to air travel among the general population following the attacks, suggesting that the latter did influence the former (cf. Begley 2004).

³⁵⁵ Fear of terrorism appears not to have superseded the fear of nuclear war, but it has moved into the foreground in public discussion and, thus, awareness (cf. Lyons 2005).

the choice of cover art for a book: both are part of marketing strategies. A picture of an aircraft in a bright blue sky is apparently regarded as the adequate tableau to speak to consumers and stimulate them to buy a book dealing with fear. The prominence of terrorism is also evidenced in the number of contemporary legends dealing with this topic and related issues. If “literature and other forms of art are important sites of response to terrorism” (Rothberg 2008: 123), these legends are certainly a part of this. They can be one element of a coping mechanism: “In disasters one of the first things that men seek, after saving themselves, is news. [...] If sufficient news is not available, it may develop spontaneously” (Shibutani 1966: 31). Due to the speed with which this can happen, an abundance of legends pertaining to a particular event speaks for the severity of the emotional impact of sudden crises such as acts of terrorism or natural disasters.³⁵⁶ This is also reflected in the categories into which legends are often sorted when they are presented as compilations. Books or websites on contemporary legends feature separate chapters or subordinate sites for stories pertaining to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.³⁵⁷ Everything points towards terrorism as a (if not the) major focus of communally experienced Western-World fear. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the goal of terrorism is not to conquer or overthrow the enemy directly, in combat, but to effect the severest possible shock on their economy and psychology.³⁵⁸ For this purpose, “[t]errorists want lots of people watching, not lots of people dead” (Brian Jenkins, quoted in Richardson 2006: 141), and this was certainly achieved on 11 September 2001, “one of the most photographed and filmed days of the twenty-first century” (Apitzsch 2010: 97). Terrorism has been at the top of the public

³⁵⁶ The number of legends concerning the 2005 hurricane Katrina and its aftermath is so large that on the respective snopes.com page, the stories are sorted into individual sub-categories (“charity”, “politics”, “crime”, etc.) to aid orientation (“snopes: Hurricane Katrina”).

³⁵⁷ Cf. Barber 2005; Barber 2007; Wiebe 2003; “snopes: Urban Legends Reference Pages” et al. A counter-example is Jan Harold Brunvand’s 2004 book, in which legends regarding the attacks are not given special prominence; they are included in in the chapter “Chills Up Your Spine” (Brunvand 2004: 88ff).

³⁵⁸ Richardson 2006: 6

agenda in the US and Europe ever since, and as the “deliberate targeting of civilians” (Richardson 2006: 6) as well as a random choice of targets among them³⁵⁹ are significant parts of terrorism, a universal feeling of being threatened appears not to be unjustified.

In consideration of all of this evidence, one might think that terrorism novels and legends are the most adequate material to use in this study.³⁶⁰ Yet this assumption proves wrong at closer inspection: the plane on the cover of Joanna Bourke’s book is used as a symbol for fear, not anxiety. It has been mentioned that it is not often the case that writers consistently follow a strict separation of the two terms, but in this example the choice of terminology in the book title appears to be perfectly appropriate – beyond the fact that the monosyllable makes for a catchier heading. Corey Robin elaborates on the distinction in his book carrying the same succinct title.³⁶¹ He explains that the Cold War was instrumental in making the Western world’s identity, and that in this regard, despite the tense political atmosphere, it was “a reassuring time” (Robin 2004: 143). The fact that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc robbed the West of a defining ‘other’ for its self-perception has been mentioned in Chapter 3.3. Robin, quoting David Brooks, emphasises that this period from 1991 on, rather than the preceding one, is seen as a time of anxiety, “insecurity and self-doubt” (2004: 143) in retrospect:

By inflicting deadly violence and rousing intense fear, the 9/11 terrorists, according to [many] commentators, promised to deliver the United States from its tedium and selfishness, its individualism and despair. For Brooks, ‘the fear that is so prevalent in the country’ was ‘a cleanser, washing away a lot of the self-indulgence of the past decade.’ Revivifying fear,

³⁵⁹ “As today’s terrorists have learned, random violence has a much bigger impact than discriminate violence, because if nobody is selected than nobody is safe.” (Richardson 2006: 24)

³⁶⁰ During the course of my work on this study, it was striking that both in university colloquiums and private conversations, people most often brought up terrorism or spiders as examples of common or communal fears. Incidentally, these are also the two topics most frequently named in a 2005 survey concerning the fears of American teenagers (Lyons 2005).

³⁶¹ Robin 2004

Brooks argued, would now supersede crippling anxiety, replacing a disabling emotion with a bracing passion. 'We have traded the anxieties of affluence for the real fears of war,' he wrote. (Robin 2004: 157)

There are valid points to make for both the Cold-War and the directly subsequent eras to be categorised as times of political or societal anxieties. However, there can be little debate about the attacks of 11 September 2001 heralding a period of fear. The criteria cited in Chapter 2.1 for the distinction between fear and anxiety are the immediacy of the threat and the intensity or level of occupation. With regard to both these aspects, the atmosphere immediately after the attacks was one of a high level of fear. Terrorists were perceived as an imminent physical threat, not a vague, potentially dangerous concept.³⁶² With the high level to which it occupied the minds of the people in the US and in other Western countries "came a loss of perspective and, ultimately, a willingness to support a response that was destined to make the situation worse" (Richardson 2006: 141). The reason is that a threat which is so present in one's mind demands action, possibly *any* action. All of this is reflected in storytelling, of course. Brian A. Monahan, who studied the media coverage of the attacks, found that in the first week after 9/11, "[a]ll but a few of NBC's news reports [...] came from one of two categories, which I refer to as *responsibility and retaliation* and *dealing and healing*" (2010: 64, emphasis in original). Most post-9/11 fiction, as well as contemporary legends, falls in these same categories,³⁶³ both of which are little to nothing to do with inspiring societal anxieties.

Dealing and healing – novels and contemporary legends

Texts whose intent is 'dealing and healing' are so unlikely to evoke these emotions that the two approaches can be seen as mutually exclusive.

³⁶² Cf. Richardson 2006: 147

³⁶³ "Post-9/11 novels often either point to the domestic realm and the problems of trauma resolution, or turn – even more than before – towards fictions of migration that deal with matters of immigration, otherness and strangeness, thereby reacting to the political developments in the US" (Liewald 2012: 246f).

These stories are only relevant for this study in as far as they can serve as counter-examples. Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2008), for example, aims to break down rather than reinforce folk group boundaries:

even in its characterizations of terrorists, *Falling Man* does not maintain an unequivocally binary opposition. Instead, it works with dichotomies that are not exactly deconstructed but shot through with cross-links and inversions to such an extent that readers cannot fully recognize the problematic constructions of American victim versus Islamist terrorist that they know from mainstream media reports since 9/11. (Pöhlmann 2010: 53)³⁶⁴

DeLillo does not hesitate to put forward the notion that healing will not be possible for some; but his novel is certainly not designed to excite an even more fearful mood in the readers than they are likely to experience already when approaching a book dealing with this subject matter. The 'dealing and healing' category also includes literary attempts to retrace and comprehend the workings of terrorists' minds: for example, Martin Amis' *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* (2006), Kiran Nagarkar's *God's Little Soldier* (2006), or John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006).³⁶⁵ Knowing a person's point of view, or understanding their motivations, tends to make them less menacing. One of the most frightening aspects of the 'army of faceless terrorists' is that even if an individual perpetrator is thwarted in their plans, there are legions of others ready to step in. However, if one knows what 'makes them tick', one may just be able to stop the next ones as well. The fact that in reality the interplay of social influences and psychological predispositions and mechanisms is complex, and different from individual to individual, is irrelevant. Even a reader who is aware of the fallibility of generalisations may experience a calming effect when being provided with some answer or

³⁶⁴ Yet Pöhlmann is not convinced that DeLillo is entirely successful in this attempt: "the novel nevertheless at crucial moments collapses some characters' identities into one association while allowing the identities of others to remain multiple" (Pöhlmann 2010: 63).

³⁶⁵ Outside the English-speaking world, examples of literary approaches taking one further step back, i.e. novels focussing on persons who in turn try and understand the inner workings of terrorists, include Yasmina Khadra's *L'attentat* (2006) and Christoph Peters' *Ein Zimmer im Haus des Krieges* (2006).

explanation, or even just speculations.³⁶⁶ In the same way that a visible, tangible ‘monster’ evokes less terror than the vague presence of a yet-unseen one, the feeling of being able to analyse a danger on a cognitive level eases the mind.

It is noteworthy that in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks, the rare phenomenon of a multitude of positive legends could be observed alongside the vast number of horrific and disturbing stories. As mentioned before, it is usually the case that tales which evoke negative emotions prevail, because disgusting or upsetting tales are ‘more tellable’. Yet the more distress real-life experience causes, it seems, the higher is the demand for reassuring narratives: “the urge to take something good from the awfulness that was 11 September 2001 serves as motivation to look to uplifting stories from that day” (Barbara Mikkelson, on “snopes: Pentagon Daycare” 2013). In this context, the healing-and-dealing legends tend to be stories of heroism and humanity: for instance of Marines saving small children from danger,³⁶⁷ or of actor and former fireman Steve Buscemi helping out as part of the relief units on the ground.³⁶⁸ Both these examples demonstrate how particular occupational groups, which had already been viewed in a generally positive light before the events, came to be aggrandised in the public opinion – possibly to ‘balance’ the inapprehensible evil that was the ‘others’, i.e. the terrorists. These were acts of group categorisations in an attempt to come to terms with a complex and emotionally overwhelming situation: their goal was to provide reassurance and hope, the very opposite of anxiety.

³⁶⁶ Cf. Pöhlmann 2010

³⁶⁷ “snopes: Pentagon Daycare” 2013

³⁶⁸ “snopes: Steve Buscemi Assisted” 2015

Responsibility and retaliation – novels and contemporary legends

In the ‘responsibility and retaliation’ category, one can find an abundance of conspiracy theories and attributions of blame; some of them do indeed reflect other societal anxieties, for example the mistrust of big corporations such as Microsoft, rumoured to have been involved in the actual planning and execution of the attacks,³⁶⁹ or Citibank, which was said to be owned by Osama bin Laden.³⁷⁰ In addition, some people used the highly emotional atmosphere to convince other people of their own particular socio-political agendas, which are not necessarily to do with terrorism as such, and also appear to be imbued with anxieties:

Television evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson said that liberal civil liberties groups, feminists, pagans, homosexuals, and abortion rights supporters bear partial responsibility for the terrorist attacks on the USA because their actions have turned God's anger against America. (“snopes: Falwell and Robertson” 2008)

Tales of retaliation included rumours in late 2001 about a new *Rambo* film, again starring Sylvester Stallone, in which he flies to Afghanistan and takes revenge on the Taliban.³⁷¹ It is no surprise that this sub-genre is suited for rather blunt approaches. In the tradition of “pulp magazine superheroes of the past written for ‘kids of all ages’” (Server 2002: 65), there are post-9/11 thrillers featuring “the action-packed plots and black-and-white characters of classic pulp storytelling” (Server 2002: 64). One of these is Tom Clancy and Grant Blackwood’s *Dead or Alive* (2010). The “animating fantasy at the heart” of this book is to find and kill Osama bin Laden, “the evil SOB” (Rutten 2010). Clancy’s heroes are “Republican fantasy figures”: “brave, morally sure – even self-righteous – defender[s] of truth, justice and the

³⁶⁹ “snopes: Wingdings” 2005

³⁷⁰ “The confluence of three factors (Osama bin Laden's fabled wealth, the average person's mystification about matters related to high finance or the stock market, and ‘one Arab is the same as another’ confusion between bin Laden and Saudi prince Alwaleed bin Talal who has a 4.8% holding of Citibank's stock) fuel rumors of this nature.” (Barbara Mikkelson, on “snopes: Osama bin Laden and Citibank” 2008)

³⁷¹ “snopes: Rambo Tackles Osama bin Laden” 2009

military-industrial way” (Server 2002: 65), who “always know who the bad guys are and just when and where to shoot” (Rutten 2010). With this, they do more than simply cater to visions of revenge; these characters also represent a reassuringly simple view of geopolitics. This is their key function: to restore confidence. In the world of the stories – *Dead or Alive* is part of a series with a long history, going all the way back to *The Hunt for Red October* (1984)³⁷² – the adversaries are easily identifiable. Within the United States, they are ‘weak’ left-wing politicians, and the extraterritorial enemies either belong to villainous groups – criminal or terrorist³⁷³ – and/or come from a country (currently)³⁷⁴ perceived as evil. Besides their unambiguous heinousness, another important characteristic is that they can be defeated through the “fetishistically military heroics” (Fenster 1999: 114) of Clancy’s brave Americans. Both traits are designed to comfort and encourage the readers by lending reinforced credence to the US’s (or in more general terms, the Western world’s) supremacy. Server states that this was the message of Clancy’s books throughout the Cold War and beyond, when he “simply turned elsewhere to motivate his stories of international crises” (2002: 65). The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 clearly relieved retaliation narratives of the burden of having to present appropriate conflicts. Yet the emotional purpose has stayed the same: like stories of dealing and healing, albeit in different manners, responsibility-and-retaliation tales intend to reassure, not to worry. In fact, the two different types of typical post-9/11 texts reflect the two antonyms of anxiety mentioned in Chapter 2.1: hope and (Hobbesian) contempt. Fictional characters successfully coping with and recovering from attacks, as well as stories of extraordinary individuals acting bravely in the face of danger, convey optimistic anticipation; and the other sort, the ones which prove the

³⁷² “Tom Clancy”

³⁷³ Server 2002: 65

³⁷⁴ Cf. Brook 2014. In this case, ‘country’ can also mean ‘region’. This is especially relevant regarding the “265 million people who reside in [...] the 22 Arab states” (Shaheen 2001: 2). For analyses of pre- and post-9/11 depictions of Arabs, see Shaheen 2001; Alsultany 2012 et al.

enemy to be inferior to one's own military, mental, and/or muscle power demonstrate that the threat may not be quite dismissible but still 'nothing that can stop us'.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist – a counter example

If one wishes to evoke anxieties with the help of a narrative, one has to go into a different direction – away from both 'responsibility and retaliation' and 'dealing and healing'. In fact, one may have to move away, temporally and/or geographically, from real-life events and thus create the necessary emotional distance. This may seem like a contradictory point when, for inspiring societal anxieties, the close connection to the lives of the recipients has been highlighted as a most crucial factor. However, a very high level of fear is marked by it occupying most, if not all, of the subject's mental capacities. Such a state leaves too little space for the reflection, unconscious as it may happen, necessary to bring forward anxiety. In this way, Wolfgang Iser's blank spaces play an important role again: terrorism and fundamentalism spelled out can create fear, but voids – possibilities – can have a longer-lasting effect in the form of anxiety.

A terrorism short novel making ample use of blank spaces and the uncertainties which come with them is Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). This text's many gaps are part of the reason why, it has been argued, the novel can "instill fear in the reader" (Liewald 2012: 246, emphasis in original). The recipient, who is put in the role of the silent listener in the story, is confronted with the ambiguity of the blank spaces in the narrative and has to "fill [them] with his own potential reactions" (Liewald 2012: 252). The narrator's – Changez' – monologue is quite frank; he does not appear to hold back much information or to censor his thoughts. His direct address bears some resemblance to the epistolary mode, as do particular linguistic features such as the repetition of questions for the benefit of the audience who only gets to hear this one narrative

voice. Liewald also points out the narrator's use of emotive language.³⁷⁵ In all of this, Changez' story is part of an "intimate conversation, as the reader and the American listener become one" (Halaby 2007). Yet as much as tale draws readers in, it still keeps them at a distance at the same time. Despite the insight into Changez' thoughts and feelings, readers are denied thorough immersion into his world or identification with him, because they are constantly made aware of the fact that they are 'the other', possibly even the dangerous other. Changez only invites the listener to become witness to his tale of disenchantment with the United States, not to identify with it.

If the text is hesitant in giving readers the chance to connect with the protagonist, it is even stricter in its negation of a distinct, plausible threat. The crucial point is that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* refuses to label the 'good' and the 'bad guys'. We know something is about to happen at the end of the story, but we never learn who it is that poses the danger. In addition to Changez and the listener, there is also the waiter, who "is rapidly closing in" (Hamid 2007: 184). What is more, not only the black part of a would-be black-and-white world view remains unidentified. The text does address socio-political anxieties relevant to the "imagined Western audience" (Liewald 2012: 253), but it does this in order to "[direct] our attention to our own stereotypes and arrogance" (Liewald 2012: 255). We are denied the luxury, as it were, of a society worth worrying about. In the section on moral panics in Chapter 3.3, one of the functions of folk devils named was the way in which they serve as an antonym to one's own group: the outsiders' detestableness highlights the in-group's ethical and moral superiority. None of this is granted in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The dilemma is reminiscent of Hanif Kureishi's character's famous utterance, "So who's the fanatic now?" (Kureishi 2010: 127)

³⁷⁵ Liewald 2012: 252

Incendiary

It has been said that no book published after 2001 can be written or read without the terrorist attacks of 11 September being at least subliminally present.³⁷⁶ Yet it could be argued that this applies primarily to American literature. It is also noteworthy that, in the UK book market, there appears to be more room for humour even when broaching very serious issues such as fundamentalism or terrorism. Both pre- and post-2001 novels attest to that, for example Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), David Llewellyn's *Eleven* (2006), or Chris Cleave's *Incendiary* (2005). This might be explained with typical national traits; yet not the source but the effect of this is relevant: comic relief can inhibit the recipients' numbing to the horrors or griefs portrayed, or bridle their negative emotions so they do not escalate into blind fear, for example.

Incendiary is in fact a rare example of a post-9/11 novel in which one can find the recipe for inspiring societal anxieties applied. As a British book, it would have benefited from the geographical distance from actual terrorist attacks,³⁷⁷ were it not for the unlucky coincidence of it having been published on 07 July 2005, the day of the London bombings. The novel's reception was definitely overshadowed by these events. The fictional suicide bomber attacks on football fans carried out in the then new Emirates Stadium were simply too close to reality.³⁷⁸ The perceived threat was probably too immediate, too physical and too present in people's

³⁷⁶ "One of the interesting things about fiction since 2001 is that the event was such a fissure in the history of the world that it dates books in a particular way – it is immediately clear whether a book is set before or after 2001. There are glancing references to it even in books of different genres, or where the events have almost no bearing on the plot of the novel ..." (R.B. 2011).

³⁷⁷ By this, attacks specific to post-9/11 literature are meant. Britain, especially London, does of course have a history of terrorist incidents with different political backgrounds.

³⁷⁸ "I wrote about something that could happen, and then it did happen, and now I feel that I'm fundamentally tied, probably for the rest of my life, to those events,' [Chris Cleave] says. [...] Rebecca Carter, Cleave's British editor, has heard accusations (from the press, mainly) that 'Incendiary' is sensationalist and insensitive in a time of mourning." (de la Torre 2005)

minds for there to be room for the possibility of anxiety, rather than fear. For this study, however, this stroke of fate can fortunately be ignored, as the reception is excluded from analysis. Looking merely at the text instead, one finds strategies for creating both an emotional connection between reader and protagonist, and a plausible threat.

The first noticeable element is the novel's (variation of the) epistolary form: the narrator addresses her story to "Dear Osama" (Cleave 2006: 3). These very first two words highlight the novel-in-letters form, and at the same time mark its divergence from the classical standard design – and both these aspects are used to create a bond between the character and her audience. The reader gets the full benefit of the insight into the epistler's thoughts and feelings. The fact that it is not, however, a 'proper' letter – not actually meant to be sent and replied to, nor signed so we never learn the character's name – lessens the few aspects of the epistolary form which can create a distance between character and reader. Firstly, it avoids the potential awkwardness of the issue of time and place of writing: her story is in fact written entirely in retrospect, and consists of only one long letter. The act of writing is discussed in the text and arguably put into a more believable context than, for example, the idea of her writing from her hospital bed in the immediate aftermath of the attacks might have been. Lacking social contacts and not being able to afford the electricity to watch TV, she spends her evenings writing down her story in a letter to Osama bin Laden.³⁷⁹ The final pages are written "on my lunch hour. [...] I'm sitting in the staff room eating Tesco's Value mincepies and finishing off this letter." (Cleave 2006: 236) Secondly, and more importantly, this unusual letter is free from two processes which can create a perceived distance for the recipients: the narrative is neither concerned with the production of carefully worded, complete, coherent sentences and paragraphs, nor with carefully selecting the quality and quantity of information it provides. As

³⁷⁹ Cleave 2006: 229

mentioned before, a stream of consciousness can convey a stronger sense of intimacy than an epistolary novel, but also deny the reader immersion in the text because of its ‘muddled’ shape. One could argue that *Incendiary* finds some middle ground between the two forms, in a way making use of the best of both worlds. Moreover, the text’s Osama bin Laden is a disembodied, almost preternatural figure to whom the narrator not only tells her tale but also addresses a confession. When she discusses her extramarital affairs, she adds: “My husband and my boy never found out oh thank you god. But I can say it now they’re both dead and I don’t care who reads it” (Cleave 2006: 9).³⁸⁰

In addition to this insight into the mind and psyche of the narrator, strategies of presenting her as likeable include the sympathy her pain over losing her husband and son in the terrorist attacks arguably evokes, and her not joining in with the anti-Muslim sentiments of her environment in the wake of the attacks. In hospital, she befriends nurse Mena whose religion and country of origin are quite irrelevant to her (“She lived in Peckham but her family was from the East. Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan or one of those Stans anyway. She told me 2 or 3 times the name of the place but I never could recall it.” Cleave 2006: 60), and gets quite upset on learning that nurse Mena has lost her job because as a Muslim she is not allowed to work in a security-relevant position anymore. The narrator also expresses her objection to other people’s overt racism.³⁸¹ Yet she is far from perfect, which can also make her more likeable in the eyes of the readers, as mentioned in Chapter 4. Her extramarital affairs may stretch some readers’ affection; and the mentioning of her sexual abuse as a child may appear

³⁸⁰ Yet on the same page she states the following about the person who abused her in her childhood: “It was one of my mum’s boyfriends [...] but I won’t write his name or he’ll get in trouble” (Cleave 2006: 9f). These incoherences may have an alienating effect on some readers, although they are in line with the overall rather careless style of the narrator.

³⁸¹ Cleave 2006: 95. When she uses ethnic slurs (e.g. “the Japs”, Cleave 2006: 117), she merely echoes the word choice of other characters (Cleave 2006: 86) in a sarcastic way; when first encountering the Japanese tourists, she simply calls them “the Japanese” (Cleave 2006: 84).

like an over-simplified reason, put into the text not quite subtly or elegantly. In the course of her tale, she keeps pointing out her unfaithfulness and condemns herself for having sex with another man when the bombs killing her husband and son exploded: “I was what the *Sun* would call a DIRTY LOVE CHEAT [*sic*]” (Cleave 2006: 9). With this, the text is again navigating a fine line regarding the readers’ fondness for the main character: on the one hand, it works as a constant reminder of what may be perceived as a serious moral flaw, but on the other hand her ceaseless self-reproach can increase the sympathy her audience feels towards her. On a different level, but similarly double-edged, the narrator’s diction and (lack of) punctuation can either engage or deter readers. Her sociolect is clearly intended to give her a realistic voice, as are the reference to brand names, TV shows, etc. However, for a full effect, *Incendiary* demands readers to not only be sympathetic with the working-class language used by the narrator but also to accept the instances in which, for the sake of a punchline, she steps out of character and makes remarks not in line with her supposed educational background:

she stood there trembling and looking like the things you want to forget about the 1980s. Actually I suppose what I mean Osama is the things we want to forget like Duran Duran and the Thompson Twins not the things you want to forget like the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. (Cleave 2006: 146)

If the text can inspire societal anxiety in its readership, i.e. if the recipe is applied successfully, the first criterion to fulfil is a connection between character and recipient. Overall, *Incendiary*’s narrator can be classified as an anti-hero: in this case, a strong perceived connection is more likely to be based on likeability than on identification. There are certainly elements in the text which are qualified to speak to readers on the latter level as well, however. The fond, yet usually slightly self-effacing, appreciation of all things British, as well as the love-hate relationship with London, which are articulated in the text, are surely meant to resonate with an audience spanning social classes:

So I used to just sit there Osama watching the telly and hoping it would stay boring. When your husband works in bomb disposal you want the whole world to stay that way. Nothing ever happening. Trust me you want a world run by *Richard & Judy*. (Cleave 2006: 7)

Social class, rather than multiculturalism, fundamentalism, or terrorism, is the novel's central theme, and the narrator is quite outspoken about her position – “If you're interested Osama [...] look up *chav pikey ned* or *townie* in Google” (Cleave 2006: 4, emphasis in original) – although she is emphatic about her and her family not being at the very lowest social level. Even without speculations about the actual social reach of popular fiction one can assume that the majority of its readership will not identify with this self-categorisation of the narrator, given that according to the 2011 survey, “71% of people define themselves as middle class” (“Why is ‘chav’...” 2011). However, as the story progresses most upper-class characters are presented in a way to make the audience feel as remote from them as she does; and readers are arguably more likely to wear more *H&M* clothes, like the narrator, than *Helmut Lang's*.³⁸²

For an analysis of what is presented as the central threat in *Incendiary*, terrorism plays an interesting role. In this novel, it is used to set the atmosphere for a conflict that is not directly related. The protagonist having been introduced, the fictional attacks in the football stadium occur very early on in the book. The main character's account of her going into the site of the bombing, looking for her son, is related in quite gory detail. It includes descriptions of injuries, dead bodies (“and bits of bodies”, Cleave 2006: 49), the smell of burned flesh, and her “crawling to find [her] boy up a waterfall of blood” (Cleave 2006: 49) as well as suffering fractures and internal injuries from being trampled. The final moments of this scene are of two injured opposing fans fighting over the body parts of a dead football player.³⁸³ There is no mention of an immediate threat of secondary terrorist

³⁸² Cf. Cleave 2006: 189 et passim

³⁸³ Cleave 2006: 50

attacks on the site; there are no reinforcement troops of terrorists waiting. In addition, the fact that both the protagonist's husband and son are dead has already been established. The gruesome account of the protagonist does not serve to produce the expectant emotions of fear or anxiety as immediate reaction. Instead, the intended effect is one of *scaring* the readers, as described Chapter 2: something unexpected, frightening and unpleasant is happening, and the text passage is designed to trigger a physical reaction such as a shudder or goose bumps. The repulsion the recipient is anticipated to experience has the function of determining the mood, and make them more susceptible to other negative feelings. In this case, however, these are not geared towards a fear of terrorism.

The narrative touches upon a range of socio-political issues in connection with the attacks, for example the state of the British health system,³⁸⁴ or the way in which terrorism “causes us to emphasize the harm it inflicts as compared to other tragedies” (Richardson 2006: 147).³⁸⁵ It also has one of its characters, who is a police chief superintendent, comment on the futility of the ‘war on terror’.³⁸⁶ The most prominent topic of these are the heightened security measures: in the aftermath of the attacks in *Incendiary*, besides Muslims not being allowed to work in particular jobs, bridges are closed, a curfew is introduced, there is helicopter surveillance over the Houses of Parliament, and the sky over London is full of barrage balloons. The narrator, however, hardly comments on social or political implications, such as the restrictions on personal freedom. Her quips (“You can’t leave a ciggie butt unattended these days without someone coming and doing a controlled explosion on it”; Cleave 2006: 176) do match her

³⁸⁴ Cleave 2006: 56ff

³⁸⁵ Richardson goes on to point out “the fact that six times as many Americans are killed by drunk drivers every year than were killed by the terrorists on 9/11” (Richardson 2006: 147), which is paralleled in *Incendiary* by nurse Mena’s grievance over the number of people dying of lung cancer: “33 times more people than died on May Day die mainly avoidable deaths every single year. [...] But does this country declare war on smoking?” (Cleave 2006: 62)

³⁸⁶ Cleave 2006: 182

presumed generally apolitical stance. Yet there is one issue which is reflected upon in considerably more detail, and that is the difference between the rich and the poor people in London. The ‘Shield of Hope’, i.e. the barrage balloons, is an apt example of this. It is called ‘terrible’ and ‘grotesque’ when it is first mentioned,³⁸⁷ but notably not by the narrator herself. It is again nurse Mena, who experiences other patients’ anti-Muslim sentiments and points out “the nature of this madness. It fills the sky with barrage balloons and people’s eyes with hate” (Cleave 2006: 63). The narrator feels sorry for Mena but does not reflect or comment on the socio-political concerns at all. They are mentioned once in the text but appear to be soon forgotten by the narrative voice. The only time *Incendiary*’s epistler herself comments on the barrage balloons in a way other than as a personal remark, observing significance for the societal structure instead, is when she looks at them from the London Eye:

The wheel carried on turning. After a while you could see over the tops of the buildings on both sides of the river and look out over North London all white stone and money and South London all dirty brown high-rise bricks. From up where we were you could see how many cables there were rising up from the north side of the river compared to the south. It was like the people who built the Shield of Hope weren’t really all that hopeful about Brixton and Camberwell and Lewisham. (Cleave 2006: 181)

The divide between the two Londons is often mentioned in the letter to Osama bin Laden (“So if you saw both Londons Osama [*sic*] then tell me this. Which London is it that Allah especially hates?”; Cleave 2006: 27), but there is one particularly revealing instance: “I never did work out how [the closing of bridges] was meant to help. Maybe they thought it would demoralise your Clapham cell Osama if they had to go via the M25 to bomb Chelsea” (Cleave 2006: 61). There is a very distinct notion of two opposing folk groups. Yet what makes it especially noteworthy is that the ‘us v. them’, in this context of terrorism, is not emphasised via the notion of a Western versus a Muslim world. The stress is not put on a religion- or ethnicity-

³⁸⁷ Cleave 2006: 62

based separation but on a class divide. What is more striking is that it is the upper class which is depicted as the menace. It is they who are invading the space of the working class:

One thing you start to hate when you live in London is the way rich people live right next to you. They'll suddenly plonk themselves right next door and the next thing you know your old street is An Upcoming Bohemian Melting Pot With Excellent Transport Links ... (Cleave 2006: 27f)

Likewise, the upper-class characters of Petra and Jasper are the ones who repeatedly intrude into the narrator's life, and into her private space. For instance, having been released from hospital she comes home to find the two having sex in her flat.³⁸⁸ When Petra takes the narrator under her wing, the former appears to envision a *Pygmalion* story for the latter. This project of Petra's, however, cannot succeed because in this text, social mobility is impossible, and neither is the upper end of the social spectrum portrayed as the preferable or in fact morally superior one. The would-be *Pygmalion* turns into a subversion of the Jekyll-and-Hyde theme: with the help of clothes, make-up, and exercises in upper-class behaviour and language the protagonist is given a 'society doppelganger', a persona she can slip into and out of. It is the posh doppelganger who represents the evil side: only in this role does she herself turn to violent revenge, killing Petra.³⁸⁹

The threat emanating from the upper social classes is most elaborately expressed and discussed, and most distinctly used with an intention to inspire societal anxiety, when it is revealed in the novel that the high ranks of the British police force, and presumably the government, were informed about the impending attacks but decided not to stop the terrorists from carrying out their plans for strategic reasons: "then the terrorists would have known something was up. They'd have changed everything. [...] We'd have lost all insight into what they were planning" (Cleave 2006: 184). Even more than before, from this moment on the terrorist attacks (and 'dear

³⁸⁸ Cleave 2006: 103ff

³⁸⁹ Cleave 2006: 232ff

Osama') appear more like a natural disaster, or at least too remote to tackle: the real evildoers are "at the very highest level" (Cleave 2006: 185) of one's own society. For the narrator, and thus for the whole text, they are the ones who are to be blamed for the deaths; and most importantly they did not sacrifice 'their own people'. As in other wars, the protagonist explains, the ones who decide on it, i.e. the upper classes, survive while the people belonging to lower classes are the ones who die.³⁹⁰ The character of Jasper gives the reasons why the football fans are dispensable to the decision-makers: "A thousand City suits die and it's good-bye global economy. A thousand blokes in Gunners T-shirts die and you just sell a bit less lager" (Cleave 2006: 188). In many terrorism novels, the fear-inducing monster is the army of faceless, replaceable terrorists.³⁹¹ In *Incendiary*, the anxiety-inspiring threat which is presented is the notion of being turned into part of the anonymous³⁹² expendable masses by powerful forces within one's own society.

The ending of the book delivers some poetic justice. The police chief superintendent is punished for his involvement.³⁹³ Petra, the only unequivocally villainous member of the upper classes, is killed. A mass panic caused by Jasper in Westminster leads to the deaths of more than 100 people, bringing the horror to the upper of the two Londons (although the protagonist again finds herself in the middle of the mayhem). The tale ends with the narrator awaiting arrest for her violent revenge on Petra. The threat, however, is far from having been neutralised, as the class system is still in place, along with its 'evil' institutions: Petra and Jasper have failed to bring public attention to the fact that the police had been informed about the imminent attacks. There are no repercussions of any kind for the police,

³⁹⁰ Cleave 2006: 189

³⁹¹ The perception of them as a group rather than individuals resembles the depiction of the enemy in war films; cf. Chapter 4.

³⁹² The namelessness of the protagonist may also speak to that.

³⁹³ "They'll chain that poor fucker down a well so deep you could throw a packet of fags down it and he still wouldn't have anything to smoke till Christmas." (Cleave 2006: 211)

the government, or the newspaper Petra worked for – quite the contrary. At least in the opinion of Jasper, these bodies all benefit from the situation, at the expense of the people: “Everyone’s a winner. Oh. Except you. And me. And the British public of course.” (Cleave 2006: 210) Thus this text is designed to inspire a feeling of societal anxiety in readers who feel connected to the main character, maybe identify with her position in relation to the rich and powerful, and perceive the ‘ruling classes’, the authorities and/or big media as a plausible threat in as far as they can reduce people of lower social rank to pawns who can be sacrificed without batting an eye.

9. Gothic horror & weird fiction

The genre and its contemporary legends

Many classic horror stories have their roots in folklore legends. If one looks at these old legends, one finds all of the constituent parts of Gothic horror:

[they] tended to be supernatural [...], and the writers favored plots featuring corpses, cemeteries, damsels in distress, helpful strangers, devoted doctors and priests, gypsies, sudden deaths, insanity, nightmares, disease, and other such details. The settings tended to be lonely spots late at night, places with dark and sometimes even romantic atmosphere and, if possible, with a hint of some terrible conspiracy. (Brunvand 2004: 26f)

Ever since the rise of the Gothic novel, these two kinds of narratives have coexisted and arguably also developed in similar ways. In both fields themes have been revisited and stories have been retold, with the adaptations necessary for the respective tale to be palatable to its audience at the time.

One might be tempted to think that a 21st-century audience needs something other than a typical horror monster to scare them; surely we are too enlightened and worldly-wise to believe in supernatural beings. There are indications that this is not the case, however.³⁹⁴ It could be argued that

³⁹⁴ Linda Dégh argues that, on the contrary, “mass communication and social stratification have made supernatural belief more visible” (Dégh 1994: 54).

we have merely repackaged and relabelled the monsters. One of the parts of this process is a scientific or pseudo-scientific explanation approach for phenomena which would previously have been called 'supernatural'.³⁹⁵ Yet it has been pointed out that connecting the two areas of science and the supernatural does not necessarily mean that the former expels the latter. Instead, the result can be a composite, in which (seemingly) scientific approaches become the bearer of mystic sensations.³⁹⁶ Further instances are the human (which in this case means non-non-human) monsters which are created in modern stories: when the figure of the serial killer is described as “emblematic of the essential *Doppelgänger* nature of the modern individual”, which is “the disturbing tension between the respectable citizens’ secret aspiration toward and at the same time deep anxiety over losing control and entering a realm where logic, reason and common sense no longer operate” (Grunenberg 1997: 207, emphasis in original), the parallels to classic works of Gothic horror are recognisable. This can be found in contemporary legends as well, and there too, the ‘non-non-human’ monsters are endowed with superhuman powers. They may not be able to fly or shapeshift – a 21st-century audience would probably dismiss this as noncredible, even ridiculous. Speed, strength, or a sense of premonition far exceeding the norm, on the other hand, are such established qualities in fictional serial killers that they tend to be accepted with little hesitation. Today’s monsters do not walk through walls or magically materialise out of thin air; they are merely tremendously skilled at sneaking into one’s home and setting up elaborate traps noiselessly and at unfathomable speed, and/or at anticipating one’s exact actions and movements to ensure maximum impact for their attack. A most famous

³⁹⁵ See “Genre characteristics of the contemporary legend”, Chapter 5.

³⁹⁶ Valk 2010: 166. Valk uses the Estonian School of Intuitive Sciences as an example: “In order to become a student [there] the applicant has to go through a special test, where his or her bio-energy and its characteristics are measured with a pendulum. Applicants with strongly negative bio-energy are eliminated” (2010: 166).

example of this is the story of the “Licked Hand”,³⁹⁷ in which the killer not only knows when the girl(s) will be home alone, and how to enter the house, sneak into the room without alerting the dog, and kill the animal noiselessly, but he is also informed about all the details of the girl’s routine of letting the dog lick her hand for comfort – but never looking at the dog while doing so – as well as when the girl will wake up and where she will go, i.e. where to leave the message for her. One version has the girl going to the kitchen for food at night: “She opened the fridge door, and out swung her butchered dog. On the dog there was a note ...” (Brunvand 1999: 58). The effort of such an undertaking is not to be underestimated. Making a dead dog, or indeed any object, swing out of a fridge when its door is opened requires a contraption of some kind, and probably refrigerator space to be cleared out beforehand. The killer in the story achieves all this, unnoticed and within a limited amount of time. Pointing this out may seem like mere facetiousness, but it is significant, as it highlights the extent to which ‘mad killer’ stories are based on superhuman capacities.

The legends of the “Slasher under the Car”³⁹⁸ are typical cases: the “sadistic killer”, hiding under the car of his chosen victim’s, “suddenly lashes out from beneath the car with a tire iron, breaking both her ankles” (Brunvand 2004: 80f). In other versions, he³⁹⁹ uses knives or razors. The invisible (i.e. perfectly hidden) murderer with apparently preternatural strength only attacks women at big shopping malls’ car parks. It has been noted that for a present-day suburban setting, the location also follows classic Gothic horror rules. Big shopping centres are seen as “well-lit, warm, welcoming, busy, safe places” (“snopes: Slasher Under the Car” 2011), but their car parks, which are on the edge of these confined worlds, are the very opposite. This follows the conventional Gothic model of a

³⁹⁷ Barber 2007: 125ff et al.

³⁹⁸ Brunvand 2004: 80f et al.

³⁹⁹ It is never a female slasher.

'civilised' centre contrasted with its dark and dangerous periphery.⁴⁰⁰ The names of the shopping malls are sometimes explicitly given in the legends.⁴⁰¹ This serves two functions: local details are included to lend credibility as well as to create a connection between protagonist and audience. If the reader, too, is a woman who shops at this specific centre, they naturally belong to the same folk group, i.e. the target group of the attacker. Even if the reader is male, if they do not frequent this particular shopping mall but know of it, or have friends or family who go there sometimes, the categorial identification effect may be almost as strong. Other variants use rather more vague geographical information, which cannot be as effective, in individual cases, as the name of their home town or favourite mall, but has the advantage of speaking to a larger group of people. Temporal or seasonal details are also sometimes used to create a sense of topicality, and again to establish who is likely to fall victim to this kind of crime: if the attacks are reported to happen at shopping centres "during the Christmas season" (Brunvand 2004: 81), then they are potentially a threat to every woman who buys presents or food in the days before Christmas – an impressively extensive folk group.

The threat posed by the slasher under the car is more likely to be fear- than anxiety-inducing. However, stories like these certainly speak to the anxieties of people who are worried about crime rates and the repercussions on society. This is also reflected in changing details about the culprits and their motives:

What appears to have begun as a cautionary tale about women being targeted for robbery or rape has, in the last few years, grown more and more into another tale about ruthless gang initiations. As inner city gang activity plays a greater part of the nightly news broadcast, our lore changes to reflect this emerging focus of our fears. In earlier versions, what the woman could be compelled to part with (her

⁴⁰⁰ A famous example is George A. Romero's use of a shopping mall as setting for his *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) as a comment on the role of consumerism in modern society.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Brunvand 1999: 105 et al.

valuables or her virtue) was key to her attacker's motivation; in its newer form, it's almost violence for violence's sake. ("snopes: Slasher Under the Car" 2011)

Violent youths are a very frequently recurring motif in contemporary legends; there appears to be a deep-seated mistrust towards young men in particular. These legends can also play a role in the conception, or perpetuation and confirmation of a particular group as folk devils. One of the many variations throws an interesting light on the folk group cast in the role of the villain of the tale. Gang initiation stories tend to focus on immigrants or ethnic minorities, but the slasher-under-the-car legend also comes in a version featuring rich white youngsters as the culprits: frat boys. This narrative is set in a college town, which has a fraternity with a "notorious shoe fetish" (Craughwell 2005: 287); the boys are said to lurk underneath cars waiting for a woman wearing expensive shoes to pass by, and then attack her in order to steal her shoes. The difference in the two tales is remarkable. Both suggest distinct misgivings regarding young men, but while the inner city gang members are reported to rob, rape, mutilate, or kill their defenceless victims, the rich white boys appear to be not much more than a nuisance: "I lost a \$300 pair of Prada shoes. But now whenever I go shopping I wear heavy, ugly hiking boots [...] And the frat boys keep their distance." (Craughwell 2005: 287)

Some versions of this legend also include allusions as to why the public has not been warned of this alleged series of attacks of the kind described. These additions also serve as connection points between the contents of the story and the reality of the readers' everyday lives: a possible discrepancy between the world as created by the narrative and the world as experienced by the audience is explained away. The story offers a bridge for this gap, relieving the recipients from this burden if they accept it. In this instance, however, these parts of the story do more than 'lampshade

hanging’;⁴⁰² they also add another dimension of threat by alluding to secret deals or plots: “When someone in the class asked why such a gruesome murder had not been covered by the local press, the [police] officer smiled knowingly [*sic*] and replied, ‘Plenty of things like that never get into the papers’” (Brunvand 2004: 81). No reasons or further explanation are offered at this point, in fact this is the very ending of the narrative – its punchline, as it were. The implications are quite obvious: there are at least two institutions, the police and the media, which do not act in the best interest of the public as they should. On snopes.com, the sentiment was expressed thus:

It’s not enough we have to worry about ankle-slashing bad guys lurking under our cars; according to lore, we face this danger on our own because the police and the press are in cahoots with Big Business and thus turn a blind eye when some of the citizens of our fair town end up victimized in this fashion! (“snopes: Slasher Under the Car” 2011)

Business interests taking precedence over the health and safety of the populace are a well-known theme in literature or films dealing with many different kinds of threats, from monsters (human, animal, or other) to natural catastrophes.⁴⁰³ As a plot element it may be trite, but in terms of societal anxieties, it is indeed significant. What is addressed is the unpleasant feeling of not only being overlooked but rather being considered irrelevant. The constant repetition works as part of an agenda-setting process.⁴⁰⁴ The inspired anxiety concerns the value and import of one’s own status within the social structure, or rather the lack thereof. Somebody who has a general mistrust of big businesses, and their influence on

⁴⁰² “Lampshade Hanging is the writers’ trick of dealing with any element of the story that threatens the audience’s Willing Suspension of Disbelief [...] by calling attention to it and simply moving on.” (“Lampshade Hanging – TV Tropes”)

⁴⁰³ “In the case of any impending disaster, natural or manmade, politicians will always arrive at the same conclusion: It is less important to issue a warning than to ‘avoid panicking the population.’ The reasoning is always the same: A warning will be bad for business.” (Eugene Accardo, in Ebert 1994: 66f)

⁴⁰⁴ This effect is dampened, if not reversed, as soon as the subject is aware of its (over-)use as a staple device; this is one of the instances in which efforts of persuasion or suggestion can backfire as described in “Setting agendas”, Chapter 6.2.

politicians, or somebody who feels underprivileged or disadvantaged will find their emotions supported and possibly fortified. Folk groups become doubly important in this situation, as it is a twofold 'us v. them' which is suggested: if 'us' is the shoppers at the mall, 'them' is the slashers hiding under cars on the one hand, but also 'them' who pull the strings in the world of business and politics. Presenting a second opposing group may be intended as a means of enhancing the sense of powerlessness, which in turn heightens the perceived feeling of being threatened.

Kraken – a counter example

In the introduction, it was claimed that unlike in *World War Z*, one cannot find enough evidence of strategies of inspiring societal anxieties in China Miéville's *Kraken* to assert that it is one of the intentions of the text. Having considered the relevant theory, this proposition shall now be examined in more detail. The first ingredient in the recipe is a character the reader feels connected with. In *Kraken*, the main focal character is a scientist called Billy Harrow, who works at the London Natural History Museum. When their preserved specimen of a giant squid, including its nine-metre tank filled with "thousands of gallons of brine-Formalin" (Miéville 2010: 10), vanishes without a trace, he haplessly becomes a central figure in the mystery surrounding the dead animal, which unfolds in a weird and fantastic society existing parallel to ours. He is the classic traveller in a strange world, the regular person suddenly confronted with "[a] knight emerging from a wardrobe with the offer of another place *but you have to come now*" (Miéville 2010: 55, emphasis in original). This motif is well-known in horror and fantastic literature. The reader can share the character's amazement and confusion, as well as their fascination, as they get to know the oddities and singularities of the unfamiliar setting. This shared experience in itself can create a strong connection. Billy, however, appears to be not much more than a vehicle used to transport the plot to the reader.

In the section on theories of character-reader relationship in Chapter 4, it was pointed out that protagonists designed as identification characters for as many people as possible are often quite undistinctive. In *Kraken*, Billy appears to be created as not much more than a canvas, vaguely in the shape of the perceived average reader of New Weird fiction: male, under thirty years of age, with his hair “tousled in half heartedly fashionable style”, wearing “a not-too-hopeless top [and] cheap jeans” (Miéville 2010: 4). He is a nerd but still mainstream enough to appeal to the readers on the edge of this specific folk group; his friend tells him he would be able to “sneak out of the nerd ghetto and hide the badge and bring back food and clothes of the outside world” (Miéville 2010: 6). Throughout the course of the novel, Billy stays in the role of the medium through which the story is related to the readers. He asks the necessary ‘why’s, ‘who’s and ‘how’s but hardly ever springs into action before the final showdown, after his guide has died. As late as on page 364,⁴⁰⁵ he is still completely out of the loop and in need of supervision and guidance:

“Jesus,” Billy said. Cars passed. What did they see? A gang-fight? Teenagers? Nothing? The police were surely on their way.

“Let’s split,” said Dane.

[...]

“Wait,” grumbled Billy. “I want to see the apocalypses fighting.” But Dane snapped at him to come, so Billy sulkily turned his back on the celestial battle and continued through the crawl space. (Miéville 2010: 364)

He is in the role of the perpetual recipient of information; there is very little exchange of knowledge. This is also commented on in the text: “... Billy told Dane – and how good it was for him to be telling Dane something ...” (Miéville 2010: 216). It could be argued that it is also Billy’s role as a (possible) prophet of the kraken religion which makes other characters ‘use’ him as a prop in the story rather than include him as a serious agent. In theory, however, the text would not have to do the same thing. When

⁴⁰⁵ Out of 481 pages (Miéville 2010)

Jonathan Harker travels to Transylvania in *Dracula*, for example, he does not take much action either; Dracula and his female vampires very much play with him as their helpless toy. Yet in his journal, his thoughts and feelings, including his horror and his sexual lust, are recounted. These passages also contain notes emphasising the private nature of the writing: “It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina’s eyes and cause her pain” (Stoker 1994: 51). The reader is put in a privileged position in regard to Jonathan Harker’s reflections and his state of mind. In *Kraken*, the audience is never privy to Billy Harrow’s thoughts beyond cursory speculations on what is happening. While it is true that the epistolary mode in *Dracula* favours a close connection between character and reader, focalisation could be used to achieve a similar effect.⁴⁰⁶

There is a second figure travelling with Billy in *Kraken*, his guide Dane, who might theoretically have been an identification character for readers. It is not impossible for the second lead to fulfil this role. Yet even to a greater extent than in the case of Billy, the reader hardly gets to know Dane. The text only reflects Billy’s perception of him. This means that the audience learns, repeatedly, that Dane’s motivations are unknown, and that therefore his actions appear puzzling at times, and this does not change over the course of the novel. The most obvious example is Dane’s religiousness. Billy does not understand it and cannot relate to it; what is more, he, and thus the novel as a whole, does not try to explore this issue. There are no attempts at getting closer to the mind or psyche of this character. It is, of course, a plot necessity – or rather a plot twist necessity – that Dane’s motivations be unknown. Finally, there is Marge, another character from our world wandering through the strange parallel universe. She is looking for her partner Leon, who has disappeared; and because she is not simply thrown into the strange surroundings and used as a pawn, but actively works to penetrate the shield which protects the ‘other’ London,

⁴⁰⁶ Sklar 2013: 48f

the reader learns considerably more about her motivations and emotional states than about Billy's. It is probably not inappropriate to claim that it is she who "carries almost the entire emotional load of the story" (Heller 2010); and, as Heller goes on to state, "even that load is scant". Marge's feistiness and tenacity may appeal to a number of readers. Her grief over the loss of her partner is not elaborated on in the text, however. The way in which it is pointed out at the very beginning that their relationship was new, non-monogamous, and not exactly close,⁴⁰⁷ is used to lessen the emotional impact, and when she sets out to uncover what has happened to Leon she is portrayed as driven by curiosity as much as grief.⁴⁰⁸ This lack of strong emotional connection points does not necessarily disqualify her as a potential identification character for the readers. Yet her very short 'stage time' may. Marge stays what her name – Marginalia – implies throughout the novel. In terms of information distribution, she is disadvantaged in two ways. Firstly, her story takes up little space in the narrative; the focus is quite clearly not on her at all. Secondly, she does not learn much about the strange world, the mysteries surrounding the giant squid, or the impending end of the world. She stays within the confines of her own personal quest of finding out about Leon's fate, for the most part untouched by the main plot.

All of this may be considered a flaw;⁴⁰⁹ but leaving quality judgements aside, it can be noted that there is much evidence pointing towards the novel being intentionally designed to deny the reader immersion, or a sense of familiarity. In the text, a picture is drawn of two Londons existing side by side: the 'ordinary' one, and "the other mapland, the city of knacks and heresies" (Miéville 2010: 180). The former London is not where most of the events in the book happen, but it is referred to and mentioned often enough to remind the recipients of the story's geographical location. Using

⁴⁰⁷ Miéville 2010: 93

⁴⁰⁸ Miéville 2010: 192f

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Walter 2010; Heller 2010; Wagner 2010; Wolfe 2010

topographical details is one of the tools which can be used in a strategy to inspire societal anxieties, and they certainly help readers of *Kraken* to orientate themselves. The acknowledgement of real London places does create moments of familiarity, but the text seems to use them only to increase the impact of the immediately following alien element in comparison. Novels like *Dracula*, or legends like the “Slasher under the Car”, have an alien and evil force invade our domestic environment. In *Kraken*, we learn that ‘our’ environment has never been entirely ours in the first place. In addition, *Kraken* does not give the audience time to get to know and possibly immerse themselves in this new, other world, either. A wide range of different creatures and supernatural elements, as well as ever new aspects of the laws and logic applying to the strange parallel world, are introduced, sometimes only in passing and never to be encountered again. A reviewer has called this a “tsunami of outré ideas, some seemingly slotted into his stories so fast it’s as if Miéville were trying to get them all down before he forgot them” (Wagner 2010); and reading the novel has been likened to “watch[ing] Miéville haul his inventions onstage like a demented ringmaster, without slowing the frenetic pace of his narrative” (Wolfe 2010). Both images used to describe the style of writing highlight that the text does not aid or abet reader immersion. Whether one feels overwhelmed, possibly even crushed, by a tidal wave of plot, or whether one feels like the spectator of a stupendous show, either is far from any kind of intimacy or the sense of security which a familiar surrounding can provide. While the respective exact nature of the emotional responses is irrelevant to this study, both statements quoted above reflect this specific quality of the text, whose purpose is to keep the readers on their toes. This creates distance rather than diminishing it.

Another feature of *Kraken*’s which promotes this effect is its language, or rather “the way that the language is engaged constantly in a kind of argument with itself” (“Inside the Imagination” 2013). For the first five chapters of the novel, the text meets all the criteria of accessibility used

to define popular literature. This, notably, is for as long as the action stays within the confines of the ‘real’ world, and starts to change when the protagonist is first introduced to the other world by the police’s FSRC, the “Fundamentalist and Sect-Related Crime Unit” (Miéville 2010: 36). From then on, the novel’s words and wordings are used as a tool to defamiliarise and challenge the readers.⁴¹⁰ In the analysis of the elements constituting the recipe for inspiring societal anxieties, it was stressed that one important element is the text helping the readers to bridge the gaps between the real and the fictional worlds. *Kraken* seemingly attempts to achieve the exact opposite of this, not only widening existing gaps but also creating ever new ones.

This range of evidence already suggests quite clearly that societal anxieties are of little to no pertinence to this text. Theoretically, however, they may still be conveyed to the audience with the help of the second part of the recipe, the plausible threat. The central menace driving the plot in *Kraken* is nothing less than the end of the world – the ends of the world, in fact, as more than one apocalyptic scenario is looming. They do lend the narrative some urgency. In addition, as the possible ends of the world draw nearer, the ‘real’ world is affected to an increasing extent. In chapter 33, the Londoners not residing in the magical second London experience nothing but “the onset of a wave of depression and anger, a bad intimation”, while “for those who lived in the city’s minority articulation things were growing daily more dangerous” (Miéville 2010: 180). Thirteen chapters later,

people were disappearing. There are no civilians in war, no firewalls between the blessedly ignorant and those intimately connected to networks, markets of crime and religiosity. And Londoners, even those determinedly mainstream, were disappearing. [...] You may not have known what was happening, but that something was happening was not plausibly deniable. (Miéville 2010: 258)

⁴¹⁰ The language Miéville uses in *Kraken* is one of the reasons why there is definitely potential for a discussion of whether the book can rightly be categorised as popular fiction. This may be one of the books whose genre keeps them from being recognised as ‘serious’ literature.

Near the ends, the magical world entirely ceases to make an effort to hide from the oblivious majority.⁴¹¹ Creatures such as “refugees from the Tattoo’s workshop – women and men shambling nude and altered, with lightbulbs, diodes, speakers and oscilloscope screens in them” walk the streets in an atmosphere of eschatological war and chaos, “horrifying everyday citizens who could only tell themselves for so long that they witnessed an art event” (Miéville 2010: 391). These passages stress that it is the reader’s world, too, which is in danger of being obliterated. At the same time, however, they create some distance between the people of London in the text and the readers. The latter are presented with Billy’s view of the former, which means a view from the other side, i.e. the outside. The ordinary people are an anonymous mass with whom it is hardly possible to identify. The text presents regular Londoners disappearing with considerably less emotion, and in considerably less detail, than for example the attack of the Tattoo’s henchmen on a group of magical beetles:

with growing alarm, [they] realised that the faceless man was bearing down on them, kicking aside the camouflaging undergrowth, raising his big biker boots, and bringing them down, right at them, too fast for them to scatter.
With each stamp tens of carapaces split and innards were pulped [...] The beetles scurried and the man killed them.
(Miéville 2010: 158)

This is a reflection of the focus of the story, in which the theurgic animals belong to ‘our’ side of the divide, while the ordinary humans are not part of the in-group. The supernatural world in *Kraken* is not a mirror of the real one either; there are no recognisably parallel structures which could serve as points of recognition for the readers to relate the events to their everyday experience. The rather outlandish cults and sects, for example, are not caricatures of existing religious communities, like Terry Pratchett’s Church of the Great God Om, for instance.⁴¹² Instead, they too exist, hidden, alongside mainstream religions. When Billy describes the kraken

⁴¹¹ Miéville 2010: 382f

⁴¹² Pratchett 2003

cult, he relates it to churches he knows.⁴¹³ Last but not least, the ends of the world are arguably too vague to even instil fear. Changing alliances, hidden agendas, and a range of villains and possible culprits convey suspense, but not fear. One may think that a looming apocalypse would qualify as an imminent physical threat. Yet in this text, it is overshadowed by the questions of who stole the squid, who wants to steal it from them in turn, and to what purpose.

It is quite obvious that it is not the goal of *Kraken* to present a plausible threat to real-world social structures in order to inspire anxiety. This does not mean, however, that the novel is devoid of socio-political commentary. Quite the contrary is the case. It could even be argued that it is the very abundance of social issues addressed or mentioned – in many cases not more often than once or twice – which keeps the reader from being able to focus on one specific topic long enough for the text to have the necessary emotional impact. In accordance with the theory that no book written and set after 2001 fails to mention, at least in passing, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001,⁴¹⁴ in *Kraken* the fear of terrorists is related to the terror of “cult-related violence” (Miéville 2010: 36), and Al Qaeda is named as the buzzword which marks newsworthiness in the 21st century.⁴¹⁵ Secret plots to keep the public from learning about certain matters in the news media are mentioned – “gag orders the like of which you’ve no idea” (Miéville 2010: 132). In a similar vein, the (regular) police are kept from interfering in violent attacks on people and are made to passively stand by, bound by somewhat conspiratorial orders from a higher level in the law enforcement hierarchy.⁴¹⁶ The text also comments overtly on the human condition in 21st-century industrial nations. Examples of this are the people who are stripped of their humanity, and reduced to their function within the

⁴¹³ “The flavour of the sect was vicarly, noncharismatic, an Anglo-Catholicism of mollusc-worship.” (Miéville 2010: 94)

⁴¹⁴ R.B. 2011, see footnote 376

⁴¹⁵ Miéville 2010: 36f

⁴¹⁶ Miéville 2010: 158f

system; even worse, some of them do willingly choose to be “tools [rather] than people” (Miéville 2010: 237). The epitome of this notion are the thugs whose heads are hidden behind motorcycle helmets with dark visors. As the army of henchmen of one of the central villains, this description would make them faceless enough. Yet they are even more faceless, and even more defined by their function as goons: underneath their helmets, instead of heads, they have “head-sized fist[s]” (Miéville 2010: 228). Later in the text, they are revealed to even have a “little dwarf-hand replacing their cocks and balls [...], meat-echoes of their head-hands” (Miéville 2010: 384). A different approach, but arguably commenting on related matters, is embodied by the minor character of Jason Smyle, who is “a proletarian chameleon”, “a function of the economy. His knack deshaped him, he was not specific. He was abstract, not a worker but a man-shape of wage-labour itself.” (Miéville 2010: 234) Jason’s particular power, which makes other people perceive him as part of the respective in-groups, is of use to the protagonists but eventually promotes his own demise. The way in which he automatically integrates into a system, previously described with lighter humour, turns into an almost tragic flaw when he is thrown into a different system, i.e. prison.⁴¹⁷ In addition, the text also discusses labour union matters. Chapter 25 is dedicated to the story of the spirit Wati and the ‘Union of Magicked Assistants’ founded by him,⁴¹⁸ whose strike continues, and continues to be mentioned, throughout the novel. All of these issues are introduced, and sometimes problematic aspects are pointed out or questions are raised in the text, but there is little time for the reader to reflect on them in detail. Not only does the plot move on at considerable pace, but it also immediately introduces different, or new concepts, or immediately focuses on other matters which demand the audience’s attention. The intended effect, again, is to leave the recipients reading “in a

⁴¹⁷ Miéville 2010: 315

⁴¹⁸ The beetles mentioned above, who are assaulted by a ‘knucklehead’, belong to this union. They are attacked because they take part in the strike of the familiars.

state of constant shock” (“Inside the Imagination” 2013) rather than drawing them in in order to give them a new, fictional home.⁴¹⁹

It shall be stressed again at this point that it is not suggested that the inspiration of societal anxieties is a feature determining the quality of a text. First and foremost, this analysis of *Kraken* is intended to highlight that evoking such feelings in the reader is not an inherent characteristic of any genre. Strategies of inspiring societal anxieties can be, but need not be, employed in a work of weird or horror fiction.⁴²⁰ Even if “[t]here is nothing confident or optimistic about Gothic fiction”, the “melancholy, anxiety-ridden sentimental love and horror”, as well as “the lurid flashes of passion and violence” (Howells 1995: 5), can be used to achieve a range of different effects. Making the audience anxious about their social environments is just one of them.

World War Z

The concept for *World War Z* is based on Studs Terkel’s “*The Good War*”: *An Oral History of World War Two* (1984), which is a collection of “rememberers” (Terkel 1984: ix) accounts of World War II. Like the 1970 book by the same author, entitled *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, it is “a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic. [...] A hesitancy, at first, was followed by a flow of memories: long-ago hurts and small triumphs. Honors and humiliations. There was laughter, too.” (Terkel 1970: 3) *World War Z* combines this narrative model

⁴¹⁹ Yet it is not the case that there is not any notion or theme which pervades *Kraken*. The question which is raised again and again in the narrative is to what extent the perception of a person or object can affect their very matter, how a quality may be transferred onto them through persevering ascription, especially in the context of religions or cults.

⁴²⁰ Putting a genre label on *Kraken* is not the easiest thing to do. The book has been called “unclassifiable except as pure Miéville” (Wagner 2010), and it is said of China Miéville that he views “genre as being merely a set of rules with which to play” (Garrard 2010). For a discussion of the genre of the ‘New Weird’, and its relation to Gothic horror, see Davies 2010.

with the early-21st-century trend of inserting zombies into familiar literary modes.⁴²¹ Using the tradition of oral history collections, it positions itself not only relatively close to folklore, despite its fictionality,⁴²² it also takes on the genre's emphasis on feelings in the 'accounts' it gives: "*Zombie* remains a devastating word, unrivaled in its power to conjure up so many memories or emotions, and it is these memories, and emotions, that are the subject of this book" (Brooks 2006: 1, emphasis in original). In fact, avid zombie fans looking for gory horror may be disappointed by the book, which deals with the human experience of war for much longer and in considerably more detail than with the undead monsters. *World War Z* is the book whose blurb has given this study its title. If the proposition that it will "spook you for real" is justified in relation to societal anxieties, one should find substantial evidence of strategies of inspiring these feelings in the text.

There is, of course, some zombie gore, which is surely intended to satisfy the fans of the genre. It is also used to set the tone and the mood of the novel. The very first report in *World War Z* is a Chinese doctor's. He encountered 'Patient Zero' in a remote mountain village which does not even officially exist and is not marked on any map.⁴²³ What can be found here are conventional Gothic horror ingredients: the event takes place at the edge of civilisation, as it were – from an American or generally Western point of view arguably even doubly so – and introduces the monster in a suitably disturbing scare scene. The very first zombie is an undead 12-year-old boy, locked in and with his wrists and feet bound by the villagers.

He was writhing like an animal; a gag muffled his growls. [...] The boy's skin was as cold and gray as the cement on which he lay. I could find neither his heartbeat nor his pulse. His eyes were wild, wide and sunken back in their sockets. They remained locked on me like a predatory beast. [...]

⁴²¹ This includes the post-modern 'zombie treatment' of literary classics, such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen and Grahame-Smith 2009).

⁴²² Works such as Studs Terkel's support the model of a gradual scale of fictionality rather than a dichotomous distinction between factual and fictional, however.

⁴²³ Brooks 2006: 7

His movements were so violent I had to call for two of the largest villagers to help me hold him down. [...]

I tried to take a blood sample but extracted only brown, viscous matter. [...]

But the boy jerked again and I heard his left arm snap. Jagged ends of both radius and ulna bones stabbed through his gray flesh. Although the boy didn't cry out, didn't even seem to notice, it was enough for both assistants to leap back and run from the room.

I instinctively retreated several paces myself. [...]

The boy began to twist in my direction, his arm ripped completely free. Flesh and muscle tore from one another until there was nothing except the stump. His now free right arm, still tied to the severed left hand, dragged his body across the floor. (Brooks 2006: 8ff)

Choosing a child rather than an adult as the first zombie is a means to enhance the scare effect,⁴²⁴ and while the novel does have its comical moments and a satirical tone, the text treats the zombies as real monsters and a serious menace.

The narrative is relayed in a series of interviews carried out by an unnamed person working on "the United Nation's Postwar Commission Report" (Brooks 2006: 1). He⁴²⁵ gives a personal and rather emotional introduction. For the rest of the book, his voice is mostly confined to short introductory notes commenting on both the people he meets, and the situations and environments he encounters them in. In some interviews, however, he is more prominent, asking questions, insisting on clarifications, or making observations about the interviewee's demeanour. There is therefore not one central character in *World War Z* for the readers to create a bond with. Instead, the recipients 'meet' a wide range of different people, most of whom they only read about one single time. In regard to a reader-character connection, this is probably not an ideal set-up. Yet at the same time this structure allows for a range of different strategies of presenting

⁴²⁴ Cf. "Evil Kids" 2008

⁴²⁵ The interviewer is identified as male by the interviewees (Brooks 2006: 208 et passim). The text does not reveal much more about him. He does write from a clearly American perspective, however, and his nationality is also confirmed by an interviewee (Brooks 2006: 267).

likeable characters. The bond may not be as strong as it is when readers get to know a protagonist over the course of hundreds of pages, but one advantage of this multitude of narrative voices is that readers may experience an emotional connection with different characters, and there is no need to draw an elaborate picture of a single protagonist who is supposed to have the potential to appeal to a large, heterogeneous audience.

As alluded to above, even the introduction by the narrator is designed to have some emotional effect on the recipients. He presents himself as the hero, having to fight against superior authorities in order to be able to publish the material the reader is about to consume; and he adds that it is valuable material, too:

This record of the greatest conflict in human history owes its genesis to a much smaller, much more personal conflict between me and the chairperson of the United Nation's Postwar Commission Report. My initial work for the Commission could be described as nothing short of a labor of love. [...]

So, needless to say, it came as a shock when I found almost half of that work deleted from the report's final edition. (Brooks 2006: 1)

One aspect which is emphasised in this passage is a sense of privileged information: while his "book of memories" (Brooks 2006: 3) has finally been published for you to read, an attempt was made to withhold these personal reports by the cold, hard people who wanted "cold, hard data [...] without being influenced by 'the human factor'" (Brooks 2006: 2). In this little story, the narrator is not only the hero who insists that "we can't let these stories die" (Brooks 2006: 2), but also the 'underdog' who has to fight 'the powers that be'. In Chapter 4 of this study, it was stated that in order to make a character likeable, either one of these two sentiments should be evoked in the reader: admiration or sympathy. With his introduction to *World War Z*, the interviewer appears to try and induce both. Finally, he stresses that he believes himself to be on the same side as the reader, as it were, pointing out that the "questions included in the text are only there to illustrate those

that might have been posed by readers” (Brooks 2006: 3), before he ends on a self-effacing note: “I have attempted to reserve judgment, or commentary of any kind, and if there is a human factor that should be removed, let it be my own” (Brooks 2006: 3). His portrayal as trustworthy and reliable is underlined throughout the interviews in his notes on interviewee’s statements. He translates military jargon for the convenience of his civilian readership, for example, or corrects mistakes.⁴²⁶

For by far the largest part of the novel, possible relationships between the readers and the interviewees play a much more important role, however. The audience is presented with short narratives, which are, it is claimed, “personal accounts of individuals not so different from [yourselves]” (Brooks 2006: 2). The latter statement suggests a reliance on categorial identification; and this strategy suits the briefness of the individual narrations, too. Yet to some degree, it is undermined by the choice of particular fictional interviewees. In order to maintain the overall narrative arc, as well as to have the chance to give the reader exciting details and inside knowledge, the majority of the characters are not average members of the public. Scientists and politicians in high-profile posts, military commanders, astronauts, human traffickers or billionaires living in a privately leased “reinforced, geodesic greenhouse” (Brooks 2006: 68) in Antarctica are not chosen because they primarily promote categorial identification. Some of them probably evoke admiration in readers, but their main purpose in regard to the emotional connection is arguably the provision of privileged information. The interviews with these characters may not reach the same level of intimacy a novel-in-letters or a fictional diary achieves, but in the text it is emphasised time and again that the recipients are given preferential treatment through the knowledge which is presented to them. Secretiveness is stressed to enhance this notion: for instance, when the readers are let in on some of the secrets of the human

⁴²⁶ Brooks 2006: 211, footnote 2 et passim

organ black market and its relevance to the spread of the zombie virus, they are told that the interviewer had to “arrive blindfolded, so as not to reveal [his] ‘hosts’ location” (Brooks 2006: 26). Another interviewee, a mercenary, says, “You don’t mind if I don’t mention any names, ‘kay? Some of these people are still alive, or their estates are still active, and ... can you believe, they’re still threatening to sue” (Brooks 2006: 105), while yet another confesses to his “egotistical fantasy” and introduces it with the words, “I would never have admitted this to anyone, even to myself” (Brooks 2006: 202). The sharing of secrets is one of *World War Z*’s means of drawing its readers in despite the lack of a central identification figure. It may therefore be more accurate to speak of a reader-text relationship rather than a reader-character relationship,⁴²⁷ but it is still a connection which engages the feelings of the recipient.

Categorical identification remains a kind of emotional connection highly viable for a text with *World War Z*’s theme and structure,⁴²⁸ however, and in the stories of the novel’s less outstanding narrators, there are indications of it to be found. These interviewees’ dictions are even more everyday; in this respect these stories are most easily accessible. The book has been said to manifest an “adolescent flair” (Campbell 2010), and there are teenaged narrators who appear to be described in ways to reflect the lives of a pubescent target group:⁴²⁹ the Japanese computer geek who shuns real-life social contact and only converses with other people who are online day and

⁴²⁷ This, too, is a parallel to some classic Gothic novels and their epistolary forms, or *mise en abyme* respectively.

⁴²⁸ “Conflict between zombies and humans allow for the audience to see themselves in the role of the protagonists. We’re not all secret agents or Chosen One vampire-slayers [...] Zombie films are about ordinary folks, and generally from many different walks of life.” (Nick Mamatas, quoted in Maberry 2008: 346) Q.v. Virant 2013: 270f.

⁴²⁹ The fact that most female interviewees are described as physically beautiful (cf. Brooks 2006: 209 et passim) may be one of the tools used to make them likeable (as outlined in Chapter 4), but it also speaks for a predominantly male target group.

night,⁴³⁰ for example, or the girl from a most unexceptional, peaceable American middle-class family⁴³¹ who describes herself as follows: “I was a pretty heavy kid. I never played sports, I lived on fast food and snacks” (Brooks 2006: 160). In these instances, the text portrays ordinary people who are not ‘made’ for war – they are not ready to fight or possess the skills necessary for survival when the infrastructure they are used to breaks down – and thus encourages the readers to put themselves in their places. Both of the characters mentioned above are quite different after the war, however: they have lost their parents, and the boy has turned from the “skinny, acne-faced teenager” into a “[c]lean-shaven, tanned and toned” man (Brooks 2006: 251), while the girl is now part of a volunteer squad who kills zombies frozen in the “subarctic wasteland” (Brooks 2006: 152) of Manitoba, Canada. At the end of her interview, she “raises her weapon, a long iron crowbar, and casually smashes [a zombie’s] skull” (Brooks 2006: 163). The text thus combines possible categorial identification with the potential for sympathy and/or admiration in the readers: unexceptional teenagers growing up to be heroines and heroes.

Another aspect which is used for categorial identification is the text’s internationality, with its various points of view. This is not the only purpose served – first and foremost, the reports from all over the world are used to contrast different political cultures and systems in the face of an all-encompassing catastrophe – but the distinct effort the text makes to assume the standpoints of people from different parts of the world also supports categorial identification from an international readership. The individual reports take into account specific characteristics of the respective societal structures as well as national histories, or folk histories, and resulting attitudes or sensitivities. An Indian interviewee addresses the

⁴³⁰ Brooks 2006: 251ff

⁴³¹ “[Dad had] never touched a gun in his life. He was a gentleman in the most literal sense – he was a gentle man. Short, bald, a pudgy face that turned red when he laughed, he was the king of the bad jokes and cheesy one-liners. [...] He was the good cop in the family, he left all the big decisions to Mom.” (Brooks 2006: 154)

issue of castes;⁴³² the Parisian makes a snide remark about London (“that architectural mongrel”, Brooks 2006: 381); the South African defense minister, “a Zulu, a ferocious man who’d rather be fighting in the streets than cowering in a bunker” (Brooks 2006: 137), has a fit of rage when the help of a former apartheid political advisor is recruited; the German military struggle with their nation’s Third-Reich past, which they can never seem to shake off, as well as with old reservations among West and East Germans.⁴³³ *World War Z* has been criticised for “resort[ing] to stereotypes a bit too often when it comes to international characters” (Campbell 2010). As mentioned in Chapter 4, stereotypes can play a significant role for categorial identification because they “provid[e] readers with the impression of ‘familiarity’ and thereby enabl[e] them to enter into the reality of the story quickly” (Sklar 2013: 66). This strategy may not work for some readers or may at worst even have an opposite effect. While individual negative reactions are irrelevant to this study, however, the criticism cited above highlights that this strategy is overtly present in the text.

There are additional means of making characters likeable in the novel which truly rely on, and benefit from, the multitude of narrative voices. Sympathy is a significant factor here: for almost every negative aspect of human behaviour presented, the text also provides the point of view of somebody affected by it. Racism, for example, is mentioned by a dark-skinned Indian; he reports that on some refugee boats people were “trying to root out darkies like me” (Brooks 2006: 90). This effect can be heightened through a specific antagonist embodying a nefarious trait or behaviour, and in a novel consisting of a series of personal reports, this can be achieved rather easily and effectively. An additional advantage is that the readers, although led by the interviewer, have the chance to arrive at their own character judgement without the voice of the likeable protagonist ringing in their ears. This may help to avoid the impression that they are

⁴³² Brooks 2006: 90

⁴³³ Brooks 2006: 142

'told who to like', and instead suggest an uninfluenced, independent evaluation on part of the recipients. One outstanding example of this is the interviewee Breckinridge Scott,⁴³⁴ who has made a fortune knowingly selling ineffective medication against the zombie epidemic and now lives in his private greenhouse in Antarctica, laughing about the "dumb shits" (Brooks 2006: 73) who bought his useless drug. He is thoroughly, unambiguously, possibly even comically, vile and does not show even the slightest hint of scruples: "I never directly hurt anybody, and if anybody was too stupid to get themselves hurt, boo-fuckin-hoo" (Brooks 2006: 73). A reader who does not get distracted by the one-dimensionality of Breckinridge Scott is likely to experience sympathy for the people whose fear and lack of information he profited from, even though in his story, these people remain an anonymous crowd. The next interviewee is "the former White House chief of staff" (Brooks 2006: 74); and he openly admits that "[w]e knew [the drug] was a placebo, and we were grateful for it. It calmed people down and let us do our job" (Brooks 2006: 75).⁴³⁵ It is after these two reports that the audience is introduced to Mary Jo Miller, a mother of two whose financial worries are made worse when the whole family starts taking Scott's alleged anti-zombie-virus medication.⁴³⁶ There is now a name and a face to a victim of the pharmaceutical racketeering. After the previous two interviews, the readers are quite likely to instantly feel for Mary Jo and her family.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Brooks 2006: 68ff

⁴³⁵ This is a reversal of the axiom saying that "[e]very tyrant knows that it is important, and sometimes possible, [...] to constrain people's actions [...] partly by making people fearful, partly by putting certain options in an unfavorable light, partly by limiting information" (Sunstein 2007: 123): cold-blooded politicians withholding information about an actual threat in order to make the public more compliant. It is also reminiscent of the business-before-public-safety cliché (see footnote 403).

⁴³⁶ Brooks 2006: 80ff

⁴³⁷ In addition, she is presented as particularly heroic: when the undead attack her home, she frees her daughter from the grip of a zombie, and tears its head off, with her bare hands (Brooks 2006: 84).

Finally, another emotion which the text taps into quite heavily, even gleefully, is *schadenfreude*. When the corrupt people in power or the arrogant rich and famous find themselves in lowly positions in post-World-War-Z society, the text appears to revel in its sense of poetic justice. The suddenly reversed position of US refugees in (zombie-free) Cuba is one example of this: “the Yankee detainees [...] would do the jobs Cubanos no longer wanted – day laborers, dish washers, and street cleaners” (Brooks 2006: 285). In the United States, the infrastructure has to be rebuilt, and therefore craftsmen are needed much more urgently, and also valued much higher, than white-collar employees. The latter are now all categorised as “unskilled labor: clearing rubble, harvesting crops, digging graves” (Brooks 2006: 174). The callous government official mentioned above, whose previous job is not needed anymore, now works “as a fuel collector for the town’s experimental bioconversion plant. The fuel he collects is dung. [...] [H]e pushes his wheelbarrow across the pie-laden pastures.” (Brooks 2006: 74) What is more, these recently-demoted people are now trained for their new jobs by instructors “many of [which] were first-generation immigrants. These were the people who knew how to take care of themselves, how to survive on very little and work with what they had” (Brooks 2006: 174f). A Hollywood casting director is reported to have thrown a tantrum when she had to attend a reeducation lecture held by her former cleaning lady.⁴³⁸ While this development is not an illogical consequence of the events described in the book, the text does present it with mischievous joy and invites its readers to join in this sentiment.

World War Z is a text which employs a range of strategies to create an emotional connection between its characters and the audience. In order to inspire societal anxieties, it also needs to present plausible threats. In regard to believability, there is ample evidence that the text strives to suggest authenticity. The footnotes with explanations and clarifications by

⁴³⁸ Brooks 2006: 175f

the interviewer have been mentioned as a means of connecting with the readers; they also give an air of authority and credibility to the narrative.⁴³⁹ The novel is set in the future, but this future is near enough for a contemporary audience to recognise it as closely related to their present.⁴⁴⁰ Interviewer and interviewees refer to recognisable landmarks, geographical and historical details, or organisations such as the United Nations or the World Health Organisation. Yet it remains a valid question to ask: how can the zombie apocalypse pose a plausible societal threat? The answer is probably quite simply that it does not. It is not the hordes of the undead which are used to evoke these feelings. As previously mentioned, the novel focuses less on gruesome zombie attacks than on the gruesome human experience of war. Quite prominent among the historical background information given in *World War Z* are the human conflicts. The text refers or alludes to a wide range of military or political clashes: Israel-Palestine,⁴⁴¹ India-Pakistan,⁴⁴² the Bosnian War,⁴⁴³ North versus South Korea,⁴⁴⁴ the Bolshevik Revolution,⁴⁴⁵ et cetera. The list of conflicts mentioned in even just the course of the very first two interviews includes “the insane nightmare of the Cultural Revolution” (Brooks 2006: 12), the Second Sino-Japanese War, Sino-Soviet border conflicts, and ongoing tensions between China and Tibet. If the first zombie encounter serves to introduce an atmosphere of imminent physical threat, it could be argued that these references to human conflicts of the past are used to set the socio-political mood.

⁴³⁹ Footnotes can make a text appear more serious and trustworthy (cf. Genette 2001: 305ff; “Footnotes and Narrative” 2012).

⁴⁴⁰ This ‘time-stamping’ the text does give it a shelf-life to some extent, however. Nelson Mandela, although unnamed, appears in the book (Brooks 2006: 138f), which is more likely to create a distance for a post-2013 audience rather than draw them in.

⁴⁴¹ Brooks 2006: 46ff

⁴⁴² Brooks 2006: 112ff

⁴⁴³ Brooks 2006: 144

⁴⁴⁴ Brooks 2006: 246ff

⁴⁴⁵ Brooks 2006: 297

A closer look at the individual stories reveals that in many cases, the zombies are not presented as the most horrifying element at all: often, they merely provide the background for, or even just the prelude to, very human horrors. One rather satirical episode describes a group of rich and famous people who live in their own heavily secured fortress, from which they continue to broadcast their extravagant lifestyles.⁴⁴⁶ When their hideout is overrun and becomes the scene of murder and mayhem – “Part of the house was burning, blood everywhere, bodies or bits of them spewed over all that expensive stuff.” (Brooks 2006: 110) – zombies do not even make an appearance at any point. Instead, the building is stormed by “not-so-rich people who just wanted a safe place to hide” (Brooks 2006: 110f). The threat posed by the undead is what makes these people panic, but the horror lies in what humans do to each other rather than in what monsters do to them. There is a distinct parallel to *Incendiary*, in which the ‘true’ source of danger is presented as coming from within one’s own society. Another quite striking example in *World War Z* is the report of a Ukrainian soldier whose “company [is] ordered to oversee the escape route [out of Kiev] at Patona Bridge” (Brooks 2006: 147). Their job is to identify and remove the refugees infected with the zombie virus, and they are on the bridge when it is attacked by four of their own military jets. To make absolutely sure that no infected person can enter a safe zone, nerve gas bombs are dropped onto the bridge. The soldier manages to hide inside a tank and witnesses the scene from there: he sees the people dying and the infected reanimating. Only one of these two events is described in terrifying details, and it is not the latter. The zombies arise:

I could see [them] coming to life, every fortieth or fiftieth person [...]

They were starting to fully reanimate, regaining their footing, shuffling slowly across the bridge toward us. I called for the gunner. [...] It took a few seconds but he settled his crosshairs on the first woman and squeezed the trigger. [...]

The other tanks followed suit.

Twenty minutes later, it was over. (Brooks 2006: 151)

⁴⁴⁶ Brooks 2006: 104ff

Unlike, for example, in the report of ‘Patient Zero’, there is neither an immediate threat as the soldiers are safely in their tanks, nor is there a description of rotten flesh or similarly repulsive details. By way of contrast, this is the passage about the people dying from the nerve agent:

[RVX] enters through the pores, the eyes, the lungs. Depending on the dosage, the effects can be instantaneous. I could see the evacuees’ limbs begin to tremble, arms falling to their sides as the agent worked its way through their central nervous system. They rubbed their eyes, fought to speak, move, breathe. I was glad I couldn’t smell the contents of their undergarments, the sudden discharge of bladder and bowels. (Brooks 2006: 150)

In this soldier’s report, again the zombie threat is only the setting, and possibly the catalyst of the events. The undead are not, however, described in a way to induce much fear or anxiety; they just rise, moan and are shot. The gruesome part is the account of humans being killed by a man-made chemical weapon, which is furthermore employed against them by their own military. The list of horrible aspects of war dealt with in the the novel is long – from the horrible living conditions in resettlement camps,⁴⁴⁷ to people profiteering from other people’s desperate situations,⁴⁴⁸ soldiers suffering from PTSD,⁴⁴⁹ unnecessarily cruel disciplinary measures within armies,⁴⁵⁰ and fathers and sons finding themselves on opposing sides in a war neither of them wanted,⁴⁵¹ etc – and to none of them the nature of the threat which initially provoked the fighting is relevant.

In the chapters dealing with the time before the panic – and subsequently the war – have broken out, there are also many issues mentioned which could excite societal anxieties. They include urbanisation and social divides,⁴⁵² human trafficking,⁴⁵³ organ trade,⁴⁵⁴ incompetent

⁴⁴⁷ Brooks 2006: 52 et passim

⁴⁴⁸ Brooks 2006: 88 et passim

⁴⁴⁹ Brooks 2006: 25f et passim

⁴⁵⁰ Brooks 2006: 102ff

⁴⁵¹ Brooks 2006: 310f

⁴⁵² Brooks 2006: 5ff

bureaucracy,⁴⁵⁵ crooked governments,⁴⁵⁶ and corrupt media.⁴⁵⁷ On their own, these interviews may evoke anxiety in readers receptive to individual matters, and some of these are definitely mentioned more often and in more detail than others, which suggests that they play a more significant role for the whole of the text. If they are not examined individually, however, but as an aggregate instead,⁴⁵⁸ they can be summarised as indications of “how fragile civilization is beneath the surface” (Phipps 2006). These interviews too tell the tales of the horrible things people do to each other, such as human traffickers “propagat[ing] the myth of a miracle cure in other countries” (Brooks 2006: 19) in order to push their business. The emphasis is on this premise: unlike the zombies, the humans who later find themselves struggling for survival were not turned into something they had not been before; the panic and the war simply bring out this side in them, which was hidden – with some people, not as well as with others – in civilised society. The abysses of the human psyche which *World War Z* forces its readers to look into have the potential for a quite severe emotional impact – if you take the book seriously, which it “clearly invites us to do” (Campbell 2010). The mood is lightened, however, with the passages in which “it flirts with silliness” (Campbell 2010) and the mischievous *schadenfreude* it conveys at times. It could be argued that, in addition to comic relief, the book also offers horror relief. When zombies, whose non-humanness is undebated,⁴⁵⁹ are being fought and killed, the violence and the immediate physical threat posed by the monsters distract, for a moment at least, from potentially anxiety-inducing contemplations about humanity.

⁴⁵³ Brooks 2006: 15ff

⁴⁵⁴ Brooks 2006: 26ff

⁴⁵⁵ Brooks 2006: 40ff et passim

⁴⁵⁶ Brooks 2006: 57ff et passim

⁴⁵⁷ Brooks 2006: 77f

⁴⁵⁸ Cf. Dearing and Rogers 1996: 14f

⁴⁵⁹ The theme of characters not being able to disassociate the undead creature from the familiar, even loved, person it used to be is hardly mentioned at all in *World War Z*, with the exception of one interviewee (Brooks 2006: 242f).

The way in which the readers are confronted with ever new societal issues, the global consequences of war, and failures of humanity is not entirely unlike the *Kraken* reading experience. It may cause readers to feel overwhelmed; they might become numb or even ‘switch off’, so they are not receptive to the contents of the book at all anymore. In addition, the text has been criticised for having a left-wing political message in the beginning, but later “find[ing] a savior in authority, tradition and centralized planning [...] So are we supposed to hate government, or embrace it as our last, best hope?” (Campbell 2010) Campbell finds that the novel lacks “an overarching moral point” (Campbell 2010). Both these arguments highlight the number and wide range of issues presented in the text, and the fact that they may deter an audience. Yet there is a point to be made that for other recipients, the threats add up to grow ever more frightening; and then the very fact that there is no easy solution, and no comfortably perfect political stance one can rely on, can add an additional layer of helplessness, which enhances anxiety. If there is an overarching strategy of influencing the mental state of the readers in *World War Z*, it concerns the fragility of social constructions and values. This is where it differs from *Kraken*: one encompassing theme can be identified, and this connection between the various issues can reiterate the threat in the readers’ minds rather than force them to focus on something else entirely.

The plan which ultimately decides the survival of the human race in *World War Z* is a good example of this: in the first interview of the section “Turning the Tide”⁴⁶⁰ the South African ‘Redeker Plan’ is introduced. It is based on

Plan Orange, appropriately completed in 1984, [which] was the ultimate survival strategy for the Afrikaner people. [...] Redeker believed that to try to protect everyone would stretch the government’s resources to the breaking point, thus dooming the entire population. He compared it to

⁴⁶⁰ Brooks 2006: 132

survivors from a sinking ship capsizing a lifeboat that simply did not have room for them all. Redeker had even gone so far as to calculate who should be “brought aboard.” (Brooks 2006: 134f)

It is this plan which is being carried out when the Ukrainian military drops RVX bombs onto the Kiev bridge, and there are comparably horrifying stories of versions of the Redeker plan being implemented in other countries.⁴⁶¹ It is true that this is the plan which ‘turned the tide’ for the humans, according to their historiography, but as one character puts it: “We lost a hell of a lot more than just people when we abandoned them to the dead” (Brooks 2006: 416). The book does not offer a ‘clean’ solution; in fact, it does the very opposite by indicating that there simply may not be such a thing. The same applies to political systems: some interviewees remark that authoritarian regimes are in an advantaged position. “The repressive nature of [Cuba’s] fortress society”, for example, “allowed the government to take steps to ensure that the infection was never allowed to spread”, and “[b]y the time of the Great Panic, when the world finally woke up to the nightmare breaking down their doors, Cuba had already prepared itself for war” (Brooks 2006: 282). Along the same lines, a South Korean official points out that North Koreans were indoctrinated to “an almost superhuman degree of national discipline” and obedience; “[i]f you were going to invent a country to not only survive but triumph over the apocalypse we faced, it would have been the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” (Brooks 2006: 246f). Yet the fate of the North Korean people in *World War Z* appears to prove the opposite.⁴⁶² Another interview mentions “two [Chinese] missile boats [which] had been caught still tied to the piers, waiting for orders like good sailors as the dead swarmed through their hatches” (Brooks 2006: 313). Is blind obedience better or worse, then, than a “free and fractured society” (Brooks 2006: 247) in which people immediately turn on each other to save themselves? “Are individuals and

⁴⁶¹ Brooks 2006: 140ff et passim

⁴⁶² The entire population disappears mysteriously; “[c]onventional wisdom is that they must have evacuated to their subterranean complexes” (Brooks 2006: 250).

individual liberties important, or do we need Great Men (and Women) [...] to compel us toward safety and salvation?” (Campbell 2010) It is true that the text does not provide a clear-cut answer. This is considered a flaw by some, while for others it may work as part of a larger strategy to inspire societal anxieties.

One reviewer of *World War Z* has said that the book “ends with an affirmation of humanity’s ability to survive the worst the world has to offer” (Phipps 2006). According to the interviewer’s introduction, warfare had ceased about a decade prior to the publication of the interviews.⁴⁶³ In many places, humans are able to live safely by the end of the book, “but we still have a few [zombie] Zones to clear: mountain ranges, snowline islands, the ocean floor, and then there’s Iceland...” (Brooks 2006: 404). The Chinese doctor who had met Patient Zero is still alive and treating patients, and his outlook is positive: “every time, we’ve managed to pull ourselves together, to rebuild and renew our nation. And so we will again – China, and the world. [...] I say, with all honesty, that everything’s going to be all right” (Brooks 2006: 412). Another interviewee emphasises that the common enemy had brought people together, and they are still connected through “this powerful shared experience” (Brooks 2006: 413). Into all of this, however, hints are woven which point towards this peace and harmony being built on thin ice. The most obvious indication is that the zombies have not all been killed and that humans still have to follow strict rules to avoid another mass outbreak of the virus.⁴⁶⁴ The vast majority of the interviewees presented as villains are alive; they have not received their just deserts, and the criminals have not been punished for their crimes. *World War Z* also makes it obvious that the experience of this truly world-wide war has not deterred people from fighting each other: “I’m sure that as soon as things really get back to ‘normal,’ [...] they’ll probably go right back to being as selfish and narrow-minded and generally shitty to one another as we

⁴⁶³ Brooks 2006: 2

⁴⁶⁴ Brooks 2006: 412

were.” (Brooks 2006: 413) On the level of international politics, fresh fault lines have emerged, and they are not really new at all. In the chapter entitled “Total War” (Brooks 2006: 332ff), the readers are told about the strange chain of events which lead to Russia being turned into a religion-based political system, the ‘Holy Russian Empire’.⁴⁶⁵ The former president stays in power as the new head of the church. These developments are relayed rather tongue-in-cheek, but in the final chapter, their consequences become clearer. Former Soviet states, which had emancipated in the 1990s, are being “reabsorbed [...] back into the empire” (Brooks 2006: 405). A previously introduced female Russian soldier is reduced to producing children for the state – “This will be her eighth” (Brooks 2006: 405) – and she is only allowed to give birth to them but not raise them herself. This is one instance of the text being rather less than subtle, but it does not step out of its line. It is not hard to see how rulers could have used the population’s fear to gain and maintain power.

The war drove us back to our roots, made us remember what it means to be Russian. We are strong again, we are feared again, and to Russians, that only means one thing, we are finally *safe* again! For the first time in almost a hundred years, we can finally warm ourselves in the protective fist of a Caesar, and I’m sure you know the word for Caesar in Russian. (Brooks 2006: 407, emphasis in original)

There seems to be no fatiguing of pointing out mankind’s viciousness, its hubris and fallibility. Not only are the Russians repeating the mistakes of their history,⁴⁶⁶ but the Americans also react with familiar contempt. This is manifest, for example, in their never referring to the country as ‘Holy Russian Empire’, or even just ‘Russia’, but ‘Ivan’ instead.⁴⁶⁷ When this old hostility is reanimated at the end of *World War Z*, it is made clear to the readers that peace and harmony are not guaranteed for their future. The choice of opponents is not coincidental, either, as it adds a final layer onto the book’s assemblage of human failures: the inability to learn from the

⁴⁶⁵ Brooks 2006: 360ff

⁴⁶⁶ Cf. Brooks 2006: 109

⁴⁶⁷ Brooks 2006: 404 et passim

past. All of this makes the book's arsenal of tools for inspiring societal anxiety certainly an extensive one. Its actual ability to 'spook a reader for real' depends on the individual recipients' disposition, particularly on whether they are prepared to view the great number of aspects mentioned in the book as one coherent composite.

10. Science fiction

The genre and its contemporary legends

Moving on to science fiction from the previous chapter means staying within the realm of speculative fiction, and there are many parallels between the genres. It has been mentioned that in many cases, such as China Miéville's, it appears quite impossible to make clear-cut categorisations. The two probably best-established defining traits which mark the difference between Gothic horror and science fiction are, firstly, that in the former, the supernatural rules, whereas science fiction relies on technology and science as an explanation for the existence of its fantastic elements.⁴⁶⁸ Secondly, Gothic horror is set in, or at least has a tendency towards, the past,⁴⁶⁹ while science fiction is firmly associated with futuristic scenarios: "cultural anxieties in the present are no longer projected on to the past but are relocated in the future" (Botting 1996: 156). This

⁴⁶⁸ This includes alien life forms, which mankind is usually confronted with owing to technological advances in space travel. It has been argued that by "offer[ing] scientific, or pseudo-scientific, explanations respectively", science fiction "can kill two birds with one stone, concurrently satisfying both rational and irrational needs" (Rieken 2008: 208, my translation).

⁴⁶⁹ The very name of the genre is evidence of this: "... a national past [...] distinct from the cultivation, rationality and maturity of an enlightened age. This past was called 'Gothic', a general and derogatory term for the Middle Ages ..." (Botting 1996: 22). This 'rule' was set by the genre's seminal work, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which claims in its preface to have been first printed in 1529, with the original text dating from even considerably earlier (Walpole 1998: 5). Yet even some of the great classics of the genre, for example *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*, do not adhere to this rule, being set in respectively much more recent pasts.

connection is strong enough even to override the information presented in the narrative. For instance, at the beginning of the 1977 film *Star Wars*⁴⁷⁰ it is clearly said, as in all the subsequent films of the saga, that it is set *a long time ago*,⁴⁷¹ and yet the science-fiction elements of the material make people forget or ignore,⁴⁷² or in some cases consciously challenge,⁴⁷³ this fact. Horrors or terrors are not essential features of science fiction, but they can play a role in works of science fiction. When an effort is made to evoke fear or anxiety in the readers, the genre can move quite close to what Botting defined as the contemporary form of Gothic horror, “‘cybergothic’: cloaked in reassuringly familiar images, technology envelops humanity in a resolutely inhuman system” (2008: 14). It has also been pointed out that there are parallels, for example, between *Blade Runner*,⁴⁷⁴ the Hollywood film adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and *Frankenstein*, as the pivotal issue in both works is “the struggle with human facsimiles” (Philip Strick, quoted in Desser 1997: 53).⁴⁷⁵

The most important aspect which brings forward these similarities is the fact that in both genres, the distance created to the reader’s world can be used to reflect and highlight facets of contemporary society. “On other planets, in other periods of time, [science fiction] frequently views life ‘as we know it’ on Earth today through mirrors of both keenly satirical distortion and piercingly detached clarity.” (Williamson 1987a: 4) This gives the genre great potential as a vehicle of societal anxieties, which is reflected in the large number of legends for which “science is a necessary element [...] – be it as background or the source of conflict” (Banks 1987: 82). However,

⁴⁷⁰ Lucas 1977. The film was later renamed *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.

⁴⁷¹ “Opening crawl – Wookieepedia”.

⁴⁷² Even the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom has committed this blunder: in a 2011 judgment, they stated that “[t]he *Star Wars* films are set in an imaginary, science-fiction world *of the future*” (“*Lucasfilm Limited & Ors v Ainsworth & Anor*”, emphasis added).

⁴⁷³ Cf. Heresiarch 2011

⁴⁷⁴ Scott 1982

⁴⁷⁵ Cf. Southwell 2014. Some critics in fact consider *Frankenstein* “the first significant work of science fiction” (Stableford 1987: 45).

there are limitations to science- and technology-based contemporary legends which do not apply to novels of the genre. First and foremost, the futuristic aspect has to be toned down almost to the brink of cancellation; an indispensable characteristic of contemporary legends is that they are told as true, regardless of their actual truth content or believability, and this means that the immediate future is the furthest a legend can venture into the time to come. From this, in turn, derives the second limitation, which pertains to the legends' life spans. Many of them become outdated very quickly as they are undermined by scientific and technological advancements, for example legends about the ill-advised use of floppy disks.⁴⁷⁶ These tales are also examples of one of the two big groups of legends which revolve around science and technology but do not qualify as equivalents of science fiction. Tales ridiculing people's lack of technological and/or scientific grasp may be a great source of amusement, and therefore exist in large numbers,⁴⁷⁷ but the entertainment is derived from the fact that these people are not familiar with things which are entirely commonplace to the members of the folk group sharing the legends. In science fiction, however, the essential element is technology which is further advanced than today's standard. The second big group of stories is comprised of horror stories with a high shock value – they could be called scare legends – about health and safety issues concerning the science and technology currently in use, such as exploding devices or harmful radiation emitted by electric appliances.⁴⁷⁸

The contemporary legends which could be described as science fiction, in terms of themes and elements, involve scientific or technological advancements which are imminent and which will transform the folk group

⁴⁷⁶ “Users backed up their floppy disk (by photo copying the actual disk[])”; “other users filed copies of their backups. (This sounds like a good idea, until you realise they have hole punched their floppy disks and put them in ring binder [*sic*]” (Fraser 2014).

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. Craughwell 2005: 252f, 338, 43f; Barber 2007: 248ff, 54ff; Wiebe 2003: 88f; Brunvand 1999: 285ff; “snopes: Hotel Safe Mistaken” 2010 et al.

⁴⁷⁸ Cf. “snopes: Horrors (Techno-Industrial Terror)”

members' lives to some extent, and when societal structures or a group's social position are adversely affected in these legends, they may inspire societal anxieties. Botting's summarisation of the cybergothic – "technology envelop[ing] humanity in a resolutely inhuman system" (2008: 14) – can be found reflected in many of these stories. Machines replacing humans because they are cheaper and less likely to make mistakes⁴⁷⁹ is certainly not an unheard-of scenario; therefore stories of ever new jobs being taken over by robots are plausible, and can be expected to provoke an emotional reaction.⁴⁸⁰ The impact of a story concerning a fast food restaurant being run entirely by robots may be limited, however, by the size of the folk groups which are likely to respond with a high level of alarm or disquiet. Apart from fast food industry workers, who are potentially threatened with being replaced by robots, this legend will land on fertile soil with people who have a Luddite or technophobic tendency or disposition. In addition, there are people who are worried about the purity of food being tainted by machines, but then they probably avoid fast food restaurants belonging to major chains in any case.⁴⁸¹ The issue takes on different dimensions with legends such as the following, which is about Japanese engineers who have built a teddy-bear-shaped robot for the use in hospitals and nursing homes, specifically to provide help in assisted suicides:

The growing suicide rate, as well as the senior population is becoming an increasing concern. Hospital Staff, and Suicide Assistant Volunteers from the JSDD are required to help euthanize those who are unable to themselves due to physical, or psychological reasons.

To aid these carers and volunteers, the JSDD-Orient Industry Collaboration Center for Human-Interactive Robotics Research in the Bunkyo Ward of Tokyo has designed an assisted suicide support robot with the face of

⁴⁷⁹ "snopes: New McDonald's" 2015

⁴⁸⁰ Both these reasons, credibility and the emotional charge of this issue, account for the fact that it was used as an April Fool's gag by the pizza chain Domino's, which announced driverless delivery vehicles on their website on 01 April 2015 ("Domino's Announces Driverless Delivery – snopes" 2015).

⁴⁸¹ In addition, there is a much larger number of much more disgusting legends to choose from if one wants to find a reason not to eat at fast food restaurants, cf. Brunvand 2004: 229ff et al.

an innocent, loveable cartoon-like bear to aid patients in self-euthanasia named SeppuKuma.

SeppuKuma, which loosely translates to “Suicide Bear” has robotic arms that are able to carry up to 80kg of weight, hands that are powerful enough to crush human bone, and roller legs that can retract or extend from a base as necessary when bending to pick someone up out of bed or when maneuvering through tight spaces like doorways. (IFLScience.org, quoted on “snopes: Japanese Engineers” 2015)

In terms of folk groups, the country of origin named in this legend is highly significant. The Japanese are a nation which seems to have taken on a special role in contemporary Western folklore. Other countries are still considered culturally, politically and/or technologically underdeveloped; at least they tend to play this role in legends and other materials relying on stereotypes.⁴⁸² The Japanese are treated differently: their technological advance is acknowledged, and indeed sometimes exaggerated,⁴⁸³ but this is often accompanied by a touch of envy or mistrust of their products,⁴⁸⁴ and ‘oddities’ are highlighted to emphasise the degree to which their culture differs from Western.⁴⁸⁵ The result seems to be the view that neither Japanese ingenuity nor their peculiarity can be overrated, and both of these notions are echoed in the legend of SeppuKuma. For the inspiration of societal anxiety, the tale lacks a folk group as the ‘target’, or the ‘victims’, however. The report does not say that the ‘Suicide Bear’ is going to be used in the Anglo-American world, where this story has circulated. Yet again the geographical setting is crucial: Japan is one of the few countries perceived by the West as ahead – rather than lagging behind – in many aspects, and it has set trends and been successful with products which may have seemed outlandish to many at first glance, such as the cyber pet

⁴⁸² A famous example is the depiction of the Mexican people and culture in legends circulating mostly in the United States; cf. “snopes: The Mexican Pet” 2002; “snopes: Mexan Vanilla and Coumarin” 2008; “snopes: Shoplifting Drops” 2009 et al.

⁴⁸³ Cf. “snopes: Scientists in Japan Clone” 2014

⁴⁸⁴ Brunvand 2003: 168f; cf. “snopes: Made in USA” 2011

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. “snopes: Japanese See-Through Skirts” 2014; “snopes: Hydrogen Beer” 2006

Aibo. ‘Japanese technology’ appears to equal ‘future technology’ in many people’s perception. Therefore, Japan is the country apparently predestined to provide ‘visions of the future’, which in this case means contemporary science-fiction legends.

To enhance the legend’s credibility, the common strategy of giving details such as place names is employed, and the description of the robot’s appearance taps into the common notion that everything Japanese must be *kawaii*: “the face of an innocent, loveable cartoon-like bear” (“snopes: Japanese Engineers” 2015).⁴⁸⁶ The plausibility value of the threat itself may lie not with the invention of the suicide-assistance robot but the underlying issues it represents. The first sentence of the SeppuKuma legend says that “the senior population is becoming an increasing concern” (“snopes: Japanese Engineers” 2015), and while this is rather inelegantly put, it will ring true with many 21st-century readers. Population ageing has indeed been publicly discussed repeatedly over the last several years.⁴⁸⁷ Whether the individual reader worries about their living conditions in old age is bound to depend on their respective current age to a certain extent. It is probably safe to say, however, that all but the most misanthropic wish to be looked after by human beings if or when they require care. Any health or geriatric care system in which the nursing staff has been replaced with robots qualifies as a literally inhuman system. The unpleasant idea of being at the mercy of a machine is intensified by the robot’s description, which includes “hands that are powerful enough to crush human bone” (“snopes: Japanese Engineers” 2015). This hyperbole is likely intended as another marker of the text as satirical, but it can enhance an already quite strong feeling of anxiety in susceptible readers.

⁴⁸⁶ In this sentence, the description also serves the purpose of humorous juxtaposition, marking the report as a satire, as the sentence goes on to say, “... to aid patients in self-euthanasia” (“snopes: Japanese Engineers” 2015).

⁴⁸⁷ Cf. “The ageing population” 2007

Jan Harold Brunvand, in his analysis of the classic legend of “The Snake in the Blanket” (2003: 160ff), points out that cautionary tales about foreign products reflect more than people’s suspicions of the respective countries of origin.⁴⁸⁸ Another important aspect is “popular distrust [...] of ‘big business’ – the large impersonal chain stores” (Brunvand 2003: 168). This statement can be easily transferred to the SeppuKuma legend: it conveys a distrust of large, impersonal hospitals or nursing homes. This element is also quite prevalent in science fiction: with all the extravagant technology and science, there must be somebody who develops and produces it, and who therefore wields a lot of power. These are inevitably large and successful companies, and they, “like foreigners, are outsiders to the local community (the accepted basis for standards and morality) and have not adopted moral injunctions” (Fine 1992: 128). This outside position, and the fact that large businesses in general tend to be impersonal entities,⁴⁸⁹ make them suitable villains. The “monolithic, evil corporation that always seems to come complete with a malevolent CEO, a cadre of sadistic scientists, and army of faceless storm troopers” (Heller 2009) has become a cliché used in many works of fiction – and science fiction in particular – but more subtle or less one-dimensional depictions can be found as well. It certainly appears not to be an outdated topic. Current legends in the field of science fiction tap into the unease many people experience towards big corporations, high-tech companies in particular, and use strategies of enhancing these feelings.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁸ The most appropriate title for this legend and its many variations would in fact be *The <Venomous Non-Native Animal> in the <Imported Good>*. Cf. Barber 2005: 83ff; Brunvand 1999: 185ff; Craughwell 2005: 586f et al.

⁴⁸⁹ Although there have been examples of entrepreneurs becoming the public face of big corporations, for instance Steve Jobs. This strategy can help make a business appear more ‘human’, and thus more likeable. In the case of Apple, Steve Jobs’ media presence was likely part of the reason why the brand holds its positive public image still today. Q.v. Mahdawi 2015.

⁴⁹⁰ “snopes: Apple iPhone Fingerprint” 2013; “A (Not So) Secret Microchip – snopes” 2015; “snopes: Facebook Privacy Notice” 2015; “snopes: Facebook Listens” 2014; “snopes: Facebook Search Engine” 2009 et al.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, the 1968 novel by Philip K. Dick, is set just more than fifty years in the future.⁴⁹¹ This is a time span which is long enough to plausibly allow for major technological developments and socio-political changes, yet also suitably short for readers to grasp and possibly relate to.⁴⁹² In the course of these five decades, a global nuclear war, ‘World War Terminus’,⁴⁹³ and its long-term consequences, made large parts of the planet uninhabitable, and killed most of its human and animal population. Significantly, “no one today remembered why the war had come about or who, if anyone, had won” (Dick 1991: 12). Mankind, significantly decimated and having robbed itself of its living space, has founded colonies in outer space in order to guarantee the survival of the human race. Back on Earth, the nuclear fallout is slowly losing its fatal effect. It does not immediately kill people anymore and “only deranges minds and genetic properties” (Dick 1991: 6) instead. The affected are “classed as biologically unacceptable, a menace to the pristine heredity of the race” (Dick 1991: 13). They are called ‘specials’ (as opposed to ‘regulars’),⁴⁹⁴ and they are not allowed to reproduce or emigrate. In addition to the negative incentive given by the nuclear dust, the United Nations present a positive incentive for the ‘regulars’ to emigrate to Mars: the free issue of one’s own personal android. According to a TV advertisement, an android is a “loyal, trouble-free companion”, which “duplicates the halcyon days of the pre-Civil War Southern states”, as these humanoid robots can be used as “body servants or tireless field hands” (Dick 1991: 14). Neither the readers nor the focal characters of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* can verify the validity of the promises made by this ad themselves, however, as they do not get to

⁴⁹¹ Cf. Dick 1991: 24 et passim

⁴⁹² Cf. Stableford 1987: 65

⁴⁹³ Dick 1991: 6 et passim

⁴⁹⁴ Dick 1991: 6

know life on mars first-hand. The story and its central figures never leave planet Earth.⁴⁹⁵

The protagonist of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is Rick Deckard. He is one of the remaining regulars on Earth; he has to stay because of his job. Rick works as a bounty hunter for the San Francisco Police Department. His targets are humanoid robots that have killed their human masters and escaped to Earth. They have, according to the law, forfeited their right to existence, and are to be ‘retired’ by the bounty hunters. The euphemism was chosen in order to emphasise their status as a non-living machine, yet it does not quite deceive any of the characters in the novel. Rick and his colleagues do use the word ‘kill’ as well as ‘retire’,⁴⁹⁶ and his wife calls him a “murderer hired by the cops” (Dick 1991: 1). The bounty hunters’ biggest problem is that the state-of-the-art androids are impossible to distinguish from humans with the naked eye. According to the manufacturer, the consumers demanded “progressively more human types” of robots (Dick 1991: 47) as their companions on the strange planet.⁴⁹⁷ These androids “surpassed several classes of human specials in terms of intelligence” (Dick 1991: 25f), and they appear to be able to show some emotions, such as fear.⁴⁹⁸ What makes matters worse is that some of the latest-generation machines have been programmed with a false memory, which means that they themselves are not aware of the fact that they are not human.⁴⁹⁹ What they cannot do is feel empathy. The way to determine whether a subject is human or android is therefore with the help of an

⁴⁹⁵ The use of hovercars does not count as departing from the planet.

⁴⁹⁶ Dick 1991: 27 et passim

⁴⁹⁷ “To construct an artifact whose purpose is to accomplish tasks that could be accomplished only by something (or someone) endowed with human sentience and human shape, one cannot avoid constructing an artifact endowed with humanoid shape, human abilities, humanlike intelligence, and humanlike emotions.” (Chu 2010: 240)

⁴⁹⁸ Dick 1991: 55. In this situation, however, the android’s reaction is described by a human unaware of the fact that he is faced with a non-human. It is possible that his interpretation of her body language is therefore wrong.

⁴⁹⁹ Dick 1991: 52 et passim

empathy test. The ‘Voigt-Kampff apparatus’ measures the physical response, “the so-called ‘shame’ or ‘blushing’ reaction to a morally shocking stimulus [which] can’t be controlled voluntarily” (Dick 1991: 41). Androids can feign the physical reaction, but in order for them to do this they have to process given input correctly, and trigger an appropriate response. This process happens quickly, but it is still slower than the real reaction of a human being. Their reaction time is what gives them away as not actually experiencing the emotion and thus as non-human.

As all of this suggests, feelings play a crucial yet not uncontroversial role in this novel. This also applies to the readers’ emotional responses, in particular in regard to the protagonist Rick Deckard. He is certainly the central character in the book, which tells the story of 24 hours in his life: it starts with him waking up one morning and ends with him falling asleep at the next dawn. He is also the main of the two focal characters in the book and therefore the prime figure for readers to potentially identify with. This, however, is not made entirely easy by the text. The synonymous German words *Sympathielenkung* and *Sympathiesteuerung* both suggest that literary material engages the audience’s sympathy in a purposeful manner and in fact *steers* it towards or away from certain characters. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, this steering does not follow a straight path at all. It is a winding road, and at a number of points along this path it is not easy to tell what is lurking behind the next bend in the road. Michael Dunker pointed out that as part of a complex *Sympathiesteuerung* approach, the portrayals of one character as likeable and another as unlikeable can be combined, connected and contrasted in order to enhance both.⁵⁰⁰ Rick Deckard has more than one antagonist, however – ranging from his (initially) estranged wife to colleagues and, of course, the various androids he is faced with – and the degree of sympathy with which he is depicted in relation to each of them varies considerably. As an additional

⁵⁰⁰ Dunker 1991: 146

confounding element, the readers learn that they might not be able to fully rely on the thoughts or indeed the feelings of their predominant source of information: even on page 1, the text says that Rick's positive frame of mind⁵⁰¹ is not the result of his current circumstances or a general cheerful disposition, but rather of having chosen the appropriate setting on a device controlling his mood.⁵⁰² Later on in the text, as Rick's own humanity is challenged, it is implied that his memories as well as his perception of himself could have been synthetically produced and implanted in his (in this case android) mind.⁵⁰³

Yet both these uncertainties and his struggles are arguably the strongest element in a strategy of presenting Rick Deckard as a likeable character a reader can empathise with. In a text which so resolutely refuses to take a clear-cut moral stance, a black-or-white protagonist would not only feel out of place but also probably fail to engage the recipients.⁵⁰⁴ If an audience takes the controversial issues presented in the text seriously, they cannot conceivably identify with a character that does not do so. Rick makes entirely contradictory statements about his job, from having to see androids as "solitary predators" in order to find his work less disagreeable,⁵⁰⁵ to claiming that his conscience does not 'bother' him anymore even if he does not mentally refer to a humanoid robot as 'it',⁵⁰⁶ and then declaring it "unethical and cruel" (Dick 1991: 111) to leave an android erroneously believing that they are human only one page later. These are not textual inconsistencies but rather signs that he is becoming

⁵⁰¹ "[H]e felt well-disposed toward the world ..." (Dick 1991: 1)

⁵⁰² The "Penfield mood organ" (Dick 1991: 3 et passim) is an expensive appliance designed to help humans cope with the loneliness on the deserted planet Earth, or, in the words of Rick's wife, "sensing the absence of life, not just in this building but everywhere, and not reacting" (Dick 1991: 3).

⁵⁰³ Dick 1991: 97ff

⁵⁰⁴ It is also quite fitting, therefore, that the question of Rick Deckard's humanity remains unsolved.

⁵⁰⁵ Dick 1991: 27

⁵⁰⁶ Dick 1991: 110. Referring to a robot as 'it', rather than 'he' or 'she', is a way of linguistically marking them as not belonging to one's folk group.

increasingly torn and confused in regard to the “distinction between authentic living humans and humanoid constructs” (Dick 1991: 125) as “the narrative gradually erodes the differences distinguishing one from the other” (Botting 1996: 164). Outside of Rick’s inner conflicts, other textual means to present the protagonist as likeable appear more straightforwardly positive – and thus more conventional. He is described as scrupulous, and he cares for other people: when he is led to believe he misclassified a human as an android, he thinks, “Thank god I didn’t go out bounty hunting on the basis of this test” (Dick 1991: 47). He also has a surprising penchant for the fine arts – his love of opera⁵⁰⁷ or his precise knowledge of 19th-century painting⁵⁰⁸ are not alluded to before or after the Luba Luft episode – and, most importantly, he does not enjoy killing and finds the joy another bounty hunter experiences despicable.⁵⁰⁹ In the end, he manages to finish his mission, i.e. kill all the androids, who he increasingly perceives as people, but at a price: the android Rachael kills his goat in an act of revenge,⁵¹⁰ and Rick suffers a mental breakdown.⁵¹¹ He is saved by a combination of two things: a kind of spiritual awakening, notably to a quasi-religion which is based on empathy, and secondly the confrontation with another living thing, a toad. This animal is later found out to be artificial, but Rick does not mind: “The electric things have their lives, too.” (Dick 1991: 214) Both the spiritual awakening and the emotions towards the electric toad are based on the comprehension that empathy is indeed what makes us human, and the artificiality of the object can be of little relevance as long

⁵⁰⁷ “As he entered [the opera house] he recognized the music: Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, the first act in its final scenes. [...] What a pleasure; he loved *The Magic Flute*.” (Dick 1991: 85)

⁵⁰⁸ “‘Did you really like that Munch picture that Luba Luft was looking at?’ he asked. ‘I didn’t care for it. Realism in art doesn’t interest me [...]’ ‘Puberty dates from 1894,’ Rick said shortly. ‘Nothing but realism existed then; you have to take that into account.’” (Dick 1991: 122)

⁵⁰⁹ Dick 1991: 120

⁵¹⁰ It may also be an act of rage; the interpretation of her motivations very much depends on the emotional capacities one concedes to the humanoid robot.

⁵¹¹ Dick 1991: 202ff

as the experienced feeling is true.⁵¹² It is this understanding which rounds off his character development and serves as the final mark designating Rick Deckard as the hero of the novel.

The presentation of the secondary focal character in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is considerably less complex, and even more clearly designed to evoke positive emotions in the readers. John Isidore belongs to the group of people affected by the nuclear fallout; he has been diagnosed with “distorted genes”, and in addition “failed to pass the minimum mental faculties test, which made him in popular parlance a chickenhead” (Dick 1991: 15). On occasion, however, the wording of his thoughts as well as his reasoning belie this classification:

He wondered, then, if the others who had remained on Earth experienced the void this way. Or was it peculiar to his peculiar biological identity, a freak generated by his inept sensory apparatus? Interesting question, Isidore thought. But whom could he compare notes with? He lived alone in this deteriorating, blind building of a thousand uninhabited apartments, which like all its counterparts, fell, day by day, into greater entropic ruin. (Dick 1991: 16f)

Rather than lacking intelligence, his major shortcoming seems to be social clumsiness or awkwardness resulting from a life mostly lived in isolation.⁵¹³ John Isidore’s most highly developed characteristic, on the other hand, is his ability to empathise with all animate beings, including electric animals⁵¹⁴ and humanoid robots.⁵¹⁵ He is thus a counterpart, if an inverted one, to the androids: both are deficient in one of the two aspects – intelligence and empathy – but excel in the other, and both are barred from being considered “part of mankind” (Dick 1991: 13) for their deficit, regardless of

⁵¹² Thus, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* could be said to assume a clear position in the discussion of whether a work of art can evoke ‘real’ or merely ‘artificial’ emotions; cf. Chapter 4.

⁵¹³ “What do you do when a new resident moves in? Drop by and borrow something, is that how it’s done? He could not remember; this had never happened to him before, here or anywhere else: people moved out, people emigrated, but nobody ever moved in.” (Dick 1991: 22)

⁵¹⁴ Dick 1991: 64 et passim

⁵¹⁵ Dick 1991: 143

their other capabilities. What makes John Isidore more likeable is, on the one hand, his privileged position in the text as one of only two focal characters, and on the other hand his underprivileged position in the book's society as a virtually irredeemable outsider. There is more hope for the androids to be accepted into the human community than there is for the 'specials'; the story does not end with the protagonist Rick Deckard arriving at a newly-found appreciation of the people in John Isidore's social stratum.⁵¹⁶ The character who exhibits the highest level of empathy is the one on whom the least amount of empathy is bestowed by other figures in the text. The depictions of this disparity, and of John Isidore's hopeless situation, are means of triggering a sympathetic response in the recipients.

In the scenario of the future presented in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Western society on planet Earth is greatly changed. Social structures as well as social ethics and attitudes have undergone extensive transformations corresponding to the radically transmuted living environment. One of the clearest indicators of this is the list of questions asked during the Voigt-Kampff empathy test.⁵¹⁷ They are based on a socio-cultural understanding of the sanctity of animal life which far exceeds the established norm of the late 1960s – or indeed the non-fictional early 21st century.⁵¹⁸ It is therefore unlikely for readers of the novel to experience categorial identification in regard to the social position of any of the characters. This does not mean, however, that such a text cannot inspire societal anxieties at all. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* features two main strategies of presenting threats plausible for an audience living 50

⁵¹⁶ The last time the reader encounters John Isidore in the text is in a chapter told from Rick Deckard's perspective. John says that he intends to move to a less deserted part of the town, but his plans appear to be of no interest to Rick, and thus the text. John then simply "shuffle[s] out of the apartment, leaving Rick alone" (Dick 1991: 199), never to be mentioned again.

⁵¹⁷ Dick 1991: 42ff et passim

⁵¹⁸ For readers not sharing the characters' norms and values, the questions in the test raise the awareness of the extent to which one's feelings are influenced by social (or folk group) norms (cf. the notion of 'learned' emotions, Chapter 1, footnote 15).

years prior to the events related in the book. Firstly, the text deals with universal or timeless issues (such as the human condition in general), or poses questions which are likely to concern the human race for the rest of its existence, e.g. matters “that relate identity to new technologies” (McCracken 1998: 103). Secondly, in the story a distinct connection is made between the “post-apocalyptic, technological wasteland” (Grunenberg 1997: 199) which planet Earth has become, and current developments, ranging from the socio-political situation, to advances in the so-called defence industry, or the ecological damage caused by mankind. It is emphasised that humanity’s dire situation is not the result of unlucky circumstance but the people’s own reckless and short-sighted behaviour.

Regarding the former, the most obvious and biggest universal issue is the question of humanity, and what criteria an entity has to meet in order to qualify as part of it. The book suggests a range of factors, for example the desire to live in freedom,⁵¹⁹ an adoration of art⁵²⁰ or an appreciation of literature,⁵²¹ or the capacity to feel lonely.⁵²² The criterion chosen by the legislators in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is empathy. It is crucial that the humanoid robots in this text are able to show empathy, however. The examination procedure which is applied to distinguish androids from humans – “a clumsy test of questionable validity” (Gwaltney 1997: 33) – has to rely on reaction time. “Not only is the difference between a human and a humanoid described here as quantitative rather than qualitative, but this quantitative difference is as infinitesimal – as negligible – as ‘a fraction of a second.’” (Chu 2010: 244) Humans are unable to detect this difference without the help of a machine, and the novel also suggests that there are human beings who would fail the test and could therefore erroneously be eliminated by a bounty hunter – for example, “schizoid [or] schizophrenic

⁵¹⁹ Dick 1991: 161

⁵²⁰ Dick 1991: 115ff

⁵²¹ Dick 1991: 132ff

⁵²² Dick 1991: 131

human[s]” who “reveal what’s called a ‘flattening of affect’” (Dick 1991: 33). The text also mentions another reason why a person might fail the test, which is quite simply a different cultural background. The character Eldon Rosen is trying to rationalise away his ‘niece’s’ failing the test by explaining that she grew up not knowing planet Earth the way it was now, as described in the novel. She would therefore not react as strongly to the death of an animal.⁵²³ The point that the novel makes is that being marked as, or perceived as, different in specific ways, which are arbitrarily chosen by a predominant group,⁵²⁴ might mark you as unhuman and thus put you in a subordinate category, or, in the worst case, clear you for elimination. This argument is further stressed by another aspect in the story: in this futuristic world, humans classified and recognised as ‘regular’ humans cannot be certain to remain in this category. John Isidore was degraded to ‘special’ only just more than a year prior to the events in the book;⁵²⁵ it was only then that he “ceased, in effect, to be part of mankind” (Dick 1991: 13). Rick Deckard, on the other hand, is still classified as a ‘regular’. As he is constantly exposed to the nuclear dust, “[a]ny month, however, the exam by the San Francisco Police Department doctors could reveal otherwise” (Dick 1991: 6). Furthermore, people who are too old (to reproduce, or, possibly, to be considered a useful part of society) are not allowed to emigrate to the outer-space colonies either.⁵²⁶ In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the question of being granted full rights as a human being is not only raised in reference to robots but also, critically, regarding people who are biologically undeniably human. These are timeless issues humanity has been struggling with throughout the course of its history, and in combination with the emotionally charged depiction of the focal characters, these questions are evidence of a strategy of inspiring anxiety in readers sensitive to these issues.

⁵²³ Dick 1991: 46

⁵²⁴ Cf. Desser 1997: 57

⁵²⁵ Dick 1991: 15

⁵²⁶ Dick 1991: 66

The second way in which this novel presents the depicted threats as plausible, despite being set in the future, is the connection it makes to the present. According to the text, the humanoid robots were originally designed as “a weapon of war, the Synthetic Freedom Fighter” (Dick 1991: 13). It also says that the first ones were built in the 1970s,⁵²⁷ a maximum of 12 years into the future from the novel’s first publication. This suggests that from the readers’ ‘today’, World War Terminus is looming. The long-term consequences may still be about one and a half generations away, but we are about to set in motion the process which is going to take us there. Humanity itself is destroying its own living environment, and the people fail to realise what is happening before it is too late. A species or two of animals becoming extinct in front of their very eyes is not enough to raise alarm, especially if it is a species which had so far not been in the forefront of the minds of the majority of the human population because they do not encounter these animals on a daily basis.⁵²⁸ This casualness is not so much a sign of mankind’s depravity but of ineptitude and ignorance.⁵²⁹ This is not presented as an acceptable excuse, however, as the text makes clear that mankind cannot afford to be casual about the environmental impact of its actions. The novel is set in the remains of the United States of America; the protagonists live in San Francisco, and the Rosen corporation has its headquarters in Seattle. Rick Deckard finds his toad “in the desert, up near the Oregon border. Where everything had died.” (Dick 1991: 213) These geographical details reiterate the fact that it is indeed the real world, the real living environment of the novels’ recipients, that is affected. In addition, the text does not allow the audience to hide behind a comfortable assignment of guilt onto another folk group: as mentioned before, the actual reason for the conflict which lead to the global war is unknown, and so is the exact source of the nuclear dust. It was not one specific country

⁵²⁷ Dick 1991: 25

⁵²⁸ Dick 1991: 12f

⁵²⁹ Cf. Ungar 2011: 197; Tudor 1989: 134

which (first) deployed nuclear weapons. “The dust which had contaminated most of the planet’s surface had originated in no country and no one, even the wartime enemy, had planned on it.” (Dick 1991: 12) If there is no particular person or group of people to blame for a problem which is undoubtedly man-made, all of humanity is potentially to blame.⁵³⁰ *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* does not grant its (human) audience any place to hide from their responsibility for the planet they (still) live on. If a reader perceives the depicted threats as plausible, they are not unlikely to be emotionally affected by the text, and a feeling of societal anxiety may be inspired in them.

The Circle

“No robots work here.” (Eggers 2013: 49) This is one of the things which Mae Holland, protagonist of Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*, is told on her second day at her new job at the overwhelmingly successful internet company called the ‘Circle’. It is a place which is quite remote from her previous life, almost as if she had entered a parallel universe. Mae is enthralled by the Circle to an extent which makes her blind to the implications and consequences of the company’s business practices, even as her immediate family and friends are affected. No robots work at the Circle. Indeed it is humans who are the company’s most valuable asset, not just as employees, but more importantly as users of their various online tools. As Siva Vaidhyanathan notes about one of the real-life companies⁵³¹ which the Circle is based on: “we are not Google’s customers: we are its product. We – our fancies, fetishes, predilections, and preferences – are what Google sells to advertisers” (2012: 3). In the novel, this business practice is extrapolated and projected to a near future in which one single business owns every little piece of personal data, even down to current vital

⁵³⁰ Cf. Tudor 1989: 136; Holländer 1994

⁵³¹ The fictional company has been described as “a mashup of Google, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Paypal” (Berman 2013), “but more impressive and intrusive than all of them combined” (Davis 2013).

functions. The text uses satire and exaggeration to reiterate its central message; it is a book which unambiguously intends to raise awareness for, and warn of, a current development deemed dangerous. Published in 2013, *The Circle* is the most recent novel analysed in this study, and it is designed explicitly to inspire societal anxiety in the contemporary audience. It is no surprise, therefore, that it has been compared to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.⁵³²

The presentation of Mae, the protagonist and focal character of the novel, offers a range of ways for the readers to make an emotional connection. There are indications that the novel aims at categorial identification as part of this. The story begins on Mae's first day at the Circle. It is related how she got there: after "meandering between majors" (Eggers 2013: 3) at college, she finds her first experience of working life frustrating and disappointing.

Of Mae's graduating class of eighty-one, she was one of twelve to go to a four-year college, and the only one to go east of Colorado. That she went so far, and went into such debt, only to come back and work at the local utility, shredded her, and her parents, though outwardly they said she was doing the right thing, taking a solid opportunity and getting started in paying down her loans.

[...]

She had not gone to college, \$234,000 worth of elite liberal arts education, for a job like that. But it was work, and she needed the money. (Eggers 2013: 9f)

She only gets the much better job with the Circle through her college friend Annie, who holds a high position in the company. This report of Mae's experience promotes a connection between her and the readers in as far as they can share her enthusiasm about the new job, and relate to her being mesmerised by the new environment. For many, the bond will be even stronger, however, because they identify Mae as belonging to their group: the young adults who experienced "many of their parents grapp[ing] with the recession's economic fallout" and who "knew of college-educated

⁵³² Davis 2013

people who lost jobs” (Gordon 2015). Mae’s youth is stressed throughout the book⁵³³ – again, it can be assumed that this is done in order to both make her likeable in general and identify her as belonging to the ‘target group’. Yet her anxieties about finding a good job and earning enough money make this target group even more specific. The more exactly defined the folk group is, the stronger is the perceived connection to fellow members.⁵³⁴

Mae is described as physically beautiful, but her “curves that brought the attention of men of myriad ages and motives” (Eggers 2013: 6) only appeared when she was already in college, together with a “more open, more accepting” (Eggers 2013: 6) attitude. From the very beginning, she is a positive, but not a perfect character, making her appear more rounded and real. She is a well-mannered girl, which is displayed in two scenes involving her friend Annie. When they first meet again at the Circle, Mae is shocked by Annie’s cursing, by “hearing such a filth coming from such a sweet face” (Eggers 2013: 16), as well as her table manners.⁵³⁵ This serves to emphasise both the negative influence that work and life at the Circle has had on her friend, and Mae’s good upbringing. Her family background, too, is used to make Mae likeable. She has loving parents, who are struggling financially and emotionally due to her father suffering from multiple sclerosis.⁵³⁶ The recipients are invited to feel sympathy for her family, and therefore to be all the more happy for her success at work. In

⁵³³ “You really think I look old? What would you say? Thirty?” (Eggers 2013: 217)

⁵³⁴ With the novel’s cautionary message in mind, the group of people identified as the target group, through Mae, is more than merely a market segment. It also suggests a call to action: it is this folk group that may be in a position to influence the course of history in regard to the way we deal with personal data and civil liberties. In connection with this, it is also noteworthy that while she belongs to the society which is threatened, Mae is at the same time part of the entity which poses the threat. The text thus draws attention to the potential double role this folk group plays.

⁵³⁵ Eggers 2013: 110

⁵³⁶ Eggers 2013: 75 et passim

addition, this is another aspect which may make it believable that Mae lets herself be blinded, or at least blinkered, by the Circle.

The company's premises, the 'campus',⁵³⁷ are like a separate, parallel realm, and Mae very much perceives it in this way:

Mae knew that she never wanted to work – never wanted to be -anywhere else. Her hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected. (Eggers 2013: 31)

This makes her also a traveller figure through a strange world, and as she gets to know its workings, she has the function of receiving the information relevant to the readers. Yet she is not an empty vessel at all; on the contrary: the text's recipients are given her emotional reaction to all the events, and this does not exclude her negative feelings either. The audience is invited to share her experience and to identify with her. Mae's insecurities and worries are significant in this respect. She is anxious about fitting in and "trying to look as if she belonged" (Eggers 2013: 1) on her first day; she worries about "flirt[ing] with a fellow Circler on her first night", which she describes as "idiotic" (Eggers 2013: 37); she struggles to find a balance between her duties as a good daughter and her professional ambitions,⁵³⁸ she scolds herself whenever she does not live up to her own, or the Circle's, expectations.⁵³⁹ Some readers may be able to relate to her overthinking and the degree to which she is critical of herself, while others may pity her. Either way, an emotional response would be the effect of the privileged information the reader is given. From "Book II" (Eggers 2013: 307) on, Mae is 'transparent', which means that she is filming and being filmed, broadcasting and being broadcast, all the time. She has to learn to

⁵³⁷ Mae's father remarks that they "used to call those places *offices*" (Eggers 2013: 74, emphasis in original).

⁵³⁸ Eggers 2013: 83 et passim

⁵³⁹ Eggers 2013: 103 et passim

hide the feelings she does not wish to share with everybody.⁵⁴⁰ Yet the readers remain in an advantaged position, as they still know her thoughts and emotions: “With a bracelet on each wrist, each snug and with a brushed-metal finish, she felt like Wonder Woman and knew something of her power – though the idea was too ridiculous to tell anyone about.” (Eggers 2013: 314)

Mae’s prominent status as the ‘transparent’ Circle employee gradually goes to her head⁵⁴¹ and increases the distance between her and her family.⁵⁴² By the time she appears to be quite detached from reality, however, a number of tools have been used whose intention is for the reader to have made a connection strong enough to still experience positive feelings towards her. In addition, even as Mae revels in her elevated status, the text does not present her situation as a positive one. She ignores all the downsides to this constant surveillance and her own growing unease, or rationalises them by overemphasising the benefits. The reader, however, not dazzled by fame, is unlikely to want to be in her position. Therefore, they probably pity rather than envy her. Even readers who can relate to the feeling of validation she attains from the number of ‘smiles’ (the Circle equivalent of Facebook or Twitter ‘likes’)⁵⁴³ in all likelihood would not want to pay the price Mae is paying for her online stardom. This sympathy which the text can evoke in the recipients still favours predominantly positive emotions toward the protagonist, whereas envy would spark negative ones. Finally, one essential character trait of Mae’s is her innocence, or naïvety. She appears to be genuinely unable to

⁵⁴⁰ Eggers 2013: 324f. The character now performs for a second audience. This leads to the twist of twofold strategies of presenting her as likeable. For example, categorial identification is used to create an emotional connection between Mae and her fictional recipients when it is decided that she should keep her previous job at the Circle, at least nominally, to appeal to her many watchers who “were working at desk jobs, too” (Eggers 2013: 330).

⁵⁴¹ Eggers 2013: 328 et passim

⁵⁴² Eggers 2013: 364ff

⁵⁴³ Cf. Oremus 2015

see or understand the negative consequences of her actions, and is convinced that she is doing a good thing “even as she helps erode our civil liberties” (Davis 2013). This may provoke an exasperated response in some readers, but even to them it would be clear that she is not the villain but merely a pawn.

As Mae becomes less easy for the audience to identify with, however, the text uses another means of keeping them emotionally involved by emphasising Annie’s emotions. Despite the fact that, in the beginning of the novel, the character of Annie is used as an embodiment of the range of negative aspects which working at the Circle has, she is presented in an increasingly more likeable way. She remains part of the system of the Circle, but she is drifting towards the edge of this microcosm. Unlike Mae, Annie at least realises the damage her actions have done and shows concern.⁵⁴⁴ Her development, in book II, unfolds inverse to Mae’s. An effort appears to be made by the text to show at least one character, at any given time, who the readers can have positive feelings towards. The shift from Mae to Annie is most obvious when the latter becomes the object of the former’s ‘ugly feelings’, such as envy or jealousy.⁵⁴⁵

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, *The Circle* is a book specifically written as a warning. Its design is to make readers aware of, and indeed anxious about, the power wielded by large internet companies. Its focus is therefore, above all, on the presentation of a plausible threat, which is also tangible for the readers. The setting of the story is very specific, both in regard to time and place. The Circle’s headquarters are located in the San Francisco Bay Area; the made-up town of San Vincenzo⁵⁴⁶ does not hide the close geographical proximity to the head

⁵⁴⁴ Eggers 2013: 444f et passim

⁵⁴⁵ Eggers 2013: 356 et passim

⁵⁴⁶ Eggers 2013: 499

offices of today's largest IT and high-tech companies.⁵⁴⁷ In the text, there are very specific references to current geopolitical events: from the Arab Spring⁵⁴⁸ to WikiLeaks,⁵⁴⁹ and, of course, the inevitable mention of Osama bin Laden.⁵⁵⁰ There is no 'diffuse realism'⁵⁵¹ aimed at timelessness, but the very opposite: the risk of the novel appearing outdated within a short period of time is taken, presumably deliberately, for the purpose of having an even stronger impact on a present-day readership. For a work of science fiction, the technology in the novel is not much further advanced than the one used by the target group on a daily basis. This too gives the tale a limited shelf life, and this decision too seems to have been made for the same reasons as mentioned above.

In his 2014 article on dystopian fiction, a genre closely related to science fiction,⁵⁵² Felix Knoke remarked that it was "actually not hard to write a dystopia. [...] Take the present, its anxieties and in fact its hopes, multiply them by 50 years and what you get is a nightmare. Dystopia is the place in which all wishes have come true." (2014, my translation) This is a quite precise description of what *The Circle* does, with one exception, and that is that the time span chosen is less than 50 years.⁵⁵³ The point Knoke makes about today's society's *wishes* is particularly relevant in the case of *The Circle*. The fictional company caters to many hopes and desires people in the Western world hold today: we want to be safe from terrorists, but also from criminals, and strangers in general; we want transparent governments; we want brutal regimes to be held accountable; we want to have all the information about everything and everybody; and we want to share our

⁵⁴⁷ Cf. "Companies – SiliconValley.com" 2015

⁵⁴⁸ Eggers 2013: 66 et passim

⁵⁴⁹ Eggers 2013: 287f

⁵⁵⁰ Eggers 2013: 450

⁵⁵¹ Reiling 2013: 250

⁵⁵² Cf. Chu 2010; Southwell 2014; Moylan 1989 et al.

⁵⁵³ This divergence concurs with the previously mentioned deviation from classical science fiction conventions also found in contemporary legends, and for the same reasons: the technological advances are not too remote for a present-day reader to believe them.

daily lives with each other in online social networks, etc. In *The Circle*, all of this has come true already, or comes true in the course of the book, with the help of technology not unimaginably further advanced than the one available to us today. In their fulfilment, the wishes come with a twist, however, or with unthought-of negative consequences, and the people are paying the price for it. The threatening image which is drawn of the Circle is one of an all-encompassing, invasive, and radically authoritarian organisation. Competition is devoured, opponents are wiped out, and non-compliance among the people is punished – all purportedly in the name of making users' lives safer and more convenient. In the text, a range of aspects of this threat is analysed, the most prominent of which are the loss of the right to privacy and the erosion of democracy. They also include the problem of monopolisation, the dangers of personal data being owned and traded by corporations, and the deterioration of both language and social interaction skills through online communication.

The respective prominence, and importance, of these issues is signified not only by how much 'stage time' they are given each in the text, but also by the range and severity of their negative consequences. The text does not elaborate, for example, on the question whether online communication has a degenerating effect on verbal skills; it merely makes fun of it. 'Circlers' cannot even say 'yes', 'no', 'maybe', 'I don't know', or 'I don't care'; instead they reply with "one of the three standard answers: *smile*, *frown*, or *meh*" (Eggers 2013: 230, emphasis in original). In contrast, the way in which social interactions are affected by the constant barrage of online communication is presented as a serious problem. The Circle demands constant connectedness, and non-participation is considered an offence;⁵⁵⁴ the company even sets its employees a minimum daily number of messages to send through their social network.⁵⁵⁵ Mae's constant availability to her online network interferes with her 'offline', 'real-life' social

⁵⁵⁴ Eggers 2013: 109 et passim

⁵⁵⁵ Eggers 2013: 98

connections,⁵⁵⁶ and her ex-boyfriend Mercer points out how everybody is connected yet isolated: “Every time I see or hear from you, it’s through this filter. You send me links, you quote someone talking about me, you say you saw a picture of me on someone’s wall....It’s always this third-party assault.” (Eggers 2013: 131) Mae’s estrangement from her parents grows when they insist on their right to privacy; it is exacerbated when she accidentally broadcasts a sexual act of theirs on the internet.⁵⁵⁷ By the end of the book, there are no people left in her life who do not belong to the Circle,⁵⁵⁸ the once close ties with her parents having been effectively severed.⁵⁵⁹ In the text, the beginning of this development is marked by Mae finding it hard to talk to her parents, because they do not share her interest and passion for the Circle,⁵⁶⁰ and by her ruining family dinners with the constant online messaging she engages in rather than talking to the people sitting at the table with her. These are scenarios which a contemporary audience may be able to relate to. By taking these close-to-life situations as starting points for quickly-escalating scenarios, it is stressed that the threat ought to be perceived as plausible by the readers. One reviewer has pointed out that in his opinion, *The Circle* “doesn’t feel like science fiction. It feels like the next horrific – but very plausible – small step for mankind” (Davis 2013). The most important words in this quote is ‘the next [...] step’, which highlight the implication that the first step has already been taken in our society today.⁵⁶¹

The other aspects of the threat posed by the Circle are presented in similar ways. The downsides are not different than those from the beginning of the text, but from minor nuisances they turn into serious

⁵⁵⁶ Eggers 2013: 256ff et passim

⁵⁵⁷ Eggers 2013: 371f

⁵⁵⁸ The shallowness of relationships among ‘Circlers’ is symbolised by the unsatisfying sexual relationship of Mae and her colleague Francis.

⁵⁵⁹ Eggers 2013: 497

⁵⁶⁰ Eggers 2013: 75

⁵⁶¹ This reviewer also finds that the novel “touches us IRL” (Davis 2013), a sentiment related to ‘spooking us for real’.

dangers at disturbing speed. One example is the mass accumulation, storage and integration of personal data. The protagonist thinks very little about the implications and possible ramifications of that. She is only vaguely annoyed when she finds that the Circle stores all her personal files from her laptop on its servers ‘for her convenience’,⁵⁶² and that the company makes the information available to everybody else. She is quite happy to accept that this is allegedly done to the benefit of everybody involved, as “[i]t saves about hundreds of hours of nonsense” (Eggers 2013: 11), i.e. the effort of gathering information and in fact asking for the permission to use this information. The next step sees Mae confronted with her collected personal data spread out in front of a big audience by her insensitive love interest, which initially provokes a stronger reaction in her.⁵⁶³ Then, the next level of escalation is reached when the same man films their sexual encounter on his mobile phone without her consent, which means that this video too is stored in the company’s cloud and thus accessible for all.⁵⁶⁴ This is no longer information which Mae herself has provided. Again, this development is not very far from today’s concerns in this respect:

To an increasing degree, your silly, confused, flirtatious, angry, and offensive moments, on Facebook or YouTube or Twitter or email or in daily life, are subject to being recorded and stored (forever) and, potentially, mischaracterized. At one or another time, those moments may come back to haunt you and perhaps to seriously injure you. (Sunstein 2007: 65)

Jay Gatsby could not exist today. The digital ghost of Jay Gatz would follow him everywhere. There are no second acts, or second chances, in the digital age. [...] As long as our past indiscretions can be easily Googled by potential employers or U.S. security agents, our social, intellectual, and actual mobility is limited. (Vaidhyanathan 2012: 93)

⁵⁶² Eggers 2013: 43f

⁵⁶³ Eggers 2013: 121ff

⁵⁶⁴ Eggers 2013: 205f

For Annie's parents, this is just what happens when their serious, in fact criminal, misdemeanour in the past is unveiled to the world.⁵⁶⁵ For Mae's parents, the process takes on a different angle when they are pressured into delivering data. A number of 24/7 webcams are installed in their house in exchange for the medical treatment her father urgently needs.⁵⁶⁶ Step by step, the voluntary online sharing of information is turning into a surveillance system which allows no opting out. The Circle's technology is also used in surveillance systems targeting criminals, or indeed *potential* criminals, such as "[a]ny new person entering the neighbourhood" (Eggers 2013: 425). In this respect as well, it is pointed out in the book that the scenario is not too far away from today's safety measures, in some parts of the Western world at least. One of the Circle's directors, speaking about a way to electronically flag criminals so this would be visible to the police, remarks that

[i]t's the community's right to know who's committed crimes. [...] This is how they've been handling sex offenders for decades. You commit sexual offences, you become part of a registry. Your address becomes public, you have to walk the neighbourhood, introduce yourself, all that, because people have a right to know who lives in their midst. (Eggers 2013: 423)

This character then goes on to continue the idea to include flags even for people who merely know somebody who has been convicted of a crime – again, 'for public safety', of course.

The fictional company in *The Circle* works tirelessly towards its goal of becoming "all-seeing, all-knowing" (Eggers 2013: 71). This ambition to vilify the notion of privacy is veiled by the alleged superior motive of 'the greater good'. One of the passages in which this becomes quite clear is the ending of book I, which comprises a conversation spanning more than nine pages,⁵⁶⁷ in which another director of the Circle eloquently seduces Mae

⁵⁶⁵ Eggers 2013: 439ff

⁵⁶⁶ Eggers 2013: 325

⁵⁶⁷ Eggers 2013: 284ff

into accepting what then goes on to become the company's slogans: "Secrets are lies. Sharing is caring. Privacy is theft." (Eggers 2013: 305 et passim) The parallel to catchphrases from famous dystopian novels of the first half of the 20th century cannot be assumed to be unintentional. This character, Circle director Bailey, has a clear vision of "democracy, and the role that technology can play in making it complete" (Eggers 2013: 386). In his speeches, he gives the impression that he is genuinely convinced that a company interfering with the political system means an improvement; and he appears to convince Mae and his audience of this. There is no ambiguity in the text, however, about the fact that the system devised here is nothing less than autocratic and authoritarian. If the power lies with a business rather than a political regime, it merely means that the politicians, too, will be among its victims; for the general populace, however, it does not make much difference. Here, too, the key word is convenience. In the first half of the book there is "talk of the Circle [...] taking over the running of [the city of] San Vincenzo. It made sense, given most of the city's services were funded by, and had been improved by, the company." (Eggers 2013: 239) There have been warnings of high tech companies making up for – yet, at the same time, thus enabling – government failure,⁵⁶⁸ so again this issue may not be new to readers. In *The Circle*, this development continues, and finally climaxes towards the end of the novel in suggestions for the Circle to replace the nation's voting⁵⁶⁹ and tax payment⁵⁷⁰ logistics along with other government facilities, because that "would save each user hundreds of hours of inconvenience, and collectively, the country would save billions" (Eggers 2013: 393). This would mean the final blow to any chance of opting out: "So why not *require* every voting-age citizen to have a Circle account?" (Eggers 2013: 391, emphasis in original) In addition, the Circle abolishes the secret ballot, without any comment – political opponents have long been silenced anyway.

⁵⁶⁸ Vaidhyanathan 2012: 6

⁵⁶⁹ Eggers 2013: 391

⁵⁷⁰ Eggers 2013: 393

This is another facet of the oppressive system of the Circle: while the people are being kept compliant with promises of safety and convenience, brutal power is exerted on politicians who dare voice criticism of the company.

[E]very time someone started shouting about the supposed monopoly of the Circle, or the Circle's unfair monetization of the personal data of its users, or some other paranoid and demonstrably false claim, soon enough it was revealed that that person was a criminal or deviant of the highest order. One was connected to a terror network in Iran. One was a buyer of child porn. Every time, it seemed, they would end up on the news, footage of investigators leaving their homes with computer, on which any number of unspeakable searches had been executed and where reams of illegal and inappropriate materials were stored. (Eggers 2013: 241)

Throughout the book it is related how, along with personal privacy, political privacy is not so much undermined as hollowed out completely. As politicians start to let themselves be equipped with perpetually broadcasting cameras, like Mae's, the ones who object are relegated to the fringes of political life. By the beginning of Book II, "90 percent of Washington [are] transparent, and the remaining 10 percent wil[t] under the suspicion of their colleagues and constituents, the question beating down on them like an angry sun: What are you hiding?" (Eggers 2013: 313) This stresses again the extent to which privacy of any kind is vilified in this system, as well as the degree of political interference of the corporation. Towards the end of the book, the Circle directors' vision of the perfect democracy has evolved into an IT-based direct democracy with enforced participation, which "might even eliminate Congress. If we can know the will of the people at any time, without filter, without misinterpretation or bastardization, wouldn't it eliminate much of Washington?" (Eggers 2013: 395) The same pattern is used here as for the other aspects of the threat: the current situation is described, possibly in a slightly exaggeratedly negative light, and then the process is carried onwards, and finally to an extreme.

In *The Circle* one can find quite clearly applied strategies of inspiring societal anxieties. Evoking this sort of mental state in its readers is indubitably one of the novel's goals. This may also be why the text does not seem to make any effort of subtlety, as is evident from Mercer's entreaties ("You willingly tie yourself to these leashes", Eggers 2013: 262), the warnings of the character who turns out to be one of the Circle's directors ("[N]o entity should have the power those guys have", Eggers 2013: 405), or the shark embodiment of the capitalist monopoly "[eating] everything, deposit[ing] the remains quickly, carpeting the empty aquarium in a low film of white ash" (Eggers 2013: 481f). In addition, the urgency of the warning is voiced quite resolvedly, as all it takes is "just one person who connected a few ideas that stood inches apart" (Eggers 2013: 401f). Finally, the cautionary message of the book is reflected in its ending. Not only is the Circle not destroyed, but the process of invading private space and storing all the information found there continues. Mae visits her friend Annie, who is in a coma, and wonders what Annie is thinking; she comes to the conclusion that "not knowing [Annie's thoughts] was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world. [...] Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait." (Eggers 2013: 497) The ending of *The Circle* does not allow for much hope. Anxiety is not resolved, in order for the audience to not be able to close the book and immediately forget about the issues discussed in it.

11. Romance

The genre and its contemporary legends

The twin ideas of ‘the romance genre’ and ‘efforts to excite a lingering negative feeling in the audience’ are presumably mutually exclusive for many people. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the prevalent definition of romance as a literary genre is a fairly narrow one; and secondly, works which stay within these prescribed confines enjoy overwhelming economic success.⁵⁷¹ Of five English-speaking national associations of romance novelists,⁵⁷² three offer a definition of the genre on their website, and the congruence in content and even wording is striking:

Two basic elements comprise every romance novel: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. (“myRWA: The Romance Genre”)

A ‘romance’ is defined by the presence of two basic elements: a love-story that is central to the story, and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending. (“Romance Writers of Australia” 2014)

Romance novels cover a vast range of topics, settings and sub genres, but what they all have in common is that the developing love story is central to the story, and there is

⁵⁷¹ This very fact is of course frowned upon by many literary critics and scholars (see Chapter 2.2, “Bestsellers”).

⁵⁷² Romance Writers of America (www.rwa.org); The Romantic Novelists’ Association (www.romanticnovelistsassociation.org); Romance writers Organisation of South Africa (www.romancewriters.co.za); Romance Writers of Australia (www.romanceaustralia.com); Romance Writers of New Zealand Inc. (www.romancewriters.co.nz)

always an emotionally satisfying happy ending. (“Romance writers Organisation of South Africa | About Romance” 2014)

Disregarding the parallel choices of words – which would at least suggest a certain adherence to formulaic phrases, even to the most well-meaning observer – the most important issue appears to be the insistence on a happy ending, which is often viewed as a distinguishing feature of lowbrow fiction.⁵⁷³ Yet today, even as “[i]n the west [...] romantic love is held up as the ultimate solution to all our problems” (Storey 2007: 88), the mandatory happy ending may be a restriction self-imposed by the writers and publishers. There is indication that readers are not deterred by novels such as “*Gone With the Wind* [which] end, at best, ambiguously – and [*Gone With the Wind*] is not infrequently listed as one of the all-time great romance novels by lovers of the genre” (Berlatsky 2015). Berlatsky disagrees with scholars who ascribe this fact to popular misreadings of the novel because, he argues, “that seems like it gives romance readers too little credit. Maybe, after all, readers see [*Gone With the Wind*] as a romance not because they’ve misread it, but because they think romance novels are broad enough to include unhappy or ambivalent endings” (Berlatsky 2015). Even more importantly, there are narratives which deal principally with love (and other personal) relationships, as well as their import on personal happiness, yet neither follow strict formulae or adhere to the rule that readers have to leave the text feeling happy – and which are therefore not marketed as ‘romantic’ fiction. Like romances, these stories often have a female protagonist who negotiates her roles as a woman, a (potential) partner/wife, mother, career woman, etc. as well as the conflicts which can arise from opposing demands or expectations in this context. In almost every case, social structures and status play a role in the decisions

⁵⁷³ See Chapter 2, “To inspire”. These prescriptions appear to be rooted in tradition, however. In her analysis of Victorian love stories, for example, Ina Schabert asserts that “[t]he realisation that desire is basically unsatisfiable [...] is banned from the novels” in favour of the happy ending, which “is regarded as the beginning of a continued all-satisfying togetherness” (Schabert 1997: 529, my translations).

which the main characters have to make.⁵⁷⁴ Yet if these texts are considered middle-, rather than lowbrow, they tend to be called *women's fiction*, as they are still chiefly read by women,⁵⁷⁵ unless they are very serious – or, it has been argued, written by a man⁵⁷⁶ – in which case the label may say *drama*.⁵⁷⁷ The fact that some genres are associated with popular (rather than 'serious') literature has been discussed in Chapter 2.2. More than others, however, romance tends to be associated with the very lowest end of the spectrum. An elaborate discussion of the politics of genre designation requires a different time and place. For this study, it shall suffice to state that the term *romance* can be extended to include critical, even pessimistic, texts without compromising its core definition in terms of the themes it deals with. Such an expansion of the definition may not be wise in terms of marketing, but for literary analysis, the focus on central themes seems sensible.

Contemporary legends, even when exclusively treated as fiction, do not have to negotiate questions of genre in the same way as novels do.⁵⁷⁸ Yet many of them also feature certain formulaic endings, in which poetic justice is of great significance. These resolutions may not always be 'optimistic', but they can certainly be 'emotionally satisfying', in particular for those who see their own values upheld or reinstated. As mentioned in the Chapter "Genre characteristics of the contemporary legend", these narratives commonly function as cautionary tales – "little morality plays" (Barbara Mikkelson, on "snopes: The Hook" 2008) – in which those who break society's rules are punished, and the audience is invited to applaud

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Reiling 2013: 243

⁵⁷⁵ Bloom 2002: 52 et passim. This term, however, does not *exclude* lowbrow fiction. Sub-categories also named for their target groups include "chick lit" or "mommy lit" (Classen 2013a: 23).

⁵⁷⁶ Cadwalladr 2011

⁵⁷⁷ Calling a work of classic literature a love story can provoke appalled protestation (q.v. Kettle 2007).

⁵⁷⁸ Anthologies and collections categorise legends by themes or topics. Classifications by literary quality do not apply in cases of texts with such high variability.

this. Within the topic of love and sex, very well-known legends⁵⁷⁹ deal with young people, especially girls, who stray off the socially acceptable course and therefore find themselves in mortal danger. “Note that the young woman in the story (characterized by ‘her high-heeled shoes and evening dress’) is shown as especially helpless and passive, cowering under the blanket in the car until she is rescued by men.” (Brunvand 2003: 11f) Barbara Mikkelson points out that the only granted instance of female disobedience in these legends is the girl’s refusing sexual intercourse,⁵⁸⁰ in which case her defiance is not only allowed but indeed expected of her: “it’s up to the girl to apply the brakes” (on “snopes: The Hook” 2008). Other potentially fatal deviances perpetrated by young women and men include vanity⁵⁸¹ and masturbation.⁵⁸² Many of these stories are given “specific local touches [which] make believable what is essentially a traveling legend” (Brunvand 2003: 7) and which aid categorial identification, while stories portraying more outlandish behaviour often feature strangers and foreigners whose queerness is thus ‘confirmed’.⁵⁸³

For grown-ups, these stories are similar, but there is one important difference: while teenagers and young adults are portrayed as single, or as being in relationships of a non-committed nature, this is not the social norm depicted for men and women above a certain age. Having completed their

⁵⁷⁹ “The Hook” (Craughwell 2005: 278ff et al.), “The Boyfriend’s Death” (Brunvand 1999: 103f et al.), or “Knock, Knock, Knock” (Barber 2005: 16f), respectively. These stories are so popular as to even have their own parodies (see Brunvand 2004: 71); Mark Barber describes them as follows: “If you have never heard this story [“The Hook”], then I welcome you to our planet, and I am sure you come in peace!” (2005: 14) Another indicator of the high profile are the lists of “sightings” (in books, films and TV series) on “snopes: The Hook” 2008 and “snopes: The Boyfriend’s Death” 2007.

⁵⁸⁰ “snopes: The Hook” 2008; “snopes: The Boyfriend’s Death” 2007

⁵⁸¹ Cf. “The Spider in the Hairdo” (Brunvand 2003: 76f et al.), “Curses! Broiled Again!” (Craughwell 2005: 253 et al.) or “The Cucumber in the Disco Pants” (“snopes: Cucumber Pants” 2007 et al.). N.B. Females tend to die in these tales, while male characters are usually only punished by exposure to ridicule.

⁵⁸² Cf. Whatley and Henken 2000: 114ff; “A Boy’s Best Friend” (Craughwell 2005: 485 ff) et al.

⁵⁸³ Cf. “Pumping” (Craughwell 2005: 398 et al.)

education and entered the world of work, the characters are no longer referred to as ‘boy’, ‘girl’, or ‘student’, and tend to be either married or in long-term relationships. Their aberrations in the field of love and sex, therefore, are often perpetrated at the expense of their partners. This is evidenced, for instance, by the subcategories presented on the snopes.com site for ‘Love’ legends: out of the three types, one pertains to stories about dating, i.e. attempts to initiate a relationship, and the other two deal with betrayals and jilted lovers.⁵⁸⁴ In turn, there is a tendency for the punishment to be administered by the wronged person rather than nature, or God, or fate, or another preterhuman force. The delight experienced through poetic justice turns into “[t]he fine art of getting even” (“snopes: (Love)”). This emphasis on the reception of one’s just deserts, in particular at the hand of the hurt or offended person, gives them encouragement and possibly a feeling of empowerment, both of which contain an element of hope – one of the opposites of anxiety. Unlike the legends for teenagers, the ‘emotional target group’ of these narratives are not the (potential) wrongdoers, who are warned of the consequences of their immoral actions, but those who have been wronged, and who are given comfort.

There is another kind of love-/sex-themed legend, however, in which the embarrassments and/or dangers of the teenage tales are combined with an aspect of adulthood. Grown-up singles, particularly females, who still have to go on dates because they have not yet been able to tie the knot, or who have to ‘resort to’ masturbation because of their unfulfilled sex lives, are confronted with humiliation and hazards, like adolescents, but for them the lack of a partner appears to be considered an additional flaw.⁵⁸⁵ The wording used in these legends is less than subtle about this. One story starts as follows: “A woman in her thirties was planning to get married for

⁵⁸⁴ “snopes: (Love)”

⁵⁸⁵ Another legend in which this is evidenced is the popular assertion that a “woman over age 40 has a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than of getting married” (“snopes: Woman’s Chance of Marriage” 2008).

the first time, and her friends were excited that it was finally happening”, and ends with the sentence, “Needless to say, the wedding was called off.” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 127f) The woman’s offence, in this case bestiality, is related to the fact that she has found it hard to find a suitable partner or sustain a ‘proper’ relationship. It is consequently also the reason why she ends up single again. In another variant, the protagonist is introduced as a “twenty-something female bank clerk who shares her apartment with another woman. Although attractive, she never has time to date or go out because of unusual constraints of her job.” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 128) Thus not only the woman’s own focus on her career is blamed for her singledom, but the story also suggests another deviation from the social norm, i.e. homosexuality, and derides this “by implying that women who reject men as sexual partners are merely ‘men-haters’ who will accept anyone – or anything – else in their place” (Barbara Mikkelson, on “snopes: Peanut Butter Dog” 2007). Yet another version of the legend finds a less ‘modern’ fault in the single woman: “There was this one secretary in a big office who no one liked. She was absolutely hideous, she never got dates, never went out, she had no life except work. No one usually talked to her because she was so ugly, but she was a good secretary.” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 129) In this case, the career is not the reason for, but rather the result of, her inability to find a man, but there still remains a correlation between these two. Being an unmarried working woman is in all of these cases presented as a blemish, and as an indication or root of further imperfections of the character.⁵⁸⁶ Whatley and Henken remark that “versions of this story are told by both men and women” (2000: 129), and it can be assumed that the public exposure of the protagonist’s perversion in the tale is a source of disgust, shock and possibly *schadenfreude* for the

⁵⁸⁶ Similarly, the depiction of feminists in contemporary legends is invariably negative, ranging from mockery to allegations of a gravely serious nature (cf. “The Off-Color Professor”, Craughwell 2005: 177; “snopes: I Aborted My Baby Boy” 2015 et al.).

male and married female members of the audience.⁵⁸⁷ These legends can, however, evoke anxiety in single female adults – especially, but not exclusively, if they themselves would prefer to be in a relationship. For the latter, such tales are the ‘evil twin’, as it were, of romance narratives which guarantee a happy ending and show “how to successfully tread the path from lonesomeness to togetherness, from singledom to loving bliss” (Reiling 2013: 245, my translation). The two kinds of narratives tap into the same feeling of unhappiness about one’s marital status, but while the romance novel offers hope, this kind of contemporary legend negates it, and presents even further grounds for grief through its disdainful view of single women. The recipe for inspiring societal anxiety can be found applied in these legends, although in a slightly more indirect way. The first part, character-audience relationship, is established through categorial identification with the protagonist: an unmarried working adult female. The plausible threat, however, does not exactly lie in the plot, i.e. the object of anxiety is not being exposed in the same manner as the protagonist. Instead, it relates to society’s assumption that this person is abnormal in an as yet unknown way, and that therefore there is something to expose. Whether this worry is in fact justified – whether people really assume this – is as irrelevant as the de facto likelihood of other scenarios which cause anxieties; it is the *perceived* plausibility which is of sole pertinence.

We Need To Talk About Kevin

The subgenre *mommy lit* is characterised by the depiction of different approaches to, and concepts of, motherhood, and particularly the negotiation of the role of the mother in relation to other demands of society with which women are faced.⁵⁸⁸ While the nomenclature is hardly

⁵⁸⁷ They identify differences in analyses, however, with “interpretations by women identify[ing] the behavior of men, rather than that of women, as problematic” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 129).

⁵⁸⁸ Classen 2013a: 23

uncontroversial,⁵⁸⁹ it can be assumed that one of the most vehement protesters against a categorisation of Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel *We Need To Talk About Kevin* as 'mommy lit' would in fact be Eva Khatchadourian, the novel's narrator. "Mommy", she finds, "sound[s] babyish" (Shriver 2011: 136, emphasis in original). This reflects an issue similar to the one outlined at the beginning of this chapter: this book deals with the matters identified as being central to a particular genre, but negates the light, even lightweight ambience which is conveyed by the affectionate name. In fact, *We Need To Talk About Kevin* has been chosen for analysis in this chapter partially because of its very lack of positive outlook, so as to highlight how far the genre definition might be stretched. The text emanates a sense of bleakness from the very beginning. The narrative is presented in the form of letters, written by the protagonist Eva to her husband Franklin, and already in the second line the reader learns that they no longer live together.⁵⁹⁰ This first letter goes on to detail how Eva now lives alone in a "what passes for [a home]" (Shriver 2011: 4), a rented two-storey flat, having moved from their "nouveau riche ranch house [...] on Palisades Parade" (Shriver 2011: 8) after it had been vandalised, presumably by neighbours; how she experiences the hostility of the public when she goes on errands; and, finally, the reason for the community's animosity and aggression: their son Kevin, who killed seven kids and two adults in his school, and who is currently serving his sentence in a young offenders institution.⁵⁹¹ As the protagonist recounts their story in her messages to her estranged husband, starting from their childless days and their decision-making process about whether to have a baby, it is quite clear that this book is not the kind of chipper material "meant to be read with all the attention you can muster while breast-feeding" (Ayelet Waldman, quoted in Skurnick 2006). Firstly, the outlook is bleak, as the reader knows from the very beginning that there is no happy ending; at the end of the tale, there

⁵⁸⁹ Q.v. Skurnick 2006

⁵⁹⁰ Shriver 2011: 1

⁵⁹¹ Shriver 2011: 12

are inevitably Kevin's killings, and "the letters that [Eva] writes to her absent husband Franklin are heavy with her own knowledge of the end of her story" (Mullan 2008). Secondly, the language used by Eva in her letters is one of the features which place the novel at the upper end of the spectrum covered by the term *middlebrow fiction*. Phrases such as "thrashing between exoneration and excoriation" (Shriver 2011: 467) may be ornate, but possibly put considerable strain on the passive vocabulary of a recipient.⁵⁹² Eva's diction is an important part of her characterisation, as will be discussed later on in this chapter, and because the story is told through her letters, it is an intrinsic part of the reading experience. Yet it has the potential of making this reading experience less than pleasant. In the same way in which the protagonist may be emotionally inaccessible for parts of the audience,⁵⁹³ the language is not unlikely to be viewed as a barrier by some.

The very title of the novel, it has been pointed out, "promises a relationship between reader and narrator", as it "delivers what seems a direct address to the reader, presented with both urgency (*we need to talk*) and a personalising of the context (*we need to talk*)" (Webb: 1, emphasis in original). Eva, the epistler, is the character with whom recipients are expected to make a connection, and for this purpose they do enjoy all the advantages of a narration in letters. The audience is given detailed insight into Eva's emotions and thoughts; as she is writing to her partner of more than 20 years,⁵⁹⁴ the level of intimacy is very high, and this, too, is evident from the very beginning. On page two, she tells him about her unease when going to the local supermarket:

⁵⁹² One reviewer advises that "a dictionary is recommended when attempting this [book]" (Beimers 2013), which (together with his assessment that this "may not be an enjoyable" book but "an important one") could be considered a criterion for exclusion from the category of popular fiction according to the definition in Chapter 2.2.

⁵⁹³ Cf. Lauren/"Imaggart" 2001; Cusk 2003 et al.

⁵⁹⁴ Cf. Shriver 2011: 9

I always feel furtive there. To compensate, I force my back straight, my shoulders square. I see now what they mean by “holding your head high,” and I am sometimes surprised by how much interior transformation a ramrod posture can afford. When I stand physically proud, I feel a small measure less mortified. (Shriver 2011: 2)

The readers are made to take part in the familiarity; they are emphatically on the inside, part of the ‘we’ which is opposed by ‘them’. The first person plural form is also used, for example, when Eva writes about the mother of one of Kevin’s schoolmates, who, “thanks to *us*” (Shriver 2011: 3, emphasis added), does not have a daughter anymore. To whom exactly this pronoun refers – to Kevin and Eva, Eva and Franklin, or the three of them – is not explicated, but the choice of words, suggesting a sense of inclusion to the reader, is surely deliberate. The audience is made to feel sympathetic for the narrator, who has to come to terms with more than the hostile environment she lives in: when she wakes up to find her house splattered with crimson enamel, she examines the damage standing outside her house wearing her thin kimono, “the one you gave me for our first anniversary back in 1980. Meant for summer, it was the only wrap I had from you, and I wouldn’t reach for anything else. I’ve thrown so much away, but nothing you gave me or left behind” (Shriver 2011: 9). In this situation, Eva’s physical and mental vulnerability is stressed – the former by her exposure to the cold and the latter by her desperate clinging to mementos of the partner she has lost. She repeatedly declares her love for Franklin and admits that “something in me, all night, every night, is waiting for you to come home” (Shriver 2011: 55). All of this is overshadowed, however, by her even more arduous struggle to come to terms with her son’s killing spree – “I wake up with what he did every morning and I go to bed with it every night. It is my shabby substitute for a husband.” (Shriver 2011: 15f) – and the futility of attempting to determine the degree to which she shares the blame for his actions. Eva is full of self-reproach and agony over what she considers her ‘defects’: not feeling the urge to procreate in the first

place,⁵⁹⁵ followed by her lack of maternal feelings after giving birth, which gives her a sense that “I had dismally failed us and our newborn baby. That I was, frankly, a freak” (Shriver 2011: 98). Yet she is torn between admissions of guilt and refusing sole responsibility, between “shrill self-justification” and “claiming that Kevin is all my fault” (Shriver 2011: 78). This inner torment is also likely to arouse compassionate feelings, as is her resignation at the end of her story, when “I can finally announce that I am too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting, and if only out of desperation or even laziness I love my son” (Shriver 2011: 468), revealing as a last detail that she does keep a room in her flat for Kevin, and that it is furnished to what she takes to be his liking, for his return after his release from prison.

The readers’ sympathy towards Eva is likely undermined, however, by the multitude of instances in which she, knowingly or unknowingly, displays the less amiable facets of her personality. She is, for example, an exceedingly vain person with a propensity to judge people harshly by their appearance⁵⁹⁶ – a tendency which she, incidentally, also exhibits in her very first letter,⁵⁹⁷ so that the ambivalence with which she is presented in the text does not crystallise slowly; it is obvious from the beginning. The fear of losing her figure is one item on the list of Eva’s reasons against having children,⁵⁹⁸ and later even her six-year-old daughter’s beauty, or prospective lack thereof, is assessed rather coldly by Eva.⁵⁹⁹ Apart from physique and style, she makes conceited remarks about her friends’ and neighbours’ choices regarding food, furniture and decor;⁶⁰⁰ the fact that she looks down on the tastes of people she is close to does not make her more

⁵⁹⁵ Shriver 2011: 31 et passim

⁵⁹⁶ Shriver 2011: 115f, 298f, 394 et passim

⁵⁹⁷ Shriver 2011: 2f

⁵⁹⁸ Shriver 2011: 30

⁵⁹⁹ Shriver 2011: 330. In addition, Eva appears convinced that her daughter’s future is determined by her appearance, assigning enough importance to this feature to surely disgruntle feminist readers.

⁶⁰⁰ Shriver 2011: 16, 44 et passim

likeable, either. When Kevin, as a teenager, asks her, “Is there anything, or anybody, [...] you don’t feel superior to?” (Shriver 2011: 363), readers are aware of the demeanour of Eva’s which he is referring to, and may feel that they are on Kevin’s ‘side’, the antagonism between the two characters having been long established in the text. Indeed, Eva appears hardly ever to experience a feeling of belonging to an in-group, and to adopt a rather adverse and condescending attitude towards all the groups she is not a member of. The most obvious example, which is also likely to have a tremendous impact on at least one segment of the readership, is Eva’s view of the USA. Although she grew up there, she “had always regarded the United States as a place to leave” (Shriver 2011: 43). With her Armenian family background and her career being founded on her travelling abroad, she does not see herself as belonging to her home country:⁶⁰¹ “I’d always thought of American culture as a spectator sport, on which I could pass judgment from the elevated bleachers of my internationalism.” (Shriver 2011: 362) Even though her beloved husband Franklin is American “by choice as well as by birth” (Shriver 2011: 42), and despite his attempts to entice Eva to get to know the country and the culture better,⁶⁰² she remains aloof and highly critical, even condescending, in her attitude.⁶⁰³ It is not surprising that this attracts objection: “a review in the Boston Globe describes Eva as ‘a pretentious, self-righteous woman whose moralising about the evils of American culture seems hypocritical and shrill’” (Cusk 2003).⁶⁰⁴

In Chapter 5 of this study, it was stated that the crucial characteristic of the epistolary novel which creates distance rather than intimacy is the act of writing, the transformation of thoughts into words, sentences and

⁶⁰¹ Although Eva continuously emphasises her Armenian roots, there is no mention in the text of her actually having spent time in, or even just travelled to, Armenia.

⁶⁰² Shriver 2011: 43ff

⁶⁰³ Shriver 2011: 72 et passim

⁶⁰⁴ It has been pointed out, however, that Eva is “in many ways, the exemplification of both neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism”, and that “as Kevin points out, she is entirely and (except for her penchant for travel) typically American” (Webb: 6).

paragraphs, which inevitably stands in the way of a perfect representation of the thoughts and feelings of the epistler. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, this distancing factor is eclipsed by a considerably more dominating issue which subverts the connection between Eva and the readers: they are given reason to doubt the truthfulness of her account. There are incongruities in her narrative, for example when she insists, in spite of the nanny's suggestion that baby Kevin may need a new diaper, that he is crying for no reason (other than, possibly, as a sign of resistance to her), and it is only mentioned in passing, two pages later, that the diaper was indeed wet.⁶⁰⁵ In addition, Eva has a tendency to tell Franklin in her letters how he was feeling, or what he was 'really' thinking, in particular situations. When his statements at the time are at odds with her interpretation of the respective circumstances, she accuses him of stubbornness,⁶⁰⁶ hypocrisy,⁶⁰⁷ or contends that he "took refuge in denial" (Shriver 2011: 18). Moreover, in her conviction that Kevin is malicious, and deliberately making her miserable, she finds fault with him in absurd details – his 'characterless' handwriting as a child, for example, which "exposed to me the insidious nihilism of the grade-school primer" (Shriver 2011: 227). Eva also projects her own negative feelings for her son onto others; she is absolutely certain that other people perceive Kevin as equally wicked as she does, and dismisses any evidence to the contrary.⁶⁰⁸ "Well before Kevin's deficiencies became national news, whenever [my brother] asked after our son [he] seemed to be fishing for mean little stories to confirm a private prejudice." (Shriver 2011: 266) Subsequently, the audience has no way of knowing whether her impression that Kevin's classmates show signs of unease in his presence,⁶⁰⁹ reflects the truth, or her almost overly suspicious perception at the time, or indeed her retrospective premonition. At times,

⁶⁰⁵ Shriver 2011: 122ff

⁶⁰⁶ Shriver 2011: 260f et passim

⁶⁰⁷ Shriver 2011: 85 et passim

⁶⁰⁸ "Kevin pulled the wool over his teachers' [and his father's] eyes for years." (Shriver 2011: 275)

⁶⁰⁹ Shriver 2011: 297

Eva displays awareness of this problem, for example when she rejects the reader's presumed accusation of over-interpretation in hindsight: "my present position offers few enough perquisites, and I *do* have the benefit of hindsight, Franklin, if *benefit* is the word" (Shriver 2011: 272, emphasis in original). This does not help the recipients of the novel, whose emotional connection with the narrator depends to a great extent on whether they can give credence to her portrayal of Kevin, and her version of how events unfolded. As mentioned in the chapter on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the German term for the strategies a text applies in order to evoke a sympathetic or unsympathetic response towards a character in the audience contains the word *Lenkung*, which means steering. Readers and their sympathies are steered in one direction or another, and this direction can certainly change in the course of a novel. In *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, however, this is taken further: the direction does not only change but is quite obscure throughout large parts of the novel. The reader might just get the impression that while they are being steered, there is no one actually in the driving seat. The audience's only hope for deliverance would be hearing the story from another point of view: "400 pages of Eva's voice left me pining to hear from other characters" (Usher 2008: 1465). The text maintains, and even piques, the desire for a reply of Franklin's by concealing the fact that he too was killed by Kevin. Manfred Pfister has noted that "an enigmatic character conception", which is marked by "leaving open gaps in their motivation" (1978: 27f, my translation), draws in the audience, who will want to solve the mystery these gaps present to them. They therefore fulfil a function similar to Wolfgang Iser's 'blank spaces', and as in their case, the quantity and quality of the voids is paramount: if they take too much space, the effect can be reversed, and the audience feels a growing distance between them and the character.⁶¹⁰

⁶¹⁰ Pfister 1978: 28

With all this uncertainty and the conflicting character portrayal, the pivotal element which can tip the scale in favour of Eva for individual readers is categorial identification. If the recipient can relate to her social status, her worldview and (some of) the moral dilemmas she is faced with, they are likely to be more inclined to forgive her ugly feelings, her “pathological moments” (Usher 2008: 1466), and her unreliability, and therefore be able to make the connection necessary for a successful strategy of inspiring societal anxiety. Eva is a Democrat, reader of the *New York Times*,⁶¹¹ and in favour of stricter gun control.⁶¹² She is a strong woman who “enjoy[s] the company of men”, as she is “prone to mistake aggression for honesty”, and “disdain[s] daintiness” (Shriver 2011: 74). Only after acquiring a certain economic standing, in her late thirties, does she even consider having children, and she does not find it easy to make this decision. This may already divide the readership, making it hard for people who are less career-minded to identify with Eva, while the others probably admire the successful businesswoman “vastly outearning” her husband (Shriver 2011: 22). It is unlikely that the part of the audience still ‘qualifying’ for categorial identification consists entirely of the “rich and liberated and loved” (Cusk 2003), but it can be assumed that they aspire to this status.⁶¹³ The field is further narrowed down, however, by Eva’s overt, and proudly cherished, education, urbaneness and internationalism. This is why her diction, for example, is of significance: it has a deterring effect on some readers,⁶¹⁴ but may for this very reason reinforce the effect of categorial identification with others. The text conceivably speaks most powerfully to recipients whose education, like the protagonist’s, is higher than average and who set a high value on this – although in this respect again a small pre-eminence on the part of the fictional character may be

⁶¹¹ Shriver 2011: 13

⁶¹² Shriver 2011: 336 et passim

⁶¹³ A fictional character’s social standing being slightly above the reader’s can help identification (Schenda 1976: 36f; q.v. footnote 223).

⁶¹⁴ Cf. Lauren/“Imaggart” 2001 et al.

noted.⁶¹⁵ A similar effect is achieved by Eva's sardonic humour.⁶¹⁶ Some recipients may find it inappropriate or distasteful, while those who are delighted by it presumably experience a strengthening of their emotional connection with her, exactly because the in-group is not exceedingly large. The approach in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in this respect, seems to be one of intentionally appealing to a small folk group, who in turn feel a greater sense of categorial identification because of the perceived selectness of the group. As suggested in the Chapter "We are folk, and we live in folk groups", the smaller the group is perceived to be, the more powerful is the group identification among members. In the case of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, this is likely the crucial factor determining why some reviewers find Eva "a compelling", if not "an entirely likable character" (Ross 2008), whereas others come to the conclusion that the novel is "narrated by a largely unsympathetic protagonist about unsympathetic people doing unforgivable things" (Webb: 10) This character is the conceptual opposite to the kind of protagonist described in Chapter 4 whose design is geared towards allowing identification for the largest possible number of readers, and she may be proof, for some recipients, that liking a character and identifying with them – to a certain extent, at least – can be two separate phenomena.

We Need to Talk About Kevin is an ambivalent, even a borderline case in some regards, but its designs of presenting a plausible threat are more traditional. The story is told in a precisely specified time frame – Eva's letters are written between November 2000 and April 2001; she finishes her account on the second anniversary of Kevin's killing spree. Throughout the first three months of her correspondence she continues to refer to the political situation, the dispute over the 2000 US presidential elections, and often starts her letters with short updates regarding the current state of

⁶¹⁵ The readers' passive vocabulary can in this case equalise the difference between the respective active vocabularies of reader and narrator.

⁶¹⁶ Shriver 2011: 14, 315 et passim

affairs.⁶¹⁷ The function of this is at least threefold. Firstly, it stresses Eva's apathy⁶¹⁸ in the aftermath of what she only refers to as *Thursday*.⁶¹⁹ Secondly, "[t]he narrative firmly situates itself in significant political and social events" (Messer 2013: 18), which are presented as symbolic of important events in Eva's life:

I was born in August 1945, when the spoors of two poisonous mushrooms gave us all a cautionary foretaste of hell. Kevin himself was born during the anxious countdown to 1984 – much feared, you'll recall; though I scoffed at folks who took George Orwell's arbitrary title to heart, those digits did usher in an era of tyranny for me. *Thursday* itself took place in 1999, a year widely mooted beforehand as the end of the world. And wasn't it. (Shriver 2011: 29, emphasis in original)

Thirdly, and most importantly for the depiction of a plausible societal threat, the reference to events of the recent past (the book was first published in 2003), together with the mention of actually existent places such as Nyack, New York,⁶²⁰ or the Claverack Juvenile Correctional Facility,⁶²¹ places the book's scenario squarely in the audience's everyday reality. Recurrent citations, and discussions, of other school killings are part of the same strategy.⁶²² In fact, Eva herself discusses this – having "morphed" into

one more white, well-off suburban mother, [...] I couldn't help but be unnerved by deadly flights of lunacy from fledglings of my own kind. Gangland killings in Detroit or L.A. happened on another planet; [the 1997 school shootings in] Pearl and Paducah happened on mine. (Shriver 2011: 305)

In his review of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Gary Carden points out that the novel "is no mere 'spook' tale" and that "there is more there than a momentary scare", because of its search for the reasons and motivations underlying school massacres, and the suggestion of "a hidden

⁶¹⁷ Shriver 2011: 13 et passim

⁶¹⁸ "Though once a staunch Democrat, I long ago gave up on defending humanity. It's beyond me on most days to defend myself." (Shriver 2011: 77)

⁶¹⁹ Shriver 2011: 14

⁶²⁰ Shriver 2011: 153 et passim

⁶²¹ Shriver 2011: 46 et passim

⁶²² Cf. Beimers 2013

cord, a motif that bounds them together” (Carden 2012). Yet in fact the text unmitigatedly refuses to supply one convenient explanation; the quest for the true motivation or meaning is even ridiculed by both Kevin and his mother, most poignantly by Eva’s recount of the civil lawsuit brought against her by the mother of one of Kevin’s victims.⁶²³ Despite the fact that gun control is discussed in the text, Kevin kills not with firearms but with a crossbow; and rather than heavy metal music or video games glorifying violence, the only influence which could possibly be named is *Robin Hood and His Merry Men*⁶²⁴ – a book, of all things.⁶²⁵ This defiance to deal with ‘the usual suspects’ of cultural influences makes *We Need to Talk About Kevin* an untypical narrative in the context of school homicides. Instead, its central themes are: motherhood, and the negotiation of the role of the mother in relation to other demands of society with which women are faced. Eva may not like the term, but it actually is a book about a *mommy*.

Indeed, we really seem to need to talk about Eva much more than we need to talk about Kevin. Her account is, not quite surprisingly, divided into a very happy *before* and a woeful *ever after*. What is important, however, is that the dividing line is not *Thursday*. Neither is it the day of Kevin’s birth, in fact; in Eva’s view, her life is changing beyond recognition from the first day of her confirmed pregnancy. “Welcome to your new life.” (Shriver 2011: 63) Franklin’s words are surely an expression of his joy, but for Eva they, at least in retrospect, herald disaster. In her *before* life she is a highly successful, independent cosmopolitan, and her accomplishments are the weightiest constituents of her self-perception.⁶²⁶ “Eva’s deepest satisfaction comes in equal parts from her professional engagements and from her sexual relationship with Franklin” (Webb: 2); she is liberated in every conceivable way and could even be seen as the personification of the

⁶²³ Shriver 2011: 169ff et passim

⁶²⁴ Shriver 2011: 281 et passim

⁶²⁵ This lack of explanation appears to have caused some frustration among a number of reviewers, cf. Lauren/“Imaggart” 2001, Beimers 2013 et al.

⁶²⁶ Cf. Shriver 2011: 196 et passim

promises of gender equality. “An entrepreneur and a millionaire by the time she is in her 30s, she has never made contact with a glass ceiling [...] Until she gets pregnant, that is.” (Cusk 2003) Despite her initial determination to continue working and going on long business trips to remote countries after having a child,⁶²⁷ she soon afterwards finds herself

reflect[ing] crankily on the fact that you’d stacked up more work than ever. Fair enough, as a freelancer you didn’t want long-term clients to find an alternative scout, whereas my own company could be trusted to underlings and wouldn’t just go away. [...] I suspected that if our situation were reversed – you headed a thriving company while I was a lone freelance location scout – Eva would be expected to drop the scouting altogether like a hot brick. (Shriver 2011: 107)

And her frustrations continue: when they hire a nanny, and Eva returns to her job, she experiences this as tremendous relief,⁶²⁸ but whenever the sitter is ill, “according to the now-established logic of your tenuous freelance employment versus my fatuous security as CEO, I was the one to stay home” (Shriver 2011: 119). Furthermore, when she does finally go away on a long business trip, which Franklin was opposed to,⁶²⁹ she does not feel “emancipated but remiss” (Shriver 2011: 140) to have left her husband in charge of their three-year-old son. Although she feels much more ‘at home’ when she is at work than, in fact, in her home, she decides to become a stay-at-home mother in the end. This decision is born from the depressing realisation that she cannot live up to her own – and society’s – expectations as both a businesswoman and a mother at the same time, and motherhood is the one of the two things she cannot simply give up.⁶³⁰ Readers who are sympathetic to Eva in this struggle and generally receptive to these issues are not unlikely to react with a feeling of anxiety. This protagonist’s story is one of what has become a ‘classic’ female dilemma in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In most of the Western

⁶²⁷ Shriver 2011: 30

⁶²⁸ Shriver 2011: 116

⁶²⁹ Shriver 2011: 138

⁶³⁰ Shriver 2011: 140ff

world, educated, emancipated women still have to decide, at least to some degree, between their careers and their families. They are still more commonly expected to cut back their workload in order to be able to spend more time with their children, and they are faced with more harsh judgement concerning their parental performance.⁶³¹ Ironically, accomplishments in gender equality may not help at all: “Motherhood, even in our liberated world, is still a process of requisition, of appropriation that feels more painful perhaps because there is more to appropriate.” (Cusk 2003) This point is made emphatically by the text, which makes it apt to leave readers anxious about the role of women, and especially mothers, in contemporary society.

What exacerbates this problem in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, is that Eva does not get to decide between two fulfilling but unfortunately mutually exclusive roles. Instead, she gives up her successful career to have to witness her life turning into “an unending stream of shit and piss and cookies that Kevin didn’t even like” (Shriver 2011: 223). Even though she had reservations about motherhood from the very beginning, Eva is utterly dismayed to find that she has little to no emotional bond with her son. During a prison visit to Kevin, she tells him, “I couldn’t have expected that simply *forming an attachment* to you [...] would be so much work. [...] I thought that part came for free.” (Shriver 2011: 68, emphasis in original) In her letters to Franklin, Eva confesses what she had vowed “never [to] reveal to anyone on earth”: that even the birth of her son had left her “unmoved” (Shriver 2011: 98). This is the text’s second big disillusion, and possibly the more terrifying one for its unspeakability: while it is perfectly acceptable to publicly discuss the struggles of being both a mother and a career woman, the possibility of the non-existence of the ‘naturally

⁶³¹ One can only speculate about whether Franklin would have had a parental negligence suit brought against him, if he had been the sole survivor of Kevin’s family.

occurring' bond between mother and infant is still taboo.⁶³² The anxiety potentially inspired in the audience is not only that paternal and/or filial emotions may fail to arise in them and/or their offspring, but also that this marks them as "frankly, a freak" (Shriver 2011: 98). Even a reading of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* in which Eva's assertions that Kevin "did not want me as a mother and [...] gave me almost daily good reason to not want him as a son" (Shriver 2011: 82) are taken entirely at face value would not necessarily redeem her, as social conventions still require her to love and nurture the child.⁶³³ It seems to be an indestructible rule that the parent – arguably more precisely, the mother – loves the son or daughter. For a woman who has had a child to feel differently almost amounts to a capital sin.⁶³⁴ This anxiety therefore concerns societal structures at quite different levels: on the one hand, the family as core unit of society, which can be disrupted by lack of emotional bond between its members; and on the other hand, at a more medium level, the community of one's peers, the position in which can be lost for good when such a lack is openly expressed. For the protagonist in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, this is an interminable state, moreover, as the son is still alive, and will not stay in prison forever.⁶³⁵ "He has five grim years left to serve in an adult penitentiary, and I cannot vouch for what will walk out the other side." (Shriver 2011: 468) For a reader who has made a connection with Eva, and who may already be disquieted by apprehensive feelings concerning

⁶³² Webb: 2. In this respect, Kevin's mass murder serves the purpose of 'allowing' the character of Eva to express her feelings this openly. Only the evidence provided by these horrible actions of his makes it even close to acceptable to have a mother confess to having doubts over loving her child.

⁶³³ Cf. Messer 2013

⁶³⁴ Cf. Shiloh: 2

⁶³⁵ A text intent on delivering a happy ending is more likely to offer a way out for the parent and the reader, so they do not have to trouble themselves with a potentially terrifying future. In *Nineteen Minutes* (Picoult 2007), for example, the boy who committed a school shooting quietly kills himself in prison after the trial, and he or his parents are never mentioned again, which leaves room for an uplifting, forward-looking ending of the novel, in which nobody has to deal with this person, or the background of his actions, anymore.

women's roles, particularly in regard to motherhood, the depicted threat likely has the potential of evoking a sustained state of anxiety.

Finally, the twist ending of this novel can also be seen as part of the strategy to leave the audience with a feeling of societal anxiety. Only at the end of the penultimate letter⁶³⁶ is it revealed that Kevin also killed his little sister and his father on the day of his school massacre. There is no explicit foreshadowing of this; Eva writes her letters to Franklin as if he were alive to read them, for example referring to anticipated reactions ("please don't say anything, Franklin, I know you don't approve", Shriver 2011: 10) or talking about his probable feelings about current political events ("The Electoral College just certified a Republican president, and you must be pleased." Shriver 2011: 169). The terminology used to describe their broken relationship is at times explicitly taken from the context of divorce procedures,⁶³⁷ and when she discusses that she was not "allowed to keep [her daughter] Celia", and how Franklin and the girl may spend their time now "getting to know one another better" (Shriver 2011: 265), the audience cannot conceivably get any impression other than that the husband is alive, and has taken the daughter with him to live in a different place.⁶³⁸ In addition, the readers are given a false sense of security, as it were, by their "prior knowledge of what the Greeks would have called [the text's] 'catastrophe'" (Mullan 2008). The intention appears to be for the unexpected development to be as shocking as possible. In this, the ending may be a counterpart of a scare scene setting the tone at the beginning of a tale: the emotional impact at the end of the book gears towards the continuity of the negative feeling beyond the act of reading. If this has the desired effect, it 'sets the mood' for an enduring experience of anxiety. A second aspect to be considered is that with this blow, the protagonist too is presented in a different light. On reflection, readers may experience anger

⁶³⁶ Shriver 2011: 453ff

⁶³⁷ Shriver 2011: 162 et passim

⁶³⁸ Q.v. Ross 2008

towards her for misleading them. In the moment of first reading, however, if the emotional shock is felt by them, they are more likely to feel with Eva's heartbreak in view of this loss. This, of course, helps them to see her in a considerably more positive way. Recipients who have struggled to find her likeable throughout the book might find their scales tipped by their commiseration – which in turn will make them more receptive for the inspiration of societal anxieties by this text.

12. Thrillers

The genre and its contemporary legends

Thrillers are a very rare case of a genre of popular fiction⁶³⁹ described by its intended effect on the reader.⁶⁴⁰ Even the term *horror fiction* could be understood as fiction dealing with horror, not necessarily attempting to evoke the feeling, just like *science fiction* is fiction in which science⁶⁴¹ plays an important role, rather than literature designed to instigate science.⁶⁴² Linguistically, there is no such ambiguity in the word *thriller*. The suffix *-er* signifies agency: this is what they (are supposed to) do.⁶⁴³ Subsumed under the heading *thrillers* are two related genres, spy novels and detective novels. These two kinds of narratives share an “intrinsic interest in society – in the law and the violation of the law” (Thompson 1993: 8), and both

⁶³⁹ Richard Bradbury has remarked that they used to be considered “an ‘unliterary’ form [...] which stood beyond the confines of the ‘great tradition’ as studied in much of the English academy” (1990: 130).

⁶⁴⁰ Cf. Chapter 2.2, footnote 49

⁶⁴¹ Including technology or pseudo-science; cf. Chapter 10.

⁶⁴² Nevertheless, the genre has on occasion inspired scientists and engineers (q.v. Strauss 2012).

⁶⁴³ Cf. Hepburn 2012. Interestingly, even this appeal to emotions appears to be frowned upon by some critics (cf. Chapter 4, “Beneficial or harmful emotional effects of literature”). In his book on the history of the British spy novel, Jost Hindersmann distinguishes between “realistic spy novels” on the one hand, and “thrillers” on the other. He defines the latter as “unrealistic, melodramatic spy novels” (1995: 2, my translations).

kinds of stories, in their typical structures,⁶⁴⁴ lend themselves to some extent to character portrayals based on folk group memberships, or rather the status of non-members of the groups in question. “The world of the thriller is inhabited by sets of contrasting pairs of character types: the good girl and the bad girl, the hero and the villain [...]” (Palmer 1989: 188). The reason for this is that there tend to be rather clear-cut opposing sides, one of which is marked as legally, socially and/or morally objectionable.⁶⁴⁵

Despite their similarities, however, there are fundamental differences between detective and spy stories, and these distinguishing characteristics are of significance in terms of inspiring societal anxieties. Firstly, there is the nature of the crime which is dealt with. The typical offence around which a detective story revolves is “murder, alongside related crimes such as blackmail and bigamy” (Hepburn 2012: 696). The lives of one or more persons have been taken or are in danger of being taken. Order has to be restored, and, crucially, *can be restored* by finding out the perpetrator and punishing them in the manner deemed appropriate by the law. In espionage fiction, on the other hand, the plot “centers on assassinations and conspiracies, usually sparked by territorial and ideological disputes” (Hepburn 2012: 696). This means that it can be harder to establish the identity of the perpetrator(s), and even more difficult to (re-)instate a sense of order. In addition, the scope of the threat is quite different: “it is no longer just the fates of individuals that are at risk, but, in the case of England, and English literature, the fate of a proud imperial nation; indeed, in many cases, what is at stake is the course of history itself” (Thompson 1993: 85).

⁶⁴⁴ “Once the thriller raises suspicion, evidence establishes guilt or innocence. Having proven guilt, the thriller arbitrates the punishment of crimes.” (Hepburn 2012: 693)

⁶⁴⁵ Michael Dunker finds that many thrillers use negative clichés in order to make readers dislike particular characters. Agatha Christie, for example, portrays foreigners as “particularly disagreeable”, and she sometimes combines a range of stereotypes to “intensify” the audience’s objection to certain figures, such as Oliver Manders in her *Three Act Tragedy*, who is “not only Jewish but also an illegitimate child. Moreover, he has an inferiority complex and Communist tendencies” (1991: 143, my translations).

For endeavours to inspire societal anxiety, this means that detective stories can more easily depict plausible threats to the recipients' immediate surroundings, whereas spy stories have the advantage of potentially pertaining to a much larger group of people. The social structure which is in danger of being disrupted is possibly more concrete and tangible in the former, but again more comprehensive in the latter. The second relevant difference between the two genres is the attitude towards established rule. In classic detective fiction, the criminal is by definition the villain, marked by his or her deviation from the rules.⁶⁴⁶ This principle, in combination with "the extent to which classes assert their legal hold on property and rank", makes it "a conservative, law-abiding genre" (Hepburn 2012: 703).⁶⁴⁷ As mentioned above, the typical ending of a detective story sees the legal and social rule prevailing over the deviator.⁶⁴⁸ In spy fiction, a sense of the sanctity of the law is less manifest: not only the criminals but also the spies act outside its reach to some degree, and sometimes governments too violate their own, as well as international laws.⁶⁴⁹ There is a stronger tendency towards a disconnectedness between the categories of 'good'/'evil' and 'legal'/'illegal' respectively. Such a lack of certainty can boost anxieties regarding the stability and reliability of societies' frameworks. Uncertainty is also to do with the third significant difference between detective and espionage narratives, which is highlighted by the following quote:

The classic British detective novel, as written by Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, begins with a murder and ends with the explanation of motive and method of crime. The classic British spy story, as written by John Buchan and John le Carré, begins with the recruitment of an ordinary fellow into a conspiracy that endangers the life of the protagonist. (Hepburn 2012: 693)

⁶⁴⁶ Palmer 1989: 187

⁶⁴⁷ Q.v. Booth 1988: 152

⁶⁴⁸ Jerry Palmer points out, however, that from the second half of the 20th century on, this clear-cut divide is being undermined. Increasingly, "the hero's acts are just as 'deviant' as those of the villain" (1989: 187).

⁶⁴⁹ Hepburn 2012: 698

What is missing from this analysis is a typical ending for the ‘classic British spy story’. Hepburn notes that it “rarely ends with a cathartic delivery of justice” (2012: 696). And Palmer, who states that “in the thriller it is always the hero who wins the final confrontation, who successfully completes his mission” (1984: 87), concedes to this being ‘problematic’ in many cases. The hero’s victory can sometimes come at the cost of great personal loss, and there are even tragic heroes in spy fiction.⁶⁵⁰ The possible implications for the inspiration of societal anxiety are twofold: firstly, an ambiguous ending is more likely to keep the reader in a state of apprehension and worry, and secondly, a tragic character can evoke the readers’ sympathy and thus draw them in. In the cases of most espionage narrative protagonists, an effort is made by the text to present them as worthy of admiration as well. If a story can elicit both emotional reactions, admiration and sympathy, a very strong connection between reader and character can be forged.

Contemporary legends, due to their limited length, are less in a position to fulfil both, give elaborate portrayals of the characters on the two opposing sides and in addition make the story of crime and punishment relevant to the audience. As is usually the case, they rely on categorial identification, but still it is commonly just one side which is given even this much detail. The deviants tend to be characterised as outsiders of the group the story is told to, which is also the group of people (potentially) harmed by the crimes. This negates the need to characterise the ‘good’ side in a positive way. Therefore, individual heroic detectives or agents rarely make an appearance.⁶⁵¹ Furthermore, the plausibility of the criminal threat does not require further illustration if the audience are the chosen victims of the offenders. The focus is on the malefactors and their

⁶⁵⁰ Palmer 1989: 191

⁶⁵¹ “The creation of a villain necessarily implies that of a hero, even if both are purely fictional.” (Burton 2013) Burton points out that the identification of a villainous opposing side creates “pleasurable feelings of piety and self-righteous indignation.”

misdeeds rather than on the heroes fighting them, with the exception of the legends depicting the criminals as stupid, or at least foolish.⁶⁵² In these cases, “the baddies are nearly always caught, often nabbed in the very act of stealing. These details, of course, are what makes the legends believable as well as gratifying to the law-abiding folk who want justice to prevail” (Brunvand 1999: 301). In this quote the reason is given why this kind of story is not suitable for inspiring anxiety: its emotional intention is the very opposite. The audience is not to feel genuinely threatened by these transgressors. Not only are their criminal plans thwarted, but the offences are also rather petty.⁶⁵³

Legends truly intending to stir anxious feelings tend to deal with considerably more frightful crimes which concern one’s personal physical health and safety rather than one’s property. These stories often come in the form of warning messages, which gives them an additional air of topicality or even urgency. The perpetrators of the crime are usually still on the loose; either their identity has not been established at all, or those who have been arrested for this particular offence are part of a larger group of people, e.g. a gang, collectively participating in these kinds of destructive and criminal practices. This is more than just an open ending to a story. In regard to the typical structure of a detective or spy novel, these contemporary legends are actually not much more than the beginning: a crime has been committed, and there are only very vague clues as to the culprit, or the folk group the culprit appears to belong to. As far as the inspiration of societal anxiety is concerned, however, this can be enough to meet the goal. One prerequisite for this is the right choice of folk group for the villains. Ideally, they fulfil (some of) the criteria of folk devils: at the margins of society, or at least vulnerable to marginalisation, and branded

⁶⁵² Cf. “snopes: Colander Lie Detector” 2011; “The Cat in the Bag” (Craughwell 2005: 365f) et al.

⁶⁵³ Cf. Brunvand 1999: 301

with an easily recognisable label.⁶⁵⁴ A typical example of such a contemporary legend is the story of the “Infected Needles” (Barber 2007: 82ff et al.): unsuspecting citizens are attacked with hidden needles infected with HIV. The syringes are concealed in such perfidious ways that the victims cannot, if they behave in very common manners, escape the attack; they are put, for instance, “in a fold in the [cinema] seat” (Barber 2007: 82), on “the underside of gas pump handles” (“snopes: HIV Needles” 2013), the coin return slot of a public pay phone,⁶⁵⁵ or in “garbage can receptacles” so people are pricked by the needle “when they throw away paper towels in the bathroom or when people throw away food wrappers in the garbage cans at the mall” (Wiebe 2003: 16). One does not have to engage in reckless activities or go to shady parts of town in order to become a victim of this crime, which in turn means, of course, that no part of the public area is safe for anyone.⁶⁵⁶ Like other legends, this tale is usually adorned with local details in order to “bring crime statistics and news stories right down to the level of the individual, who may feel as if he or she is the next possible victim” (Brunvand 2004: 182). The legend variants set in cinemas often have a young female protagonist: a “young lady” (Brunvand 2004: 243), a school girl on holiday, or a college girl.⁶⁵⁷ Even most versions which initially simply refer to the victim as ‘a person’ later use the feminine pronoun.⁶⁵⁸ It has been pointed out that this type of victim

is a metaphor for us. By casting the one pinpricked as one of tender years, the undeserving nature of the victim is underscored. She’s seen as both young and untouched by the world, therefore completely undeserving of this terrible fate. (As, by implication, are we.) [...] Her fatal infection is made to appear doubly tragic in that it doesn’t seem to us,

⁶⁵⁴ See Chapter 3.3, “Moral panics”

⁶⁵⁵ Craughwell 2005: 123. This variant is likely to disappear with the decreasing number of public pay phones.

⁶⁵⁶ There is a version of the legend in which young people at a club are targeted by members of a gang: “a member plants a sticker on the unaware clubber. The stickers are filled with minute needles infected with HIV” (Barber 2007: 83). The important difference is that in this variant, the site of crime could be considered dangerous or inappropriate for young people in the first place.

⁶⁵⁷ Barber 2007: 82; “snopes: Pin Prick” 2014

⁶⁵⁸ Wiebe 2003: 7; Whatley and Henken 2000: 78; “snopes: Pin Prick” 2014 et al.

the audience, she would otherwise have come in contact with this illness. Indeed, no more “innocent” a mythical victim could be created. [...]
 The terrifying aspect of this bit of scarelore is we see ourselves in her place. (Barbara Mikkelson, on “snopes: Pin Prick” 2014)

Another aspect of this is the emphasis on the dangers of living in densely populated areas.⁶⁵⁹ As conurbations continue to grow, endeavours to ‘keep the bad people out’, as it were, become ever more futile.⁶⁶⁰ In the public space of a large city, you inevitably come across a considerable number of people not belonging to your folk group, or at least not to the folk groups most relevant to your perception of self at that moment. Bluntly put, this is where *you* are faced with all of *them* – and then bad things happen to you.

For an analysis of the (perceived) plausibility of the threat depicted in this legend, it is of the utmost importance that it is the human immunodeficiency virus, rather than any other pathogen, which is used by the villains in these stories. Not only is AIDS a widely feared disease – “once HIV-positive, the infected lives under a death sentence” (“snopes: AIDS Mary” 2006) – but also one carrying a stigma. Its strong association with (male) homosexuality, its perception as a ‘gay disease’, initially designated it as a “disease of perversion” (Bourke 2006: 307), even leading to claims that AIDS was God’s punishment for sexual deviation.⁶⁶¹ Many heterosexuals are said to view homosexuality not only as a deviation from, but also a subversion of, traditional gender roles and categories, which in turn can mean for them that their own sexual identity is challenged. They may react with strenuous opposition, or even aggression, because gay men and women, in their minds, are a substantive threat to the social structure they are positioned in.⁶⁶² This may also be part of why many people think of HIV/AIDS in categories of folk groups, with members of ‘bad’ groups posing

⁶⁵⁹ This is an example of a truly *urban* legend.

⁶⁶⁰ Zinganel 2010: 33; cf. Minton 2009

⁶⁶¹ Whatley and Henken 2000: 84f; Bourke 2006: 307

⁶⁶² Goodwin 1989: 80f

a threat from the outside.⁶⁶³ Educators have therefore stressed the importance of teaching about “risky behaviors” rather than “risk groups” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 71) in order to stop stigmatisation. However, there is a double-edge to this, which lies in the emphasis on personal responsibility for the infection with HIV, which can simply add another layer to the social imputation. If the woman or girl in the contemporary legend is labelled an ‘innocent victim’, it is implied that there are others who are not inculpable, who may ‘deserve’ the disease.⁶⁶⁴

In public discourse, the topic of HIV/AIDS is often discussed in highly emotional language, reflecting the people’s high level of fear. It has been, for instance, likened to a terrorist⁶⁶⁵ – “a stealthy enemy, concealing itself in the body until ready to strike. [...] The virus activated ‘suicide programs’ like suicide bombers.” (Bourke 2006: 311) Such rhetoric is designed to trigger an affective rather than a cognitive reaction, which does not make it easier for the general public to differentiate between the affliction and the afflicted, i.e. not to project an anxiety or fear of one onto the other. The contemporary legends of the Infected Needles, then, relieve the recipients from this cumbrous task. The ‘permission’ to direct all of one’s negative feelings towards the HIV sufferer in question is granted by the account of their criminal behaviour. In some versions of the tale, the hidden syringes have a message from the perpetrator to their victim attached to them. It says, “You have been infected with HIV” (Wiebe 2003: 15 et al.), or “Welcome to the real world, you’re HIV positive” (Brunvand 2004: 243 et al.). For the storytelling, these messages serve as a much better punchline than a test taken weeks later, or even mere speculation about a possible

⁶⁶³ “Students often say they are safe because they only become sexually involved with classmates from their own school [...] Not only they, but their entire schools are protected just by being ‘self’ and not ‘other.’” (Whatley and Henken 2000: 75)

⁶⁶⁴ Whatley and Henken 2000: 85

⁶⁶⁵ Terrorism, in turn, has been described as “a cancer that’s so far proved impossible to excise” (Bourke 2006: 367), and HIV has been called “gay cancer” (“snopes: AIDS Mary” 2006). Similar levels of fear and anxiety seem to be connected with these three matters, so that they are used as metaphors for each other.

infection. They do even more than that, however: they highlight the criminal's malice. It is not enough for the villains to cause harm, they also have to gloat about it, and let the victim know that it was certainly not an accident but indeed the culprits' own vicious plan to infect them. The readers can no longer feel any sympathy for the folk devil.⁶⁶⁶ Finally, and critically, the harm inflicted is not merely physical. Being infected with HIV means even more than living 'under a death sentence'; it also means living with a stigma. Even so-called 'innocent victims' suffer the social consequences. The attack described in the legend therefore targets not only a person's health but also their standing within their communities. These tales stress how fragile social constructions are, and how easy it can be to lose one's position in them. They say that a person from outside your folk group, who moreover belongs to a marginalised group themselves, can get to you in the public space, attack you and even turn you too into one of them.

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Anxiety-inspiring contemporary legends of the thriller genre tend to focus on the crimes and the criminals, or their folk groups respectively, as these short stories do not allow for elaborate tales of individuals solving a case. In a longer text, a wider range of different elements is available for the inspiration of societal anxieties. One example of such a text is John le Carré's 1974 novel *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. In many ways, it is quite a classic spy story: the hero sets out to unmask he⁶⁶⁷ who has passed on secret information to an enemy state and who has thus betrayed his country. The twist is that George Smiley, the hero spy, has to investigate

⁶⁶⁶ The less likeable the antagonist, the more likeable the protagonist (see Chapter 4, "Making a character likeable"); and in this case, this reflects quite explicitly on the respective folk groups. It has been pointed out that the young female victim represents 'us', and all we know of the faceless villain is that they belong to this one particular group of people.

⁶⁶⁷ *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is very traditional in its featuring almost exclusively male spies, and all the people who are named suspects in the novel are men.

within his own intelligence service, as he has to find out the identity of a double agent. Some critics find that this is a deviation from the characteristic structures of this genre; they contend that readers are not presented with two opposing sides,⁶⁶⁸ and that “the distinction between in-group and out-group is deceptive, because Smiley uncovers a person, seemingly a representative of the in-group, to belong to the out-group” (Hindersmann 1995: 3, my translation). Yet there are good arguments against this position. The audience is not deceived at all; it is made clear from the beginning of Smiley’s mission that there is a mole in the service. The protagonist is brought back from forced early retirement, behind the backs of the current members of the secret service, to expose the traitor. It could be argued that in fact the opposite of Hindersmann’s statement is true: in this novel, all the people presently working for the ‘Circus’, as it is called in the book, are members of the out-group, and only the discovery of the identity of the mole can ‘redeem’ them, as it were. The fact that in this Cold-War spy thriller, the KGB spies merely play a secondary role is certainly noteworthy. ‘Karla’, Smiley’s counterpart on the Soviet side, only appears in flashbacks or stories told by other characters.⁶⁶⁹ Yet this void does not mean that there are not two opposing sides; they are merely both to be found in (the orbit of) the British secret service. Neither is it correct that the text’s recipients are not aware of the different groups. George Smiley, the protagonist and main focaliser in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, cannot trust any of the people currently working in the Circus, and moreover views them with a good measure of negative feelings.⁶⁷⁰ If Smiley is “the character with whom the reader is ‘required’ to identify” (Bradbury 1990: 131), then for the reader, too, the members of the Circus are not part of their in-group.

⁶⁶⁸ Hindersmann 1995: 2

⁶⁶⁹ le Carré 2000: 63ff, 200ff et passim

⁶⁷⁰ le Carré 2000: 30, 79 et passim

In this novel, the very introduction of the figure of George Smiley, who has appeared in previous novels by John le Carré, portrays him emphatically in contrast to other characters. He first appears in chapter two, which begins as follows: “*Unlike Jim Prideaux*, Mr George Smiley was not naturally equipped for hurrying in the rain...” (le Carré 2000: 23, emphasis added). He is on his way to meet a former Foreign Office colleague, Roddy Martindale, and he anticipates this meeting with utter distaste because he does not experience any sense of affiliation with this person. Martindale “worked on the fleshy side of the Foreign Office”, rather than in the “secret world” to which Smiley belonged, “and his job consisted of lunching visiting dignitaries whom no one else would have entertained in his woodshed” (le Carré 2000: 24f). This marks quite clearly one of the divides which characterise the working environment of the two men, but it is not the gravest difference between the two in Smiley’s opinion: “Martindale spoke in a confiding upper-class bellow of the sort which, on foreign holidays, had more than once caused Smiley to sign out of his hotel and run for cover” (le Carré 2000: 25). George Smiley is an outsider; he is most clearly characterised by the groups he does *not* belong to.

This could mean, theoretically, that readers might not find it easy to relate to this character. In this genre, however, it can help efforts to position the fictional person closer to the common reader than, for example, the upper classes, as spies tend to be endowed with skills and capabilities far exceeding the norm. This can create a great distance between them and the recipients, who then “find it impossible to imagine, and relate to, [the character’s] feelings, thoughts and desires” (Pfister 1978: 27, my translation). The most famous quote concerning George Smiley is arguably his wife describing him as “breathtakingly ordinary” (le Carré 1980a: 7) in the 1961 novel *Call for the Dead*, and this statement, coming from his blue-blooded spouse, certainly concerns his social stratum. Smiley does not come from an upper-class background, he is “without school, parents, regiment or trade” (le Carré 1980a: 7), which again makes him an outsider

among the people he socialises and sometimes has to work with. This in turn also makes it easier for the readers to forge an emotional connection with him, based on the premise that they are ‘everybody’, which means that they are to a large percentage as ‘ordinary’ as the protagonist.⁶⁷¹ His intellectual, academic and analytical skills, on the other hand are anything but average.⁶⁷² He is the mastermind in the story, and the circumstances and intricacies in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* are “[presented] as a devilish, perverse chaos which only Smiley [can] resolve” (John le Carré, quoted in Seed 1990: 140). His flaws and fallibilities, then, do not make him quite ordinary, but rather place him within emotional reach of the readers. George Smiley is described as “[s]mall, podgy and at best middle-aged”, with a “gait anything but agile”, and wearing expensive yet “ill-fitting” clothes (le Carré 2000: 23). His physical shortcomings can be viewed as a kind of compensation for his outstanding cerebral capacities, avoiding a character portrayal going to extremes, or even absolutes. The audience is supposed to be in a position to admire his keen intellect without an element of distancing awe.⁶⁷³ Reading the novel, we are “invited to identify with Smiley as our intellectual and physical guide through the labyrinths”, as he is the central figure of the narrative and the main focal character, “but at the same time [we are] invited to cast knowing glances at our hero’s weaknesses” (Bradbury 1990: 139).

Among these weaknesses are also, in George Smiley’s own words, “emotional attachments which have long outlived their purpose” (le Carré 2000: 30). The most important one, in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, is his inability to divorce himself, both emotionally and legally, from his wife Ann,

⁶⁷¹ In the 2011 survey previously quoted (Chapter 3.2, footnote 111), the percentage of respondents saying they belonged to the upper class was zero (“Speaking Middle English” 2011: 4).

⁶⁷² Hindersmann has characterised him as a scholar who has merely happened to end up in the secret service (1995: 117). In his retirement, Smiley is still occupied with his academic interest, as evidenced by his magazine subscriptions, which include “*German Life and Letters*” and “*Philology*” (le Carré 2000: 32).

⁶⁷³ Cf. Pfister 1978: 27

who has had a number of affairs, with varying degrees of publicity. At the beginning of the novel it is related that Ann is currently separated from him, financing her and her lover's lives with help of "the lion's share of [Smiley's] monthly pension" (le Carré 2000: 24). Even though Ann herself does not make an appearance in the novel, their relationship is highly significant for the narrative. She "haunt[s] Smiley through her infidelities" (Bradbury 1990: 133), and the readers are made to witness the ways in which this affects him.⁶⁷⁴ While his physical flaws make him more human, his desolation evokes sympathy in the readers. This is an additional ingredient in the first part of the recipe, viz. making the protagonist likeable and creating an emotional connection between them and the recipients. One more aspect of this strategy is the way in which Smiley views himself, which is full of scrutiny and doubt. "It is sheer vanity to believe that one, fat, middle-aged spy is the only person capable of holding the world together,' he would tell himself." (le Carré 2000: 79) In his humility, George Smiley "function[s] simultaneously as a fallible human being and as an ideal" (Monaghan 1985: 125). Finally, there is another character who helps evoke, or possibly heighten, the readers' sympathy for Smiley: the school boy Bill Roach. There are clear parallels in their respective descriptions: the "fat round child with asthma" is "graded dull, if not actually deficient" (le Carré 2000: 10) by his upper-class schoolmates, and his family background makes him an outsider. Bill Roach struggles with self-reproaches, most of all for not being able to stave off the failure of his parent's marriage, and has "come to doubt whether he had any purpose on earth at all" (le Carré 2000: 15). Therefore the boy tends to withdraw into himself and spend his time observing, intelligently and diligently, which gives him a lead in terms of knowledge.⁶⁷⁵ The resemblance between the two characters is stated explicitly in the text: "[Smiley] might have been the final form for which Bill Roach was the prototype" (le Carré 2000: 23). The boy is the only character who is described as having any similarities to Smiley at all. This connection

⁶⁷⁴ le Carré 2000: 80, 205 et passim

⁶⁷⁵ le Carré 2000: 16

having been made, the sympathy one experiences for the 'innocent',⁶⁷⁶ lonely child is to some extent projected onto the adult spy as well, which strengthens the emotional bond between the readers and George Smiley.

The significance of Smiley's wife Ann, and in particular her infidelity, goes further than has been sketched so far. It becomes a momentous detail when the identity of the mole in the Circus is exposed: the double agent is Bill Haydon, who used to have a public affair with Smiley's wife. Haydon reveals that this affair was initiated by him on Karla's orders for the purpose of clouding Smiley's judgement:

Karla had long recognised that Smiley represented the biggest threat to the mole [...]
 'But you had this one price: Ann. The last illusion of the illusionless man. He reckoned that if I was known to be Ann's lover around the place you wouldn't see very straight when it came to other things.' (le Carré 2000: 362)

This plan of Karla's is also the basis of a noteworthy particularity in the way the readers' affective reactions to specific characters are guided, and it fulfils a specific function in regard to the novel's arc of suspense. The text purposefully misleads the recipients in a similar way to Karla's strategy concerning Smiley. The audience learns about Haydon's affair with Ann early on. Therefore, whenever Bill Haydon is portrayed in a negative light, the recipients are aware that the information they receive is filtered, possibly slightly distorted, by the focal character's – Smiley's – unfavourable view of this figure. Their appraisal of Bill Haydon is equally impaired as Smiley's. If this plan works, then the readers are caught by surprise. In a typical thriller, this sensation should then be paired with a sense of triumph, giving them the chance to share the protagonists' rejoicing in their victory. In *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, however, there is very little of this. Smiley's initial reaction to the revelation that Bill Haydon is the mole is "utter disbelief", which then turns to despair, "then to mutiny", and finally he "felt not only disgust; but, despite all that the moment meant to

⁶⁷⁶ Cf. Chapter 9, "World War Z"

him, a surge of resentment against the institutions he was supposed to be protecting” (le Carré 2000: 342f). Similarly, the younger spy Peter Guillam, who has helped Smiley in his investigations, “felt not merely betrayed; but orphaned. His suspicions, his resentments for so long turned outwards on the real world – on his women, his attempted loves – now swung upon the Circus and the failed magic which had formed his faith.” (le Carré 2000: 345) Another character personally betrayed by Bill Haydon, a former member of the Circus and lover of Haydon’s, kills the traitor,⁶⁷⁷ but again this is not a triumphant defeat of the villain, and it only leaves behind a sense of loss in the former friend and lover.⁶⁷⁸ It has been remarked that “[l]ove, in le Carré, is whatever can and usually is betrayed” (Lewis 1985: 112). This is the dominating mood at the end of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, regardless of the fact that the mission itself has been completed successfully, which is likely to affect in turn any reader who sympathises, or even empathises, with the protagonist. The purpose of this markedly dampened ‘happy ending’, similar to the twist at the end of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, is not entirely unlike the function of a scare scene at the beginning of a story. It puts the audience in a particular state of mind. A conclusion such as in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is designed to leave the recipients dejected, which is close enough to the mental state of anxiety to potentially increase its effect. Without triumphant, comic or other relief in the text, the evident intention is for the feeling to endure.

The quite less than jubilant atmosphere, which marks the ending of this novel, is of further significance to a strategy of inspiring societal anxiety. The reason for this is that not only personal relationships, not only love for another human being, is what can and is betrayed. Both Smiley and Guillam find their despair directed at the Circus, the institutions which they serve and the nation they represent. Bill Haydon’s betrayal is the climax, in this book, of the plausible societal threat portrayed: “a

⁶⁷⁷ le Carré 2000: 363

⁶⁷⁸ le Carré 2000: 366

directionless society in which the establishment, struggling with their desperation in the face of having lost the empire, takes refuge in snobbery, grief, and treachery” (Hindersmann 1995: 118, my translation). Spy thrillers are based on the mental and psychological construct of a nation worthy of, and in need of, defending.⁶⁷⁹ In *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, only the latter is fully affirmed. The national threat is geopolitical irrelevance, which has the potential to undermine the former. With its emphasis on the glorious imperial past,⁶⁸⁰ this threat is very specific to the United Kingdom, or possibly even just England. It is not entirely inconceivable for the depicted unease to also speak to non-English readers who are susceptible to this topic, and there is certainly evidence in literature and film that other nations have struggled with similar issues.⁶⁸¹ However, the details of the characters, institutions, events, and geopolitical situation described in this book are so quintessentially English that readers transferring them, or projecting them, onto another nation seems rather unlikely. One of the most obvious elements of this is the great importance attached to the social class system. Debates whether a certain member of the Circus is ‘redbrick’ or ‘sandstone’⁶⁸² reflect social hierarchies inextricably connected with images of Englishness. Both the significance of, and the attitude towards, this system in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* can be summed up with George Orwell’s dictum that “England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly” (quoted in Dag 2015).

⁶⁷⁹ Cf. Hindersmann 1995: 9

⁶⁸⁰ Cf. le Carré 2000: 115f et passim

⁶⁸¹ “It wasn’t a mistake that the fantasy avenger figure of Rambo became immensely popular in the wake of defeat in Vietnam or that, unlike American heroes of earlier decades, he had such a visibly, almost risibly overblown musculature. As eye-candy, it was pure overcompensation for the obvious. Similarly, when the United States was actually ‘the greatest’ on this planet, no one needed to say it over and over again.” (Engelhardt 2011: 184) Rather than enkindling anxieties over the loss of the nation’s status, a character like Rambo (Kotcheff 1982 et al.) serves to put the people’s minds at ease. In the genre of the British spy novel, James Bond fulfils a similar function.

⁶⁸² le Carré 2000: 28f

It is this emphasis on Englishness which in turn highlights the severity of the experienced threat. The more value the English themselves attach to it, the greater is the discrepancy between internal and external perception. In the depiction of the Cold War, the English appear to be considered a neglectable party: “As a Russian, one would give almost anything to the English if ... well, if one could buy the Americans in return.” (le Carré 2000: 224) This is a threat on a different level but it still pertains to the social structures in which individuals are positioned. For the spy, it is a more urgent issue because it affects their very purpose. They are “responsible for the destiny of a group or nation”, which gives them, “to adopt Georg Lukács’s phrase, a ‘world-historical’ significance” (Thompson 1993: 85) – unless, of course, the fate of their nation is of little consequence in any event. For Bill Haydon, this, rather than ideology or possibly a pecuniary incentive, was the reason to become a double agent:

For a while, after forty-five, he said, he had remained content with Britain’s part in the world, till gradually it dawned on him just how trivial this was. [...] [H]e knew that if England were out of the game, the price of fish would not be altered by a farthing. (le Carré 2000: 354)

If there is no nation which is both in need and worthy of defending, spies are rendered useless and have to either give up their profession, or make a decision like Bill Haydon and relocate one’s affiliations to a political construct they find more adequate. The genre of the spy thriller is therefore highly suitable as a vehicle for anxieties regarding the geopolitical importance of one’s country. This does not mean, however, that only people working in the secret services experience these feelings, and in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* this is stressed by the connections which are made to the general public’s everyday lives in a number of ways.

For a spy thriller, unusually extensive parts of the narrative are set in England. Smiley does not once leave the country in the course of his investigations. More exotic sceneries only appear in reports or

flashbacks.⁶⁸³ This is not entirely surprising in view of the novel's plot, but still it constitutes a breach from genre formulas which, viewing it as a "hybrid of adventure and detective fiction" (Thompson 1993: 86), rely on travels to exciting and mysterious foreign places. In this novel, the work of the spy takes place at home, and what is more, it is an endeavour which in itself is less than dramatic: "Good intelligence work, Control had always preached, was gradual and rested on a kind of gentleness." (le Carré 2000: 36) Smiley spends most of his time at his desk, which could make for a story utterly defying the genre name 'thriller'. Yet it has been remarked that the opposite is the case. "If spying is no longer an adventure it is also, through its presentation, more *terrifyingly* 'real'." (Bloom 1990: 10, emphasis added) Adding to this reality are descriptions of places with which readers may be familiar, a tactic found in many other stories, notably contemporary legends, in order to draw the audience in and convey plausibility. In this text, there is more to these descriptions, however, as they are also essential in imparting a sense of former glory unmistakably lost:

eight or nine unequal roads and alleys which for no good reason had chosen Cambridge Circus as their meeting point. Between them, the buildings were gimcrack, cheaply fitted out with bits of empire: a Roman bank, a theatre like a vast desecrated mosque. Behind them, high-rise blocks advanced like an army of robots. (le Carré 2000: 329)

Richard Bradbury has remarked that "[p]resumably, for a London reader the continued existence of certain now-demolished buildings in Cambridge Circus" (1990: 137) heightens the effect of this focus on the past.⁶⁸⁴ For the interior of the Circus, a slightly different strategy is used, as secret service offices are not an area with which most recipients are likely to be familiar. This space is described as merely dilapidated, without a hint of a more magnificent past:

The lobby looked dingier than ever. Three old lifts, a wooden barrier, a poster for Mazawattee tea, Bryant's glass-fronted

⁶⁸³ le Carré 2000: 42ff, 202ff et passim

⁶⁸⁴ Cf. Hindersmann 1995: 106f

sentry box with a Scenes of England calendar and a line of mossy telephones.

[...]

The grille of the centre lift rattled like a bunch of dry sticks.

'Time you oiled this thing, isn't it?' Guillam called as he waited for the mechanism to mesh.

'We keep asking,' said Bryant, embarking on a favourite lament. 'They never do a thing about it. You can ask till you're blue in the face. [...]' (le Carré 2000: 88)

While much-needed repairs are ignored, flashy new acquisitions, such as an expensive coffee maker, are used as symbols of progress.⁶⁸⁵ This portrayal of the offices could be considered almost comical were it not for the seriousness of the business conducted there. In this case, however, the state of the facilities and equipment is quite clearly presented as a reflection of the disintegration of state institutions. This establishment does not appear to be in a position to safeguard the public. Further emphasis is put on this point by the description of the Circus' Paris residency, in whose front room one can find "out of date Notices to British Subjects hanging on the grimy wall" (le Carré 2000: 328). It is made clear that the issue is of a comprehensive nature, similar to the serious character flaws of all the men in crucial positions, from the chief of the secret service to the minister.⁶⁸⁶ Even readers who are not to a high degree susceptible to anxieties concerning England's geopolitical standing may find this unsettling.

Finally, the text does not even grant an ideological straw to cling to. Anybody – person, institution, or nation – who has lost their former prominence and relevance, and who is not capable of exercising the same power as before, could, theoretically, (re-)claim the *moral* high ground for themselves by way of compensation. Yet, George Smiley does not provide the readers with a political dogma or philosophy they could take on

⁶⁸⁵ le Carré 2000: 89. Ironically, this new machine also quickly becomes a reminder of bygone better (which in this case means, more English) times. Peter Guillam is rather dismayed to find "[d]ust and teabags on one shelf. [...] How long since anyone made tea?" (le Carré 2000: 95)

⁶⁸⁶ "The Minister's lolling mendacity, Lacon's tight-lipped moral complacency, the bludgeoning greed of Percy Alleline ..." (le Carré 2000: 343)

themselves. He condemns his adversary's fanaticism, claiming that "one day, if I have anything to do with it, that lack of moderation will be his downfall" (le Carré 2000: 216),⁶⁸⁷ and does not even hold with more moderate levels of ideological conviction. This is expressed most clearly in a recount of Smiley's first encounter with Karla, in which the former tries to persuade the latter to defect to the West, becoming rather desperate in his attempt, until he asks, "Don't you think it's time to recognise that there is as little worth on your side as there is on mine?" (le Carré 2000: 212) Karla's silence in response to this question, and Bill Haydon's refusal to offer an ideology-based explanation for his treason, also reinforce this effect for the audience: they are not even given a counter-ideology they can take issue with, thus forming or conforming their own position.⁶⁸⁸ All of this can enhance the anxiety-inspiring effect of the novel. It has been pointed out before that the mood of the book's ending has the effect that readers are left with voids, a sense of loss. The same applies to the threats to society. The Russian mole has been discovered; some of the people whose incompetence was doing harm to the service have been removed from the Circus;⁶⁸⁹ and yet the institutional, as well as the geopolitical, issues pervading the text remain unresolved. There is clearly no intention to relieve an (English) audience's anxieties concerning these matters.

⁶⁸⁷ For this analysis, the novel *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is treated as a single work rather than part of a series. For the sake of completeness, however, it should be noted that this statement of Smiley's does not prove true. When Smiley finally defeats Karla, it is not fanaticism or ideology, but rather his love for his daughter, which makes Karla vulnerable – a fact which makes this victory, too, rather bitter-sweet. (le Carré 1980b) A different, equally noteworthy aspect of this statement is that it again underlines Smiley's Englishness (and Karla's lack thereof). Moderation has been identified as a typically English virtue (Fox 2005: 192ff et passim).

⁶⁸⁸ The character most outspoken about his political convictions is Jim Prideaux (le Carré 2000: 17f). He is a minor character and, notably, the pawn sacrifice.

⁶⁸⁹ le Carré 2000: 351ff

Black Box

The short story *Black Box*, written by Jennifer Egan, stands in the tradition of a different kind of spy narrative. It is an “adventure-romance” (Bloom 1990: 5), set in an undisclosed location “on a rocky shore in the South of France” (Egan 2012, chapter 3),⁶⁹⁰ and features powerful, shady men, speedboats, great residences on remote islands, and scantily-clad, nameless women. *Black Box* was first published via the internet platform Twitter. The magazine *The New Yorker* used its Twitter account to issue the 607 tweets which make up the narrative between 24 May and 02 June 2012.⁶⁹¹ The story was subsequently published in full on the *New Yorker* website⁶⁹² and as an e-book;⁶⁹³ ‘real’ books, i.e. print editions, are available for translations into some languages, for example Italian or German.⁶⁹⁴ The decision to present the story (or have the story presented) via Twitter was criticised by some reviewers who found fault with the fact that the conversational tone usual for tweets was not used, and that the text does not make use of the “links, connections, back-and-forth and running jokes” (Anne Trubek, quoted in Waldman 2012) which are defining elements of Twitter communication. At the root of the problem, it has been argued, was the author’s lack of familiarity with the platform, as “Egan, who doesn’t operate a Twitter account, knew none of the shortcuts or secret handshakes” (Waldman 2012). Regardless of individual conceptions of what “[f]iction in Twitter needs to be” (Battles 2012b), it must be pointed out that while the narrative is presented in tweets, and the narrator addresses her audience directly, her messages themselves are not tweets. They are

⁶⁹⁰ All quotes from *Black Box* are taken from the *New Yorker* website. Chapter numbers are given to aid orientation in view of the lack of pagination.

⁶⁹¹ “New Yorker Fiction (@NYerFiction) | Twitter”

⁶⁹² Egan 2012

⁶⁹³ <https://www.waterstones.com/ebook/black-box/jennifer-egan/9781472102812>, last accessed 02 October 2015

⁶⁹⁴ Egan, Jennifer. *Scatola Nera*. Trans. Colombo, Matteo. Roma: Minimum Fax, 2012; and Egan, Jennifer. *Black Box*. Trans. Walitzek, Brigitte, Frankfurt am Main: Schöfling, 2013 respectively. Other translations, e.g. Ton Heuvelmans’ Dutch edition, are only available as e-books either (<http://www.bol.com/nl/p/black-box/9200000013469963>, last accessed 02 October 2015).

recordings of her thoughts, mental memoranda, which the spy files “as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work” (Egan 2012, chapter 15). This does not entirely invalidate related points of criticism, for example “the problem [...] that the medium isn’t integral to the work itself, and ends up as nothing more than a quirky/clunky method of delivery” (Crown 2012), but it highlights why many features of Twitter would not, in fact could not, be used in *Black Box*.

The story is set in the near future; in terms of language and culture, there appears to be little to no difference to the year 2012, in which the text was published. The main divergence lies in technology, particularly in the way it is incorporated, in the truest sense of the word, into the human body. A microphone is implanted in the protagonist’s ear;⁶⁹⁵ a camera, including a flash unit, is embedded in her eyes;⁶⁹⁶ etc. As mentioned above, *Black Box* is an epistolary text, told in mental messages by the female spy while on her mission. Her instructions reveal that the protagonist’s messages are “stored in a chip beneath your hairline”, and recording is activated by “[p]ressing your left thumb (if right-handed) against your left middle fingertip” (Egan 2012, chapter 15). The purpose and the addressees of these memos are clearly defined by her employer: her log is not only used for an analysis of the current mission but also as educational material for other “citizen agents” (Egan 2012, chapter 39) like herself. It consists of instructions she has received, passes on, repeats to herself, and adds to. Hence the text is written in the second person, “a gamble few novelists can get away with” (Lauro 2013, my translation), but which can be a powerful means of engaging the audience. Like the dramatic *ad spectatores*, the second-person form evokes cognisance or even complicity.⁶⁹⁷ Despite the fact that the mental memoranda are purposefully recorded, which implies some kind of selection process on the part of the protagonist, these

⁶⁹⁵ Egan 2012, chapter 13

⁶⁹⁶ Egan 2012, chapter 25

⁶⁹⁷ Cf. Pfister 1978: 30f

messages are considerably more immediate than a note put in writing could be, as well as considerably ‘closer to the action’, as it were, because they can be recorded at any time, inconspicuously and without the help of material outside one’s own body. In addition to the selection of which thoughts to record, the act of putting them into words also filters them to some extent.⁶⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the readers may not be quite inside the protagonist’s mind but they are literally under her skin, more precisely under her scalp. Finally, in the story, it is stressed that what is presented is in fact unfiltered, privileged information. The agents are allowed to review their recorded cogitation after the mission is completed: “Where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them.” (Egan 2012, chapter 15) In contrast to the final mission log, this text offers the advantage of (almost) unrestricted access to the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings.

The female spy who is the central character and the narrator⁶⁹⁹ of *Black Box* is already in the field at the beginning of the narrative. The audience is not told about how she got there, or what the goal of her assignment is. While this adds to the suspense of the story, at the same time it makes the mission secondary and puts the focus on the protagonist. She is introduced as a beautiful woman, the kind who can seduce a man with the help of “giggles; bare legs; shyness” (Egan 2012, chapter 1), who has to become one of the “beauties” (Egan 2012, chapter 2 et passim) who ‘belong to’ the target person. In fact her target is referred to as her “Designated Mate” (Egan 2012, chapter 2 et passim), which expresses quite unambiguously what kind of a role was chosen for her. Yet the

⁶⁹⁸ When recording, the thoughts are “mentally [spoken]”, “as if talking to yourself” (Egan 2012, chapter 15). While this process does create a small distance between the very inner workings of the mind of the narrator and the information relayed to the audience, it again makes the messages more easily accessible for the readers than a recorded stream of consciousness would be.

⁶⁹⁹ The similarities to the character Lulu from Egan’s 2010 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are duly noted but will not be taken into account in this analysis of the protagonist’s presentation and characterisation in *Black Box*.

readers quickly learn that there is more to her than physical beauty. The narrator alludes to the fact that she is more of an intellectual than she is allowed to show in her impersonation of a 'beauty'.⁷⁰⁰ This can certainly aid categorial identification, although it may have the opposite effect on some readers, and one reviewer has found this to be rather too obvious in its attempt to speak to a particular target group.⁷⁰¹ The more prominent, and arguably more promising, way of presenting the protagonist as a likeable character is through her emotions. Her first recorded feeling is an appreciation of kindness offered to her, "even when it's based on a false notion of your identity and purpose" (Egan 2012, chapter 2): she is the very opposite of callous. Even less typical of an 'adventure-romance' spy is her deep devotion to her husband.⁷⁰² These traits of the protagonist's may make it easier for readers to relate to her, and they also mark her as a non-professional. It has been pointed out that in this kind of thriller, "the essential nature of the hero is his amateur status [...] and his ability using innate amateur cunning to defeat 'mad' professionals" (Bloom 1990: 5). The protagonist in *Black Box*, however, is even more of an amateur than the characters Bloom referred to. She belongs to a group of so-called 'citizen agents', neither trained nor experienced in the field of espionage,⁷⁰³ who will be sent on only one single mission. In the instructions she has received she is called "an ordinary person undertaking an extraordinary task" (Egan 2012, chapter 21). For the character-reader relationship, the first part of this statement is particularly relevant. The text asks the audience to identify with a thirty-three-year-old who has "spent [her] professional life fomenting musical trends" (Egan 2012, chapter 15), rather than chasing secret agents and thwarting evil plots to destroy the world, and who loves her husband and seeks cordiality in an unfamiliar environment. This image is possibly undermined to some extent by the sum of the protagonist's additional

⁷⁰⁰ Egan 2012, chapter 3

⁷⁰¹ Battles 2012a

⁷⁰² Egan 2012, chapter 15 et passim

⁷⁰³ Egan 2012, chapter 21

expertise and skills, ranging from martial arts⁷⁰⁴ to a familiarity with speedboats, even though at some points an effort is made to present these qualifications as coincidental: “Be grateful for the lakes in upstate New York where you learned to pilot motorboats.” (Egan 2012, chapter 41)

Finally, what can amplify a reader’s positive feelings towards this spy is the despicableness of her adversaries. In the course of the story, she is faced with two men to whom she has to try and get close enough in order to steal data from them. The greatest achievement would be to “capture the contents of his handset” (Egan 2012, chapter 34). The first of these two men is her ‘Designated Mate’, the second a potential business partner of the former. Both are rich, powerful, violent, criminal foreigners who regard women as hardly more than a commodity. The protagonist has to sleep with one of them in order to gain his trust and avoid being exposed as a spy. She manages to conceal her revulsion but not her uneasiness; however, it appears that her “discomfort is not unwelcome” (Egan 2012, chapter 7). When an unforeseen turn of events means that the spy “change[s] hands” (Egan 2012, chapter 30), the other man rapes her violently and afterwards has her shown to “a tiny room containing a very large bed, [suggesting that] your utility to your new host may not have been exhausted” (Egan 2012, chapter 32). These events are not unlikely to evoke sympathy for the protagonist, possibly including an element of admiration for her resilience, and they can make an audience root for the spy for personal, rather than geopolitical or patriotic reasons. When politics and national feelings are of secondary significance, a spy thriller can have a stronger emotional effect on readers who do not identify with the goals of the agent’s mission or their side in a conflict.

Black Box is, as previously mentioned, a spy thriller set in the near future. The technology described is definitely more advanced than the one

⁷⁰⁴ Egan 2012, chapters 36f

the majority of early-21st-century Western readers would use in their everyday lives. Similarly, the doctrine on which the use of ‘citizen agents’ appears to be based will not sound familiar to a contemporary Western, particularly American, audience:

In the new heroism, the goal is to merge with something larger than yourself.

In the new heroism, the goal is to throw off generations of self-involvement.

In the new heroism, the goal is to renounce the American fixation with being seen and recognized.

[...]

You may accomplish astonishing personal feats, but citizen agents rarely seek individual credit.

They liken the need for personal glory to cigarette addiction: a habit that feels life-sustaining even as it kills you.
(Egan 2012, chapter 21)

Readers are saved from utter alienation, however, by indications that this new doctrine is not applied universally: the protagonist’s husband, for example, is “a scientific genius” and “a national-security hero” (Egan 2012, chapter 40), and his “rise to prominence would have been unimaginable in any other nation” (Egan 2012, chapter 15). It thus transpires that this ‘new heroism’ may only be instilled in some, notably the citizen agents such as the protagonist, who has to seek mental refuge in repeating the teachings to herself – “Your voluntary service is the highest form of patriotism” (Egan 2012, chapter 7) – for example when her duty involves having to have sex with a man she finds revolting: “Remind yourself that you aren’t being paid when he leads you behind a boulder and pulls you onto his lap.” (Egan 2012, chapter 7) This makes the leap required of the reader, or the strain put on their “muscles of imagination” (King 2012: 121), significantly less substantial. They do not have to accept an outright overthrow of American ideals by a government in the near future; instead, what they are asked to believe is that people in power would use indoctrination to make other people compliant to their purpose.

One part of the ideas inculcated in the citizen agents is the danger that emanates from the individuals they are sent to spy on. The agent in *Black Box* reminds herself of the menace in order to stay focussed: these men are “individuals who are working actively to destroy [your country]” (Egan 2012, chapter 5) and by fighting them “you’ll have helped to perpetuate American life as you know it” (Egan 2012, chapter 25). These phrases, which the spy clings to, could hardly be less vague; neither she nor the audience is given any indication, throughout the course of the story, as to the actual nature of the threat these men pose to her country. The notion of a specific, worthwhile goal is additionally subverted by the interchangeability of her targets; when her ‘Designated Mate’ leaves the protagonist on the island of the second criminal, there is no reason for her to abort the mission. “Your job is identical regardless of whose hands you are in.” (Egan 2012, chapter 30) It is not her job to spy on one particular individual who has given explicit cause for suspicion, but rather on anybody whose location, association, wealth and foreignness is suspicious enough. This vagueness is turned into something akin to mockery when the agent, escaping in a speed boat but severely weakened by a gunshot wound, is struggling to stay conscious: “If it helps, *imagine* that the [data you have stolen] will help thwart an attack in which thousands of American lives would have been lost” (Egan 2012, chapter 42, emphasis added). The word *remember* is only one letter longer than the word *imagine* (a difference which, it is conceded, could theoretically play an important role in twitterfiction) but the disparity in implications is profound. The agent has no way of knowing whether the data for which she has just risked her life is in fact of any help to her government or her service at all, or even what matters it could pertain to. As a substitute, she has to imagine a purpose for her perilous mission, and make it substantial enough in her mind to be worthy of the risk she has had to take. Because of its structure, it is not possible to tell from the text whether this sentence is taken from the instructions the protagonist has received beforehand, or whether it is

entirely her own conception which she records for its “didactic value” (Egan 2012, chapter 15). The ramifications of either possibility, however, do not differ to a considerable extent. If ‘to imagine a purpose’, even in less blunt words, is part of the instructions, it underscores the indifference of the instructing body and the disregard with which the agents appear to be held. If, on the other hand, this piece of advice stems solely from the spy herself, it highlights how little actual mental, moral or ideological support she is equipped with on her mission; in this case, her conjuring up a meaningful purpose fills a void left in her preparation for this duty, which again does not indicate much regard for her and her fellow agents. While the cruel men on their islands are, understandably, a source of fear for the protagonist, she does not seem to experience any feelings of anxiety towards her own people. She feels protected and reassured by the thought that her husband “understands and applauds [her] patriotism” (Egan 2012, chapter 15), that the service he works for can track her “as a dot of light on a screen” (Egan 2012, chapter 22), and that they have “never yet failed to recover a citizen agent, dead or alive, who managed to reach a Hotspot” (Egan 2012, chapter 43). For some readers, her very faith and innocence may enhance emerging negative, anxious feelings towards her employers, who put her in this position.

Another aspect which has so far only been alluded to plays a significant role in *Black Box*: the way in which the female body of the spy is made use of in various ways. The sexual assaults of the criminals may be the most obvious instances, but her own people too reduce her to her physical attributes. She is sent to the Mediterranean as a sexual lure for these men; she is to “be both irresistible and invisible” (Egan 2012, chapter 1) and “appear simpleminded” (Egan 2012, chapter 18) in order to get close to her ‘Designated Mate’. It is in fact not only condoned but quite openly intended for her to have to let him use her body in order to fulfil her

mission.⁷⁰⁵ It could be argued that sex has long played a role in ‘adventure-romance’ thrillers, and nobody has ever blamed intelligence services for ‘using’ a male spy’s body, e.g. James Bond’s. The crucial point is that in *Black Box*, the spy’s role consists of nothing more than the carrying out of somebody else’s plan. She has no power of decision (other than, possibly, aborting the mission). Since she does not even know the background or goal of her assignment, she is in no position to determine whether a particular course of action, other than the one prescribed, is preferable for her. Somebody else decided for her to go to this island and have sex with this man; the agent herself only follows orders. It becomes evident that the citizen agent is not much more than a physical tool in the eyes of her own organisation and, by association, the American government. This is presented as a plausible threat, potentially enkindling readers’ anxieties regarding the role of women in (Western) politics and governments in general. The audience hardly learns anything about the people who pull the strings; but the only character representing the service is a male, i.e. the agent’s husband. The male is the ‘genius’ devising great plans while the female is taking orders.

This also brings into play a further element which has as yet not been discussed in sufficient detail, the role of technology in *Black Box*. It has been mentioned that various technological equipment has been implanted into the body of the protagonist. The instructions which come with them illustrate that she is not the only one to have undergone these modifications; they appear to be the standard for American ‘citizen agents’. For example, the button for the “Subcutaneous Pulse System” is “embedded behind the inside ligament of your right knee (if right-handed)” (Egan 2012, chapter 15). Most of these technological enhancements are not geared, however, towards giving the agents a physical or mental advantage over their adversaries. Instead, their main purpose is turning the

⁷⁰⁵ Egan 2012, chapter 9

agents' bodies into data recording and storage devices. The epitome of this is the "Data Surge" (Egan 2012, chapter 34 et passim), a process in which the information stored on a person's mobile device can be downloaded onto the physical body of the citizen agent, with the new data overwriting the agent's own memories.⁷⁰⁶ Part of their identity is thus deleted, and they serve no further function than to transport the acquired data to their home agency.⁷⁰⁷ Not even their vital functions are of any relevance to this: "Remember that, should you die, your body will yield a crucial trove of information. [...] Remember that, should you die, you will have triumphed merely by delivering your physical person into our hands." (Egan 2012, chapter 43) Thus, it also becomes clear why 'citizen agents' are sent on only one single mission.⁷⁰⁸ From what is revealed about the effect of a 'Data Surge' on a human body,⁷⁰⁹ these agents simply are not likely to be serviceable anymore afterwards. This violation of the body attacks the agent's mind as well: the protagonist is no less invasively and excessively violated by her own people than at the hands of the criminals. Whether recipients find this threat plausible depends on their evaluation of two elements, the technological means and the political will. In view of the technology described in the book, an audience could find itself divided: some may find the devices and components described too far-fetched, possibly even ridiculous, to take them seriously; others may be worried enough by today's scientific progress to find these extrapolations credible. Still others may indeed deem feasibility irrelevant and instead exclusively concentrate on the question whether a government, or a government agency, would be willing to use such technology if it were available. Some basis has already been laid for such a train of thought in the course of *Black Box*, which may help susceptible readers to make this next notional step. It might not be absurd, either, to read this aspect as a metaphor for

⁷⁰⁶ Egan 2012, chapter 35

⁷⁰⁷ Their reduction to function is reminiscent of the 'knuckleheads' in *Kraken*.

⁷⁰⁸ Egan 2012, chapter 5

⁷⁰⁹ Egan 2012, chapters 34ff

other instances in which people have been used and exploited by those in power for their political, or war interests. The extent of the emotional effect on readers is certainly, as in all other cases, contingent on individual predispositions. In this case, however, it may be intensified by a combination of issues which are presented as building up on one another, from political indoctrination and the disregard for individual lives, to the sexual exploitation of the female body and the technological exploitation of human bodies. In *Black Box*, all of these things are experienced by the protagonist whose thoughts and feelings the audience is privy to, which can affect the readers emotionally and indeed inspire a feeling of societal anxiety.

13. Purposes of societal anxieties in fiction

Popular narratives which are easily accessible, both literally and figuratively, for a large number of people may be the ideal vehicle for societal anxieties. A recipe for the inspiration of such feelings, or states of minds, or moods⁷¹⁰, has been devised on a broad theoretical basis in the first part of this study. As illustrated in the second part, it can be found applied in a wide range of texts of different forms, lengths, and genres, which confirms its adaptability and applicability. While shorter texts rely heavily on categorial identification, novels and other stories of greater length can make use of a wider spectrum of different methods in order to encourage and stimulate a reader-character relationship, including designs which only focus on promoting either identification with, or sympathy for, the fictional character. The issues which, according to the second step of the recipe, are presented as threats to the societal construction and the person's position in it, have been found to often involve an element of being at the mercy of a nameless, or faceless, body or institution. These include hooded (again, literally and figuratively) groups of people from outside of one's folk groups, as well as large corporations and intransparent political systems. A sentiment of helplessness is thus conveyed, which is conducive to an enduring feeling of anxiety. In this last chapter, the intended purpose of societal anxieties in fiction will be briefly examined, which leads to the question of what goals a storyteller could pursue through inspiring these

⁷¹⁰ Cf. Frijda 1986: 253, quoted in Chapter 2.1, Footnote 22

emotions. Once more, the distinction between fear and anxiety is significant, as the former can involve an element of pleasure, especially when evoked by a work of art. Fear may thrill the recipients, combining the negative emotion with the delightful buzz of agitation. A critical prerequisite for this is the notion that no real harm can befall them: “Only if we have good reason to firmly count on the rollercoaster being stable, on the parachute opening, or on the bungee rope not snapping do we expose ourselves to our fears of velocity or of heights with relish.” (Anz 1998: 146f, my translation) Texts which aim to inspire anxiety do not provide a ‘safety net’, or the pleasurable relief from previously elicited trepidation;⁷¹¹ so it seems legitimate to ask why somebody would subject an audience reading, or intending to read, for entertainment or relaxation to this. Having made a sincere effort to avoid conjecture about readers’ states of mind, no attempts at clairvoyance regarding the thoughts and feelings of authors shall be made either. Rather, discussing a range of potential motivations may reflect on the choice of strategies applied in order to inspire societal anxieties. It would be the task of further research to examine the existence and, if indicated, the nature of such correlations.

A number of possible purposes of societal anxiety in fiction have been mentioned in Chapter 3, the first of which is the transition to an ‘authentic self’ in the Heideggerian sense. According to him, without anxiety a person’s state of existence is devoid of meaning because there is no reason for them to question, or reflect on, their environment. Not until they have experienced the structures in which they reside as threatening can they leave this state. “By putting the familiar in an unfamiliar light, anxiety gives one the opportunity to come to grips with one’s life, to dwell in the world clear-sightedly and resolutely.” (Polt 1999: 78) Fiction can aid this process if it succeeds in inspiring the respective feeling. This purpose is reflected in one reviewer’s assessment of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*:

⁷¹¹ Cf. Anz 1998: 232

“You may not enjoy it, but you will see things differently afterwards, and that’s exactly what a good book should do.” (Beimers 2013) The lack of relief provided by the text may thus be rewarded, if deferredly, with insight.

As a second possible function, shared societal anxieties are relevant for the creation and perpetuation of folk group identities: like joyous sensations, negative feelings too can have the power to produce a sense of communion among those who experience them⁷¹² and thus affirm group membership.⁷¹³ This effect can be further enhanced through the connectivity facilitated by internet-based texts, or by online platforms on which users discuss their reading experiences. They all become inhabitants – members – of the ‘global village’.⁷¹⁴ Outside the realm of *second* orality, where the reception of tales has, in contrast, never been considered an affair of “extreme individuality and solitude” (Hanich 2010: 249), it has long been acknowledged that “[i]n general, having a corpus of shared stories that reflects collective anxieties brings people together and fosters the recognition of community” (Fine 1992: 31). Another vital aspect is that in a number of stories, the threat is identified as, or at least narrowed down to, a specific group of people; a menacing *they* is created, or confirmed, which in turn affirms the *we* which is in need, and worthy, of protection.

In the chapter on political and socio-political theory, it was expounded how significant emotions are to political constructs. If a nation is an “imagined political community” (Anderson 2006: 6), common experiences, such as shared feelings or shared expressions of feelings, are required in order to sustain it. Anxieties can also be used to keep people, or a people, under control, and narratives are an essential part of this. For instance, “[p]olitical leaders who would take their countries to war need the right story” in order to keep the public opinion in favour of their belligerent

⁷¹² Anz 1998: 124

⁷¹³ Cf. Rozin, Scott, Zickgraf, Ahn and Jiang 2014

⁷¹⁴ Q.v. Ong 1982: 136

efforts: “Put another way, war must be narratable before it can be fought.” (Frank 2010: 76) Similarly, people or bodies not in power can use potentially anxiety-evoking tales to undermine the people’s faith in governments, sovereigns, or the established social or political order. In either case, if used deliberately, individual stories would have to be part of an overarching strategy to set the respective agenda. Therefore, a storyteller may have specific political motives for her or his attempt to inspire societal anxieties.

Fourthly, the goals of these endeavours can be more closely related to self-interest: rather than in the name of a political or social cause, a storyteller may try to evoke anxious feelings with a view to personal aggrandisement or personal gain. The successful telling of an anxiety-inspiring tale can enhance one’s social standing:

I am in the know. Some stories allow the tellers to suggest that they are privy to some special knowledge, usually hidden – for example knowledge about the workings of big business [...]. This element could be added to any story by claiming that it is something which has been “hushed up”. (Hobbs 1987: 142, emphasis in original)

The more anxious the audience, the more they will rely on informants who appear to have inside intelligence, which in turn further enhances both the storyteller’s status and perceived credibility.⁷¹⁵ The increase in prestige is not easily measured, although in computer-based exchanges of information, there are indicators which mark a person’s (or body’s) popularity: the number of accesses to the respective website or platform profile, the number of ‘followers’ who subscribe to updates from the source in question, or the various different expressions of approval in online communities (‘retweets’, ‘likes’, etc). For print publications, the relevant equivalent numbers are reach and sales figures. Anxiety sells; the positive effect which negative emotions aroused by a story can have on audience

⁷¹⁵ Cf. Shibutani 1966: 14f. There are considerable similarities to propagators of rumours (q.v. Sunstein 2014).

retention has been proven,⁷¹⁶ and of course the blurb praising *World War Z* as a text which ‘will spook you for real’ is evidence of this characteristic being considered marketable. A different, but possibly related, case is the storyteller who is driven by misanthropy. This impetus could be seen as another facet of self-centredness: for them, there is “a gulf between themselves and the slobs and fools they portray” (Booth 1988: 186) and, arguably, write for. They could be likened to people who spread harmful rumours out of sheer malice, “simply to inflict pain” (Sunstein 2014: 13).

The fifth and final set of purposes which shall be suggested here is connected with the storyteller’s own feeling of anxiety. They may write in order to explore their particular emotional experience or perception, following the principle of writing about what one knows intimately. This view reinforces the common image of the *littérateur* as an especially sensitive soul: “Artists see the world a little differently ... some of them have the courage to look at the darker things – pain, madness, death ... capturing the essence of each on canvas or in print, illuminating the mysteries for all the world to ponder.” (Steve Hester, quoted in Maberry 2008: 79) A text inspiring societal anxiety could therefore be the product of an unsuccessful personal process of catharsis. If the intended focus is not so much inwards, the writer’s own anxiety may be the motivation for efforts to educate, or warn, others about an impending threat: the storytellers are then acting, at least in their own perception, for the public good, possibly feeling that they have to be cruel to be kind. Some also believe that the nobility of their cause grants them permission to attempt to elicit a stronger reaction than strictly pertinent:

Nobody is interested in solutions if they don’t think there’s a problem. Given that starting point, I believe it is appropriate to have an over-representation of factual presentations on how dangerous [global warming] is, as a predicate for opening up the audience to listen to what the solutions are. (Al Gore, quoted in Ungar 2011: 196)

⁷¹⁶ Main and Hobbs 2009: 212; Sunstein 2014: 6

This purpose of societal anxiety in fiction is, of course, related to Heidegger's notion of authenticity: a storyteller who makes the audience more aware of their surroundings and the dangers within them aids their reaching an authentic state. However, the goal of this kind of cautionary storyteller is not (primarily) to improve the recipients' lives but rather to encourage them to join the cause after the reception of the respective text has made them, too, anxious. In its most overt form, this objective becomes manifest in explicit calls to action directed at the now-alerted reader. The letters of the character Mercer, and Ty's declaration of "The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age" (Eggers 2013: 490) in *The Circle* are examples of this.

Irrespective of such rather conspicuous examples, the domain which remains to be researched concerns the intertwining of individual purposes of societal anxieties in fiction and the respective strategies, i.e. applications of the recipe, as well as the specific details of such an interrelation. What we do know is that the reward for engaging in a text can be, as Vermeule puts it, "[s]ocial information. The deep truth about people's intentions – including perhaps one's own." (Vermeule 2010: 14) If a narrative does succeed in this, and recipients feel that their own intentions have in fact been revealed to them, they may experience a sensation which is quite possibly qualified to *unnerv*e you in actuality.

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