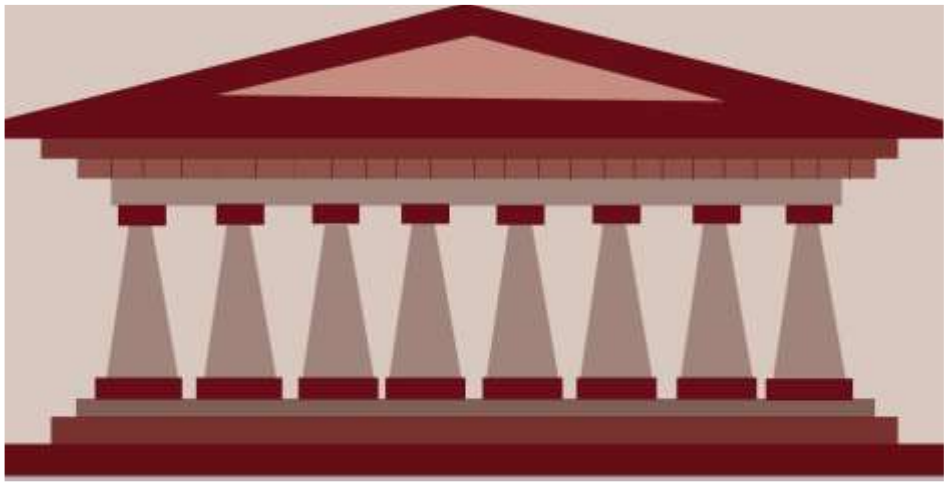
Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts

Quarterly Academic Periodical, Volume 13, Issue 3
Published by the Athens Institute
URL: https://www.athensjournals.gr/ajha Email: journals@atiner.gr
e-ISSN: 2241-7702 DOI: 10.30958/ajha



July 2026

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts

Quarterly Academic Periodical, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026

Published by the Athens Institute

URL: https://www.athensjournals.gr/ajha Email: journals@atiner.gr

e-ISSN: 2241-7702 DOI: 10.30958/ajha

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts

Published by the Athens Institute

Athens Institute is an Athens-based World Association of Academics and Researchers based in Athens. Athens Institute is an independent and non-profit Association with a Mission to become a forum where Academics and Researchers from all over the world can meet in Athens, exchange ideas on their research and discuss future developments in their disciplines, as well as engage with professionals from other fields. Athens was chosen because of its long history of academic gatherings, which go back thousands of years to Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Both these historic places are within walking distance from Athens Institute's downtown offices. Since antiquity, Athens was an open city. In the words of Pericles, Athens"…is open to the world, we never expel a foreigner from learning or seeing". ("Pericles' Funeral Oration", in Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War). It is Athens Institute's mission to revive the glory of Ancient Athens by inviting the World Academic Community to the city, to learn from each other in an environment of freedom and respect for other people's opinions and beliefs. After all, the free expression of one's opinion formed the basis for the development of democracy, and Athens was its cradle. As it turned out, the Golden Age of Athens was in fact, the Golden Age of the Western Civilization. Education and (Re)searching for the 'truth' are the pillars of any free (democratic) society. This is the reason why Education and Research are the two core words in Athens Institute's name.

The ***Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts (AJHA)*** is an Open Access quarterly double-blind peer reviewed journal and considers papers all areas of arts and humanities, including papers on history, philosophy, linguistics, language, literature, visual and performing arts. Many of the in this journal have been presented at the various conferences sponsored by the Arts, Humanities and Education Division of the Athens Institute. All papers are subject to Athens Institute's Publication Ethical Policy and Statement.

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts
ISSN NUMBER: 2241-7702 - DOI: 10.30958/ajha
Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026
Download the entire issue (PDF)

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts

Editorial and Reviewers' Board

President's Message

All Athens Institute's publications including its e-journals are open access without any costs (submission, processing, publishing, open access paid by authors, open access paid by readers etc.) and is independent of presentations at any of the many small events (conferences, symposiums, forums, colloquiums, courses, roundtable discussions) organized by Athens Institute throughout the year and entail significant costs of participating. The intellectual property rights of the submitting papers remain with the author. Before you submit, please make sure your paper meets the basic academic standards, which includes proper English. Some articles will be selected from the numerous papers that have been presented at the various annual international academic conferences organized by the different divisions and units of the Athens Institute for Education and Research. The plethora of papers presented every year will enable the editorial board of each journal to select the best, and in so doing produce a top-quality academic journal. In addition to papers presented, Athens Institute will encourage the independent submission of papers to be evaluated for publication.

The current issue is the third of the thirteenth volume of the *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts (AJHA), published by the Arts, Humanities and Education Division of Athens Institute.*

Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute

18th Annual International Conference on Visual and Performing Arts
7-12 June 2027, Athens, Greece

The Arts & Culture Unit of Athens Institute is organizing its **18th Annual International Conference on Visual and Performing Arts, 7-12 June 2027, Athens, Greece** sponsored by the Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts. The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers of visual and performing arts, and other related disciplines. You may participate as stream leader, presenter of one paper, chair of a session or observer. Please submit a proposal using the form available (https://www.atiner.gr/2027/FORM-ART.doc).

Academic Members Responsible for the Conference

- **Dr. Stephen Andrew Arbury,** Head, Arts & Culture Unit, Athens Institute and Professor of Art History, Radford University, USA.

Important Dates

- Abstract Submission: **10 November 2026**
- Acceptance of Abstract: 4 Weeks after Submission
- Submission of Paper: **10 May 2027**

Social and Educational Program

The Social Program Emphasizes the Educational Aspect of the Academic Meetings of Athens Institute.

- Greek Night Entertainment (This is the official dinner of the conference)
- Athens Sightseeing: Old and New-An Educational Urban Walk
- Social Dinner
- Mycenae Visit
- Exploration of the Aegean Islands
- Delphi Visit

Conference Fees

Conference fees vary from 400€ to 2000€
Details can be found at: https://www.atiner.gr/fees

12th Annual International Symposium on Religion & Theology
24-29 May 2027, Athens, Greece

The Humanities & Education Division of Athens Institute is organizing its **12th Annual International Symposium on Religion & Theology, 24-29 May 2027, Athens, Greece**. The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers of Religion, Theology and other related disciplines. You may participate as stream leader, presenter of one paper, chair of a session or observer. Please submit a proposal using the form available (https://www.atiner.gr/2027/FORM-REL.doc).

Important Dates

- Abstract Submission: **27 October 2026**
- Acceptance of Abstract: 4 Weeks after Submission
- Submission of Paper: **26 April 2027**

Academic Member Responsible for the Conference

- **Dr. William O'Meara**, Academic Member, Athens Institute & Professor, Department of Philosophy and Religion, James Madison University, USA.

Social and Educational Program

The Social Program Emphasizes the Educational Aspect of the Academic Meetings of Athens Institute.

- Greek Night Entertainment (This is the official dinner of the conference)
- Athens Sightseeing: Old and New-An Educational Urban Walk
- Social Dinner
- Mycenae Visit
- Exploration of the Aegean Islands
- Delphi Visit
- Ancient Corinth and Cape Sounion

More information can be found here: https://www.atiner.gr/social-program

Conference Fees

Conference fees vary from 400€ to 2000€
Details can be found at: https://www.atiner.gr/fees

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026 – Pages 217-238

Light, Technology, and Kinetics in Costume Design

*By Jessica Telfer**

In a world where filmed media captures a large percentage of the viewing population, many live performing arts have turned to technological advances to enhance performance quality and engage an audience. Collaborations and innovations in technologies have created new opportunities and allowed costume designers to progress into new mediums. This paper examines the use of technology in costume design with a focus on dance, theatre, and circus. These advances are used to enhance character and create optical appeal in the performing arts. Costume design has relied on fiber and fabric manipulation to communicate character and mood to audiences. Advances in technologies have opened the door for costume design to jump into the twenty-first century by utilizing technologies such as fiber-optics, 3D printing, light-reactive fabric, and kinetics. These are becoming more accessible and allowing character creation opportunities ranging from Broadway to cosplay. Examining these four different types of technologies integrated into fabric, this paper looks at their application, demonstrates their use in creating mood and character, and contrasts utilization in both entertainment and by the general population. It demonstrates that costume design is an open field for innovations that is hampered by slow adoption rates, funding, and barriers to accessibility.

Keywords: *Costume Design, Technology, Performing Arts, Innovation, Design Concepts*

Introduction

Theatre and live performances are an ancient art form, with a history spanning at least four thousand years. Costume Design, a supporting element of performance, has a less clear history, but evidence of costuming can be traced back to the sixth century BCE[1] with clear guidelines and practiced medium emerging via commedia dell'arte in the sixteenth century CE and the professional title emerging in the nineteenth century[2]. Over the past three hundred years the craft has expanded over many live performance mediums with notable venues such as film studios and Broadway elevating some practitioners and designs to global recognition. Within the scope of performing arts, especially in mediums other than film and television, budgetary resources are often scarce. The long history and global nature of performing arts shows an innate human need for this type of entertainment and creative outlet, and while film and television have helped bridge distance, language, and monetary barriers, live performance spaces remain the most accessible training

*Associate Professor of Arts Management/Costume Designer, Ann Lacy School of Dance and Entertainment, Oklahoma City University, USA.

1. Iris Brooke, *Costume in Greek Classic Drama*, New York: Dover Publications, 2003.

2. Triffin Morris, Gregory DL Morris, and Rachel E Pollock, *A History of Theatre Costume Business: Creators of Character.* New York: Routledge, 2021.

platform for future professionals, hobbyists, and initiates to this craft. Live performance also creates a different experience for audiences and allows for more experimentation and industry growth. To compete with the large budgets, industry size, and wide reach of filmed media, live performing arts are a perfect incubator for new and innovative visual elements introduced in the design and creative elements of process. Over the past fifty years, leaders in theatrical design, specifically costume, scenic, and lighting designers and those working under that creative umbrella have used combination technologies to advance their craft and its visual impact, and usefulness. Many technologies invented in the past century are finally moving into this creative space to produce more integrated designs, supporting the story and optical impact. In a discipline such as costume design, where many expansions in material focus on fabric and fabrication techniques, the addition of fiber optics, kinetic elements, three-dimensional (3D) printing, and light reactive fabric can elevate designs from mere garments to an enticing, effective, and dynamic supporting player in live story telling.

Literature Review

Due to the novel and constantly changing nature of this type of technology, established literature on fiber-optic fabric, kinetic fabric, 3D-printed fabric, and light-reactive fabric is limited. Literature on the topic of theatre and costume history is widely available, as are texts on many schools of costume design. While the philosophy and practical application of costume design has many giants within the field of academic study, such as Rosemary Ingham and Liz Covey (1992), Barabara and Cletus Anderson (1984), and Richard La Motte (2001) who have analyzed and described the creative process of design and fabric manipulation extensively, the underpinning philosophy of practical application and methodology remains relatively unchanged. Instead, it is the materials with which to execute the design that have changed. Despite the amount of time that fiber-optic fabric has been available, there is a lack of scholarly work on the material outside the medical or scientific fields. Zidan Gong et al. (2019) discuss a myriad of applications within the medical field for wearable fiber-optics, such as medical alerts or wearable light therapy, and Saiful Hoque et al. (2022) write about new manufacturing processes for fiber-optic fabric that would open the applications and uses of this material to more user-friendly fabric. Kinetic fabric is in its infancy. Most literature regarding this medium is museum reviews or scientific papers on the manufacturing, rather than the application, of the product. For both kinetic and three-dimensional costumes, magazines and reviews of fashion collections proved very useful. Ultimately, literature on this is topical rather than academic and focused primarily on consumer reviews, editorials, and scientific journals. Some forays in the academic side of the performing arts application can be seen by Katie Remark (2022) with her research into 3D printed sets, properties, and costumes and Faye Hall (2020) whose work

dives into the definition and innovation of kinetic materials used for costume and fabric design. Howe Baum (2022) discusses the practicalities and newest technologies in fiber, but not the application of these technologies in performing arts. To explore the application of neoteric technologies in fashion and performing arts, I relied heavily on periodicals and less traditional forms of literature such as YouTube, blogs, online reviews of performances, and the testimony of creators themselves. The lack of scholarly work in a traditional sense on this topic and the much larger availability of non-traditional literature as it pertains to the performing arts demonstrates not that this material lacks use, but the unique lack of emphasis on traditional modes of research via scholarly papers and focus on the production of art for the purposes of the performance. Hopefully this paper can help to bridge that gap.

Methodology

This paper relies heavily on qualitative research, fundamental research, and has large utilization of secondary rather than primary research. The research design developed a quest to discover new ways to mix technological innovations with costumes and create wearable art with a scientific edge. Research examined current innovations within the fashion, garment, and costume industries, seeking examples that pushed the boundaries of current technology and early adopters of new technologies. Adoption rates were examined based on reviews of costume designs with focus primarily within the United States. Within my own costume shop I was able to test some of these technologies and incorporate them into my own designs, allowing a minute case study that focused on affordability, ease of use, ability to fit the parameters of the design concept, and learning curve.

Results

The purpose of this research was to examine new technologies available to costume designers, find adoption points, prevalence of adoption, the time that each technology was on the market, and barriers that might stand in the way of costume designers adopting these resources to enhance their designs. Studying these four costume technologies showed that the costume industry adopts at a far slower pace than the fashion industry. Rather than leading the industry, they fall on the right side of the bell curve as late adopters. Usually costume designers, and more importantly their funding sources, will not risk resources on innovative technologies until they are widely available at a lower cost. Fashion designers are the earliest adopters and are more willing to take the risks of using less proven and costly technologies to give them an edge against competition. With late adoption, costume designers risk losing compelling story-telling opportunities, increased fabric waste, and lower audience retention. This pattern is unlikely to change without funding changes and training

opportunities that allow a safety net for costume designers to take risks with new technology.

Discussion

Creating costumes that have an extra level of creative or technical interest has always been of interest to me and made me passionate about staying on top of innovations within the world of costume design. Studying these new advances occupies a large part of my research. It is rare to be able to apply these new technologies. Due to the limited budgets in education, the additional limit of being hired on to a project that needs this extra level of design creativity, and a hesitation to adopt new or rare mediums in parts of the industry, it is exciting to be able to move these elements from the theoretical and studied to the practical application. I have had multiple opportunities to incorporate lights into my costumes, starting with a firefly costume in 2013 for Oklahoma City University's *Home for the Holidays* directed by Jo Rowan. Being able to see technology advance so quickly in twelve years is very exciting. Some of the discussion on fiber-optics will focus on my design for *Hang Your Lights* a tap number choreographed by Shadoe Brandt and featured in multiple performances during the holiday season from the opening night of Safari Lights at the Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden to *Holiday Spectacular* at Oklahoma City University directed by Tiffany van der Merwe. This discussion will also feature applications by other artists exploring the limitations and possibilities of kinetic costumes, a medium that has so much potential to expand out of the museum and high fashion arena, 3D printed fabric and fiber, a design area that is primarily utilized to create accessories but has so much possibility to be a part of the future of most costume creation, and the future of light-reactive fabric, a popular in the industry surrounding the costume play (cosplay) subculture that has yet to fully break in to the stage costume world. It is my hope that one day I can explore all these fiber technologies as deeply as I have been able to explore fiber-optic costuming.

Costume Design: Story Telling and Collaboration

The performing arts are a collaborative field. Led by a director, the creative team consisting of a scenic designer, costume designer, lighting designer, and sound designer (along with their supporting teams) use their disciplines to tell the playwright's story. This means that all artistic vision is led by the director and serves the ultimate purpose of advancing the plot. Costume designers play an important role in character creation within performing arts. In-depth analysis of character, psychology, story, plot, and motivation allow designers to paint a picture of the person on stage using garments to communicate intent and personality to an audience. Attributes

such as color, texture, time-period, style, and contrast help these creative elements to combine into one cohesive unit. While no creative element should take on the primary focus, using accents can help elevate a moment in the visual story or grab the audience's attention. While a light-up costume or gravity defying headpiece may not fit into every story line or be fitting for every story (they are unlikely to be appreciated in a play such as Arthur Miller's *Crucible,* for example*)*, as live entertainment shortens its run time and focuses on spectacle and delivering as many high impact moments as possible, elements like a light-reactive costume can be the final element that sells one artist's show over another. Blending multiple disciplines that previously functioned as separate departments means that current professionals need to widen their knowledge base to allow for comfort in multiple areas of production design.

Fiber-Optics

The history of fiber-optic fabric is closely related to the history of fiber-optics in the technology sector. The original medium for light transmission via fine transparent rods was glass used in a variety of capacities, from dental work in the 1890s to television in the 1930s[3]. While humankind has long had a fascination with wearable glass, forays into garments made of glass, such as the 1893 dress of Princess Eulalia of Spain (made by the Libby Glass Company)[4] lacked the flexibility and endurance required by garments meant for the stage. It would not be until the 1980s when Plastic Optic Fiber (POF)[5] became available that the flexible thread made of polymethyl methacrylate could be incorporated into woven fabric. POF has the appearance of fishing line. While it cannot conduct as efficiently as its glass counterpart, it is less brittle and therefore has a higher number of applications. The low cost of producing the thread allows it to be used in conjunction with other fiber types and either woven (most common) or knitted into fabric. Once the fibers have been incorporated, the long fibers left are bundled together with electrical tape and inserted into a small housing connected to an LED (light-emitting diode). These fabrics can then be cut to assemble a garment. Depending on the type of control connected to the LED, these fiber-optic fabrics can be controlled by the user with a small button or, with a more intelligent and larger battery pack, be controlled by an application on the user's phone. The LED lights allow for a variety of colors to be displayed in the fabric. Companies such as Lumisonata, a leader in the fiber-optic fabric and garment

3. Jim Johnson. "History of Fiber Optics." Timbercon: A Radiall Company. October 18, 2018, https://www.timbercon.com/resources/blog/history-of-fiber-optics/

4. Allison Marsh. "The Rich Tapestry of Fiber Optics: The Tale of the Material That Knits the World Together Has Many Surprising Threads." *Spectrum,* July 2020.

5. Kenneth Eben. "Plastic Optic Fiber-An Evolving Technology: POF Technology Has Much to Offer to the Device Industry". *Medical Design Briefs*, November 1, 2013.

industry, allow for full color mixing and programming with a digital application that mirrors twenty-first century light boards and utilize user-friendly touch screen sliders for changing and custom-mixing colors or programming. The light is shot down each fiber in the garment with a brighter node where the fiber terminates at the end of the fabric. Every few inches on the fiber are small imperfections in the fiber that create a brighter spot. Fabric and garment manufacturers can manipulate the intensity and saturation of the light by grouping fibers closer together allowing for pattern on the garment to be formed via light.

Fiber-optic materials found their way into theatrical use quickly, but those uses were limited and did not enjoy widespread adoption. Disney theme parks were an early adopter for fiber-optics, using them primarily in floats or merchandise, with less use in costuming of park cast. They even incorporated it into the sidewalk in Epcot. Disney's early use of light in non-traditional capacities and their devotion to light up entertainment after sunset hours in the park made them a very public venue to showcase the use of light-up technology in live and interactive performing arts. Small forays into fiber-optic fabric can be seen in major performing arts venues. Melanie Wargo of Electric Diva Creations designed massive fiber-optic wings for an anti-bullying musical, *Taking Wing: Legends of Emimencia* in New York City's New Work's Theatre Festival in 2017.[6] Wargo's designs heavily utilize fiber-optics and her primary design venue is the concert and festival circuit. In 2018, Inter Woven Design Studio created fiber-optic tutus for the Brooklyn Ballet's Waltz of the Flowers in their production of *The Nutcracker*[7]. More visible use of fiber-optic fabric in a design was Zac Posen's dress created for actress Claire Danes to wear to the Met Gala in 2016. However high-profile use, while it helps with visibility for the technology, does not necessarily encourage widespread use or ease of adoption.

The most visible and widely accessible use of fiber-optic fabric and garments has been by cosplayers and costume influencers on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Influencer Asta Darling had 142,000 views in November 2022 of her partnership with Lumisonata on Instagram, featuring a fiber-optic ballgown. Creator Shay on TikTok had 1.4 million followers accompany her as she created her fiber-optic costume from scratch in September 2021. By 2025, the price point and availability of fiber-optic fabric has expanded drastically, taking what was a niche material in 2015 to a product that is widely available on platforms such as Amazon. A 47.2-inch by 39.4-inch section of fabric costs $69.88 USD, and Lumisonata offers a full range of pre-made garments already connected to their application ranging from hats at $38.69 to custom made wedding dresses in the thousands. This price is high for smaller theatres and dance companies, but not entirely prohibitive. What makes it so much more accessible is the wide availability and the versatility that vendors,

6. Gina Vincenza. "Behind the Scenes with Fiber Optics Costumes on Broadway." Costume Rigging Tips and Tricks. Wix Site, December 7, 2017, https://info74177.wixsite.com/costumerigging/single-post/2017/12/07/behind-the-scenes-with-fiber-optics-costumes-on-broadway

7. Interwoven Design Group, LLC. "Fiber Optic Tutu." Get Interwoven Design. Accessed April 21, 2025, https://www.getinterwoven.com/our-work/fiber-optic-tutu/

motivated by consumers that use costumes as a hobby rather than an integral part of their industry. Fiber-optic fabric also has a very user-friendly side. Clever patterning and cutting allows an adept draper/cutter to pattern based on where light sources originate and requires a very low-level understanding of how light works to manipulate both the fabric and the light source. Applications that control the lights are very intuitive and allow for a maximum of creativity.

A Case Study: Hang Your Lights

Hang Your Lights is a tap number to the song "Hang Your Lights" sung by Jamie Cullum and choreographed by Shadoe Brandt for the Star Dance Company based out of Oklahoma City University's Ann Lacy School of American Dance and Entertainment. The original concept was "the spirit of Christmas trees and their joyfulness" and it was meant to fit seamlessly into both the larger show of *Holiday Spectacular* and to exist as a stand-alone performance. Under the direction of Artistic Director/Director Tiffany van der Merwe, Brandt and I worked to create a tap number that celebrated the magic that light brings to the coldest and darkest part of the year in the northern hemisphere. Brandt envisioned a number where the audience could experience darkness, allowing them to focus on the sounds of the tap shoes without the distraction of a full stage of performers and other creative elements. While this concept might work for a devoted concert dance audience, it is a hard sell for a broader commercial audience that includes both devotees and neophytes. This presented a challenge for the production design: creating a dance that needed to embody the sensation of darkness while still functioning as a visual medium. As a designer, I needed to find a costume medium that would allow this production value to become a reality. Using fiber-optic costumes allowed the stage to darken significantly while still illuminating the performers and providing visual interest to the audience. A cast of nine dancers, double cast, wore black polyester satin trousers and button-front long-sleeved dress shirts with black acrylic wool fedoras. A white-front fiber-optic vest purchased from Lumisonata was worn over the dress shirt. The back of the vest was black acetate. Black ribbons were added to the front of the vest, replacing the original hook fastening that could not withstand the bounce of tapping dancers. Staff in the Ann Lacy School of American Dance and Entertainment Costume Shop used fiber-optic fabric from LYML.E1 to add tuxedo stripes to the sides of the trousers and to add a hatband and fabric "feathers" to the hats (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hang Your Lights Costume Rendering

Source: Jessica Telfer, 2024

Two students enrolled in Arts Management Costume Lab were assigned to operate the costumes during performances. They trained using rehearsal videos to learn the lighting cues mapped out by the costume designer. The fabric source from LYML.E1 via Amazon did not connect to the Lumisonata application, and, for this show, I lacked the time and resources required to re-circuit the individual computer chips that programmed the board to a Lumisonata battery pack. I do think that this is possible and does not require much advanced computer programming or electrical knowledge. This limited the number of changes possible with the pants and hats and meant that changes to these had to be limited to moments when dancers left the stage and my crew backstage could manually press buttons to change colors. For a cohesive design, we selected two pant colors and chose to add the magical element via the remote changes made possible by the wireless connection provided via app to the vest. Colors were inspired by the overall theme of Christmas and moments of lighting change were inspired by dance formation changes. Before the first event of the season, cast and crew came together in a studio that allowed for near darkness to practice together and give the wardrobe crew a chance to time their work to the dancers in real time.

The wardrobe crew and the ability to remotely control the lights greatly increased the ease with which these costumes could be incorporated. My previous work with light-up costumes involved wired lights, low battery capacity, and unwieldy large costumes. Being able to work with costumes that were known and established garment types that also lit up opens an entirely new world for working with these costumes. Battery life for the costumes ranged from six hours to forty-eight, depending on how long they were on and how they were used. Using crew to control the costumes meant that the cast could focus on their dancing and performance and rely on wardrobe to troubleshoot. Being able to use these fabrics in real life scenarios meant an opportunity to test the durability and practicality of this tech-enhanced fabric. The crew experienced wi-fi going out mid performance

(the crew on the other side of the stage had access to cellular service and took control of all lights until wi-fi was restored). Cross-training the two wardrobe crew members meant that either member could control all lights and knew both wardrobe crew tracks in the event that a crew member was out. With the Lumisonata program (Figure 2), multiple costumes could be linked together, and cues could be built, mirroring the process of programming stage lighting.

Figure 2. Lumisonata Phone Application

Source: Lumisonata, 2025

The effect of multiple costumes magically changing colors was breathtaking and elicited gasps from the audience at every show. At our first event, the opening night of *Safari Lights* at Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden, the front lighting was so bright it washed out the colors from the front (the stage was elevated and in the round). Lessons learned from this event led lighting designer Steve Estes and moving light designer/stage manager Evelyn Walter to only use high angled lights placed in the attic of our home theatre (Kirkpatrick Auditorium on Oklahoma City University's main campus) when lighting the dance number from the front and to rely more on angle side lighting and a colorful Cyc to help create light and visual interest that was ambient rather than overwhelming (Figure 3). Due to the physical nature of dance, the costumes experienced regular wear and tear. This was primarily seen in the tuxedo stripes down the sides of the trousers. After repeated knee lifts, the fibers for the stripe would rip out of the connector that attached the bundled fibers to their light source. Later versions of the costume allowed more slack in the wiring to allow for this movement, but regular repairs needed to be made using electrical tape and needle nose pliers. Even LYML.E1 changed their manufacturing during this process, switching from a small metal flange to a long skinny rubber one to replace the electrical tape and make it harder for the fibers to disconnect from the LED casing. The process of design and costume creation began in July 2024, and the first performance took

place in November 2024. This meant both the costume shop and an unaffiliated vendor based out of China were refining their manufacturing during this short time frame. Fabrics ordered prior to October 2024 had the old metal manufacturing and all fabrics ordered later had the new rubber fixture.

Figure 3. Hang Your Lights performance at OCU Donor Gala, November 2024

Source: Oklahoma City University, 2024

To allow for ease of operation and cohesive changes, both the hat and the trousers are controlled using a small single-use button connected to a small computer chip housed in a minute plastic case with a charging port (Figure 4). This connects via two insulated wires to a larger plastic case out of which each individual cable for a 7.5" section of fiber-optic fabric. This allows cutting and re-patching of the fiber-optic fabric as the entire fabric is not controlled by a single cable. It also means cutting along the lines between each area allows them to be used on different areas of the garment. We utilized this to make a manufacturing choice to allow us to control multiple garments with one central electrical source.

Figure 4. Fiber Optic Hat and Tuxedo Stripe with One Light Control

Source: Jessica Telfer, 2024

The biggest learning curve within the costume shop was allowing enough slack in the wires for performers to be able to lift their legs, bend at the waist, and have full head mobility. Slack wires and control packs were stored in a pocket in the vest

and cables were paged into the pocket or held in place with internal loops within the trousers. Because the fibers are not conducting electricity, just light waves, keeping all wires separate from the garment meant that when wires were damaged or control packs ceased to work, they could easily be switched out using the flanges. I led work on costume creation, assisted by two student staff members, a senior and sophomore. The fiber-optic material can be sewn on a sewing machine with no damage (provided that the actual electrical wires are not sewn through) and the only impact is additional light "beads" where the small nicks to the fiber create stronger light bleeds due to a new termination location at stitching marks. Depending on how the LED light source is attached to the fabric, the garment can be hand-washed, avoiding the light-housing. In garments where the light source is sewn into the garment, only spot-cleaning is available.

After twelve years of working with light-up costumes and various forms of LEDs incorporated into costumes, this was by far the easiest application and opened the door for many more possibilities, both in dance and beyond. The price point, self-contained and rechargeable batteries, and ease of utilization make it far more attainable for lower budget productions. The smaller learning curve means that training takes less time and is worth the cost in personnel hours. A creative costume designer can easily incorporate this into designs without sacrificing huge budgetary resources. The impact that this type of costume has on the audience shows a reward on investment. Beyond application in costume design, the process outlined in the case study above shows that wearable fiber optic fabric can be easily altered, sewn, and operated with a minimal learning curve. This opens the door to other industries such as sportswear or wearable medical devices and shows that collaborations across fashion, theatre, and the sciences show a wealth of opportunity.

Kinetic Fabric

Kinetic fabric has so much potential. This fabric is amorphous and so new to the industry that it lacks a fully formed definition. Some fabricators define it as any fabric rigged or created to have exaggerated movement when stimulated. Others have added complex pleating diagrams to their fabric and garment creation and attached the pleats to computer controlled animatronic devices, allowing the garments to move as though they have a life of their own. The most notable artist to pioneer and apply this technology is London-based fashion designer Lisa Jiang, whose exhibit, Moments in Motion showed at The Combine in Toronto in October 2024. Jiang pairs her fashion degree with fine art to create garments that become art installations. Using a soft silk organza, she pleats them into intricate folded bundles and dyes the outer edge before attaching them to a basic circuit that uses the tension of the fabric to move it independently. The fabric takes on a life of its own, with vivid colors and intricate pleats mimicking a tightly petaled flower or sea creature that curls and

extends in a complex, but seemingly random pattern. In an interview with Julian Battersby from The Combine, Jiang said:

> Tension is what drives a lot of the movement, like the right play of fabric tension when the motors are in motion. But on my first attempt, the effect was too unpredictable, and sometimes the fabric would get tangled. So, the updated version is done with my partner, Timothy Boll, and that one's properly coded.[8]

The prohibitive element to this type of costuming process appears to be the need to understand circuits and coding. Other designers interpret kinetic fabric based more on the inherent nature of movement created by the fabric. Fabric and fashion designer Hannah Starkey, also based in the United Kingdom, knits fibers into unique patterns, maximizing and capitalizing on the stretch that knit creates to make a fabric that appears to grow and change shape when moved or stretched. The kinetic nature is captured not by added motors and circuitry, but by the wearer of the garment moving and stimulating movement in the fabric. Clever placement of color enhances the illusion, with the closed exterior of the fabric pre-stretch one color and the interior of the fold that is exposed with movement a vibrant contrasting color (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Kinetic Fabric designed by Hannah Starkey

Source: Faye Hall, 2020

Dutch fashion designer, Iris van Herpen, took the term "kinetic" in yet another direction, using close repetitive, carefully arranged patterns or pleats on her dresses to create the illusion of movement. Primarily neutral-toned, these garments use kineticism rather than color to capture the eye. She incorporated sculptural creations that sat on top of the garment and had a delicate balance on wires so that they moved as the model moved, giving them a life of their own in her Fall 2019 collection. Like Jiang, van Herpen used silk organza as well as silk moire. She used laser cutting techniques to provide both accuracy and a low weight finished edge.

8. Julian Battersby. "Between Paper and Real Life" *The Combine*, October 2024.

She also utilized strategic dyeing of the fabric to enhance the sense of movement. Much like Starkey's work, it is the wearer that motivates the kinetic element, as opposed to a separate entity or capturing more advanced technologies. The sculptural additions that van Herpen added for kinetic effect would be cumbersome for practical wear and movement-based performance, but the concept could be easily adapted to allow the fluttery and intricacy these garments evoke to be captured for the character creation by costume designers.

Costume designers working for Cirque du Soleil have been early adopters (and inventors) of innovative costume technologies. Early examples of experimentation with costumes that took on kinetic traits can be seen in Eiko Ishioka's (deceased 2012) costumes for *Varekai* (2002). Made of Lycra and vibrantly colored, these costumes transformed performers into otherworldly creatures with spines, fins, and feather-like appendages that appeared to move on their own. Meredith Caron, costume designer for Cirque du Soleil's 2012 *Amaluna* followed this type of aesthetic with costumes that added dimension to performers while incorporating intensely pleated fabric into her costumes that incorporate the movements of multiple performers to enhance the sense of movement. Heavily beaded headpieces move tremulously with the slightest vibration from a performer's head. Building an otherworldly atmosphere that still allows heavy movement is a signature of shows produced by Cirque du Soleil and variations of this design concept can be seen repeated from show to show, building on the heritage created by the early designers for this company.

While these high-profile designers have access to expensive tools and assistance in programming and creation, their use of pleating provides opportunities for designers within the lower budget sphere the possibility of creating garments with this enhanced sense of movement from sometimes pleating patterns alone. Jiang's coded and motorized self-moving garments require several specialized skill sets and experts that are not within the reach and budget of most designers working outside the sphere of Broadway or Cirque du Soleil. It is within reason to expect that this type of technology will become accessible to a larger audience within the next ten or fifteen years. Already creators inspired by Jiang's work are emulating it, and at times directly copying, drawing into the spotlight the delicate balance between inspiration and artistic ownership that has a far less developed and rigorous copyright program than other disciplines. As Cirque du Soleil's early innovations in creating exterior movement in costumes shows, there is a thirst for this type of costuming asset. It is within the reach of lower budget productions using the mechanisms that have existed for thousands of years, pleating and sculptural draping. The clever uses of folding and building with fabric can be captured and used to create a sense of exterior movement without copying an innovator or outsourcing for expertise from other disciplines.

3D Printing in Costume Design

Three-Dimensional (3D) printing is another device that can be used to create kinetic elements in costumes. This technology, invented in 1981 by Dr. Hideo Kodama[9] underwent many refinements in the three decades before it reached the capacity to print fabric. Iris van Herpen, regularly a leader and new adopter of technologies in the garment industry, used 3D printed garment pieces in her Spring/Summer 2010 collection entitled "Crystallization" and her Spring 2013 collaboration with Julia Koerner and Materialise entitled "Voltage". In 2024, she designed a 3D printed wedding dress for Mariana Pavani. This dress was the result of 600 hours of design work on the software Zbrush using a 3D body scan of Pavan and took 41 hours to print. Designer Zac Posen has worked with 3D printed fabrics and garments including two looks for the Met Gala in 2019. These looks, "Rose Petal Dress" worn by Jourdan Dunn and "Glass Dress" worn by Nina Dobrev have a heavier visual weight than pieces made by van Herpen. "Rose Petal" dress consists of 37 large textured undulating dark rose iridescent petals that used electric beam melting (EBM) to create a printed titanium frame. The petals also used a 3D printing technique in plastic polymer with vibrant color added in paint post printing. "Glass Dress" is made of plastic (Somos Watershed XC 11122) and used an ultraviolet (UV) laser in the manufacturing process. The final effect is that of a dress with all the folds and layers of fabric that appears to be frozen in action and rendered in a hard translucent shell. In contrast, van Herpen's work relies on interlocking layers of printed material and brings a delicacy more reminiscent of lace or an intricately embroidered trim. Layers of the same motif repeat in the garments creating a moveable and wearable garment. While both "Crystallization" and "Voltage" showcase van Herpen's highly sculptural style, they differ from Posen's work. Posen's garments have a hard plasticine element to them, appearing like armor. Van Herpen's garments move with the body and drape. The armored aspect is more reminiscent of an exoskeleton and the structural moments have a softness created by many small spines and layers that create a fuzzy effect from plastic as opposed to a hard shell. Other designers have adopted this new technology, with Balenciaga using this medium for their Fall/Winter 2023/2024 collection and designer Anouk Wipprecht creating a hybrid 3D printed/kinetic garment known as the "Spider Dress" that moved 3D printed "arms" over the shoulders of the model using robotics.

While these garments are attention grabbing and awe inspiring, their manufacturing technique is highly prohibitive for lower budget venues. The time, knowledge, personnel, and material used are beyond the budgets of all but the biggest live performing arts venues. Even when introduced to the performing arts, as seen in a 2020 Just Dance video game release that featured a performer in a 3D printed basket-like hood, it is an expensive process. The creation of her skirt and

9. UtiliMaker, "The Complete History of 3D Printing" accessed May 1, 2025 https://ultimaker.com/learn/the-complete-history-of-3d-printing

hood from a lightweight printed plastic that still allowed her to fully move and perform required a large team of designers and creators with a diverse set of backgrounds and disciplines to create a single garment for a popular and high grossing video game. Film has moved into this space easily with high budget productions like *Iron Man* and *Malificent* using the technology to make their iconic and titular characters' costumes. Ruth E. Carter dived deeply into 3D printing for headpieces and other elements to bring Wakanda to life in *Black Panther,* a logical extension of the world created in Wakanda that relies heavily on printing technologies for so much of the plotline.

So where does this leave the live performing arts? 3D printing has been overused for creating accessories and add-ons to garments and underutilized to create the actual garment. While Posen's model may not be practical for most designers, van Herpen's model can be inspirational. Fabric can be printed in four ways: chainmail, geometric coding (G-code), modeling in Computer-Aided Design (CAD), and infill method as shown by Sara Alvarez[10]. It is quite likely that 3D printed fabric is the future of fabric manufacturing. Currently fabric is manufactured as woven or knitted. Knitted garments can be made in an additive process with minimal waste, but most garments are assembled in a subtractive manner. Fabric is manufactured in long rectangular lengths. Pieces of the garment are cut from this fabric and then assembled, creating waste from remnants of the fabric that are too small or the incorrect shape, grain, or pattern to procure additional garment pieces. With 3D printing, the pieces for the garment can be printed in the exact size, shape, and with the proper pattern, greatly reducing waste from the manufacturing process. Additionally, because these printers use plastic, these garments can use recycled raw materials for manufacture and create a cyclical manufacturing process. While costume shops are a very small portion of the waste experienced by the garment industry, due to their large dependence on re-use of items in established costume stocks held by rental houses or individual costume houses, the ability to use CAD to create a costume that is then printed will greatly reduce the time spent on cutting fabric and the waste generated in that process. While the current use of 3D printing is relegated to creating structural elements, accessories, jewelry, and armor, creating viable fabric and more importantly, stretch material is possible with 3D printing. The most common use is the chainmail printing technique that prints small individual forms that interlink. Many designers and textile innovators utilize this method. It can allow for kinetic elements such as easy expansion and compression and has many more applications than clothing (such as architecture and engineering and space technology). More intriguing for costume design manufacturing are the three other options. G-code and CAD are similar in their ideology. G-code is the coding for how the fabric will be assembled. It requires the designer to be able to code,

10. Sara Alvarez, "How to 3D print fabric-Step by step" posted February 6, 2022 by Sara Alvarez, YouTube, 5:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MQSxgcn9i0

although this coding is easier to learn. CAD is a program regularly used in theatrical design by scenic and lighting designers. Costume shops are slowly adopting this programming for pattern making, although many shops still rely heavily on antiquated hand drafting techniques due to budgets that do not allow for the software or a lack of training in the field. Within their counterpart, the fashion industry, it is hard to find shops and studios not utilizing computer programming for most pre-assembly applications. Using CAD, a costumer can design the piece and have the printer print it. Easier for a novice in 3D printing is the final method, this uses pre-programmed elements in the printer without an additional software or knowledge of coding. Most 3D printing is done with solid shells and geometric interiors allowing for less material usage and a lighter weight object. By setting the exteriors at zero, home or shop manufacturers of the 3D printed fabric can capitalize on the geometric interior as the pattern of the fabric, creating a tightly linked lace like pattern. For dancewear, this strong, stretchy material printed on a tight geometric pattern opens a host of opportunities. Introductory 3D printers with this capability cost $4,000-$5,000 USD meaning that without a higher operational budget, this technology is within reach, but not necessarily a realistic investment at this time. Some shops are working to adopt it, such as the Royal College of Arts in London for their 2017 production of *Farewell My Concubine,* with printed gauntlets, pleated fabric, and elaborate collars (Figure 6). 3D printing is entering the theatrical world via scenic and properties design. Hopefully as more scenic shops acquire printers, 3D printing can be used by the costumes shops or allow more acceptance for that budget line in annual production expenses.

Figure 6. 3D Printed Collar for Farewell My Concubine

Source: Royal College of Arts, 2017

Light-Reactive Fabric

Returning to the interplay of light and costumes, the final exciting invention on the horizon of costume design is light-reactive fabric. This fabric has several names:

light-responsive, photochromic, and UV reactive. Early versions of this concept already exist in the performing arts and were captured heavily in performances of the late twentieth century: glow-in-the-dark costumes. In my personal design portfolio, I have used glow-in-the-dark multiple times, most recently with glowing tap dancers dressed as large dolls that come to life in Oklahoma City University's 2016 production of *Home for the Holidays* directed by Jo Rowan. Fabric with these reactive capabilities and paints that respond to blue light and ultraviolet to enhance costumes are widely available, easy to use and incorporate into costumes, and have a very affordable price point. Costumes can be bought pre-assembled, or fabric can be acquired that is treated with light sensitive chemicals and assembled to a designer's vision. This form of light reactive costuming and theatrical design is enjoying a resurgence in popularity with less renowned companies such as *Vertigo* acrobatics show heavily using it in their 2021 season of touring shows.

Figure 7. Light Reactive Fabric

Source: fabricshow, 2025

This technology is also enjoying growth beyond the glow-in-the dark version and is entering a "change in the sun" era. The technology is similar, but instead of trapped in low light and dark performance spaces, fabric is now being treated to change colors in sunlight (Figure 7). These optically adaptive fabrics are moving into the typical early adopters: fashion designers and cosplay influencers. Anrealage's Spring/Summer 2024 collection "Invisible" revealed logos when exposed to UV light on a catwalk and Dior's Autumn/Winter 2023 used photochromic textiles made by Joana Vasconcelos that appear one color in the sun and another when removed from sunlight. Costume influencer Asta Darling made a "Sleeping Beauty" dress using solar reactive dye in June 2023. The fabric was dyed by Darling and turned from pink to blue when exposed to sunlight. Solar dyes are inexpensive and available from a variety of vendors but become permanent when exposed to sunlight and do not return to their original color when removed from the sun. The magic seen in the Dior and Anrealage collections is created using silver halide or organic molecules that allow the garment to be "restored" back to the original when removed from the UV or sunlight. Yarns that have these properties are in the infancy of manufacturing and

are not widely available but have the potential to reach the mass market in the next ten to fifteen years. However, these progressions in light-reactive fabric can be mimicked using the current technology or a clever collaboration between lighting designer and costume designer. Violinist Lindsey Stirling impressed fans at a concert in December 2024 with a costume that was taupe and then vibrant indigos and violets. Clever lighting and use of wavelengths not usually seen in the performing arts made the costume appear to change color. While technology is steadily progressing, designers have a thirst to use light-reactive material in new ways beyond concert, circus, and dance settings. This type of medium has so much potential to create characters and tells stories in the live performing arts while giving a visual boost at a very low-cost point.

Conclusion

There is so much potential available for costume designers to incorporate technology into a traditional fabric and fiber medium. While there will always be a need to preserve the traditional and stick to the garment forms of the past, the potential for innovation and telling stories based on emotion, fantasy, or future, enhanced by the addition of light or movement, is undeniable. Lighting enhanced costuming is easily obtainable, even in spaces where money, resources, or training are low. These additions to costumes require a small investment and low learning curve with a high reward. Utilizing collaboration with the lighting designer, a costume designer can use a combination of light and treated fabrics to allow a character's garment to change colors magically in front of the audience's eyes or incorporate fiber-optic fabrics to allow the couple in love to literally glow with the light of falling in love as they move through a touching pas de deux. Other advances in fabric and fiber technology still seem out of reach for most costume designers. Companies such as Cirque du Soleil and Warner Brothers studios have extraordinarily large budgets compared to the average theatre, dance, or circus company. Costumes that require 3D printing require the equipment to print them. While the learning curve on a 3D printer is relatively low, the upfront investment is beyond the usual operational budget for most costume shops that prefer to allocate that money for machines used daily in the shop. It is likely that this will change in the next decade or two as this type of technology becomes more mainstream in the fashion industry. It is likely that most shops will begin to use this technology because of partnerships with scene shops that already have one. It is also likely that universities will be quicker to adopt this technology as their mandate is training future professionals within the field and their funding structure can allow for grants to purchase equipment for that purpose.

Despite the stunning visual impact of kinetic costuming, it is unlikely that this will be adopted on a large scale by the costuming community. It has limited uses and its needs in character building are very specific. The high cost and learning curve that necessitates learning coding, robotics, and potentially wiring will decrease its

adoption as freelance designers and their teams are usually at full capacity with their usual show load and unable to spend significant time learning new programs and techniques. It is likely that when characters requiring a sense of kinesis are required, designers will stick to the current widely adopted methods: pleating, light weight fabric, latex appendages, and vera-form armors.

Costume creation is an ever-evolving discipline. Designers have a responsibility to spend time incorporating new techniques and learning new methods of character creation to allow themselves to stay ahead of the trend. This is especially important in the live performing arts where budgets and demand can be lower, but the majority of costumers work in these parameters. Staying competitive helps secure a designer's desirability in a crowded field and allows this profession to continue to contribute to the viability of live performance. The ability to use small tricks that deliver large impact on a lower budget allows these designers to stand out and helps the performing arts continue to draw an audience, thereby helping everyone in the industry. Beyond their usual character and historical research, costume designers can use advances seen in high fashion as a research mechanism to inspire high-impact creativity.

Acknowledgements

This paper was made possible by the support of Oklahoma City University, especially the Ann Lacy School of Dance and Entertainment. Dean Melanie Shelley supported the acquisition of costumes and materials to further study the applications of these technologies and works tirelessly to find funding for further costume creation and study. Tiffany van der Merwe provided artistic vision and guidance to make space on stage and find performance venues for these innovations. Shadoe Brandt is always a willing choreographer ready to explore new ideas and possibilities in the entertainment industry. Thanks to Steven Philbrick and Lauren Hunter for assistance in managing the costume shop, Jessica Neef and Carly Roberts for work on fiber-optic costume creation, and Morgan Riley and Lorna Waggoner, our fiber-optic costume operators. Selma Moore and Taylor Poynton worked as my design assistants and Lydia Hotovy and Emma Lacy led the wardrobe team for *Holiday Spectacular*. The costumes could not be seen without the amazing lighting provided by Steve Estes and Evelyn Walter. Special appreciation to Theo Spencer for research assistance, Rodney Wilhite for editorial guidance, and Adam Telfer for feedback and support. Costume design is a fully collaborative work that cannot exist in a vacuum and requires a full support team to make it possible.

Bibliography

Adams, Michael David. "Moonstruck with Cirque du Soleil-Amaluna" Michael David Adams Portfolio, accessed April 30, 2025 https://michaeldavidadams.com/portfolio/ moonstruck/

Alvarez, Sara. "How to 3D print fabric-Step by step" posted February 6, 2022 by Sara Alvarez, YouTube, 5:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MQSxgcn9i0

Anderson, Barbara, Cletus Anderson. *Costume Design*. New York: CBS College Publishing, 1984.

Battersby, Julian. "Between Paper and Real Life" *The Combine*, October 2024.

Baum, Howe. "Advances in Technology: Smart Textiles" University of Cincinnati, 2022, https://www.uc.edu/content/dam/refresh/cont-ed-62/olli/summer22/3d%20tech%20fashion.pdf.

BeautyHub. "Anrealage is Blending Science and Tehcnology Seamlessly: Anrealage SS 2024 Collection 'Invisible'" *Beauty Hub*, accessed May 3, 2025 https://www.beautyhubmagazine.com/anrealage-is-blending-science-and-technology-seamlessly/.

Brooke, Iris. *Costume in Greek Classic Drama*, New York: Dover Publications, 2003.

Bundell, Shamini. "The Smart Chain Mail Fabric that Can Stiffen on Demand" posted August 11, 2021 by Nature Video, YouTube, 3:43, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2n9VJrra3g.

Chi, Paul. "Met Gala 2016: Claire Danes's Glow-in-the-Dark Gown Upstaged a Red-Carpet Robot Army" *Vanity Fair*, May 2016.

Clark, Shaula. "Best of the Day: Cirque du Soleil's *Varekai*", *Boston Magazine*, July 15, 2015.

Darling, Asta. @asta.darling, November 2022, June 2023, Instagram.

Dionysus, "KINETIC MEMBRANE/movement prototype03" posted November 12, 2012, by CLRLSS, YouTube, 1:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GWqkprBtwE

Do, Michael. "New Shape-Shifting Smart Textile Material Created That Can Move Like a Robot" posted July 12, 2022 by Dr. Do's Soft Robotic Lab, YouTube, 2:42 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gfqc2bIiFSc

Eben, Kenneth. "Plastic Optic Fiber-An Evolving Technology: POF Technology Has Much to Offer to the Device Industry". *Medical Design Briefs*, November 1, 2013.

Etherington, Rose. "Crystallization by Iris van Herpen, Daniel Widrig, and MGX by Materialise". *Dezeen*, August 11, 2010.

Gong, Zidan, Ziyang Xiang, Xia OuYang, Jun Zhang, Newman Lau, Jie Zhou, and Chi Chiu Chan. "Wearable Fiber Optic Technology Based on a Smart Textile: A Review" *Materials* 12, no. 20 https://www.mdpi.com/1996-1944/12/20/3311, 2019.

Gonick, Melanie. "Robotic Fibers can Make Breath-Monitoring Garments.", posted October 15, 2021, by Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 3:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDT7Nt_sBqQ.

Hafza, Yasmine. "Top 10 Inspirational 3D-Printed Clothes for 2025", *Parametric Architecture*, February 28, 2025.

Hall, Faye. "Kinetic Textiles". The Open College of the Arts. August 31, 2020, https://www.oca.ac.uk/weareoca/textiles/kinetic-textiles/.

Holiday Spectacular. directed by Tiffany van der Merwe, Kirkpatrick Auditorium, Oklahoma City, December 2024.

Home for the Holidays. directed by Jo Rowan, Kirkpatrick Auditorium, Oklahoma City, December 2016.

Hoque, Saiful, Jakir Hossain, Mahbubur Rahman, and Mizanur Rashid. "Fiber Types and Structures Influence on Weft Knitted Fabrics" *Heliyon* 8, no. 6 (2022) https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844022008933.

Ikiz, Serra Utkum. "Anrealage Used Color-Changing Technology in the Fall 2023-2024 Collection". *Parametric Architecture*, September 16, 2023.

Ingham, Rosemary, Liz Covey. *The Costume Designer's Handbook.* Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992.

Interwoven Design Group, LLC. "Fiber Optic Tutu." Get Interwoven Design. Accessed April 21, 2025, https://www.getinterwoven.com/our-work/fiber-optic-tutu/.

Jacobi, Angeles. "Durational Textiles Installations. Mixed Fibers, 2023, Uno+Uno, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Jiang, Lisa. *Moments in Motion*, September-October 2024, silk organza garments with metal and mixed media, The Combine, Toronto, Canada.

Johnson, Jim. "History of Fiber Optics." Timbercon: A Radiall Company. October 18, 2018, https://www.timbercon.com/resources/blog/history-of-fiber-optics/.

La Motte, Richard, *Costume Design 101: The Art and Business of Costume Design for Film and Television.* Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2001.

Loke, Gabriel, Juliette Alain, Wei Yan, Tural Khudiyev, Grace Noel, Rodger Yuan, Anais Missakian, Yoel Fink, "Computing Fabrics" *Matter* 2, no. 4 (2020) https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S259023852030120X.

Marchese, Kieron. "Iris van Herpen Sculpts 'Kinetic Couture' That Moves as Models Walk the Runway." *Design Boom*, July 2019.

Marsh, Allison. "The Rich Tapestry of Fiber Optics: The Tale of the Material That Knits the World Together Has Many Surprising Threads." *Spectrum,* July 2020.

Massaroni, Carlos, Paola Saccomandi, Emiliano Schena. "Medical Smart Textiles Based on Fiber Optic Technology: An Overview" *Functional Biomaterials* 6, no. 2 (2015) https://www.mdpi.com/2079-4983/6/2/204.

Morris, Triffin, Gregory DL Morris, Rachel E Pollock. *A History of Theatre Costume Business: Creators of Character.* New York: Routledge, 2021.

Munster, Petr, Tomas Horvath. "Intelligent Technical Textiles Based on Fiber Bragg Gratings for Strain Monitoring" *Sensors* 20 no. 10 (2020) https://www.mdpi.com/1424-8220/20/10/2951.

Owen, Jen. "Exploring the Creation of 3D Printed Fabric and Fashion". *3D Universe*, Ep 24, June 8, 2023.

Remark, Katie. "How 3D Printing is Building Itself into Theatre". *Arts Management and Technology Laboratory* March 18, 2022 https://amt-lab.org/blog/2022/3/3d-printingbringing-theatre-to-life-in-a-new-way.

Rose, Shay. @crescentshay, July 27, 2021, TikTok.

Russo, Ricky. "Amaluna". Grand Chapiteau. Richasi, 2013, https://www.richasi.com/Cirq ue/Amaluna/index.html.

Sarmiento, Alicia Reyes. "The Future of Fashion is Here: How 3D Printing is Changing the Industry". Fashion United, December 4, 2024, https://fashionunited.com/news/fashion

Scully, Leah. "3D Printed Costumery Creates Juxtaposition between Culture, Theater, and Tech". *Machine Design*, November 2017.

Shapeways Blog. "How Film Costume Designers Use 3D Printing to Bring Science-Fiction to Life" Shapeways. Accessed April 26, 2025 https://www.shapeways.com/blog/film-costume-designers-use-3d-printing-bring-science-fiction-life?srsltid=AfmBOopusaU-u82ZBDgC2t2HNnNfsR_PNhtHnlVlKNqvwTdV6ZejQZZU.

Smith, Lacey. "Researchers Developed a Robotic Fabric that can Move by Itself". Mashable, October 15, 2020 https://mashable.com/video/yale-robotic-fabric.

Stirling, Lindsey. *Halestorm Tour,* November 2024.

Teich, Jessica. "'Amaluna' Costumes take a Beating". *Boston Globe,* June 25, 2014 https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2014/06/25/they-may-look-ethereal-but-those-amaluna-costumes-take-beating/tdaEpBGSZqB9qboXhlKovN/story.html.

UtiliMaker. "The Complete History of 3D Printing" accessed May 1, 2025 https://ultimaker.com/learn/the-complete-history-of-3d-printing/.

Van Herpen, Iris. *Crystallization*, Spring/Summer 2010, New York, https://www.irisvanherpen.com/DOCS/IVH-Crystallization.pdf.

Venuez. "Photochromic Textiles: Sunlight Responsive Fashion Solutions", Venuez Industry and Commerce, May 25, 2024 https://www.venuez.dk/photochromic.

Vertigo. *Flying Cube-Great Aerial Outdoor Show*, produced by Art4promotion and KVANT, 2025.

Vincenza, Gina. "Behind the Scenes with Fiber Optics Costumes on Broadway." Costume Rigging Tips and Tricks. Wix Site, December 7, 2017, https://info74177.wixsite.com/costumerigging/single-post/2017/12/07/behind-the-scenes-with-fiber-optics-costumes-on-broadway

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026 – Pages 239-262

Montebotolino's Folkloric Tales: Whimsy and Wisdom from a Tuscan Village

*By Simonetta Milli Konewko**

This investigation analyzes the folkloric tradition of Montebotolino, a small village in Tuscany and precisely in the Badia Tedalda's territory. Converging on the village's humorous tales, the research examines how these stories transcend simple entertainment to provide a reflective perception into universal human practices. The article centers on the characters, themes, and narrative techniques used in these stories, locating them within the worldwide "wise fool" tradition. Montebotolino, despite experiencing substantial migration, has saved its oral traditions reflecting both local cultural identity and broader philosophical worries. Through a close analysis of representative tales and comparative examination with similar folkloric expressions worldwide, this research highlights how apparently unpretentious village stories may function as sophisticated means for cultural preservation, social commentary, and philosophical inquiry, offering valuable views on contemporary challenges in an increasingly complicated world.

Keywords: *Tuscan folklore, wise fool tradition, oral narratives, cultural preservation, community identity*

Overview

Folklore embodies the rich tapestry of human knowledge, communicated through generations of storytelling, custom, and beliefs.[1] These oral traditions function as sources, preserving the collective wisdom, values, and identity of communities across time. Folklore, unlike formal historical records, captures the emotional and spiritual essence of people, their fears, aspirations, understandings of the world, and mechanisms for dealing with life's uncertainties.[2] Through folklore material circulating from one generation to the next, communities can maintain their distinctive character and engage with universal human concerns. What makes folklore especially fascinating is its dual nature: deeply rooted in specific geographical and cultural contexts while, at the same time, addressing universal human experiences.[3] These tales often use symbolic language, archetypal characters, and recurring motifs to vibrate across cultural frontiers. Folklore provides entertainment and instruction through its cautionary tales, celebratory myths, and

*Professor of Italian, Department of World Languages and Cultures, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA.

1. Bascom, W. (1954). Four Functions of Folklore. Journal of American Folklore, 67(266), 333-349.

2. Thompson S (1977). *The Folktale,* Berkeley, University of California Press.

3. Burke, K. (1984). *Attitudes Toward History*. Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 123.

humorous anecdotes helping communities find the way through life's complexities through shares narratives.

This article examines the exclusive folkloric tradition of Montebotolino, a small Tuscan village in the area of Badia Tedalda and explores how its distinctive brand of humorous tales rise above mere amusement to offer profound insights into universal human experience. Specifically, this study asks: How do the tales of Montebotolino function to preserve culture, provide social commentary, and convey philosophical ideas within both local and broader contexts? This study demonstrates that Montebotolino's tales are, in fact, a sophisticated way for cultural preservation, social commentary, and philosophical inquiry. An insight gained through examinations of their characters, themes, narrative techniques and comparisons to similar "wise fool" traditions from other cultures that clarifies this material's powerful significance.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework in Folklore Studies

Folklore studies have employed various theoretical frameworks to evaluate the meaning of oral practices. Structural approaches, as the ones developed by Vladimir Propp's "Morphology of the Folktale" (1968) examine the underlying pattern that connect diverse narratives[4]. Propp identifies universal narratives functions that appear across cultural contexts, offering instruments for examining how Montebotolino's tales modify these universal configurations to local matters. On the other hand, scholars like Alan Dundes consider how folklore functions as a mechanism for social unity and cultural identity development.[5] His study, "Interpreting Folklore" (1980), underlines how communal narratives create a safe environment for collective self-reflection and allows communities to recognize difficulties by confirming shared principles. It is also worth mentioning the work on folk humor, "Rabelais and His World" (1984) by Mikhail Bakhtin that offers understanding of how folklore uses comedy to subvert conventional authority.[6] Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" clarifies how humorous narrative constructs spaces for questioning social hierarchies and searching for alternative point of views, a context especially relevant to Montebotolino's tradition of wise fools.

4. Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin, University of Texas Press, p. 89.

5. Dundes, A. (1980). *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 78.

6. Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 159.

Wise Fool Traditions in Global Context

Beatrice K. Otto's comprehensive examination, "Fools Are Everywhere" (2001), documents the widespread presence of wise fool characters across diverse cultures and geographical locations.[7] In his study the figure of the fool has multiple functions, such as serving as universal human needs for social critique, philosophical exploration, and truth -telling inversion.

Similar studies have identified parallel global traditions such as the Wise Men of Chelm in Jewish folklore, Mullah Nasreddin in Middle Eastern and Central Asian traditions, and the Schildbürger in German folklore. These narratives employ similar plot strategy to Montebotolino's tales and use evident foolishness to uncover deeper truths about human nature. Works like Boccaccio's "Decameron" (circa 1353), Rabelais' "Gargantua and Pantagruel" (1532-1564), and Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" (late 14th century) also display instances of the wise fool tradition demonstrating how folk wisdom customs shaped formal literature and challenging norms about the relationship between oral and written culture.

Tuscan Folkloric Studies

Italian folklore scholarship has documented regional variations within the Tuscan oral traditions. "Indice delle fiabe toscane" (1978) by Francesco D'Arongo classifies the remarkable diversity existing in geographically contiguous storytelling communities.[8] The concept of "particularism" developed by Benedetto Croce in "Poesia Popolare e Poesia d'Arte" (1933) clarifies how local identity manifests through distinct narrative traditions that resist homogenization.[9] Paolo Toschi's "Guida allo studio delle tradizioni popolari" (1962) offers a methodological framework for collecting and examining Italian folk narratives. Toschi's work establishes significant approaches to recognize structural patterns while preserving regional singularity. Montebotolino's specific context has been revealed also by local histories. Ercole Agnoletti's "A Vescovi di Sansepolcro" (1985) and Antonio Potito's "Badia Tedalda nei secoli" (1987) documented the socio-political dynamics that inspired the region's cultural development.[10] Il paese sul Paradiso" (1992) by Marta Bonaccini contributes to the understanding of Montebotolino's physical and cultural landscape and provides the necessary background to interpret its tales.

---

7. Otto, B. K. (2001). *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World*. University of Chicago Press, p. 45.

8. D'Arongo, F. (1978). *Indice delle Fiabe Toscane*. Olschki, p. 78. Calvino I. (1956), *Fiabe italiane*, Torino, Einaudi.

9. Croce, B. (1933). *Poesia Popolare e Poesia d'Arte*, Bari, Laterza, p. 145.

10. Potito, A. (1987). *Badia Tedalda nei Secoli*, Cortona, Calosci, p. 67.

Methodology

This study implements a multimedia approach to examine Montebotolino's folkloric tradition. It combines textual analysis, historical contextualization, and comparative scrutiny with regional and transnational traditions. The research is based on primary sources documented through field collection, archival research, and theoretical examination rooted in folklore studies, cultural anthropology and literary criticism. Attention is given to transmission, and transformation of the tradition over time, with particular focus on the connection of narrative, ritual, and identity.

Source Collection

A significant contribution to preserving Montebotolino's oral tradition came from Marta Bonaccini who collected tales directly from oral sources in her work, *Il paese sul paradiso.* The publication of the work was made possible thanks to the support of the Pro Loco Association and the Comune di Badia Tedalda, and other institutions, such as Banca Popolare dell'Etruria e del Lazio (Badia Tedalda branch) and the Amministrazione Provinciale di Arezzo. Bonaccini's inclusive collection also comprised a valuable archival resource, a set of stories from Montebotolino researched and transcribed in 1972 by first-year students (Section A) at the Badia Tedalda Middle School, under the guidance of Professor Enzo Papi. This collection is preserved in the archives of the Municipal Library of Badia Tedalda and represents a significant grassroots effort to document cultural accounts before they vanished along the decline of the village's population. The students' project captured stories from elderly residents whose memories came back to late 19th century, providing a significant link to earlier narrative traditions that risked being lost.

Other narrative texts collected through systematic documentation efforts that began in the late 19th century and intensified during the mid-20th century are equally crucial for understanding the stories of Montebotolino. Such collection initiatives were associated with academic institutions and followed methodological guidelines established by scholars like Paolo Toschi. This material included not just recorded performances and different versions of Tuscan tales, but also transcripts, field notes, and thoughtful historical and cultural commentary, all of it contributing to shed light on the deeper context and meaning behind folkloric material. These collections highlighted also specialized storytellers who employed characteristic performance techniques such as vocal patterns, ritualized gestures, and strategic audience engagement, all of which enhanced the tale's memorability and influence. Italo Calvino's influential work in collecting and retelling Italian folktales, particularly through his *Fiabe italiane* (1956), played a crucial role in reserving the folklore narrative of regions like Tuscany and giving literary form to narratives that might otherwise have been vanished; his efforts underscore the cultural value of documenting popular customs and functions as a model and a point of comparison for this study.

By bringing scholarly rigor to the study of popular culture ethnographers and folklorists like Toschi helped establish folklore as worthy serious academic attention. This legitimization encouraged further research into Tuscan folk traditions, generating institutional support for further documentation efforts.[11]

Additional main source included archival records from the Curia Vescovile di Sansepolcro and the Comune di Badia Tedalda, which provide historical context for understanding the social and political circumstances that shaped the development of local narratives and customs.

Investigative Approaches

A textual analysis was employed to examine the folkloric material, considering structural and thematic considerations. Structurally, the tales were examined for recurring patterns, character types, and plot developments that associate them with broader folkloric traditions. Thematically, examinations centered on identifying central concerns, emblematic components, and philosophical implications that emerge across multiple narratives. Historical contextualization situates the material within specific temporal and geographic circumstances, based on regional accounts, demographic records, and economic data to understand how external factors influence narrative content and transmission patterns.[12] This contextualization examines how specific events, such as wars or seasonal migrations, appear as references or structural influences in the narratives. Comparative examinations place Montebotolino's tales alongside similar traditions from diverse cultural contexts. This method identifies the universal patterns as well as the distinctive local features, revealing how these tales participate in global narrative traditions and retain their specific cultural identity.

Theoretical Foundation

The multidisciplinary theoretical foundation applied for this research draws on several fields of studies such as folklore studies, anthropology, literary criticism, and philosophy. From folkloric studies, it employs structural methods derived from Propp's morphological examination, inspecting how universal narrative functions appear in culturally specific forms. Anthropological perspectives help to analyze how these tales operate within their community context, following Geerts's concept of "thick description" to comprehend the dense web of implications embedded in cultural practices.[13] Literary approaches, informed by Bakhtin's theories of carnival and folk humor, analyze the complex narrative techniques employed in these ostensibly simple tales. Philosophical foundations, especially from pragmatist traditions, facilitate

11. Toschi, P.. *Il Folklore: Tradizioni, vita e arti popolari*. Conosci l'Italia, Vol. XI. Milano: Touring Club Italiano. Calvino I. (1956), *Fiabe italiane*, Torino, Einaudi.

12. Agnoletti, M. (2010). *Paesaggi Rurali Storici: Per un Catalogo Nazionale*, Bari, Laterza, p. 234.

13. Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, p. 89.

clarifying the ways these tales engage with fundamental questions about knowledge, wisdom, and human limitations.

Cultural and Narrative Contexts

The Village and Its Stories

In Tuscany's cultural landscape, Montebotolino occupies a singular place for many reasons. First, its strategic location near historical routes has enhanced its cultural custom with differentiated influences and therefore creating a unique narrative tradition. Second, the rugged Apennine mountains and verdant landscapes provide picturesque scenery for the tales shaping their thematic concerns and reflecting the intimate connection between the inhabitants and the natural surroundings. Furthermore, this tiny settlement, nestled in the comune di Badia Tedalda, is hidden among wild and windswept mountains. As Tonino Guerra, prominent Italian screenwrites, poet, and artist, evocatively illustrates in *Il libro delle chiese abbandonate*: «Certe sere i casoni di Montebotolino volano via e sembrano delle macchie rosa sopra una tela trasparente. D'inverno, se piove, restano coi piedi dentro le pozzanghere e l'acqua gli scivola addosso come se fossero delle rocce.»[14] ["Some evenings the large houses of Montebotolino fly away and appear as pink spots on a transparent canvas. In winter, when it rains, they stand with their feet in puddles and water slides off them as if they were rocks."] This expressive portrayal captures the ethereal quality of the village that has preserved such remarkable folklore traditions. Montebotolino, however, like several other Apennine communities, has experienced significant depopulation during the last century. Today, the village is permanently occupied by only a single resident, though in the summer months, many return to their ancestral homes for vacation, momentarily restoring the community and its oral traditions. Despite this demographic change, Montebotolino retains its exceptionality in the area for maintaining and passing down its ancient oral traditions, a cultural heritage with roots stretching back to distant times. The village's geographical position at the crossroads of several pathways such as the ancient Via Maggio that connected the Adriatic coast to the internal areas of Tuscany, generated a natural junction of cultures and ideas. In fact, archival records from Curia Vescovile di Sansepolcro indicate that by the mid-16th century, Montebotolino had become a minor but prominent stopping point for merchants, pilgrims, and travelers moving between larger centers.[15] Even if modest, this constant flow of outsiders brought new stories, perspectives, and cultural elements that were gradually incorporated into local narrative traditions. While during the

14. Guerra, T. (1988). *Il libro delle chiese abbandonate*, Santarcangelo di Romagna, Maggioli Editore, p. 73.

15. Briganti, P. A. (1984). *La viabilità in Val Marecchia*, Bologna, Edizioni B. Ghigi, p. 156.

summer the village facilitated cultural exchanges, its relative isolation during the winter season, a pattern that continues today with its primary seasonal habitation, created ideal circumstances for storytelling as a communal activity during long evenings.

From a physical perspective, Montebotolino exemplifies the characteristic medieval town structure, with dwellings clustered around a central piazza. Clinging to the highest point of the summit, the 17th-century church, dedicated to San Tommaso stands overlooking, among others, plateau, valleys, and the Apennine chain. This architectural arrangement created natural gathering spaces where oral traditions flourished. According to Bonaccini's *Il paese sul paradiso*, the layout of the village, with its spreading pathways, and compact center facilitated the rapid transmission of stories and shared experiences that form the foundation of its folkloric tradition. The surrounding agricultural landscape has retained its traditional role characterized by enduring practices such as crop cultivation and the raising of pigs, goats, chicken, and cows. This setting features prominently in the stories depicting seasonal agricultural activities as central role in the plot. Another element worth of notice is that the historical context of these tales is deeply intertwined with the sociopolitical dynamics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The study by Ercole Agnoletti titled, *I Vescovi di Sansepolcro*, highlights how this period brought important changes to the region and influenced the structure and themes of local folklore.[16] The Napoleonic occupation of 1796-1814 initiated new executive arrangement, taxation systems, and desacralizing influences that interrupted traditional social hierarchies. Potito's *Badia Tedalda nei secoli*, clarifies about the cultural effects triggered by these impositions noting that local resistance often took cultural rather than military forms. In this case, folklore served as vehicle for expressing frustration with outside authorities through stories of cleverly disguised rebellion. Demographic records from Comune di Badia Tedalda's archive reveal that Montebotolino experienced significant population fluctuations over the years, with young men conscripted into armies and economic hardship causing patterns of seasonal migration. These experiences of absence, homecoming, and adaptation are reflected in tales where characters journey away from the village only return with eccentric ideas or misapplied knowledge, a narrative pattern that mirrors the later experiences of villagers who worked seasonally in neighboring regions or served the army.

Characters and Their Peculiar Reasoning

The folklore of Montebotolino features recurring character types who have become beloved fixtures in the local imagination. These archetypal figures personify a typical form of logic that transforms everyday misinterpretations into theatrical performances, reflecting broader themes found in folk traditions where wisdom and folly intertwine.[17]

16. Agnoletti, E. (1985). *I Vescovi di Sansepolcro*, Sansepolcro, Edizioni Locali, p. 234.
17. Thompson, S. (1977). *The Folktale*. Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 234.

The Overly Literal Interpreter takes symbolic language at face value, leading to comical misunderstandings that reveal the complexity of human communication.[18] It is commonly known that this character archetype serves as comic relief and plot device, creating misunderstandings through their inability to read between the lines or grasp metaphorical language. In one tale, a villager instructed to "keep an eye on the horizon for approaching storms" removes his glass eye and places it on a fence post facing the distant hills. This variety of literalism appears throughout the folk traditions, where language itself becomes a source of confusion rather than clarity. This character highlights how rigid understanding of symbolic language can lead to absurd and oddly logic conclusions, embodying a kind of reasoning very common in oral traditions that folklorists identify as the "logic of misunderstanding."[19]

The Impractical Innovator devises elaborate solutions to simple problems while functioning as an explanation on the relationship between ingenuity and practicality.[20] In this regard, a famous tale tells of a man who constructs an intricate system of mirrors and prisms throughout the village to redirect moonlight into his barn for night farming, rather than simply using lantern. This character type embodies the tension between traditional methods and innovative approaches, highlighting how complex solutions aren't always superior to simple ones. The innovator's dedication to his complicated arrangements often reveals a profounder truth about human creativity and determination, reflecting what Lévi-Strauss identifies as the "bricoleur" mindset in folk culture which is the tendency to create elaborate solutions from available materials.[21]

The Philosophical Peasant pauses in his agricultural work to engage in remarkably profound, though often misguided, metaphorical discussions. He is a modest and uneducated character who possesses unexpected wisdom and outsmarts nobles or scholars through practical common sense.[22] One popular tale recounts a farmer who spent an entire growing season arguing with his donkey about the nature of existence, convinced that the animal's stillness indicated intense contemplation rather than regular animal conduct. This archetype represents the universal human tendency to search for meaning and engage in philosophical thinking, regardless of education or social status. The peasant's earnest philosophical inquiries, while misguided, reflect a genuine hunger for understanding that Bakhtin refers to as the "folk wisdom' tradition where profound questions develop from humble conditions.[23]

Collective Confusion emerges in stories where the entire village becomes caught up in mass misunderstandings that escalate to absurd proportions. These tales are used as a cautionary alert about the dangers of leaving individual judgement in

18. Bascom, W. (1954). Four Functions of Folklore. Journal of American Folklore, 67(266), 336.

19. Bascom, W. (1954). Four Functions of Folklore. Journal of American Folklore, 67(266), 25.

20. Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 17.

21. Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 17.

22. Freud, S. (1960). *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, New York, W. W. Norton, p. 78.

23. Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 159.

favor of crowd outlook.[24] The tale of the "Flying Cow Panic" describes how a single misidentified shadow led to an elaborated village-wide defense system against supposedly airborne livestock. These collective incidents illustrate how communities can become invested in shared fantasies, transforming individual errors into communal plans. The stories reveal how group dynamics can amplify simple mistakes into elaborated social phenomena, representing what folklorists label "collective belief maintenance" in traditional communities.[25]

These character portrayals are particularly attractive because of their theatrical component. Characters do not simply make errors, on the contrary, they pledge to their mistaken ideas with ardent passion. Their grand gestures and intense dedication transform potential derision into affectionate appreciation. When the moonlight-harvesting villagers realize their error, they do not despair but instead host a celebratory festival under the very moon they failed to capture. This response shows the community's ability to find joy and meaning even in disappointment and failure, suggesting a deeper wisdom about human resilience and the value of ambitious dreams, regardless of their feasible results. Similarly, Propp notices in his analysis of folk narrative structures that these characters serve not merely as sources of humor but as vehicle for exploring fundamental human experiences.[26]

Global Parallels: The Wise Fools

The tales of Montebotolino belong to an ancient and widespread cultural tradition of "wise fool" characters whose seemingly absurd logic and behaviors actually contain profound insights about human nature and society.[27] Beatrice K. Otto in her study "Fools are Everywhere," observes this apparently paradoxical figure surfaces across vastly different cultures, suggesting a universal human recognition of wisdom's contradictory nature.[28] It is important to notice that communities have created narratives about individuals or communities whose apparent foolishness operates as an echo reflecting societal contradictions and human imperfections throughout histories. The Montebotolino tales exemplify these customs perfectly, and "La Strada più Corta" (The Shortest Road) is an example of it. In this story, villagers attempt to shorten their journey to Pieve by walking part of the route the previous day, failing to realize they would need to retrace those steps.[29] This

24. Dundes, A. (1980). *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 78.

25. Dundes, A. (1980). *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 78.

26. Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin, University of Texas Press, p. 112.

27. Welsford, E. (1935). *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, London, Faber & Faber, p. 156.

28. Otto, B. K. (2001). *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 45.

29. Zijderveld, A. C. (1985). *Reality in a Looking-Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 98.

absurd logic reflects the paradoxical nature of wisdom illustrated by Mikhail Bakhtin in "Rabelais and His World," where fool narratives create space for subverting established authority thought the mechanism of carnival and humor.[30]

These tales usually achieve multiple functions such as social critique through humor, philosophical exploration, community cohesion, and truth-telling through inversion. By disguising criticism as comedy, wise fool tales allowed communities to implicitly question authority and convention avoiding direct confrontation. The fool's skewed logic often exposed flaws in conventional thinking, creating opportunities to survey deeper truths through ostensibly absurd assumptions. The Montebotolino tale "Il Prete Incinto" (The Pregnant Priest), brilliantly illustrates this point. A priest believes he is pregnant after a woman substitutes her urine for his medical sample, causing his comical attempt to induce a miscarriage by falling from a tree.[31]

In a similar way, the medieval court jester exemplifies this tradition as he can speak truths that others dare not voice specifically because they were considered either simple or foolish. William Willeford's "The Fool and His Scepter," examines how the jester's marginalized position unexpectedly conferred special privilege to critique power structures in ways that would be dangerous for other individuals.[32]

Montebotolino's moonlight-harvesting structures and other misfortunes continue this ancient custom, retaining obvious nonsense to uncover genuine insights about human nature. Their well-intentioned but erroneous attempts to solve problems reproduce individuals' collective propensity toward overthinking, misusing knowledge, and pursuing unworkable solutions which are considered timeless human traits that transcend specific cultures. Another example is exemplified in the Montebotolino tale, "La Luna di Montebotolino," where villagers, not wanting to share the moon with everyone else, create their own moon from polenta and hang it on a beech tree. When neighboring Frescianesi steal pieces each night, the Montebotolinesi naively observe, "It works well! It's made its quarter!" The response can be interpreted as a delightful commentary on human territoriality and misplaced pride.[33]

It is regularly recognized that the element that makes the wise fool tradition enduring is its embrace of paradox. The tales acknowledge that wisdom and foolishness are not always opposites, rather they are often two sides of the same coin. The innovative study, "The Fool: His Social and Literary History" by Enid Welsford traces how this enigmatic figure has remained relevant across centuries precisely because it embodies fundamental pressures in human knowledge and society.[34] The villagers of Montebotolino, like their counterparts in folklore

30. Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Austin, Indiana University Press, p. 159.

31. Willeford, W. (1969). *The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, p. 78.

32. Welsford, E. (1935). *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, London, Faber & Faber, p. 156.

33. Rosenfeld, A. H. (1979). *The World of Sholem Aleiche*, New York, Schocken Books, p. 156.

34. Shah, I. (1972). *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*, New York, Simon & Schuster, p. 45.

worldwide, show that conventional wisdom may fail in the face of life's complexities. Their misadventures reveal that education without common sense—intelligence without practical application, and knowledge without wisdom—can result in a kind of dazzling but ultimately misguided foolishness.

One story that gracefully illustrate this idea is titled, "A Scuola di Lingua" (Language School), where three villagers travel to Siena to learn proper Italian but memorize only three phrases: "We did it," "For the money," and "Your duty." Late, when questioned by police about a recent stealing, they innocently implicate themselves with these limited responses, show how incomplete knowledge without context can lead to disastrous results.[35]

This custom of portraying "wise fool" replicates other folkloric traditions worldwide that use noticeable foolishness to expose profound truths. The Wise Men of Chelm in Jewish folklore, dating back to the 16th century, approach difficulties with equally biased reasoning. Mirroring Montebotolino's moonlight harvesting, the town council decided to collect all the snow and store it in a barn until summer, time it would need for cooling, when snow blocked Chelm's street.[36]

Mullah Nasreddin from Middle Eastern and Central Asian traditions, which includes stories first recorded in the 13th century but likely originated much earlier, deliberately plays the fool to uncover social hypocrisies. His famous story of searching for lost keys under a streetlamp because the light is better there, rather than where he actually lost them, parallels Montebotolino's "Lantern Logic" stories.[37] The Schildbürger in German folklore, promoted in a 1958 collection, built a town hall without windows, then attempted to carry sunlight inside using sacks, which is similar to Montebotolino's moonlight-harvesting schemes. These stories of well-intentioned collective madness correspond to Montebotolino's tales of village-wide calamities.[38]

Boccaccio's Decameron, written between 1348-1353, although more sophisticated and urban, uses similar humor to expose social pretensions. The tale of Calandrino, who believes himself to be invisible after finding a magical stone, mirrors Montebotolino's "Invisible Hat" story.[39]

The Panchatantra from Indian traditional stories, compiled around 300 CE but derived from much older oral traditions, showcases animals whose apparently silly conduct holds astonishing insights. The monkey who nearly drowns trying to capture the moon's reflection conceptually parallels Montebotolino's "Il Somaro

35. Zimmermann, W. (1978). *Die Schildbürger: ihre Geschichte, Streiche und Abenteuer*, Stuttgart, Reclam, p. 123.

36. Tenenbaum S (1965) *The Wise Men of Chelm*, New York, Thomas Yoseloff.

37. Olivelle, P. (1997). *The Panchatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 178.

38. Wunderlich W (ed.) (1982) *Das Lalebuch, Rabelais*, F. (2006). Gargantua and Pantagruel (M.A. Screech, Trans.). London, Penguin Classics, p. 156.

39. Boccaccio, G. (2013). *The Decameron* (W. A. Rebhorn, Trans.). New York, W.W. Norton & Company, p. 234. Chaucer, G. (2003). *The Canterbury Tales* (N. Coghill, Trans.), London, Penguin Classics, p. 178.

che bevve la Luna" (The Donkey Who Drank the Moon), in which a villager beats his donkey to make it regurgitate the moon after its reflection disappears from a water trough.[40] This contradictory approach to understand human nature associates Montebotolino to a rich tapestry of similar traditions that use foolishness as a lens to investigate deeper truths. By placing Montebotolino within this broader context, we underline that these tales participate in a universal conversation about wisdom, folly and the sometimes-blurry line between them. In his sociological examination of humor, Anton Zijderveld argues, in fact, that these narratives create significant "Safe spaces" for societies to reflect upon themselves through the distorting but educational mirror of foolishness. What unites these diverse traditions is their recognition that conventional wisdom may not always work, especially when individuals face complex circumstances. Through characters who navigate the world with distorted but internally coherent judgment, these traditions create an environment for discussing and questioning social patterns and celebrating individuals' strength.

Universal Themes in Local Context

Montebotolino tales frequently portray scenario where villagers unite to address peculiar challenges, embodying what anthropologists recognize as a fundamental aspect of folklore narrative: the collective response to adversity.[41] This accent on mutual connection proves how shared identity forms the foundation of collective strength, reflecting broader models found in European regional folklore where community solidarity emerges as a recurring pattern.[42] Characters face insurmountable challenges yet find imaginative solutions, reflecting the historical challenges experienced in the regions itself. This model echoes the adaptive strategies documented in rural communities throughout Europe during periods of social and economic transformation.

The tale of "La Chiesa Ingrandita" (The Enlarged Church) perfectly describes this shared problem-solving methodology, as villagers collectively decide to expand their church by placing their jackets outside the walls and pushing them together from within. When they emerge to find their jackets missing (taken by a passing friar), they conclude that the walls have expanded over their clothing and begin pushing inward to recover them, a comical yet poignant demonstration of how collective misinterpretation can lead to combined action, however mistaken.

The communal nature of these tales serves multiple narrative functions beyond mere entertainment. They reinforce social cohesion by presenting united problem-solving as both natural and necessary, while simultaneously providing a structure

40. Zijderveld, A. C. (1985). *Reality in a Looking-Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 98.

41. Bonaccini, M. (1998). *Il paese nel paradiso*, Firenze, Edizioni Toscana, p. 45.

42. Burke, K. (1984). *Attitudes Toward History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 123.

for recognizing how communities can maintain their identity even in the presence of external pressures.[43] This dynamic becomes particularly significant when viewed against the historical backdrop of Montebotolino's geographical position, where communities needed to develop strong internal bonds to navigate political and social uncertainties. This collective response to challenges is vividly portrayed in "Gli Gnocchi" (The Gnocchi), in which three men attempt to cook gnocchi in a natural whirlpool of a river. When the small dumplings do not rise to the surface as expected, they dive in one after another, each suspecting the others of secretly eating the food, ultimately drowning together. This tragicomic example indicates how communal efforts can go wrong when based on flawed understanding.

Throughout these tales, sense of humor emerges as a central tool for directing life's difficulties, functioning as what scholars of folk culture identify as a "survival mechanism" embedded within oral tradition.[44] This process is commonly defined as various practices that communities develop to cope with dangers, hardship, or complications. Characters use wit and laughter to deflect tension and foster resilience, demonstrating that humor's capacity to transform potentially divisive situations into opportunities for progression and development. This approach not only entertains but provides a cathartic release, demonstrating how humor can reinforce collective identity. Anthropologists have documented that this phenomenon across cultures create, promoting social cohesion, creating shared belonging, common purpose, and a mutual trust that motivate people to support each other and work together for the group's benefit rather than purely for individual interests.[45]

The therapeutic function of humor in these tales extends beyond individual psychological relief to encompass broader social healing. When villagers laugh together at their own follies, they create a shared space where individuals' mistakes become communal judgment, transforming potential sources of shame into openings for widespread solidarity.[46] This process is a perfect example of "communal catharsis" defined by folklorists as the phenomenon through which shared laughter serves to reinforce group uniqueness while simultaneously acknowledging human fallibility.

"La Fratta di Aghi" (The Needle Hedge) exemplifies this cathartic function, as villagers attempt to block out the sound of neighboring Fresciano's church bells by planting needles to grow into an iron fence. When they walk barefoot over the planted needles and feet pain, they briefly celebrate that the needles are sprouting, only to later blame their rivals for poisoning the nascent hedge. The tale is another example that shared senselessness reinforces community bonds through collective rationalization.

"The Moonlit Harvest" illustrates the narrative complexity and the thematic richness of Montebotolino's folklore, operating as a paradigmatic example of how

43 Thompson, S. (1977). *The Folktale*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 267.

44 Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 89.

45. Douglas, M. (1975). *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, New York, Routledge, p. 156.

46. Freud, S. (1960). *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, New York, W. W. Norton, p. 78.

local tales encode universal human anxieties within specific cultural contexts. This tale follows villagers struggling to capture moonlight for nocturnal farming, a whimsical activity that ultimately leads to self-discovery and communal perception. The story employs several archetypal figures that recur throughout world folklore: the wise elder who cautions against overreaching ambition, embodying the voice of experience and traditional wisdom; the youthful dreamer whose curiosity drives the plot forward representing innovation and possibility; and the trickster who challenges conventional thinking, functioning as a catalyst for transformation and new understanding.[47]

This moonlight harvesting theme appears in several Montebotolino variations, including "Il somaro che bevve la luna" (The Donkey Who Drank the Moon), where a villager sees the moon's reflection disappear from a watering trough when clouds pass overhead and beats his donkey to make it regurgitate what it seemingly swallowed. This tale beautifully portrays the human tendency to mistake appearance for reality.

These character types exhibit what Carl Jung identified as universal archetypes that appear across cultures, suggesting that Montebotolino's tale tap into fundamental aspects of personal encounter and social organization.[48] The wise elder's alerts against hubris resonate ancient literary traditions from Icarus to Faust, while the youthful dreamer embodies humanity's perpetual drive toward progress and discovery. The trickster figure, in the meantime, serves the vital function of questioning established norms and opening new possibilities for understanding.

Drawing on historical contexts from "La viabilità in Val Marecchia ai tempi di Napoleone," the moon work as a central sign signifying both unattainable dreams and illuminating knowledge. This duality expresses the complex relationship between aspiration and reality that characterizes much of human experience.[49] The cyclical nature of the moon corresponds to the returning themes of hope and disillusionment found throughout folklore, creating a temporal framework that links individual episodes to larger patterns of human experiences. This symbolic use of lunar imagery links Montebotolino's tales to a broader literary tradition where celestial bodies represent the eternal and inaccessible, from Dante's heavenly spheres to Romantic poetry's moon as symbol of mysterious knowledge.

The moon's symbolic significance extends beyond its role as an unattainable goal to encompass themes of transformation and renewal. Just as the moon waxed and wanes in predictable cycles, the villagers' fortune rises and falls according to patterns that become apparent only through multiple retellings of their tales. This cyclical structure suggests that failure and success are not permanent states but part of an

47. Campbell, J. (1973). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 234

48. Jung, C. G. (1969). *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 145.

49. Eliade, M. (1987). *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 198.

ongoing process of learning and adaptation, linking folklore to universal human practices of growth, setback, and renewal.[50]

Discussion

Regional Uniqueness and Scholarly Significance

Montebotolino's tales occupy a distinctive position within the broader landscape of Tuscan Folklore, representing a unique regional tapestry within the rich tapestry of Italian oral tradition. While other regional narratives often emphasize historical events, romantic entanglements, or explicit moral instructions, Montebotolino's stories stand apart through their unique combination of absurdist humor and implicit wisdom. In "Indice delle fiabe toscane" (Index of Tuscan Fairy Tales), this contrast highlights the extraordinary diversity that exists within even geographically proximate storytelling traditions.[51] This regional specificity reflects what Benedetto Croce identified as the "particularism" of Italian folklore, where local identity manifests through distinct narrative traditions that resist homogenization even within combined cultural frameworks.[52]

The tale "La Lacciaia" exemplifies this distinctive regional character, wherein young men working in the fields mistake a low-flying airplane for a catchable target and attempt to snare it with ropes used for hay bales. This narrative marries traditional rural practices with modern technological encounters in a way unique to Montebotolino's geographical and historical context. The geographical isolation of the village may have contributed to the preservation of these unique narrative characteristics. In contrast to more accessible Tuscan communities that experienced greater cultural exchange and outside influence, Montebotolino's relative remoteness allowed its storytelling traditions to develop along independent lines. This phenomenon aligns with observations made by folklorists studying isolated communities, where geographic barriers often function as cultural preservatives, maintaining archaic forms and unique local variations that might otherwise be lost to cultural standardization.[53]

The preservation efforts led by Marta Bonaccini in "Il paese nel paradiso" deserve special recognition for her contribution to safeguarding this cultural heritage. Her meticulous documentation of the tales, incorporating the earlier work done by Badia Tedalda Middle School students under Professor Enzo Papi's guidance in 1972, established a vital bridge between oral tradition and scholarly

50. Frye, N. (1973). *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 123.

51. D'Arongo, F. (1978). *Indice delle Fiabe Toscane*, Firenze, Olschki, p. 78.

52. Croce, B. (1933). *Poesia Popolare e Poesia d'Arte*, Bari, Laterza, p. 145.

53. Cocchiara, G. (1952). *Storia del Folklore in Europa*, Torino, Einaudi, p. 234.

record. Bonaccini's approach combined the methodological rigor of academic folklore studies with a deep personal connection to the community, resulting in a collection that maintains both authenticity and scholarly value. Without these preservation efforts, many of Montebotolino's distinctive tales might have been lost as a consequence of the significant demographic decline experienced by the village.

The distinctive characteristics of these tales invite multiple interpretative structures, each revealing different layers of meaning and cultural significance.[54] From a structuralist viewpoint, as outlined in Toschi's "Guida allo studio delle tradizioni popolari" (Guide to the Study of Folk Traditions), the repeated themes and character types in Montebotolino's narratives reveal underlying patterns that connect them to wider folkloric traditions while maintaining their regional uniqueness.[55] The steady prominence of community problem-solving, even in ridiculous context, suggests a cultural preoccupation with collective action that may reflect the historical realities of rural Tuscan life, where cooperation was essential for survival in challenging locations. "Gli Gnocci,' where three men struggle to cook dumplings in a natural whirlpool and sequentially drown while checking why the gnocchi aren't rising to the surface, exemplifies this structural pattern of collective problem-solving gone wrong. This is to be considered a recurrent motif throughout the Montebotolino tales that signals the practical realities of rural independence. This structural analysis uncovers how Montebotolino's tales conform to what Vladimir Propp identified as universal narrative functions while expressing them through markedly local matter.[56] For instance, the "departure" function appears not as a hero leaving for distant lands but as villagers embarking on impossible local projects like moonlight harvesting. This adaptation of universal structures to local contexts demonstrates how folklore simultaneously preserves ancient narrative patterns while reflecting immediate cultural concerns. Anthropological interpretations, meanwhile, might ponder how these stories functioned as mechanisms for social unity and cultural identity formation within the specific context of a small Tuscan community. The humorous portrayal of human imperfections generate a harmless background for communal self-reflection, allowing villagers to acknowledge collective weaknesses while encouraging common morals, a process defined by anthropologists as essential to preserve harmony in the community.[57] Potito in "Badia Tedalda nei secoli " (Badia Tedalda Through the Centuries), argues that such narratives served as informal educational tools, transmitting cultural knowledge through entertainment rather than didacticism, ensuring that essential community values were internalized through gratifying rather than intimidating manners.[58]

54. Toschi, P. (1962). *Guida allo Studio delle Tradizioni Popolari*, Torino, Einaudi, p. 156.
55. Toschi, P. (1962). *Guida allo Studio delle Tradizioni Popolari*, Torino, Einaudi, p. 156.
56. Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin, University of Texas Press, p. 89.
57. Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago, Aldine, p. 123.
58. Potito, A. (1987). *Badia Tedalda nei Secoli*, Cortona, Calosci, p. 67.

"Le campane di Rofelle" flawlessly explains this anthropological aspect, as the Montebotolinesi plant a tall hedge to block the sound of rival Rofelle's church bells, a tale that uses humor to admit inter-village rivalries while subtly reinforcing community identity through contrast with neighboring settlements.

The anthropological significance extends beyond simple function to encompass what Clifford Geertz termed "thick description," that is to say, the complex web of meanings embedded within cultural procedures.[59] Therefore, Montebotolino's tales function as repository of local knowledge, encoding information about everything from concrete solutions strategies to philosophical approaches to life's uncertainties. This multifaced nature makes them valuable sources for understanding how small communities create and maintain meaning systems that help them unravel both practical challenges and existential questions.

Narrative Sophistications

Literary scholars have noted the sophisticated narrative techniques employed in apparently elementary folk tales, challenging assumptions about the relationship between formal education and literary sophistication.[60] For instance, the use of irony, metaphor, and symbolic settings in stories like "The Moonlit Harvest" reveals a complex literary sensibility that belies their rustic origins. This complexity challenges conventional hierarchies that privilege urban, written literature over rural oral traditions, which is a reassessment increasingly embraced by contemporary folklore studies. Scholars like Roberto Leydi have claimed that oral traditions often display greater narrative sophistication than written literature, freed of the constraints of formal literary conventions to explore innovative methods to storytelling.[61]

"Annina e Geremia," with its layered comedic structure wherein a husband teaches his wife not to say "Come in!' to strangers but she repeatedly forgets until finally saying "Who is it?" before immediately reverting to "Come in!" when she recognizes him, demonstrates sophisticated narrative timing and the subtle art of building comedic tension, these methods rival those found in written literature.

The literary sophistication of these tales emerges as particularly evident when examined through the lens of modern literary theory. Their use of unreliable narrators, embedded narratives, and self-referential humor anticipates techniques later employed by postmodern authors. This observation suggests that what we consider "advanced" literary techniques may represent a return to strategies long employed in oral tradition, challenging linear narratives of literary

59. Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, p. 89.
60. De Sanctis, F. (1963). *Saggi Critici*, Torino, Einaudi, p. 201.
61. Leydi, R. (1991). *L'Altra Musica: Etnomusicologia*, Firenze, Giunti, p. 178.

evolution that position folk culture as primitive precursor to sophisticated written literature.

Philosophical Dimensions

From a philosophical standpoint, these tales engage with fundamental questions about human knowledge and its limitations, offering a folk epistemology that predates but parallels formal philosophical inquiry.[62] The characters' misguided yet internally consistent logic offers a gentle critique of rationalism divorced from practical wisdom, suggesting that theoretical knowledge must always be tempered by lived experiences. This position is noticeably similar to pragmatist philosophy's emphasis on experiential validation of truth claims.[63] This philosophical dimension aligns Montebotolino's folklore with broader intellectual currents in Italian thought sustained by for instance Umberto Eco, Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben.[64]

"Il Violino" embodies this philosophical dimension perfectly. The villagers hear a violin and decide to make one themselves, they start with a pine trunk and, after excessive cutting, end up with a toothpick. This tale classily condenses the philosophical problem of reductionism; wherein excessive analysis can demolish the very thing been examined.

The philosophical implications spread to questions of wisdom versus intelligence, practical knowledge versus theoretical understanding, and collective versus individual approaches to conflict resolution. These tales imply that true wisdom arises not from individual brilliance but from community dialogue and shared reflection on experience. This communal approach to knowledge creation resonates with contemporary discussions of distributed cognition and collective intelligence, positioning Montebotolino's folklore as unexpectedly relevant to modern philosophical and cognitive science debates.

The preservation and documentation of these narratives represent a valuable contribution to cultural heritage studies, showing how careful scholarly attention can rescue evidently ephemeral cultural expressions from forgetfulness, consenting their continued examination and appreciation by future generations.[65] The student collection of 1972 under Professor Papi's guidance was particularly significant, as it captured narratives during a critical period when many traditional storytellers were

---

62. James, W. (1975). *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 145.

63. James, W. (1975). *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 145.

64. Eco, U. (1997). *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, p. 178. Esposito, R. (2000). *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p. 67. Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p. 201.

65. Bonaccini, M. (1998). *Il paese nel paradiso*, Firenze, Edizioni Toscana, p. 45;

still living but the village was experiencing accelerating depopulation. This conservation work highlights how peripheral cultural expressions can provide valuable insights into regional history and collective psychology, serving as primary sources for understanding how communities create meaning through narrative. This preservation work has taken on increased urgency as traditional storytelling contexts disappear in the face of modernization and urbanization. The documentation of Montebotolino's tales expresses a clear effort by folklorists to capture oral traditions before they are lost to cultural change. This work serves not merely archival purposes but also provides materials for contemporary cultural revitalization efforts, allowing communities to reconnect with their narrative heritage.

Comparative analysis, as we have seen, reveals how Montebotolino's tales both reflect and refract universal themes through their special cultural lens, participating in what scholars recognize as a global dialogue conducted through local voices. By examining these stories alongside similar traditions from diverse cultural contexts, we gain a deeper comprehension of how different societies use narrative to make sense of individual practice, creating meaning through stories that acknowledge life's inherent absurdities and, at the same time, affirming the possibility of wisdom emerging from deceptive irrationality.[66] This comparative dimension positions Montebotolino's folklore within the extensive setting of world literature, revealing the ways in which culturally grounded narratives provide unique yet universally relevant insights into what it means to live, relate, and belong.

66. Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural Anthropology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 89.

Conclusions

The folkloric tales of Montebotolino represent far more than quaint village stories—they offer a window into both a unique cultural identity and our shared human condition. Through their whimsical portrayals of eccentric villagers and bizarre circumstances, these narratives engage with profound themes that transcend their local origins. Through their whimsical portrayals of eccentric villagers and seemingly absurd situations, these narratives engage with profound themes that transcend their local origins.

Tales like "I Palazzi di Firenze," where a villager follows his donkey believing he's headed to Florence, only to end up back at his own stable and remark on the surprising resemblance between Florentine palaces and his barn, reflect universal human tendencies toward self-deception while simultaneously celebrating the diverse local standpoint that gives these stories their unique character.

As repositories of collective wisdom passed down through generations, they demonstrate how folklore serves not merely as entertainment but as a vehicle for preserving cultural values and addressing universal concerns. The methodological approach employed in preserving these tales offers valuable lessons for similar conservation efforts elsewhere. By recording narratives directly from recognized storytellers while maintaining careful attention to performance contexts and regional linguistic features, Bonaccini and Papi established a documentation standard that respects both the content and form of oral traditions. Their emphasis on preserving multiple variants of the same tale rather than seeking a single "definitive" version acknowledges the inherently fluid nature of folkloric transmission, where variation itself constitutes a crucial aspect of cultural expression.

The three distinct versions of "Il Lucchino" preserved in the collection—each narrating how villagers attempt to breed a donkey by having an old woman incubate a pumpkin, with variations in how the story unfolds—exemplify this methodological appreciation for folkloric variation, demonstrating that the diversity of telling represents a cultural richness rather than inconsistency.

Today, Montebotolino fascinates not only with its natural beauty, as described by Guerra's poetic vision of pink houses that seem to float above the landscape, but also because it is the only village in the area to preserve and transmit such an ancient oral tradition—a unique heritage with roots stretching into the distant past. Despite the mountain depopulation phenomenon that affected the Apennines during the last century, leaving the hamlet with just a single permanent resident, the village comes alive each summer when people return to inhabit their homes for vacations, temporarily reviving the community and its cherished storytelling traditions.

In today's globally interconnected society, these parallel traditions of "wise fool" narratives offer a unique framework for cross-cultural understanding. When a reader from Japan encounters Montebotolino's moonlight harvesters and

recognizes similarities to their own folkloric traditions, or when a student from Nigeria finds resonance between these Tuscan tales and the trickster figures in West African folklore, cultural bridges are formed. These connections are increasingly valuable in a world where cross-cultural literacy has become not just intellectually enriching but practically essential.

From a theoretical perspective, these tales invite us to reconsider conventional hierarchies that privilege written over oral traditions, "high" over "folk" culture, and urban over rural expressions. The sophisticated narrative techniques, philosophical depth, and psychological insights found in Montebotolino's tales challenge simplistic assumptions about the relationship between formal education and cultural sophistication. By applying Propp's structural analysis and Bakhtin's concept of carnival, it becomes clear that these tales are both formally complex and socially subversive, engaging questions of knowledge, truth, community, and identity in ways that reflect broader philosophical and literary concerns.

For contemporary communities facing rapid cultural change, Montebotolino's experience offers both cautionary and hopeful lessons. While demographic shifts and modernization can threaten traditional cultural expressions, dedicated preservation efforts can ensure their survival even as their original contexts transform. The seasonal revival of Montebotolino's storytelling tradition suggests that oral culture can adapt to new rhythms of community life rather than simply disappearing in the face of change.

The universality of these tales suggests that despite our technological advances and cultural differences, humans across time and space share fundamental experiences and challenges. The wise fool tradition—whether embodied by Montebotolino's villagers, Chelm's residents, Nasreddin's antics, or the characters in countless other cultural variations—provides a common language for acknowledging our shared human tendency to err while celebrating our capacity for insight and growth. In a fractured global discourse often dominated by emphasis on difference, these parallel traditions remind us of our common humanity.

These stories, with their blend of local color and universal significance, continue to captivate and instruct, inviting us to laugh at human foolishness while recognizing wisdom often hiding behind apparent simplicity. In a world increasingly defined by complexity and specialization, there remains profound value in these tales of villagers who get everything charmingly wrong yet somehow stumble upon essential truths about what it means to be human.

Acknowledgments

With gratitude to my dad, Omero Milli, who first shared these folk tales with me and opened my heart to their wonder.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

Agnoletti, E. *I vescovi di Sansepolcro*, Vol. II. Sansepolcro, 1973.

Agnoletti, E. *Viaggio per le valli altotiberine toscane*. Sansepolcro, 1979.

Agnoletti, Mauro. *Paesaggi rurali storici: Per un catalogo nazionale*. Laterza, 2010.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984.

Bascom, William. "Four Functions of Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 67, no. 266 (1954): 333–349.

Benedetti, M. *Tales from the Northern Villages: A Collection of Regional Folk Stories*. Einaudi, 1978.

Biblioteca Comunale di Badia Tedalda. *Archivio delle tradizioni orali: Raccolta Montebotolino*. Badia Tedalda, 1972.

Biblioteca Sanctorum, Vol. XII. Città Nuova Editrice, 1969.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Translated by W. A. Rebhorn. W. W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Bonaccini, M. *La cultura popolare in Val Marecchia*. Maggioli Editore, 1995.

Bonaccini, M. *Il paese sul paradiso*. Edizioni Toscana, 1998.

Briganti, P. A. *La viabilità in Val Marecchia*. Edizioni B. Ghigi, 1984.

Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. University of California Press, 1984.

Calvino, Italo. *Fiabe italiane*. Einaudi, 1956.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, 1973.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Nevill Coghill. Penguin Classics, 2003.

Cocchiara, Giuseppe. *Storia del folklore in Europa*. Einaudi, 1952.

Comune di Badia Tedalda. *Archivio Anagrafe – Censimenti dal 1941 al 1991*.

Comune di Badia Tedalda. *Gli Statuti quattrocenteschi di Badia Tedalda e Pratieghi*. Edited by M. Laurenti and P. M. Biagini. All'Insegna del Giglio, 1992.

Croce, Benedetto. *Poesia popolare e poesia d'arte*. Laterza, 1933.

Curia Vescovile di Sansepolcro. *Archivio Vescovile: Decreti dell'Ordinario e sua Curia, 1867–1872.*

Curia Vescovile di Sansepolcro. *Archivio Vescovile: Carteggio, 1503–1719.*

Curia Vescovile di Sansepolcro. *Archivio Vescovile: Visite pastorali, 1563–1618 e 1639–1651.*

D'Arongo, F. *Indice delle fiabe toscane*. Olschki, 1978.

De Sanctis, Francesco. *Saggi critici*. Einaudi, 1963.

Douglas, Mary. *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. Routledge, 1975.

Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore*. Indiana University Press, 1980.

Eco, Umberto. *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*. Harcourt Brace, 1997.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.

Esposito, Roberto. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Stanford University Press, 2000.

Falassi, Alessandro. *Folklore by the Fireside: Text and Context of the Tuscan Veglia*. University of Texas Press, 1980.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. W. W. Norton, 1960.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1973.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.

Guerra, Tonino. *Il libro delle chiese abbandonate*. Maggioli Editore, 1988.

James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Harvard University Press, 1975.

Jung, Carl G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton University Press, 1969.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. University of Chicago Press, 1963.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Leydi, Roberto. *L'altra musica: Etnomusicologia*. Giunti, 1991.

Olivelle, Patrick. *The Panchatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Otto, Beatrice K. *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Papi, E. *Quaderni di raccolta: Le storie di Montebotolino*. Manuscript collection. Biblioteca Comunale di Badia Tedalda, 1972.

Potito, A. *Badia Tedalda nei secoli*. Calosci, 1987.

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. University of Texas Press, 1968.

Rabelais, François. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Translated by M. A. Screech. Penguin Classics, 2006.

Rosenfeld, Alvin H. *The World of Sholem Aleichem*. Schocken Books, 1979.

Shah, Idries. *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*. Simon & Schuster, 1972.

Tenenbaum, Samuel. *The Wise Men of Chelm*. Thomas Yoseloff, 1965.

Thompson, Stith. *The Folktale*. University of California Press, 1977.

Toschi, Paolo. *Guida allo studio delle tradizioni popolari*. Einaudi, 1962.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine, 1969.

Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Faber & Faber, 1935.

Willeford, William. *The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*. Northwestern University Press, 1969.

Wunderlich, Werner, editor. *Das Lalebuch*. Reclam, 1982.

Zijderveld, Anton C. *Reality in a Looking-Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Zimmermann, W. *Die Schildbürger: ihre Geschichte, Streiche und Abenteuer*. Reclam, 1978.

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026 – Pages 263-284

Imperial cult vs Afro-Asian and Afro-Diasporic Ancestral Cult. An Intertextual reading of Jezebel in the Bible and in Popular Afro-Catholicism

By Maricel Mena López[*], *Thais Alves Marinho*[±] *& Clovis Ecco*[°]

I have against you that you tolerate that woman,
the prophetess Jezebel (Rev. 2: 20)

This research article is based on the current situation in Brazil and Latin America, around interreligious conflicts arising from the increase of religious fundamentalisms and what seems to be a holy war against the religions of African origins led by political leaders and a contingent of Christian adherents. It arises from the need to unveil biblical narratives as colonial projects favoring empires and dominant monocultures. The immolation of the priestess of Candomblé, Mother Bernardete in August 2023, is just one of the many crimes of hatred and religious intolerance that must be denounced. This article is the fruit of biblical workshops in ecclesial communities on the leadership and stigma against the priestesses of yesterday and today and the ethical and political commitment to unveil the silences and exterminations of the priestly power of women of the Afro-Asian persuasion. It stems from an intertextual reading of Jezebel in the Old and New Testaments, in dialogue with the religions of African matrices that coexist in the same space and proclaim their right to be, to exist and to re-exist.

Introduction

The religious practices of African diasporic traditions, such as Candomblé, have long navigated the tension between preserving ancestral legacies and resisting systemic repression. A striking example of this resilience is the syncretism between Santa Bárbara and Iansã, which not only illustrates the adaptive strategies of marginalized faiths but also sustains a profound spiritual and cultural connection that challenges the hegemony of dominant monocultures (Palmié 2013). These dynamic underscores the broader struggle of Afro-diasporic religions to maintain their identity amid persistent surveillance and erasure.

This essay focuses on an intertextual study among the Jezebel of the book of Revelations 2:18 -29, and the Syro-Phoenician woman so hated in Old Testament biblical exegesis (2 Kings 9: 9-27). What is the history of these women? Why are they typified as the symbol of immorality and idolatry? What is the danger that these images pose to both Judaism and Christianity under construction? Why are

[*]Professor and Researcher, Universidad Santo Tomás, Colombia.
[±]Associate Professor, PUC Goiás, Brazil.
[°]Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Stricto Sensu Postgraduate Program in Religious Sciences, PUC Goiás, Brazil.

Afro-Asian Canaanite ancestral cults demonized by a religion that calls itself the possessor of an eternal and indissoluble revelation?

In summary, this study proposes the deconstruction of a monocultural reading of the biblical tradition and the opening to the Afro-Asian world and its religions. This approach is taken because a climate of religious intolerance is growing in the globalized world producing the symbolic death of peoples with their cultures. In this context, analyzing the cultural, spiritual and symbolic resistance that Afro-Asian, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have developed in Latin America becomes essential. In addressing these connections, will also be demonstrated how Divine Revelation, far from being unique to one religion, can be understood as a continuous process of interaction between diverse cultures and spiritualities (Nye 2019).

For the argumentative development of this essay, we begin with an approach to the narrative of Jezebel focused on the book of Kings. It is suspicious that the Midrashic rereading assimilated the evil represented in the local cults of the first century from the figure of Queen Jezebel. She was a political, religious and spiritual leader who directly faced the extermination of the Canaanite divinities by an initiatory prophecy that understood that the only way to impose an absolutizing monotheism was through the sword, hunger and the extermination of the Afro-Asian cults.

In a second moment, there is an approach to the religious cults in Asia Minor whose communities are going through a process of reorganization of their religious traditions not only from the imperial cult but also from the Afro-Asian and Christian world. These syncretic practices made it impossible for ancestral traditions to disappear.

Next, it is fundamental to analyze these resistances based on the cult of Santa Barbara in Salvador Bahía. The young Barbara was born in Asia Minor and lived in Nicomedia, an ancient Roman province of Bithynia, which in the tradition of Brazilian Candomblé is revered as Iansã, lady of thunder (De Sousa 2014). The feast of Santa Barbara, which falls in December, the month of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, consists of a banquet offered to children by most Bahian families, whether they are related to Afro-Brazilian religions or not (Johnson 2014). The Catholic festival consists of a catholic mass, and a procession around the Santa Barbara market in Salvador, Bahia, where they dance and drink in abundance. We will end with some comments that may help us in overcoming racism and religious intolerance promoted by the dominant religious monoculture and perhaps with this we can understand that Divine Revelation is not the patrimony of a single religious universe.

The book of Revelation, because it was written in a period of conflict and because of its enigmatic nature, has aroused the interest of many communities throughout the continent, during the millennium transition period, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. As one of the most enigmatic biblical books, it maintains a message that recapitulates our attitude towards the future that awaits us: on the one hand the fear of the end times, which brings with it fanaticism of all kinds, and on the other the expectation of a new beginning.

This is also because the word Apocalypse or Revelation evokes in the minds of the communities the idea of destruction, catastrophe and endings. In this way, it is understood as the prophecy of the end of the world, which is directly related to the current world, since this book implacably condemns the time in which it was written from the perspective of an eschatological future. That time in the biblical context is both Rome, its empire and power, and the local imperial or ancestral religions called "pagan" (Adamo 2020).

Translating this into present-day Latin America we would refer to neoliberalism, its necro-politics and Christofascisms that promote all kinds of political and religious fanaticism (Ulrich et al. 2020). These tensions also reveal colonial strategies of delegitimizing ancestral belief systems, particularly Afro-Asians, by demonizing spiritual and cultural traditions that offered a sense of resistance and cohesion in the face of imperial oppressive forces.

From this conjuncture, we see juxtaposed foci: good/evil, kingdom/empire, poor/rich, Jesus/antichrist, God/Satan, ancestral religion/Christians. These foci hide religious tensions and crises of faith since the Christian community is coexisting with the empire that crucified Jesus and reviving grayish religious practices that are opposed to Christianity (Barros 2023). Moreover, these polarities show how apocalyptic narratives seek not only to legitimize Christianity as the only way to salvation but also to position it in a direct struggle against Afro-Asian religions, seen as a threat to spiritual and political monopoly (Muñóz 2024).

Because it is one of the most symbolically charged biblical books and because of its metaphorical language, it hides broad codes of social and sexual orthodoxy in its language. The first of these, as we said before, is the tendency to a certain fatalism that prevents our action in search of a transformation of reality. The second code, in our view, is fundamentalism (Blanco 2020) which separates the life and history of the people and absolutizes the Christian experience as the only true one in which God revealed himself, thereby demonizing the ancestral Amerindian and African-American religious traditions (Mendes 2021).

The third is *androcentrism*, which employs female metaphors to depict religious and social evil (Muñoz 2024). Thid study argues that such gendered symbologies—far from being merely rhetorical tools of imperial power—are strategically emphasized in apocalyptic discourse to eradicate the memory of goddesses (deemed "pagan") and cement the triumph of Christ over ancestral cults. This mechanism mirrors the repression faced by Afro-diasporic traditions like Candomblé, where syncretism (e.g., Santa Bárbara/Iansã) became a means of preserving spiritual legacies against dominant monocultures. Here, too, female imagery is weaponized to suppress alternative cosmologies, revealing a broader pattern of colonial and patriarchal control.

Contextualizing the Old Testament Jezebel

Jezebel the Syrophenician woman daughter of the king of the Sidonians Etbaal (872–851 BC) was married to Ahab as the result of a commercial alliance between Israel and the Syro-Phoenician region (1 Kings 16:31). Despite being a victim of the purchase and sale of women in ancient times (Antela-Bernárdez 2008), she acquires royal prerogatives in Israel because she is a princess married to a king. The etymology of her name "Baal exalts" already points to her priestly activity, she is described in the Hebrew Bible as a dominant and potentially religious priestess, she was the spokesperson of the gods, and for this reason, and she is a priestess and prophetess. Archaeological investigations have identified a seal with an inscription with her name, which denotes her importance within the Omridan dynasty (Mandoca 2017).

It is for this reason that she is the religious leader par excellence of the group of 450 prophets of Baal who were killed by Elijah the prophet of Yahweh with the sword of Ahab her husband, and although we do not find any episode where she does the same, the narrative interprets Elijah's action as a legitimate reckoning for the supposed prophets of Yahweh that she would have passed to the sword, as a consequence of the prophecy that he launched, announcing the anticipated annihilation of all the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19: 1-2).

According to biblical tradition, the prophet Elijah, a native of the city of Thesbi in Gilead (1 Kings 17: 1), exercised his activity during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah (874-852 BC), therefore, his activity is inscribed in the context of Ahab's policy. In this way, the ascension and descent of the dynasty founded by Amri (884-841 BC), father of Ahab, provides the background in which the traditions of Elijah arose.

Amri came to power through a military coup (1 Kings: 16:15 -22), after a period of great confusion and infighting. The Amridas faced the crisis, combining an external policy of alliances with an internal policy of strengthening the state (Finkelstein & Siberman 2001). In the field of foreign policy, the alliance made with the Phoenicians through the marriage of Ahab with Jezebel, daughter of Etbaal, king of Tyre and Sidonia, stands out. From this international alliance arises a religious problem, due to the strengthening of the cult of Baal and Asherah and the alleged infidelity to the cult of a Yahwism still under construction. The internal policy was marked by the transfer of the capital Tirsa to Samaria (1 Kings 16:24). Undoubtedly, these policies brought great economic development to Israel, but with them came great socio-economic imbalance and also religious tensions. Ahab's religious policy is associated with the priestly activity of his wife Jezebel, a follower of the gods of Tyre, especially the god Baal. It is within this climate of conflict, that the Deuteronomistic narrative places the story of Jezebel.

In 1 Kings 16:31 he speaks of his marriage to Ahab, king of Israel, with a summary exposition of all the king's ills. However, it should be noted that this is not the only king who establishes an alliance with foreign women, Jeroboam had already done so, as well as David and Solomon, nor is he the only one who builds buildings and increases the number of his horses and installs altars for Baal and

Asherah (1 Kings 16:32 -33). During this reign, the city of Jericho was rebuilt by Hiel for the price of the two sons of Ahab (1 Kings 16:34). But the text does not directly say that Ahab was responsible for those sacrifices, it only emphasizes that his sin is greater because in addition to setting up an altar for Baal, he also set up one for the goddess Asherah (1 Kings 16:33).

In 1 Kings 18:4-13, there are references to the massacres of the "prophets of Yahweh" and that this is likely to be the work of Jezebel. But as Camp states, (1992) "it is unlikely that her polytheistic religion would have motivated her to eliminate Yahweh's prophets unless they posed a political threat." (p.104). The exclusivity of prophetic Yahwism induced some of its followers to adopt the mentality of the crusades against the worshippers of other deities. But it was the Deuteronomist wording that blamed Jezebel with extreme exaggeration and cruelty for the persecution of Yahweh's prophets, to the point that dogs eventually ate Jezebel's flesh (2 Kings 9:36).

Along the same lines, Sook Lee, (1998) states that "it is unlikely that an aggressive religion originated in the royal house against the religion of Yahweh, as described in the first book of Kings." (p.138) On the contrary, the royal house approved the Yahwist religion, a proof of that is that all the children of Jezebel and Ahab bore names of Yahweh (Ahaziah, Jaram, Athaliah). In addition, Yahweh and Baal worked side by side with respect and veneration (Daly, 1994, p. 182-195), and even the diversity and ambiguity of the different monarchs in Israel and Judea made possible a trend of plurality and coexistence of various religious systems both in the court sphere and in the popular sphere. Such falsification of historical facts corresponds to an androcentric literary tendency bent on demonizing those women who possessed economic and priestly power.

In 18:40 Elijah captures and kills the prophets of Baal, and in 1 Kings 19:1 Ahab, husband of Jezebel, gives her the news that Elijah slaughtered his prophets on Mount Carmel. Jezebel sends a message to Elijah threatening him with death. According to Trible, (1998) "there is a confrontation and opposition between Jezebel, the prophetess of Baal, and Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh" (p.8). In the same way that Elijah threatens Jezebel with death for murder, she also threatens him. "So do the gods to me, and even add to me, if tomorrow at this time I have not put your person as that of one of them!" (1 Kings 19: 2).

In Ch. 21 The king returns irritated and angry because Naboth refuses to sell his vineyard, claiming that the land is his father's inheritance. As a result, Jezebel puts together a plan. She writes to the elders and nobles of the city of Naboth, she promotes the proclamation of a fast-during which Naboth will be accused of cursing God and the king, and as a consequence, he will be stoned. After Naboth's death, she sends Ahab to take possession of that land.

The episode of 1 Kings 21 still angers and inconveniences many, and it seems that the story of Jezebel comes down to just this episode. As a result, we skip the abominable death that she receives and do not bother with it. If we compare the account of 1 Kings 21, the death of Naboth, with 2 Kings 9, the death of Jezebel, it is noticeable that in 1 Kings all the criminal credit is attributed to Jezebel while in

2 Kings she is not even mentioned as guilty but only Ahab. The possibility that Jezebel was not to blame for Naboth's death is reinforced at the end of 1 Kings 21, where the inclusion of the oracle of judgment against Ahab is a Deuteronomistic aggregate. For these writers, it is not Ahab who is responsible for making the people sin, but his wife who motivated him to. Thus, we see that there is a clear ideological tendency of a second editor of the post-exilic period, since, at this time, the controversy revolves around foreign women and the danger that mixed marriages represent for Israel. Jehu's attack on "Jezebel's whores" can also be explained in the same way.

Biased metaphors against Jezebel characterize the second book of Kings. Jehu the usurper appointed to conquer the kingdom of Judea (2Kings 9:9-27), in his struggle for hegemony, first murders Joran, son of Jezebel, but first highlights "the prostitutions and sorceries of his mother Jezebel" (1Kings 9:22). He immediately kills her second son (2 Kings 9:27).

The crime against Jezebel and her house does not appear to surprise many since memory always refers us to the death of Naboth. But the brutal reaction to Naboth's refusal to sell his vineyard can be understood within the context as an appropriate real response to insubordination, in contrast to the weakness of the leader Ahab. Thus we see how the power of patriarchal rhetoric allows injustices committed against women and especially against foreign women who exercise leadership roles, so they represent a danger of destabilizing the patriarchy and Israelite monotheism. For the reinforcement of this ideology later tradition defines Jezebel's sins in terms of prostitution and idolatry. This powerful queen is reduced to a simple sexual stereotype.

Death of the cursed Jezebel (2Kings 9:30 -37)

According to the Deuteronomist wording, Jehu went in search of Jezebel and he found her at the window adorned as a prostitute (Provan, 1995, 220). The Hebrew noun *pk* "black paint for the eyes" (KLB, 1985, p.754) is always used in contexts of prostitution and female idolatry (v.30; Ez 23,40, Jr 4,30). She who is adorned as befits a queen, prophetess and spiritual leader of one of the fertility cults, is stereotyped with the two metaphors that encompass the lives of foreign women in the Deuteronomistic language, prostitution and idolatry. She cannot simply appear as queen, with all the glory of a monarch. To hide this, the editor gives an extraordinary emphasis to the adornments of Jezebel that echo even to this day, since she is remembered as a great prostitute.

A modern reader would not think to see in the text that a man in the position of king puts on his robes and crowns to wait with his head upright for his death. However, she in the face of her impending death proudly faces the challenge. She mocks Jehu and calls him Zimri, a clear allusion to 1 Kings 16: 8-20, where Zimri murders the king and usurps the throne, but his reign lasts only seven days. It is a

serious criticism of Jehu's politics and the God he represents since he calls him the "murderer of his lord."

Once Jezebel has carved out her end, Jehu asks for help in executing his plan to assassinate Jezebel, and ironically the editor chooses two or three officials of hers as accomplices. These are eunuchs, a common condition of the officers of the royal courts of the Ancient East. They throw her towards the plot of land below, her blood splashes on the wall and the horses trample her and crush her. All this violence against Jezebel's body, in addition to being a terrible crime, is absolutely (Dictionary, 1998, p.229) conscious and it intends to stereotype the woman's body even more. Together with the narrator and the eunuchs, Jehu testifies to this bloody fact. The text tells us he relishes this fact. "he went in and ate and drank", Jehu has been satisfied with the spilled blood of a woman, and the worst thing is that modern readers take pleasure in this cruelty without questioning why evil is stereotyped and encapsulated in the body of a powerful woman.

While Jehu ate and drank, the dogs also fed on Jezebel's body. After being satisfied, Jehu remembers a detail - "That damned woman is the daughter of a king", so he sends her to be buried. The verbal root *'rr* "curse" as a passive participle has extraordinary force against women. He does not even mention her name, nor does he acknowledge her status as queen of Israel; her identity is derived from her father. She, who was independent and autonomous, but who to be buried as she deserves, must have her body claimed by her father. The Israelite patriarchal model must prevail.

However, at this time, Jehu's command cannot be obeyed. A proper burial at this point is impossible because the servants find nothing but the skull, the feet and the palms of the hands. Most of the body had already been devoured. In this way the prophecy has been fulfilled, Elijah has triumphed and she is defeated. Thus, the prophecy of Elijah in v.36, which is a later gloss, takes on more force. The prophet finally overcomes the woman. This ideology of extermination of women and their bodies does not seem to bother many, and even many of us women reproduce these patriarchal ideologies.

The archetype of Jezebel as a woman consumed by lustful prostitution and as an ambassador of a false doctrine is taken up through a vision of John, the alleged author of the book of Revelation, in a letter addressed to the communities of Asia Minor. In this letter, Jesus gives a warning, considering her to be a false prophetess. This happens at a time when Christianity begins to spread in this region and where, once again, this ancestral cult was already established in these communities before nascent Christianity. We will see how this archetype is nothing more than a strategy of a patriarchal religion whose interests are not only religious but of territorial expansion and economic power.

Religious Cults in Asia Minor

The imperial cult and local cults of Asia were central to the understanding of imperial culture. The cult was one of the mechanisms through which the empire could extend a wide "network of power", since the inhabitants of the empire were linked to the emperor. Imperial worship was the only way the emperor was known in Asia Minor during the first century, only the elite could go to Rome to visit him. The cult of the emperor was located in each of the seven cities addressed in the Apocalypse. Temples played an important role in Asia's economy as they operated as banks and markets. In Rome, the temple of Saturn was the seat of the imperial treasury. The temple of Artemis, in Ephesus, was also a financial center.

There were local cults in Asia, among which those of Cybele, Isis and Mithras stand out. The most important cult was that of Cibele, Mother Earth dating back more than six millennia before Christ (Tucan 1992). Due to the need to incorporate female roles into a model of divinity, several Mother Earth cults originated throughout the region. This leads us to question what exactly the female influence in these communities was. This divinity was also assimilated by other Greco-Roman goddesses such as Artemis, Diana and Demeter (Gwyther 2003). In 191 BC, Cybele gained a temple of her own in Rome. Thus, at the time of the Apocalypse, the cult of Cybele was almost 300 years old in Rome and that is why the tradition of this goddess in Asia was strong.

Although Isis was not a goddess assimilated by the imperial cult, as happened with Cybele, statues of this goddess were found throughout the territory of Domitian's domain. In this period, the cult of Mithras was very similar to that practiced by Christians. During worship, astral and supernatural journeys took place, the resemblance was such that on many occasions they were considered by the Fathers of the Church as "demonic" elements within Christian worship (Gwyther 2003).

The original role of these local cults was to strengthen the unity and social order of the communities in this context of Hellenization, but the Romans, instead of transforming these goddesses and gods into their rivals, supported and assimilated them to such an extent that they were alienated from the system. With Christians, it was different, with the other cults as we see in Acts 19:21-41 where the community feels threatened by the evangelization of Paul who does not tolerate the cult of Artemis in Ephesus. This temple enjoyed numerous pilgrims, which, among other things, generated employment for those dedicated to goldsmithing. They elaborated temples and miniature images of this goddess. For this community, Paul's affirmation that constructed gods are not true is a discredit and disrespect to this Goddess venerated not only in the province of Asia but throughout the world.

Regarding the Christian ekklesai in the empire, there is no doubt that there were communities inspired by the memory of Jesus. From the beginning, the Christian movement was characterized by its political consciousness concerning the empire. His language was always marked by political rhetoric since the Gospels' semantic oppositions were an important literary resource: good/evil, kingdom/ empire,

poor/rich, Jesus/Caesar, and God/Satan. In the context of the Apocalypse, this rhetoric returns with greater zeal and recognizes that the community is coexisting with the empire that crucified Jesus peacefully, forgetting the death of the Lamb. That is why John assumes a critical stance and resistance to the dominant imperial cult. Thus he sees Rome as a ferocious Beast and a seductive prostitute.

We suspect that female symbologies, in addition to being rhetorical figures opposed to imperial power, appear especially in apocalyptic language, not by chance, but because they are important for ending the memory of the goddesses, said pagans, and to reinforce the definitive triumph of Christ over the ancestral cults.

Jezebel in Rev. 2: 18-29: Socio-political and Literary Context

Revelation is one of the few New Testament writings to bear the author's name (Rev. 1: 1.4.9; 21. 2:22. 8). The Christian tradition of the first centuries identified him with Jesus' favorite apostle, who was also credited with the authorship of the fourth gospel and the three Johannine letters. Although other names were suggested such as Cerinthus, Papias, John the Presbyter, etc., today the vast majority of scholars are in favor of the apostle John. The probable date of composition would be after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. Probably in the period of Domitian (88-96 A.D.).

In the period in which the Apocalypse was written, "Imperial Rome offered Asians an orderly and coherent structure of reality that unified religious, social, economic, political, and aesthetic aspects of the world" (Thompson 1990). The *ekklesiai* to which the Apocalypse refers are located in important cities of the Roman province in Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Laudicéa (Ap. 2-3). The Asian locations are important for the interpretation of the Apocalypse. The province of Asia was incorporated into Rome's control in 133 BC and was achieved not by force but by the concession of territory by King Attalus of Pergamum (Koester 1992).

In first-century Asia, an established elite included Roman officials and local public notaries, illustrious families, agricultural property owners, and merchants. In Hellenistic politics, the council (Greek *boule*) was regarded as of a higher level than the *ekklesia* in the local government hierarchy. There was a political orientation towards urbanization that strengthened the power of the elites. With the introduction of dual citizenship, the rights and duties of local elites who had to ensure the maintenance of buildings, food, public celebrations, games and parties in the cities were increasing. First-century Asian cities competed with each other for honor and imperial privilege (Gwyther 2003).

There is little information about the life of the provincials, but it is known that the basis of the economy was agriculture, which is why there were a good number of rural inhabitants who supported the life of the cities. They were poor because the high Roman taxes increased the work of rural producers and because there were rich landowners who seized the productive lands of peasants and consolidated them into

the hands of the bigger landowners and inhabitants of the city. Those who remained on the land were tenants and those who lost the properties came to the city increasing the social pressures there (Ap. 6.5-6) (Gwyther 2003).

This quick overview of the social situation serves to make us aware that we are talking about Asian communities that largely assimilated Roman culture. But this assimilation did not diminish the climate of conflict and tensions between the various social sectors, especially between the empire and the provinces, the countryside and the city, rich and poor and also between the local and imperial cults.

Our text in question Ap. 2: 18-29 is placed within a broader context entitled "The letters to the churches of Asia Minor" that are found in chapters 2-3. Here we have a series of messages, conventionally called letters, sent by Christ, through John to the seven communities located "in the coastal and precoastal area of Asia Minor, north of Ephesus" (Corsini 1984).

In Ap. 2:18-29 we have a letter addressed to the community of Thyatira. This community was located on the road to Pergamon and Sardis. Thyatira was an industrialized, commercial center. Its main products were textiles and metal industries such as iron and bronze. Like the other cities, Thyatira had its imperial cults and the main divinity of this city was Apollo, the Sun god (Mesters & Orofino 2003).

The content of this letter seems to follow the following outline: Presentation of Christ, praise, reprobation and promise, let us see:

1. Presentation of Christ: It is the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze (cf. 2:19).
2. Praise: The community is full of works: love, faith, service, patience and is in continuous progress.
3. Threat: There is against the community the fact of tolerating the woman Jezebel, who is said to prophesy. Christ gives Jezebel time for repentance. As this does not happen, he launches a threat against her: to throw her to the bed of pain and those who adulterate with her to a great tribulation while the children are wounded to death.
4. Promise: the victor is promised dominion over the nations and "the morning star" (cf. 2: 26 -28).

But what's behind this scheme? For this analysis we start from the study of the semantic fields: life/death personified in the figures of Christ and Jezebel.

Of Jezebel, it is said	Of Christ it says
She proclaims herself a prophet	the One who is the Son of God.
She teaches and misleads my servants to prostitute themselves by eating meat sacrificed to idols	He gives time for repentance, so he throws her on the bed and those who commit adultery with her, in a great tribulation He will also cause her children to die
She represents the depths of Satan	He is the One who probes the kidneys and hearts

We find in this scheme a series of oppositions that are inscribed within the symbolic field of life and death. To rebuke the community, the author relies on the figure of Jezebel as a symbol of the death of the community, Christ will be the life that will conquer death. For she is destined to suffer a terrible sentence, she will be thrown to the bed and those who fornicate with her and their children will be killed. It is incredible how we assume a God who is pleased with the death of some creatures. This seems to be the maxim of a religion that to stand as universal sovereign lacks any feeling of pity in the face of the death of some little ones and those who practice religions outside the dominant one.

In the androcentric language that surrounds biblical literature, it leads us at first glance to reject the evil that Jezebel represents and accept the merciful love of Christ, who with his infinite mercy cleanses the evil of this world. The text does not present a critical position to those stereotypes of sexuality and idolatry that the woman supposedly represents.

In Ap. 2:18-29 Jezebel is presented as a representative of a group opposed to official Christianity. She can relate to the Nicolaitans and Baalitans, representatives of other leaders who occupy the same space.

According to the editor, she is responsible for the diversion of the community that prostitutes and practices the idolatry of the oppressors. This proposition hides in some way, the possible conflicts, coming from the unsupportive practice of the community and its rulers. It seems that social problems are reduced to the practice of prostitution and contact with gods outside Christianity.

Jesus is presented as the Son of God who sees all things (eyes) and who stands firm (feet) and perseveres (v.18). It seems that observation and firmness are two important elements for that community. For Jesus does not excite in presenting the important qualities of the community, the fruit of observation and in exhorting the perseverance that is achieved in continuing their spiritual journey without becoming discouraged. However, he also observes negative aspects. There is a dissident faction led by a woman, who claims to prophesy and who receives the symbolic name of Jezebel (v.20). This name evokes Queen Jezebel, who, in the past, was also accused of idolatry and prostitution (1 Kings 16: 31-32). There is no clarity in the text if the group led by Jezebel is a parallel group to the Christian community. What is explicit is that it is a Balamite cult; therefore, it is likely that the cult of Baal was not eradicated as was previously believed from the reform of King Josiah in 621 BC.

She represents a group opposed to official Christianity. Jezebel's group had a different doctrine that is being disavowed in the letter. But it is only through her adversaries that we know what she taught. She is the leader of a religious group that occupies the same space as Christians. For the writer, she is responsible for deviant behaviors in the community. But it seems that until now the community did not consider Jezebel's attitude as wrong, since she lived in peace within the community. It seems that the possible conflicts also come from the unsupportive practice of the community and its rulers.

Prostitution in the text has a double dimension. The first refers to the sexuality of women and the second to the act of eating the flesh of idols, but both have a religious connotation: "I lead my servants astray to fornicate and to eat what is sacrificed to idols" (v. 20).

The first refers to the very act of having sex "Behold, I will cast her to the bed of pain, and those that commit adultery with her in great tribulation" (v. 22). This is reminiscent of the fertility cults widely known and legitimized by Old Testament Yahwehism (Gen. 38 and the book of Ruth). This type of cultic sexuality emulates the seminal rain of Yahweh (male) on Israel (female). In these cults women are called the *queesah* "sacred prostitutes" an erratic translation of the feminine of *qadosh* meaning "holy" also supported by De Matos in his doctoral thesis arguing that these women are the priestesses of Asherá (Matos 2022).

> Starting in v. 20, John describes his Christ's treatment of a figure he calls Jezebel. The text itself seems to hypersexualize Jezebel, casting her as a false prophet who tricks Christ's slaves into practicing fornication and other types of immorality (2:20) and who refuses to repent of her actions (2:21). John indicates in 2:22 that Christ is 'throwing her onto a bed' (βάλλω αὐτὴν εἰς κλίνην) and her bedfellows and children will endure their punishments (Heister 2022)

In first-century Christianity, prostitution and fornication have a female profile, although this practice necessarily requires the active participation of men, a condition without which it would not exist as an institution. This markedly feminine profile already reveals an asymmetrical model of relationships, responsibilities and ethical valuation according to gender. Although she calls those who sleep with her adulterers, all the blame falls on the woman. Prostitution reveals a fundamental problem that involves everyone. It must be admitted as a concrete social problem and not simply as a metaphorical theme of apocalyptic symbolic language. We see from that, the emergence of forces that promote prostitution as a condition of life for women and their children. Two fragile sectors in society, especially children, the woman's offspring are the ones who are going to be mortally wounded. Those who did not commit any crime would pay for the "woman's improper" behavior.

The second emphasizes the act of eating meat sacrificed to idols, and we remember that in ancient Israel animal rituals were also allowed. These rituals consisted of the immolation of an animal for Yahweh. The viscera of these animals and the meat were burned, as it was for the supply of the royal and priestly house only.

Paul observed this practice. In 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13, Paul wrote that eating or not eating the meat offered to idols depended on each person's conscience. The fact is that what the local cults are promoting is the equitable distribution of meat, it will no longer be for the royal and priestly house but for the entire community. That meat was the part left over after the ritual burning of the inedible parts. And only the elite were invited to participate in the banquet and only the rich could

buy the remaining meat. The banquets served to legitimize the patronage system, the imperial cult and the privilege of the elite. It seems that the New Testament Jezebel is aware of this, which is why she makes an equitable redistribution.

However, John does not enthusiastically call it "the depths of Satan" (v. 24). According to the text, Jesus discerns between the oppressive satanic theology of Jezebel and the liberating apocalyptic one of John. But the question at this point is whether or not Jezebel should have known the Christian practice of eating the flesh of the lamb, that is, of eating unleavened bread that feeds the soul, but not the physical body. The act of eating that meat as we said before is not believed to be a type of distributive justice. It is worth remembering that, in the African context, especially Ethiopian, as attested to by Homer in the Odyssey, it refers to the table of the setting sun that invites a full commonality for all so that bread and meat are not a right only of the priestly elites.

Despite these intuitions, the androcentric language contained in the biblical writings immediately requires us to reject the evil practiced by Jezebel and accept the merciful love of Christ. Without a critical position to these stereotypes of sexuality and idolatry that women personify. In the end, the prize promised to the victor who remains faithful to the works of Christ will be "power over all nations and the morning star." This is a tempting enough prize to dwell on the details of sexist and patriarchal language and the power asymmetries behind this rhetoric.

Jesus' promise to the community of Thyatira is inspired by Psalm 2 (the political psalm that dominates the entire Apocalypse), where the Messiah is presented as the Son of God (2:18) who has power over the nations and all the kings of the earth. Now Jesus promises that power to whoever overcomes the community. The winners, in addition to having the power of domination over other peoples and cultures, will find the same Jesus represented in the "morning star" since in 22:16 he is called the "radiant morning star".

In this analysis, we highlight two problems related to women's lives: sexuality and idolatry. These are issues that transcend the entire history of Israel and also the history of women in the West. For centuries evil was associated with women, it is the inheritance that we have carried since Genesis with Eve. In Ap. 2:18 -29 she is described as the depths of Satan. Although there is severe criticism of the oppressive system, we cannot forget that that system is made up of bodies that are being symbolically violated and through them, religious and gender intolerance is being promoted. It is possible that Jezebel simply represents a religion, or a goddess contrary to that of the empire and Christianity. This is a possibility that cannot be ruled out. Therefore, we can ask ourselves how long official Christianity will continue to impose itself as sovereign over other religious expressions. How long will we continue with those readings that associate evil with women's bodies?

Based on feminist criticism, it is impossible to continue with this type of reductionism. Prostitution reveals an underlying problem that involves both men and women. It must be admitted as a social problem and not simply as a topic elucidated in apocalyptic symbolic language. Although, in the environment in

which the text is written, prostitution is more related to complicity with the cults of the empire. This rhetoric also refers to the practice of female sexuality, this is inferred from the reference to fornication in Rev 2:20.

In summary, it is evident that in both Judaism and first-century Christianity, prostitution and fornication have a female profile, even though that practice requires the participation of men, a condition without which it would not exist as an institution. This markedly feminine profile reveals an asymmetrical model of relationships, responsibilities and ethical assessments according to gender.

In this study, there is another element in common, which is idolatry. According to Rev 2:18-29, Jezebel leads the community to practice the idolatry of oppressors, yet John qualifies it as the depths of Satan. Could it be that in fact, she represents the oppressors? Would it be a different religious practice?

From Santa Barbara to Iansã

Regarding this final point, it is worth examining the extent to which such metaphors have shaped the lived experiences of Afro-descendant communities across the Americas. Branded as descendants of transgression, Black women remain subjected to persecution for offenses they did not commit. The Africans who arrived on the continent were marked by the curse of Can together with their descendants and only with much suffering and pain could they begin to be part of a controversial humanity that is still under construction. African American communities continue to build their identity and rebuild their tradition within the nation of which they are a part. Afro-Catholic syncretism occurs in that space and occurs at times of reconstruction or invention of the tradition of each religious group.

In the diaspora, this historical and symbolic construction of black women must be analyzed from an intersectional perspective, considering how race, gender and class have operated in an articulated way to structure specific oppressions that impact until today. The concept of intersectionality emerges as a response to the limitations of traditional social theories that treat gender, race, and class in isolation. This notion germinated from the abolitionist feminist movement in the United States in the mid-19th century, with Sojourner Truth and Maria W. Stewart, and (re)emerged from the 1970s and 1980s, both in women's movements and in academia. This development was highlighted by the contributions of Angela Davis (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Bell Hooks (1981) in the United States, and Avtar Brah (2007) in England, who raised criticisms of the problematic of the homogenizing stability of the category "woman" and highlighted the need to equally address the combined forms of differentiations and inequalities such as "race" and social class, which cut across women's experiences.

These demands were also present in Chicano feminism with Gloria Anzaldúa (2004), Norma Alarcón and Cherríe Moraga (1993), as well as in theorists of Asian

origin such as Trinh T. Minh-há (1998), Chandra Mohanty (1991) and Gayatri Spivak (1990).

The communities of Asia Minor also went through this process of reorganizing their traditions not only in reference to the Western Roman world but also with the African world. Moreover, it is interesting to see how that phenomenon is perpetuated to this day.

Intersectionality thus challenges simplistic explanations of inequalities by demanding approaches that understand the complexity and simultaneity of the factors that structure oppression. This perspective, fueled by the struggles of social movements, is an invitation to academia to rethink its methodologies and epistemologies, recognizing black women as historical and intellectual agents, whose experiences and knowledge are rooted in more inclusive and transformative paths.

This notion also connects to the contexts of cultural and symbolic resistance developed by enslaved Africans in the face of colonial structures. In the case of Brazil, African-based religious practices, such as Candomblé, represented not only a space of spiritual connection but also of active resistance (Alexandre, 2024). The enslaved Africans, by identifying symbolic correspondences between the saints of Christianity and their divinities, such as the orixás and inkices, managed to preserve their beliefs amid surveillance and repression. Thus, Santa Barbara, syncretized as Iansã, not only becomes a religious icon but also a symbol of that cultural resistance.

In this context, devotion to Santa Barbara/Iansã reflects the dynamics of cultural adaptation and reconfiguration imposed by the African diaspora. The connection with Iansã, lady of thunder and winds, reinforces the ability of the centers of Candomblé to articulate symbolic strategies of resistance and reterritorialization. These spaces became meeting points for the reconstruction of identities, the transmission of ancestral knowledge and the organization of collective activities. In addition, in the specific case of Afrodiasporic women, centers of Candomblé became fundamental places to confront the colonialities of power and gender (Marinho & Simoni 2021). The occupation of these spaces allowed the materialization of beliefs fragmented by enslavement and made it possible to mobilize actions against racism and patriarchy (Marinho 2023).

Thus, the relationship between Santa Barbara and Iansã is not limited to a mere symbolic correspondence but encapsulates the cultural resistance, spiritual agency, and prominence of black women in the struggle against colonial and patriarchal impositions. This devotion is part of a broader history of resistance and cultural reinvention that continues to live on in Afro-Brazilian traditions.

The feast of Santa Barbara, which falls in December, the month of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, is celebrated with a banquet offered to children by most Bahian families, whether or not they are related to Afro-Brazilian religions. The Catholic festival consists of a mass and a procession around the Santa Barbara market in Salvador, Bahia, where they dance and drink in abundance. The origin of this festival dates back to the first centuries of Christianity.

> The young Barbara was born in Asia Minor and lived in Nicomedia, an ancient Roman province of Bithynia. Her father was a very rich young man who resolved to protect his daughter from the world, isolating her in a tower. From there Barbara managed to communicate with Origen, in Alexandria. Then her father, himself a Christian, denounced her. Governor Marciano sentenced her to death and, finding no way to kill her, ordered her beheaded. Popular history tells us that when she was decapitated, a bolt of lightning fell from the sky and struck the trunk, reducing her body to ashes. It was the 4th of December and the time of Emperor Maximilian. (Sousa 2003)

The devotion to Santa Barbara spread very early, perhaps by the turn of the ninth century A.D. In the city of Salvador, where there had already been a chapel dedicated to Santa Barbara since the sixteenth century (Oliveira 2000). Devotion to the Saint since its inception is deeply linked to the markets, to the lives of vendors and especially of women. Markets played an important social role, it is there that kings made their decisions public, exhibited their women, mothers presented their new-born children, the dead are carried before being buried, the initiated presented themselves, people circulated, and marriages took place, among other things. It is a space for socialization.

In addition, markets and their cultural practices in the Americas represent a meeting point between African and European worldviews, reinforcing the role of women as guardians of the collective and spiritual memory of their communities. The problem is generated by the pre-understanding of syncretism as the deformation of an original matrix.

> In truth, religious syncretism always existed in the history of human civilizations and occurred in various forms: assimilation of religious practices between conquered peoples, contacts between different cultural groups, catechism of native peoples during the colonization of new territories, trafficking of slaves, etc. Furthermore, all religions are syncretic. In Brazil, the term religious syncretism was historically applied, in a pejorative way, to refer to all religions within an African matrix. (Santos 2021)

In this way, the pattern of exclusion of women within priestly leadership continues, even though the role of women within this and other religious experiences and in the transmission of the faith is of extraordinary importance in communities of African origin. Many concepts such as "motherism" proposed by Catherine Acholonu (1995), "womanism" by Alice Walker (1983) and Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1996) have been developed. Others, including African Womanism by Clenora Hudsson-Weems (1993), Stiwanism by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Misovire by Werewere Liking (1983), Femalism by Chioma Opara (2004), Gynism by Pauline Marie Eboh (1996) and or Gynandism by Chinweizu and Barnabe Bilongo (1990), serve to expand the reflections on how black women reinterpret spirituality from their own cultural contexts, offering critical alternatives to hegemonic feminism.

The religiosity of black people is the foundation of their existence, therefore, the image of God the creator and of a Jesus Christ companion and friend has a

relevant importance. In their religious celebrations, they incorporate the rhythm, symbols and expressions of their tradition. As Lélia Gonzalez argues, Afro-descendant spiritualities resignify the values of Christianity, recontextualizing them in a relational ethic that prioritizes community and cultural resistance against colonialism.

That is why the church reflected in the faces of the poorest African-Americans must maintain its prophetic voice so that the richness of cultural and religious pluralism is not weakened by the dominant culture so that this cultural pluralism is an expression of a radical ecumenism of Christian utopia.

In short, this point served to point out that no matter how much in the history of Christianity, the struggle against other religious groups or traditions, as well as the obfuscation of women's work, is a constant on the part of official Christianity. Communities have nurtured and recreated their faith in contact with diverse traditions and cultures. That faith is what has accompanied black people in their history of struggle and resistance and is the same that keeps alive the hope that new relationships between genders, peoples and cultures can emerge. That faith is what encourages women to imagine and forge a better world for their offspring.

Conclusion

An analysis of the social situation of violence and persecution of first-century Christian communities, which uses metaphors and female representations to explain prostitution, adultery, and idolatry, may at first glance seem a common conclusion. However, the analysis of the book as a whole indicates that both men and women would have to assume part of their responsibilities for these situations, as well as their plots of power to build alternative roads together. For this reason, commenting on the attitude of women looking for lovers, to accentuate how much the people had forgotten Yahweh, brings various prejudices, one of them being the reduction of the religious problem, the exchange of Christ for Baal without considering other social problems that were promoted by Christians.

The whole book of Revelation poses a hermeneutical problem for the readers of our time. The feminine metaphors used in apocalyptic symbols reinforce the idea that evil is rooted in the feminine. The socio-cultural context in which the book is inserted, and sexual ethics that classified women as despicable, by their power of seduction. These constructs can induce violent behavior by men against women. Especially, sexual violence or sexual behaviors classified as perverse for women and men could become socially accepted. These texts to some extent favor the sexual acceptance of a double standard.

Another hermeneutical problem is religious intolerance towards other non-Christian religious practices. This is a great challenge for Christianity, it starts from the realization that on our American continent, there are indigenous and African-American religions that must be valued. The path cannot be extermination as is presupposed in the Apocalypse and if the valorization and acceptance of diversity

must be implicit, only in this way is it possible to participate in the construction of a different world where relations between men and women are truly human.

In this sense, recognizing the spiritual and epistemological richness of indigenous and African American traditions not only allows for a more equitable coexistence but also mutual enrichment that challenges the idea that only Christianity possesses absolute truth. Interreligious dialogue and respect for spiritual plurality are essential steps toward just coexistence.

It is important to highlight that this reading is also placed in a critical perspective on the world economic order. It can be understood today as a *kairos* of our generations to overcome economic, political and cultural colonialism. It can no longer be believed that a single world economic order and a single culture is capable of embracing the full range of human experience. Cultural and religious colonialism has sustained a narrative of domination that invisibilizes alternative worldviews and ancestral knowledge systems. Overcoming it not only implies rejecting economic inequalities but also valuing the knowledge that emerges from the margins, understanding that subordinate cultures have valuable responses to global challenges.

We must be aware today that the Christ proclaimed in apocalyptic Christology may or may not be understood and eventually believed by those people who live in other cultures with other worldviews. The Good News is not just singing the conceptual content of a book, much less does it mean teaching an ideology as a vehicle of salvation. If the figure of Christ has a universal meaning, it must, at the very least, make some sense to people who do not belong to the Abrahamic line. The figure of Christ must not be a tool of cultural domination, but a symbol that can dialogue with other spiritualities, recognizing in them the presence of the divine and the dignity of their ways of life. Thus, Christians should not monopolize the knowledge of Christ. The affirmation that one is Christian begins with the challenge of this proclamation. Is it possible to leave the empire promoting exclusions and exclusivities ate the same time? This reflection leads us to consider that Christianity, instead of being an agent of division, could become a bridge towards a more inclusive humanity, capable of learning from the spiritual and cultural richness of all traditions, collectively building a future where justice, peace and diversity are fundamental pillars.

Bibliography

Acholonu, C. *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. African World Press, 1995.

Adamo, D.T. Decolonizing African biblical interpretation. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25121-8, 2020.

Alexander, C. *Exu-mulher e o matriarcado nagô. Sobre masculinizacao, demonização e tensões de gênero na formação doos candomblés*, Rio de Janeneiro, Aruanda, 2024.

Antela-Bernárdez, B. Vencidas, violadas, vendidas: Mujeres griegas y violencia sexual en asedios romanos. *Klio*, n.2, v. 90 (2008): 307-322, 2008.

Anzaldúa, G. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2a ed.). Aunt Lute Books, 2004.

Barros, O. *Tirando o véu do Apocalipse*, São Paulo: Editora Recriar, 2023.

Blanco, K.M. Fundamentalismos religiosos, género y sexualidad: Abordajes al tema desde las publicaciones de RIBLA, *70* (2020): 69, 2020.

Brah, A. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 2007.

Camp, C. (1992). 1 and 2 Kings. *The Women's Bible Commentary,* Carol A. Newsom y Sharon H. Ringe, editoras, Londres, Westminster/John Knox Press, 102-116, 1992.

Choi, H. The Case for Intersectional Theology: An Asian American Catholic Perspective. Journal Of Moral Theology, 12(SI 1). https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.75194, 2023

Chinweizu, B.B. *Gynandism: Exploring African and Afro-Diasporic Gender Discourses*. African World Press, 1990.

Collins, J.J. From Prophecy to Apocalypticism – The Expectation of the End, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism. The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity,* v. 1, John J, Collins (editor), New York, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1984.

Collins, P.H. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 1990.

Corsini, E. *O Apocalipse de São João*. São Paulo: Edições Paulinas, (Grande comentário Bíblico) 1984.

Crenshaw, K. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039, 1991.

Davis, A. *Women, Race & Class*. Random House, 1981.

Day, J. Yahweh and the Gods and Goddessses of Canaan, en *Ein Gott allein?: JHWH- Verherung und biblicher Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religiongeschichte,* W. Dietrich e M. A. Klopfenstein, editores, Fribourg, Editions Universitaries, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 182-195 (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 139), 1994.

De Miranda Mendes, A.P. A política dos terreiros contra o racismo religioso e as políticas cristofascistas. *Debates do NER*, ANO 21, N. 40. doi.org/10.22456/1982-8136.120344, 2021.

Dicionário Hebraico-Português e Aramaico-Português. São Leopoldo, Vozes/Sinodal, 1992.

Eboh, P.M. *Gynism: A Critical Approach to African Women's Struggle*. African World Press, 1996.

Finkelstein, I., Silberman, N.A. The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Sacred Texts, New York-London, 2001.

Gwyther, A. *Desmascarando o imperialismo: interprestação do Apocalipse ontem e hoje*. São Paulo: Loyola/Paulus, 2003.

Heister, C.R. Jezebel's Punishment in Revelation 2: Research and Trends. *Currents in Biblical Research*, *20*, 186-199, 2022.

Hooks, B. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press, 1981.

Hudsson-Weems, C. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Africana Womanism Press, 1993.

Johnson, P.C. Secrets, gossip, and gods: The transformation of Brazilian Candomblé. Oxford University Press, 2014.

KBL. Lexicum in Veteris Testamenti Libros, Ludwing Koehler y Walter Baumgartner, editores, Leiden, E. J. Brill.], 1985.

Korpel, M.C.A. Fit for a Queen: Jezebel's Royal Seal. Biblical Archaeology Society. Consultado en 20 de noviembre de 2024

Lee, K.S. Die Königsbücher, Frauen-Bilder ohne Frauen- Wirklichkeit, *Feministische Bibelauslegung,* Christian Kaisser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh, 130-145, 1998.

Liking, W. *Misovire: African Feminism from the Perspective of African Women*. Zed Books, 1983.

Matos, S.H.M de. As sagradas de Asherah e YHWH: narrativa e memória do sacerdócio feminino no templo de Jerusalém. Tesis doctoral, Universidade Metodista de Sao

Paulo, Ciencias da Religiao, Programa de Pos Graduacao em Ciencias da Religiao Brasil, 2022.

Mendonca, E., Sales, V. A Dinastia Omrida: Reconstrução do Primeiro Estado Independente de Israel a partir da Bíblia e da Arqueologia. Tesis doctoral, Universidade Metodista de Sao Paulo, Ciencias da Religiao, Programa de Pos Graduacao em Ciencias da Religiao Brasil, 2020.

Mesters, C., Orofino, F. *Apocalipse de São João: a teimosia da fé dos pequenos*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2003.

Minh-Ha, T.T. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1998.

Mohanty, C.T. Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. En C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo, & L. Torres (Eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (pp. 51–80). Indiana University Press, 1991.

Moraga, C., Anzaldúa, G. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (2a ed.). Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1993.

Muñoz, L. Apocalyptic femininity: Religion and gender in colonial Latin America, 2024.

Nye, M. Race, religion, and Black Lives Matter: Essays on a moment and a movement. Bloomsbury Academic.asia, 2019.

Ogundipe-Leslie, M. *Stiwanism: African Feminism in Contemporary Africa*. Routledge, 1994.

Ogunyemi, C.O. *Womanism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Oliveira, W.F. (2000). Santa Bárbara e Yansã... a mesma coisa. *Revista Néon*. Año 2, n.24.

Opara, C. *Femalism: An Alternative Feminist Discourse from an African Perspective*. African Press, 2004.

Palmié, S. *The cooking of history: How not to study Afro-Cuban religion*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Provan, I.W. 1 and 2 Kings, Peabody, Paternoster Press, (New International Biblical Commentary), 1995.

Santo, W.J.R. (2020). Salve Bárbara, Caminhos de uma festa popular na cidade de Bahia. Tese doctoral, Universudade da Bahia, 2020.

Schüssler, F. *The Book of Revelation, Justice and Judment,* Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985.

SEDOC. Pastoral Afro-americana e caribenha. In: Jesus Cristo portador de Água viva:uma reflexão cristã sobre a nova era. Petrópolis: Vozes, vol. 36, n. 300, p. 216-227, 2003.

Sousa, V.C.O. Santos e festas: encontros e desencontros dosincretismo afro-católico na cidade de Salvador. Bahia: UNEB, 2003.

Souza, D.S. Raios e ventos: narrativas mágicas sobre Santa Bárbara e Iansã. Texto retirado do livro "Magia, Encantamentos e Feitiçaria", dos organizadores Semíramis Corsi Silva, Flávia Regina Marquetti e Pedro Paulo A. Funari. São Paulo, Cultura Acadêmica Editora, 2023.

Spivak, G. C. Can the Subaltern Speak? En C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press, 1990.

Thompson, L. The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Trible, P. Exegesis for Storytellers and other strangers, *Journal of Biblical Literature,* Vol. 114, No. 1, 3-19, 1995.

Turcan, R. The Cults of the Roman Empire. Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell,1992.

Ulrich, C.B., Ströher, M.J., de la Paz, N.I.N. Derechos Humanos y Libertad Religiosa resistencia al cristofascismo en Brasil. *Estudos Teológicos* 60.1: 113-133, 2020.

Verger, P. Notícias da Bahia-1850. 2 a Ed. São Paulo: Corrupio, 1999.

Viladecans, I.M, La mujer vestida de Sol: una revisión del Apocalipsis, *Duoda* 66: 16-31, 2024.
Walker, A. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harcourt, 1983.

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026 – Pages 285-300

Some Thoughts on Humour in Yeatsian Style

*By Nicholas Meihuizen**

Yeats has a keen understanding of the ramifications attending style, and the effect of the right touch or tone in conveying certain materials. This is where his use of humour comes into play. For instance, in parodic mode, he writes of the congruence of natural and supernatural with an elegant nonchalance, at once prosaic and strange, and this paradoxical coupling generates a quirky sense of otherness, in keeping with the subject. He also uses humour, though, in a way that simply makes fun of self and family, without any apparent doctrinal positioning; here he seems to enjoy the mode of humour for its own sake, a stylistic trait not often commented on by critics. The present article would consider the two different contexts in which both uses of humour are to be found in Yeats, that in A Vision (1937 version) and that in Reveries Over Childhood and Youth.

Introduction

Relatively few critics have engaged with Yeats's apparent lack of seriousness in presenting certain esoteric matters. Elizabeth Müller, in her thorough investigation of "derision" in the prologue to the 1937 version of *A Vision*, feels that this work "constitutes a healthy proof, if we needed one, of Yeats's sense of humour", and further observes that the prologue "conceals important occult knowledge under the cloak of irony and self-derisive wit".[1] Steven Helmling, also in reference to *A Vision*, writes of the satiric play involved, where "a certain single-mindedness", the "obtuseness of being earnest", is made fun of, while at the same time another type of single-mindedness is being "celebrated and exemplified". That is, the single-mindedness involved in "the self-evident … ludicrousness" of Yeats's "system" makes of it an "heroic, gay, quixotic *credo quia impossibile est*, rising ebulliently out of the stony rubbish of the disillusioned postwar wasteland". The point, Helmling feels, is that through these means Yeats combats:

> the regnant materialism of [an age which] scorned the fictions of imagination in favor of "facts", supposed to be real in some ungainsayable way. In "reality" (a compromised word, which Yeats defiantly liked using) "facts" are only the Gradgrindian mainstay of another fiction, or myth, the myth of science. When we say we are mastering "facts", we are only making matter the measure of our minds,

*Extraordinary Professor, North-West University, South Africa.

1. Elizabeth Müller, "The Mask of Derision in Yeats's Prologue to *A Vision* (1937)" in *Yeats Annual 19: Yeats's Mask*, eds. Margaret Mills Harper and Warwick Gould (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 125, 121.

> so that "fact" masters us, narrowing the possibilities of human prerogative and imagination.[2]

Eugene Korkowski, rather, understands that the Prologue of *A Vision* uses jocularity to make serious philosophical thought appealing and entertaining (in the vein of Menippean satire).[3] Chris Miles refers to another article by Korkowski concerning Cornelius Agrippa's ambiguous recantation of his "magical" text, *De occulta philosophia* (1533), demonstrating how the recantation paradoxically recants itself, a fact overlooked by literalists, and thus offers a Yeatsian-type smokescreen behind which true occult knowledge might be revealed.[4] James Olney sees the "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends", part of the Prologue material of *A Vision* (1937), serving as a type of parody comedy which anticipates some of the elements of the divine comedy that is the rest of *A Vision*. He writes of its "virtually impenetrable maze of humor and fiction", whose obfuscatory function should alert us to the fact that the "truths" within the work "are not literal but symbolic".[5] Hazard Adams refers to *A Vision*'s self-derisive irony which presents the opposite of what is announced.[6] He also notes that the book, as a work expressing Yeatsian *sprezzatura*, is not to be taken seriously.[7] Writing in more general and provocative terms, Frank McGuinness, however, feels that "Yeats, when it comes down to it, had no or next to no sense of humour".[8] He sees Yeats's adoption of "ridiculous" poses as a function of his "sheer doggedness", as the poet's mind is "upstaged and confounded by its own machinations", in a rather pointless act of self-defeating wilfulness, which nevertheless elicits the type of admiration one feels, perhaps, for a character from Greek tragedy or Beckett, compromised by fate. Yoko Sato invokes Bakhtin, through Michael McAteer's suggestion "that Yeats's sense of farce owes much to his reading of Chaucer in the 1900s, 'giving expression to the transgressive and

2. Steven Helmling, *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman and Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 187-88.

3. Eugene Korkowski, "Yeats's *Vision* as Philosophic Satura", *Eire – Ireland* 12, no. 3 (1977): 67.

4. Chris Miles, "Occult Retraction: Cornelius Agrippa and the Paradox of Magical Language", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no.4 (2008): 445-8. Miles refers to Eugene Korkowski's "Agrippa as Ironist", *Neophilologus* 60 (1976): 594-607. I have not been able to access this article. Agrippa's language, according to Miles, "is designed to foster exactly the kind of mistrust in any human language's ability to convey truth" (448). Might Yeats's approach in *A Vision* be informed by occult tradition, in which he was well-versed? See Kathleen Raine's *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Writings of W.B. Yeats* (Mountrath: Dolmen Press, 1986), 177-246.

5. James Olney, "W.B. Yeats's Daimonic Memory", *The Sewanee Review* 85 (1977): 598.

6. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's* A Vision, *Romantic Modernism and Antithetical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 20, 30.

7. Ibid., 40.

8. See Frank McGuinness, "A Kick in the Head", *The Poetry Ireland Review* 116 (2015): 46.

transformative power of laughter Bakhtin identifies in medieval literature'".[9] If Bakhtinian "carnival laughter" is "directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants", and is ambivalently "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding, asserting and denying", then Yeats's humour is certainly attuned to it.[10]

My paper, I hope, will add to the voices of these critics, in order, first, to consider the straightforward use of humour in Yeats's early autobiography, *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*. Second, I hope to help clarify the effect of the more sly, doctrinally-inclined humour associated with *A Vision*. Before engaging with these matters, though, I consider, briefly, those instances where Yeats is parodied by others, as I believe his turn to self-parody emerged in some part from his awareness of his susceptibility to such mockery.

Yeats Parodied by Others

Conor Cruise O'Brien's essay, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W.B. Yeats", provides an anecdote which he feels encapsulates Yeats's relation to factual truth:

> My father, at the Arts Club, used to poke gentle fun at Yeats's "Fascism", parodying him as referring in a speech to "that very great man, Missolonghi" and then, when corrected, saying majestically: "I am told the name is not Missolonghi but Mussolini – but, does it . . . really . . . matter?"[11]

This strand of humour levelled at Yeats by others goes further back, at least to a Beerbohm cartoon from the 1890s, where a bent and lanky Yeats presents George Moore, looking as if "carved from a turnip" (as Yeats once wrote of him in his *Autobiographies*),[12] to a diminutive Queen of the Fairies, a proto-type

9. Yoko Sato, "Yeatsian Heroes and Laughter", *Journal of Irish Studies* 34 (2019): 46. Sato refers to Michael McAteers *Yeats and European Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 84. See also R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats, A Life: I The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 327. Foster includes Ben Jonson among the works read by Yeats at this time, surely another pertinent influence.

10. Ibid. Sato refers to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 34. Max Nänny, writing on Ezra Pound and Menippean satire, notes of this satire that "frequently the author himself makes an appearance", certainly true of Yeats's "Stories". Pound was, of course, an influential figure for Yeats, even playing a prominent role in the introductory matter to *A Vision*, in "A Packet for Ezra Pound". See Max Nänny, "Ezra Pound and the Menippean Tradition", *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 11, no.3 (1982): 401.

11. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning, and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 33.

12. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 405.

Tinkerbell.[13] Then there is the cartoon by Mac, explaining how Yeats and George Russell, though seeking each other out, pass one another by without realizing the fact: Yeats has his nose in the air, Russell's is pointing at the ground.[14]

William O'Donnell also provides a classic anecdote:

> Yeats announced to Higgins, "I have never been in a pub in my life and I'd like to go into a pub". Higgins dutifully selected a Dublin pub that he hoped would not offend Yeats's refined sense of propriety. When the great moment came, Higgins took charge and prudently ordered mild drinks. Yeats looked around for a moment and then announced, as his first and last words in an Irish pub, "Higgins, I don't like it. Lead me out again".[15]

As Helmling notes, "there is no end to such stories".[16] But perhaps the worst pieces of mockery levelled at Yeats, the ones which had the most effect on him, were those by George Moore, in his sketches in the *English Review* of January and February, 1914 (slightly revised in *Vale*, under threat of legal action from Lady Gregory).[17] Helmling summarizes:

> In it Moore announces publicly, while professing to scold those who whispered it privately, that Yeats was ashamed of his family's social standing; presents as a frequent matter for speculation in Dublin the interesting question whether Yeats and Maud Gonne ever "gratified" their "passion"; reports as from the poet's own lips that the answer was no, Yeats explaining that as a young man he had made himself content with the "spirit of sense"; represents himself as having replied to this disclosure, "Yes, I understand, the common mistake of a boy": then makes mock of lamenting the death of Yeats's inspiration and the effective end of his literary career, prematurely passed "because it had arisen out of an ungratified desire".[18]

R.F. Foster offers another quotation from *Vale* (the 1914 edition, "for the sake of vividness", not the revised one of 1933). Here Moore mocks Yeats the public

13. In Frank Tuohy, *Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 149. The picture is housed in the National Gallery of Ireland.

14. Ibid., 179. Made available to Mr Tuohy by the late Prof D.J. Gordon, Department of English, Reading University.

15. William O'Donnell, "The Textual History of Yeats's *On the Boiler*", in *Yeats Annual 21: Yeats's Legacies*, ed. Warwick Gould (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 403. O'Donnell's footnote reads, "As told by Brinsley MacNamara in a BBC broadcast, June 1949". His source is William R. Rogers, "W. B. Yeats: A Dublin Portrait", in *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats: 1865–1939*, ed. by A. N. Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 3.

16. Helmling, 160.

17. Ibid., 162.

18. Ibid., 162-3.

man, at a meeting concerning Lane's controversial bequest of his impressionist paintings:

> As soon as the applause died away Yeats, who had lately returned to us from the States with a paunch, a huge stride, and an immense fur overcoat, rose to speak. We were surprised at the change in his appearance, and could hardly believe our ears when, instead of talking to us as he used to do about the old stories coming down from generation to generation, he began to thunder … against the middle classes, stamping his feet, working himself into a great passion, and all because the middle classes did not dip their hands into their pockets and give Lane the money he wanted for his exhibition.[19]

Helmling feels that in the "aftermath" of these attacks Yeats was able to crystalize his motives for writing *A Vision*. While in the first decade of the twentieth century Yeats had "shed his ninetyish poses of detachment from the world", wishing "to appear not as an otherworldly dreamer, but as an active public man", after the attacks he entered "a period of reflection and consolidation in which [he] pressed the antitheses of active and contemplative, esthete and nationalist, occultist and controversialist to yield new syntheses concerning self and antiself and the project of compelling their tensions and interplay into a 'unity of being'. Yeats is withdrawing from his 'public man' role and investing his energies again, after a lapse of several years".[20]

Another point which I briefly touch on at the conclusion of this essay, is the relation of Yeats's humour to his notion of tragic joy. He enlarges upon the idea in, for example, "A General Introduction for My Work": "The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death…. I have heard Lady Gregory say, rejecting some play in the modern manner sent to the Abbey Theatre, 'Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies.' Nor is it any different with lyrics, songs, narrative poems".[21] Though he refers here specifically to tragedy, the joyful attitude he envisions pertains to life in general, and humour surely plays a role in its cultivation.

Yeatsian Self-parody 1: *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*

While Moore's intensity of mockery had indeed appeared to mark a turning point in Yeats's relation to self and world, self-parody had never been far from the poet's thought;[22] this is so even in his most seriously-undertaken researches.

19. In Foster, 327.

20. Helmling, 163.

21. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 522-3.

22. That the boy Yeats was prone to enjoying comic humour is perhaps indicated by the report that he gave a copy of a popular Victorian comic, Alley Sloper, to his brother, Jack.

In *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* (1916), for example, he writes of his attendance at his first séance in the 1880s, a precursor moment of the studious effort that went into the production of *A Vision*:

> Presently my shoulders began to twitch and my hands. I could easily have stopped them, but I had never heard of such a thing and I was curious. After a few minutes the movement became violent and I stopped it. I sat motionless for a while and then my whole body moved like a suddenly unrolled watch-spring, and I was thrown backward on the wall. I again stilled the movement and sat at the table. Everybody began to say I was a medium, and that if I would not resist some wonderful thing would happen.

His father comes to mind at this point, as a type of superego cum censor, but Yeats remains at the table:

> I remembered that my father had told me that Balzac had once desired to take opium for the experience's sake, but would not because he dreaded the surrender of his will.

His continuing account (in which he bypasses his father's warning without comment – a fact significant in itself at this time of youthful rebellion) has the candid simplicity of reportage emptied of literary devices:

> We were now holding each other's hands and presently my right hand banged the knuckles of the woman next to me upon the table. She laughed, and the medium, speaking for the first time, and with difficulty, out of his mesmeric sleep, said, "Tell her there is great danger". He stood up and began walking round me making movements with his hands as though he were pushing something away.

The matter-of-fact nature of the account adds to its sense of veracity:

> I was now struggling vainly with this force which compelled me to movements I had not willed, and my movements had become so violent that the table was broken.

Yet the humorous tone found elsewhere in this book is not far from the author's perception of his earlier self:

> I tried to pray, and because I could not remember a prayer, repeated in a loud voice –
>
> "Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world and all our woe . . .
> Sing heavenly muse."

See Michael Connerty, "Comic Acts", *Irish Arts Review* 39, no.1: 100. Connerty refers to Hilary Pyle's *The Different Worlds of Jack B. Yeats: His Cartoons and Illustrations* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 16.

The humour continues, as he conveys his own credulity in a deadpan way:

> Then I saw shapes faintly appearing in the darkness and thought, "They are spirits"; but they were only the spiritualists and my friend at her prayers. The medium said in a faint voice, "We are through the bad spirits". I said, "Will they ever come again do you think?" and he said, "No, never again I think", and in my boyish vanity I thought it was I who had banished them.[23]

This violent intervention of the supernatural in his life, its physical manifestation, so to speak, is coloured by "disobedience" towards the father, intensified, if through a humorous enough reference to Milton, to humankind's inherent disobedience towards God. The sense of transgression is manifest, and yet this tone tinged with humour puts the whole matter into a new perspective, one conditioned by an acceptance to step beyond what is given, what is commonly deemed proper. The humour sweetens the blow, as it were, while making the experiencer (because so willing to parody himself, hinting at some ridiculousness in the whole account) strategically complicit (for an ambiguous moment) with the probable upholders of common sense, including the father.

Humour in *Reveries* is also at times related to the general theme of familial peculiarity, not unconnected to the larger concerns associated with the imponderable nature of existence, which were to trouble Yeats for years, until the material for *A Vision* began to cohere in his mind. Humour is apparent in the opening pages: for instance, writing of the misery of childhood, Yeats says, in chiasmic fashion, "having prayed for several days that I might die, I had begun to be afraid that I was dying and prayed that I might live".[24] The form, with its mannered, inverted repetition, hints at the absurdity inherent in the views life sometimes forces on one. In the case of his eccentric father, who gets in the way of the school's educational system, he "often interfered, and always with disaster, to teach me my Latin lesson". And the head-master at school, aware of the father's interference, tells the boy: '"I am going to give you an imposition because I cannot get at your father to give him one"'.[25] A further lightly humorous example of his father's interference in his education follows:

> I was asked to write an essay on "Men may rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things". My father read the subject to my mother who had no interest in such matters. "That is the way", he said, "boys are made insincere and false to themselves. Ideals make the blood thin, and take the human nature out of people".[26]

23. W.B. Yeats, *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* (London: Macmillan, 1916), 206-9.
24. Ibid., 3.
25. Ibid., 106-7.
26. Ibid., 108.

These points are to remain with Yeats all his life: the importance of sincerity, of not being false to oneself, of suspecting ideals or opinions, of valuing human nature. But a wickedly humorous touch follows:

> He walked up and down the room in eloquent indignation, and told me not to write on such a subject at all, but upon Shakespeare's lines, "To thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day thou canst not then be false to any man".[27]

The words chosen by his father are those originally uttered by the hypocritical Polonius. Surely an element of irony is present in Yeats's portrayal of his parent, anticipating in miniature his future adolescent rebellion against him? This humour, quietly fomenting, barely discernible, softens our impression of the stern Victorian father J.B. Yeats could sometimes be, and adds a stylistic charm to the work.

The second extended section dealing with the father also presents him as highly critical towards his son, now in connection with horsemanship: "He was indignant and threatening because he did not think I rode well". This time Yeats does offer commentary on his father's attitude. His father had said: "'You must do everything well . . . that the Pollexfens respect, though you must do other things also'". The humour in Yeats's commentary once more colours our impression of the father's critical attitude:

> I can see now that he had a sense of inferiority among those energetic, successful people. He himself, some Pollexfen told me, though he rode very badly, would go hunting upon anything and take any ditch. His father, the County Down Rector, though a courtly man and a scholar, had been so dandified a horseman that I had heard of his splitting three riding breeches before he had settled into his saddle for a day's hunting, and of his first rector exclaiming, "I had hoped for a curate but they have sent me a jockey".[28]

It is the arrangement of elements that sets the tone of this portrayal of the father. The poet's comment, "that he had a sense of inferiority", refers to a commonplace enough psychological condition, attenuating our displeasure at the father's harshness towards the boy. But what really tell in J.B. Yeats's favour are the anecdotes about his bad riding and impetuous behaviour on horseback. And these are placed in a familial context that contributes to the softening effect, with its implication that such "half-legendary" family anecdotes (the account of the split breeches is almost vaudeville in nature) are shared in a spirit of amusement. Yeats again manages these elements with a straight-faced understatement, which is all the more humorous.

Belief in the supernatural was obviously of profound importance for Yeats. He appears to have been a psychically sensitive child to begin with, a fact which he broaches with his usual matter-of-factness, and again, in this case, a disarming humour:

---

27. Ibid., 108-9.
28. Ibid., 97.

> One day some one spoke to me of the voice of the conscience, and as I brooded over the phrase I came to think that my soul, because I did not hear an articulate voice, was lost. I had some wretched days until being alone with one of my aunts I heard a whisper in my ear, "What a tease you are!" At first I thought my aunt must have spoken, but when I found she had not, I concluded it was the voice of my conscience and was happy again.[29]

The literalism of the child is satisfied, ironically, by an extraordinary event whose full significance is not apparent from the child's perspective; and, even from the perspective of the implied author it is recorded in factual, non-sensational terms, though its significance is better appreciated:

> From that day the voice has come to me at moments of crisis, but now it is a voice in my head that is sudden and startling. It does not tell me what to do, but often reproves me. It will say perhaps, "That is unjust" of some thought.[30]

It is almost as if the child were correct, that this is indeed a "voice of conscience". The voice is certainly not linked to "the father's constant badgering", as O'Hara claims.[31] This unsettling of perspectives to do with narrative point-of-view combined with humour adds an element of veracity, reflective of the non-circumscriptive nature of lived experience, and, as in a dream, of there being more to the experiences than can be dealt with by reason.

The passage in *Reveries* regarding his first exposure to sex confirms the presence of an imagination-fact binary even in his boyhood, making us realize how integral it is to his thought and experience. In terms of structure, the content of the passage conforms to a setting of the one against the other – imagination against fact. The whole is enlivened by the perspective of the adult looking back on the child and evoking a gentle humour at the expense of his earlier self, but it also captures the distaste present in the soiling of an innocent, even magical, view of the world. The passage taps into a central cluster of related notions, then: unbelief versus belief; science versus imagination; the factual versus the imaginative; the mechanistic versus the magical; the material versus the spiritual; the search for higher meaning in the face of blighted experience; the seeds of Yeats's later absorption of the downright nature of sex into a broader vision of process, including human elevation and degeneration based on sex (through the dubious theory of eugenics and his ideas on the impact of visual art on the womb of the mother);[32] the question of intellectual authority; the need for corroboration of evidence; the importance of words; and the power of images in evoking spiritual emotion:

---

29. Ibid., 14-15.

30. Ibid., 15.

31. Daniel O'Hara, *Tragic Knowledge: Yeats's* Autobiography *and Hermeneutics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, 64.

32. See "Under Ben Bulben", *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, eds. (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 636-40. From this point on referred to as *VP*.

> My father's unbelief had set me thinking about the evidences of religion and I weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety, for I did not think I could live without religion. All my religious emotions were, I think, connected with clouds and cloudy glimpses of luminous sky, perhaps because of some Bible picture of God's speaking to Abraham or the like. At least I can remember the sight moving me to tears. One day I got a decisive argument for belief. A cow was about to calve, and I went to the field where the cow was with some farm-hands who carried a lantern, and next day I heard that the cow had calved in the early morning. I asked everybody how calves were born, and because nobody would tell me, made up my mind that nobody knew. They were the gift of God, that much was certain, but it was plain that nobody had ever dared to see them come, and children must come in the same way. I made up my mind that when I was a man I would wait up till calf or child had come. I was certain there would be a cloud and a burst of light and God would bring the calf in the cloud out of the light. That thought made me content until a boy of twelve or thirteen, who had come on a visit for the day, sat beside me in a hay-loft and explained all the mechanism of sex. He had learnt all about it from an elder boy whose pathic he was (to use a term he would not have understood) and his description, given, as I can see now, as if he were telling of any other fact of physical life, made me miserable for weeks. After the first impression wore off, I began to doubt if he had spoken truth, but one day I discovered a passage in the encyclopaedia, though I only partly understood its long words, that confirmed what he had said. I did not know enough to be shocked at his relation to the elder boy, but it was the first breaking of the dream of childhood.[33]

The present self observes the past self from the point of view of past ignorance, but incorporates into the narrative a continuing theme throughout the poet's life, that of belief. He manages to convey the child's innocence with the humour of the adult's perspective, yet also suggests the seriousness of the matter to the child, in telling of his "great anxiety", of how his views conflicted with those of his father (at an age when the authority of the father could not be intellectually or existentially contested). The clichéd nature of the child's "religious emotions" are in keeping with his stage of life, and add humour, never overstated, to the account. The "clouds" and "luminous sky" are, however, rescued from present cliché by our extended awareness of Yeats's work: we recall how they are to become significant images, which will recur in major poems concerning varying existential issues, such as "A Woman Homer Sung", "Paudeen", and "Fallen Majesty", if we only consider his work prior to 1916 (the publication date of *Reveries*).[34] After this date the same imagery is to be found in "The Tower", "Meditations in Time of Civil War", "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931", and "An Acre of Grass".[35] In these first two sentences of the extract, then, we find serious matter combined with adulthood's humorous view of the child's perspective. This innocently conveyed, unforced humour has serious enough ironic

33. Yeats, *Reveries*, 42-5.

34. *VP*, 254; 291; 314.

35. Ibid., 409; 417; 490; 575.

undertones: for any reader familiar with the poet's work, originally vacuous clichés are reinvested with imaginative substance.

The situation of the child asking about the secrets of birth and being fobbed off with a false reason is a stock one, and is inevitably amusing. Yeats immerses us in the child's viewpoint through the use of a cluster of absolute statements in a few lines: "that much was certain"; "it was plain"; "children must come in the same way"; "I was certain". This perspective is further stabilized by the unquestioning application of the child's belief: calves are "the gift of God", and they come through God's agency "in the cloud out of the light". But then this naïve innocence, amusing to an adult's eyes, is brought into juxtaposition with a third perspective, that of the knowing child "of twelve or thirteen", who displaces miracle and wonder with a rationalist account of, pointedly, "the *mechanism* of sex" (my emphasis). The stark factual nature of the account makes the young Yeats "miserable for weeks", thereby exposing the passage to yet another mood, the miserable one of the child at the mercy of unsavoury knowledge. The mood of childish curiosity, the subsequent wonder, are juxtaposed with the mood of amusement, and now with that of misery based on disgust at the factual displacement of wonder by mechanistic natural process.

This play of moods is not incidental to the stock theme of lost innocence. The child eventually leaves his "misery" behind, as children do, but not through mere forgetfulness; rather, because of the same entrenched wilfulness we found in his account of his first séance, which will serve the man as it did the boy. Ironically, Yeats retains his innocence in the face of the homosexual relationship between the boy and his older partner – he did not know enough to be "shocked" – but yet experiences "the first breaking of the dream of childhood" because of a factual account which turns miracle into mechanism, and which is corroborated by a factual source, an encyclopaedia, a text not mastered by the child, but which he understands to be a source of objective knowledge. But after his initial bout of misery, he begins to "doubt" the account of the older boy, and so wilfully spurns that knowledge.

Again, the elements in this account are not tangential to the work as a whole, are not tangential to the entire Yeatsian oeuvre. In the passage Yeats seeks confirmation for belief, as he was to do throughout his life. Yet, in the face of apparent ignorance, he must, like Blake's Los, affirm his own "system" or be subjected to the perhaps incompatible systems of others;[36] in doing so, he introduces an agency beyond the quotidian, couched in semi-humorous terms, another typically Yeatsian move.

Yeatsian Self-parody 2: *A Vision*

Humour is also used to deflate a much later version of the self (though appearing in verse at roughly the same time *Reveries* was published). In the poem "The Phases of the Moon" Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes, two personae

36. William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. W.H. Stevenson (London and New York: Longman, 1989), 648.

dispatched by Yeats in the stories "Rosa Alchemica", "The Tables of the Law" and "The Adoration of the Magi" in the late 1890s,[37] now reappear, to critique him and his latest researches, which are part of the machinery of *A Vision*. They understand as a matter of course what he must labour over intensely, with fruitless results. It is as if Yeats, aware of the eccentric figure he sometimes makes in the face of the world (as suggested earlier), anticipates, and so disarms this criticism, bound to emerge from such dubious-seeming work. Aherne and Robartes refer disparagingly to the poet, working, "after the manner of his kind" (itself a contemptuous generalisation), late at night in his tower, which is tinted by the romanticism associated with past literary towers:[38]

> The light proves that he is reading still.
> He has found, after the manner of his kind,
> Mere images; chosen this place to live in
> Because, it may be, of the candle-light
> From the far tower where Milton's Platonist
> Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince:
> The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,
> An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;
> And now he seeks in book or manuscript
> What he shall never find.

The humour becomes more intricate in intention, as, though the supposed barrenness of the research might be the message here conveyed, Yeats is actually pointing to the extra-human sources involved in the writing of *A Vision*, along with valued sources of literary inspiration. Ahearne and Robartes thus insinuate into the poem a sly message at the expense of would-be critics. And though themselves projections of the poet's own thought, they actually mirror to an extent the autonomous thought of Yeats's spirit interlocuters involved in *A Vision*. Thus Ahearne asks of Robartes:

> Why should not you
> Who know it all ring at his door, and speak
> Just truth enough to show that his whole life
> Will scarcely find for him a broken crust
> Of all those truths that are your daily bread;
> And when you have spoken take the roads again?

Later, as Robartes is expounding the existential burden of the phases of the moon, Aherne laughs in an "*aged, high-pitched voice* / *… thinking of the man within,* / *His sleepless candle and laborious pen*". At the end of the poem, Aherne imagines himself playing the part of "some drunken countryman", who would stand at Yeats's door, and

37. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, vol.8 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908), 105-77.
38. *VP*, 373.

> … mutter there until he caught
> "Hunchback and Saint and Fool," and that they came
> Under the three last crescents of the moon,
> And then I'd stagger out. He'd crack his wits
> Day after day, yet never find the meaning.[39]

The image of Yeats is hardly a flattering one, and ties in, though from the *opposite* of a skeptical viewpoint (and this is where Yeats gets his own back), with the popular prejudices levelled against poets and researchers into the arcane.

Robartes and Aherne are used in a similar destabilizing way in the final (1937) version of *A Vision*, in the "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends" which prefaces that work (as does a repeated version of "The Phases of the Moon".)[40] James Olney long since, in "W.B. Yeats's Daimonic Memory", considered the style of the "Stories" as follows:

> The virtually impenetrable maze of humor and fiction that contains and obscures whatever statement is being made should reveal to us that these truths, though stated literally, are not literal but symbolic…. Michael Robartes's story is wrapped in John Duddon's story, which is in turn wrapped in John Aherne's letter, and they are all like so many trial balloons sent up by Yeats – and I mean sent up in a double sense – so that if someone shoots them down neither Yeats nor his Vision will suffer.[41]

Olney begins to fathom the purpose of this manifestation of Yeatsian style, but stops short at the level of the "symbolic". Husain Haddawy, translator of the 1992 Everyman edition of the *Arabian Nights*, offers a possible, style-centred means for delving further. He notes how the great nineteenth century translators of the work (Edward Lane, John Payne and Richard Burton) with their exoticisms and archaisms violated the spirit of the original, most fundamentally by "failing to see that fidelity to the precise detail was crucial to achieve the essential quality of the *Nights*, by bridging the gap between the natural and the supernatural". Haddawy explains that the storyteller of the *Nights* does this bridging by using "precise and concrete detail" in a "matter-of-fact way in description, narration, and conversation", so that "the phantasmagoric is based on the concrete, the supernatural grounded in the natural".[42] Yeats's task with his "Stories of Michael Robartes" (as with the earlier "Phases of the Moon") is precisely to bring the natural and supernatural together, to suggest a congruence of dimensions that, through humour, does not take itself too seriously, in accordance with modern predispositions and belief patterns. The appearance of what is strange in this work, though, reinforces the presence of artifice, but also, as Olney notes, the symbolic, and (in a context where the supernatural

39. *VP*, 375; 377.
40. *Vision*, 23-40; 41-47.
41. Olney, 598.
42. Haddawy, xxv.

blends effortlessly with the natural) the suggestion of possible veracity underlying symbol. Style is used by Yeats here, then, to indicate the complementary relation of two opposite things, a pair of antinomies: artifice and truth. The two undermine each other to an extent, but also reinforce each other. Artifice that freely admits its own culpability by laughing at its own apparent pretensions, approaches the condition of truth; and if this is so, why should not humorous artifice be an oblique bearer of a deeper truth, otherwise blocked by the serious, rational mind?

A passage from near the conclusion of the "Stories" reads as follows:

> Mary Bell then opened the ivory box and took from it an egg the size of a swan's egg, and standing between us and the dark window curtains, lifted it up that we might all see its colour. "Hyacinthine blue, according to the Greek lyric poet" [Sappho], said Robartes. "I bought it from an old man in a green turban at Teheran; it had come down from eldest son to eldest son for many generations."

Aherne's intervention provokes a response from Robartes not unlike Yeats's nonchalant response in Conor Cruise O'Brien's anecdote:

> "No", said Aherne, "you never were in Teheran". "Perhaps Aherne is right", said Robartes. "Sometimes my dreams discover facts, and sometimes lose them, but it does not matter. I bought this egg from an old man in a green turban in Arabia, or Persia, or India…."

"It does not matter" chimes with "Does it really matter?" from the O'Brien anecdote. So the self-parody, again, perhaps incorporates Yeats's awareness of what might have been popular fare in the clubs and pubs of Dublin. The "Stories" concludes with a letter addressed to "Mr Yeats" (involving the author in his fiction, in the manner of Menippean satire), refers to his writings, and mentions the characters in the "Stories" as if they were actual persons.[43] The mingling of fact and fiction coloured by humour prompts a specific mood, wherein the improbable is made readily acceptable, as in the *Arabian Nights*.[44]

43. Yeats, *Vision*, 38-40.

44. Yeats's library contains the 1923 Casanova edition of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night: Rendered from the Literal and Complete Version of Dr J.C. Mardrus and Collated with Other Sources by E. Powys Mathers* (Wayne K. Chapman, *The W.B. and George Yeats Library: A Short-title Catalogue*. (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2019), 28). There is textual evidence in "Rosa Alchemica" that Yeats was familiar much earlier with the Burton translation of the *Nights* (see Nicholas Meihuizen, '"I say that a Djinn spoke': Arabian Influences in Yeats", in *English Studies in Africa* 46.1 (2003): 37-40).

Conclusion

There is a serious enough point to Yeats's strategy in this prologue: it is a means of conveying a truth, and not simply a symbolic truth or an aesthetic truth, to recall Olney and Haddawy. The style, drawing on figures which span over forty years of creative work (and which thus gain a degree of canonical authority), underwrites the literal truth of George's mediumship, the veracity of which, however, seems to lie in a scarcely comprehensible realm where fact meets fiction: humour – because it distances itself to an extent from the Balzacian human comedy (which includes the poet himself) – helps suspend disbelief. The humour in *Reveries*, more keyed to the tone of wonderment which permeates that book, and which is reflective of a developing consciousness, seems to counter the doctrinally-weighted humour in *A Vision*, with its freer, more generous feel. At the same time, though, a continuity is suggested, where the mysteries of existence are met with by an attitude not unconnected to Yeatsian joy, mentioned earlier; this fact perhaps brings to mind the old Chinamen in "Lapis Lazuli", who, looking out over all the "tragic scene" of existence, see beyond this surface, as a consequence of which:

> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.[45]

Bibliography

Adams, Hazard. *The Book of Yeats's* A Vision, *Romantic Modernism and Antithetical Tradition*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965.

Blake, William. *The Complete Poems*. Edited by W.H. Stevenson. London and New York: Longman, 1989.

Chapman, Wayne K. *The W.B. and George Yeats Library: A Short-title Catalogue*. Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2019.

Connerty, Michael. "Comic Acts". *Irish Arts Review* 39, no.1: 100-103.

Haddawy, Husain. "Introduction", *The Arabian Nights*. London: Everyman's Library, 1992.

Helmling, Steven. *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman and Yeats*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Jeffares, A.N. and K.G.W. Cross, eds. *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats: 1865–1939*. New York: Macmillan, 1965.

Korkowski, Eugene. "Yeats's *Vision* as Philosophic Satura". *Eire – Ireland* 12, no. 3 (1977): 62-70.

McGuinness, Frank. "A Kick in the Head", *The Poetry Ireland Review* 116 (2015): 46-7.

Meihuizen, Nicholas. '"I say that a Djinn spoke': Arabian Influences in Yeats". *English Studies in Africa* 46, no.1 (2003): 31-46.

45. *VP* 567. The two old Chinamen encapsulate most directly in verse Yeats's idea of "tragic joy".

Miles, Chris. "Occult Retraction: Cornelius Agrippa and the Paradox of Magical Language", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no.4 (2008): 433-456.

Müller, Elizabeth. "The Mask of Derision in Yeats's Prologue to *A Vision* (1937)". *Yeats Annual 19: Yeats's Mask*. Edited by Margaret Mills Harper and Warwick Gould. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013, 121-46.

Nänny, Max. "Ezra Pound and the Menippean Tradition", *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 11, no.3 (1982): 395-405.

O'Brien, Conor Cruise. *Passion and Cunning, and Other Essays*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988.

O'Donnell, William. "The Textual History of Yeats's *On the Boiler*". *Yeats Annual 21: Yeats's Legacies*. Edited by Warwick Gould. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018, 391-446.

O'Hara, Daniel. *Tragic Knowledge: Yeats's* Autobiography *and Hermeneutics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Olney, James. "W.B. Yeats's Daimonic Memory". *The Sewanee Review* 85 (1977): 583-603.

Pyle, Hilary. *The Different Worlds of Jack B. Yeats: His Cartoons and Illustrations*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994.

Raine, Kathleen. *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Writings of W.B. Yeats*. Mountrath: Dolmen Press, 1986.

Tuohy, Frank. *Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1976.

Sato, Yoko. "Yeatsian Heroes and Laughter". *Journal of Irish Studies* 34 (2019): 42-52.

Yeats, W.B. *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, vol.8. London: Chapman and Hall, 1908.

——. *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1916.

——. *Autobiographies*. London: Macmillan, 1955.

——. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Edited by Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: Macmillan, 1957.

——. *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1961.

——. *A Vision: The Revised 1937 Edition*. *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, vol.14. Edited by Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine E. Paul. New York: Scribner, 2015.

Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026 – Pages 301-316

Broken Mirror

*By Zane Ozola**

This paper examines the transformation of aesthetics by tracing the shifting relationship between art and reality through the conceptual frameworks of Oscar Wilde and Paul Virilio. It interrogates the functions of representation, imagination, and immediacy within the contexts of modern and postmodern aesthetics. Drawing on Wilde's paradoxical defense of artifice in The Decay of Lying and Virilio's critique of technological perception, the paper situates contemporary art as a cultural domain suspended between fiction and hyperreality. It further investigates the metaphysical and ethical consequences of the erosion of representation, asking how this rupture unsettles aesthetic theories grounded in mimesis (mimēsis) and contemplative distance. By foregrounding aesthetics as the domain of the sensible (aisthēsis), the locus where artwork and spectator converge, the paper reframes the critique of representation as a critique of fractured perception. Wilde and Virilio are approached not as antagonistic but as complementary figures: Wilde affirms the imaginative lie as the precondition of aesthetic experience, while Virilio laments the collapse of perception into immediacy. Through this interdisciplinary dialogue, the paper contributes to ongoing debates in the philosophy and theory of art concerning the status of representation, the crisis of meaning in contemporary aesthetics, and the ethical stakes of artistic expression in the contemporary culture.

Keywords: *aesthetics, representation, immediacy, Oscar Wilde, Paul Virilio*

Introduction

What happens when art no longer mirrors the world but starts to produce it? This paper examines the shifting metaphysical and ethical orientations of art from the late nineteenth century to the contemporary moment. Through Oscar Wilde's ironic defense of "lying" in art and Paul Virilio's critique of the aesthetics of immediacy, it asks: how has the relation between art and reality been reconfigured by the advent of modernity, the acceleration of technological progress, and the ensuing crisis of representation in postmodern culture? And what are the implications of abandoning *mimesis* as an aesthetic principle?

The inquiry unfolds within the philosophical domain of aesthetics, while drawing upon art history and cultural theory. Its method is interpretative and rhetorical: a juxtaposition of two thinkers from distinct epochs to trace the philosophical logic of aesthetic transformation across modernity and postmodernity. Aesthetics is here conceived as the sensible field in which art and life intersect, the site where perception itself is formed, unsettled, and contested.

*Scientific Assistant, University of Latvia, Latvia.

Wilde and Virilio are brought together not *despite* their differences, but because their thought illuminates the aesthetic field from opposing yet convergent perspectives. Wilde's nineteenth-century aestheticism, with its paradoxical defense of fiction as *truth*, reclaims imagination as the vital ground not only of aesthetic experience but of *reality* itself. Virilio, writing within a media-saturated contemporary culture, exposes how the technological collapse of distance between artwork and spectator destabilizes the very experience of the *real*. Their juxtaposition underscores the fragility of the aesthetic as both the medium of expression and the site in which reality is constituted.

In his 1891 essay *The Decay of Lying*, presented as a Socratic dialogue between the fictional characters Vivian and Cyril, Oscar Wilde inverts the traditional relationship between art and reality, proposing a new aesthetics: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. [..] Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction."[1] Although framed as a satirical late-Romantic speculation, Wilde's aesthetics offer a provocative perspective on European art history and the metaphysical relationship between art and reality, or *life*. He presents art not as a reflection of the world but as its creative source, proclaiming that in arts "as a method, realism is a complete failure."[2] According to Wilde, when art begins to mimic reality, it loses its vitality and becomes sterile – trapped within the confines of "poor, probable, uninteresting human life."[3] For Wilde, the capacity to create reality *via* fiction is the highest expression of human imagination – an act he equates with *life* itself. The decline of lying "as an art, a science, and a social pleasure,"[4] he says, led to the deterioration of modern art and literature, which in his time had embraced realism and the pursuit of accurate representation.

Contemporary art no longer merely draws upon reality as its source; it increasingly blurs the boundaries between fiction and fact, illusion and experience, most notably through what has come to be described as *anti-representationalism*[5].

1. Wilde, Oscar. 1905 [1891]), "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p. 39.

2. Ibid., p. 25.

3. Ibid., p. 29.

4. Ibid., p. 8.

5. Anti-representation in art refers to a retreat from, or rejection of, traditional modes of depiction and representation. Artists and aesthetic theorists who adopt an anti-representational approach seek alternatives to the direct portrayal of reality, challenging the notion that art should serve as a mirror of the visible world. Practices of anti-representation in art include, for example, conceptual art, minimalism, performance and installation art, as well as the deconstruction of traditional media. See. Verstegen, Ian (2016) "The anti-sign: anti-representationalism in contemporary art

Art practices today pursue this blurring in multidimensional ways—interrogating authorship, presence, and the very constitution of reality and perception. Notable examples include the immersive *"Stalinist Truman Show"* of the DAU project[6], Marina Abramović's mixed reality performance *The Life*[7], and the AI-generated portrait *Edmond de Belamy* created by the Paris-based collective Obvious[8], which raises provocative questions about authorship, creativity, and machine agency. These works do not represent reality in a classical sense but rather simulate, distort, or co-produce it. Similarly, relational aesthetics (as theorized by *Nicolas Bourriaud*[9]) and immersive installations by artists like Bill Viola and James Turrell prioritize sensory affect, spatial experience, and direct interaction, further challenging traditional representational frameworks. Yet with the emergence of AI-generated art, new ontological and ethical dilemmas come into view: the effacement of the artist's hand, the opacity of algorithmic processes, and the increasing indistinguishability between the original and the synthetic as sites of aesthetic experience.

These developments propel the anti-representational trajectory into a new phase—one in which perception itself becomes unstable, and the boundaries between artistic vision and machinic production are not merely blurred but increasingly undecidable. What happens when *anti-representationalism*—emerging as the paradoxical offspring of modern realism— dissolves not only the traditional separations between artwork and spectator, artistic expression and political action, creative participation and direct involvement, artist and art, but ultimately effaces the very distinction between art and life itself?

---

theory", *Culture, Theory and Critique*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 215–227, Taylor & Francis. Also, Rancière, Jacques (2007) *The Future of the Image,* tr. G. Elliott, London: Verso.

6. DAU is a 2019 Russian film project directed by Ilya Khrzhanovsky. DAU is an ongoing experiment, evolving from a biopic about a Soviet physicist into a large-scale project - part cinematic cycle, part behavioral experiment - involving hundreds of participants from around the world. Combining elements of film, theatre, science, psychology, architecture, visual arts and performance, it has created a complex and absorbing world that has to be lived as much as seen. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1728616/

7. Written and performed by Marina Abramović, *The Life* works exclusively in Mixed Reality, and captured by 4D Views with devices provided by Magic Leap. Marina Abramović ventures into Mixed Reality to explore this notion further and map new territory at the intersection of technology and performance. https://www.widewalls.ch/ma rina-abramovic-serpentine-galleries/

8. Edmond de Belamy is a generative adversarial network portrait painting constructed in 2018 by Paris-based arts-collective Obvious. It was the first artwork created using Artificial Intelligence and was featured in a Christie's auction. It was sold for $432,500. https://obvious -art.com/ portfolio/edmond-de-belamy/

9. Bourriaud, Nicolas. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics.* Tr. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.

What if this convergence lends credence to Wilde's *tongue-in-cheek* claim that *life imitates art?* What if, in concealing truth within fiction, Wilde gestures toward a deeper reality? And what if lived reality itself is, at its core, a construct of the imagination—an imagination as fundamentally human as it is generative of life? If so, what are the philosophical consequences?

To take a brief historical detour, it is worth recalling that, not long after the publication of Wilde's essay, the Western European artistic tradition underwent a revolutionary transformation that redefined the relationship between representation and human reality. The visual arts began to abandon established modes of depiction, striving instead for more immediate and unmediated forms of expression. This shift was propelled both by evolving aesthetic canons and by the advent of new technologies, which opened previously unimagined terrains of experimentation. In consequence, the formal criteria as well as the conceptual foundations of art were profoundly reconfigured.

The twentieth century in the West began with great hopes for human liberation, yet it ultimately became the century that proclaimed the end of history,[10] the end of philosophy,[11] the end of art,[12] and the death of God[13] — the very foundations upon which the Europe had once rested. The World Wars erupted as catastrophic events that came to define the twentieth century while the Holocaust — an unprecedented escalation and mechanization of terror— continues to serve as a central reference point in contemporary discussions of politics, ethics, and cultural memory. The very dream of technological and scientific progress—once imagined as the path to human emancipation—had instead fueled the war machine, while at the same time reshaping society and transforming collective modes of perception, that is, culture itself. These traumas bound art ever more closely to political discourse. Confronted with the disintegration of reality and the erosion of human dignity, the arts sought new strategies of survival within a cultural landscape haunted by latent terror, pervasive fear, and existential emptiness.

Walter Benjamin[14] observed that the reproducibility of images through photography and film fundamentally altered the conditions of perception, while

---

10. Fukuyama, Francis. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, NY: Free Press.

11. Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" (1964) in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1977), 427–449.

12. Danto, Arthur. (2005 [1986]), "The End of Art," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, p. 81–116.

13. Nietzsche. Friedrich. (2001 [1882]) *The Gay Science,* trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

14. Benjamin, Walter. (2008) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations,* ed. by Hannah Arendt, tr. by Harry Zohn. London: Penguin.

Arthur Danto later argued that the breakdown of conventional representation marked the philosophical "end" of art as it had been traditionally conceived. Both diagnoses point to revolutionary aesthetic movements propelled by a utopian impulse—and at times by explicit programs—to envision and enact a radically transformed future. The boundary between art and *life* began to erode, as the artist's role expanded beyond aesthetic creation to encompass social, political, and existential engagement – artists no longer merely represented revolution – they sought to embody it.

Russian Constructivists such as Rodchenko sought to integrate art with politics and industry, while Dadaists like Hannah Höch employed collage to critique war and social norms. Movements such as Futurism and the Bauhaus embraced urbanization and technology, whereas Abstract Expressionists like Pollock pursued authentic individuality through expressive, non-representational forms. These trajectories promised not only progress, but a total reconfiguration of human existence. In this process, the boundaries between artistic expression, ideological critique, and political activism became increasingly entangled. Artists often responded by transgressing the remaining taboos and sacralities, attempting to pierce through the unbearable weight of reality, and as observes Paul Virilio,[15] becoming *pitiless*[16].

Today's art world has expanded dramatically, and with the disintegration of modernity's master narratives, it has fractured into a multiplicity of experimental practices that resist unification within any coherent discourse. Since the rise of Pop Art, no single dominant style has prevailed; instead, contemporary art reflects a broader cultural shift toward fragmentation, pluralism, and stylistic hybridity—phenomena further intensified by the growing integration of entertainment, mass media, and commercial culture into artistic production. Yet despite the fragmentation of contemporary practice and the pulverization of tradition, art continues to uphold the ideal of originality and to assert its capacity for offering new perspectives on the world. Increasingly, it engages with popular

15. Virilio, Paul. (2010) *A Pitiless Art: Conversations with Sylvère Lotringer.* New York: Semiotext(e).

16. Examples of this "pitiless" dimension in contemporary art include: Viennese Actionism (e.g., Hermann Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater*), which used ritualistic violence and animal blood to confront existential horror; Santiago Sierra's socially charged performances that reduce labor and marginalization to spectacle; Harun Farocki's *Serious Games*, revealing the simulated aesthetics of military violence; Luc Delahaye's large-format war photography, presenting conflict with chilling formal elegance; and Damien Hirst's works like *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, which commodify mortality into visceral spectacle. These works embody the aesthetics of immediacy, rupture, and hyper-reality that Virilio associates with the collapse of traditional representation and the disappearance of ethical distance in contemporary visual culture.

culture, entertainment, design, and fashion—blurring the boundary between high and popular art[17] more than ever before.

As Wilde astutely observed, "A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher."[18] This observation could aptly describe contemporary art's entanglement with the globalized market, where it functions as a creative force within the culture and entertainment industries.

Today's art functions as an experimental laboratory – challenging tradition, questioning taboos, and destabilizing established meanings. It seeks to subvert symbols and dissolve social, cultural, religious, and political boundaries in the pursuit of continual innovation and radical originality. In this process, it produces alternative realities, imagined utopias, and confronts social bias and conflicts, thereby contributing to broader debates about the futures of global society. As Nicolas Bourriaud has argued[19], contemporary art frequently abandons the object in favor of interaction, proposing new modes of being-together in a fragmented world. In times of political, social, and economic crisis, art emerges as one of the last bastions of expressive freedom – raising urgent, often controversial questions about what is culturally acceptable, valuable, or beautiful, and even challenging the very foundations of what it means to be human.

Classical aesthetic theories and philosophies of art often falter when confronted with today's pulverized traditions, emergent mythologies, and the fluid, contested criteria of what qualifies as art. Within a landscape defined by fragmentation and hybridity, art engages with reality—and with human life—more directly and urgently than ever before. Yet this engagement can no longer be grasped solely at the level of artistic practice; after the proclaimed "end of art," it belongs more fundamentally to the domain of aesthetics, where the very conditions of perception and meaning are constituted, contested, and reconfigured. In this regard, Jacques Rancière contends that aesthetics is inherently political, as it reconfigures the "distribution of the sensible"[20] – the field via which we perceive and make sense of what is *real*.

In this light, contemporary art's capacity to *reimagine* perception of *what is* may be key not only to redefining art, but also to reclaiming a shared sense of reality/humanity. The arts can provide existential perspectives that increasingly intersect with cultural and political life, and even clinical psychology and

17. Bourdieu, Pierre. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Tr. by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

18. Oscar Wilde, (1905 [1891]), "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p. 32.

19. Bourriaud, Nicolas. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics.* Tr. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.

20. Rancière, Jacques. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible.* Tr. by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum.

therapeutic practices[21]. As a vehicle for critique, activism, and even healing, the expanding role of the artistic field raises a pressing question: can it contribute to restoring the image of the human in an age marked by disinformation, fragmentation, and "post-truth"[22], of a deep collapse of reality itself? In a world increasingly described as post-historical[23], post-cultural[24], post-Christian[25] and even post-human[26], the stakes of artistic expression have grown even more complex. Art practices today often offer a space for shared meanings and new narratives in openness, new sensible territories. Yet must we take this claim seriously in an era in which, within art, everything is permitted—where no boundary remains inviolable—or does such boundless permissiveness conceal a more fatal loss, one in which meaning, depth, and perhaps even *life* itself quietly slip away?

In his essay *A Pitiless Art*, Paul Virilio investigates the roots of contemporary cultural brutality, revealing how modern aesthetics have come to absorb and mirror the violence and desensitization that pervade modern life. For Virilio, this "pitiless" dimension of art is not simply a representation of trauma, but rather a manifestation of a deeper crisis in perception – one in which the traditional boundaries of representation collapse, and immediacy overtakes reflection. Virilio provocatively asks, "Did the Nazi terror lose the war but, in the end, win the peace?"[27] – suggesting that the aesthetic and perceptual strategies born of totalitarian violence have, in subtle ways, permeated postwar culture, shaping the visual language and psychological conditions of contemporary life. He cites philosopher Jacqueline Lichtenstein[28], who, after visiting the Auschwitz Museum in 1997, reflects with unsettling clarity: "In the museum, I suddenly had the

21. Russo, Rebecca. 2012. *Videoinsight®: Healing with Contemporary Art.* Bologna: Damiani Editore.

22. Lee C. McIntyre. (2018) *Post-Truth*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

23. Vilém Flusser. (2013) *Post-History. Thinking Possibilities for Freedom in a Programmed World,* trans. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, Univocal Publishing.

24. Steiner, George. (1973) *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

25. Vattimo, Gianni. (2002) *After Christianity.* Tr. by Luca D'Isanto and David Webb. New York: Columbia University Press.

26. Posthumanism critiques the universalist posture of the idea of "Man" as the alleged "measure of all things." This theory is prevalent in contemporary art discussions and explored in depth by such authors as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Povinelli.

27. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 28.

28. Jacqueline Lichtenstein (1947) is a French philosopher, art historian, and professor of aesthetics and the philosophy of art at the University of Paris IV – Paris-Sorbonne. A central theme of Lichtenstein's work is the reception of colour by various disciplines, such as philosophy, art, sociology and ethics. A focal point for her analysis is the antagonistic relationship between colour and the notion of the design or plan of a work.

impression I was in a museum of contemporary art. I took the train back, telling myself that they had won! They had won since they'd produced forms of perception that are all of a piece within the mode of destruction, they made their own."[29] For Lichtenstein – as for Virilio – this moment signals a chilling continuity: the perceptual frameworks born in the machinery of destruction have migrated into the aesthetic language of contemporary art. The museum, meant to memorialize atrocity, mirrors the formal and affective codes – forms of expression – in a pitiless cultural present.

In Virilio's view, "pitiless art" is not merely symbolic – it is a multidimensional and direct manifestation of destruction, reflecting a contemporary cultural perception shaped by a deeply distorted collective mentality. Unpacking the aesthetic, political, and technological dynamics that underlie this shift, Virilio poses a critical question: *"Contemporary art, sure, but contemporary with what?"*[30] This challenge calls into question the foundations of our present aesthetic paradigm, where immediacy replaces reflection, and violence is often no longer represented but enacted via form and perception – performed as present, here and now as *real*.

For Virilio, contemporary art is marked by the collapse of traditional representation and its perceptual frameworks, replaced by a regime of *immediacy* – a direct presentation of experience in which the boundaries between the real and the virtual dissolve. In this context, art becomes increasingly entangled with advanced technologies, new media, and what he calls "hyper-abstraction"[31] – aesthetic strategies that intensify rather than mediate perception. These developments generate a distorted sensory field, leading Virilio to question whether it is still possible for art to resist denying or destroying our capacity to grasp reality. Instead of fostering critical distance or contemplative insight, such art risks overwhelming the viewer with presence, sensation, and data. In this regard, even Theodor Adorno's famous assertion about "the impossibility of writing a poem after Auschwitz" [32] has dissipated in what he terms the "aesthetics of disappearance" [33] – a condition marked by the vanishing of the horizon, the medium, critical distance, and ultimately, the human itself. In this perceptual regime, art no longer bears witness or reflects; it dissolves into immediacy, erasing the space necessary for reflection, memory, or empathy.

---

29. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 28.

30. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 27.

31. Ibid., p. 14.

32. "The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today." Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (London: MIT Press, 1997), 34.

33. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, 1991).

There is no definitive answer as to what caused the rupture in the art historical tradition of representation – arguably the foundational expressive mode of visual art – which was gradually abandoned in favor of radical presence. In his essay *The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense*, Arthur Danto speculates: "Perhaps the challenge came from photography and moving pictures. Perhaps it came from a complex loss of cultural faith in Western values." [34] For Virilio, however, these two aspects – technological and ethical – are not separate but deeply intertwined. He sees them as complementary dimensions of a broader transformation rooted in the scientific worldview of modernity (a worldview that had already begun to shape aesthetic ideals in the time of Oscar Wilde). This shift undermined the symbolic and reflective dimensions of art, replacing them with mechanisms of immediacy and control.

Philosophically, a major intellectual shift in nineteenth-century Europe was the rise of a scientific worldview, accompanied by new theories of mind that sought to reduce human consciousness to empirical data, sensory inputs, and material substrates—atoms, neurons, convolutions, and lobes—thus beginning to redefine what it meant to be human. As philosopher William Barrett argues in *The Death of the Soul*,[35] this transformation marked the displacement of inwardness and existential meaning by technical rationality and mechanistic thought. These developments were sustained by an accompanying ideology: scientism[36] – the conviction that science alone provides the ultimate pathway to truth and mastery over nature. Scientific materialism, in its drive for control and objectivity, increasingly disregarded the non-instrumental, qualitative aspects of human existence. This mechanistic ideal of modernity had, in fact, been anticipated much earlier. As Francis Bacon declared in the preface to *The New Organon*: "There remains one hope of salvation [...] that the entire work of the mind be started over again [...] by machines."[37]

For Virilio the emergence of a new scientific mode of perception[38] – one that privileged objectivity, control, and detachment – was the same mindset that enabled the development of anesthetic drugs and "allowed the doctor or surgeon to diagnose illness due to the ability to repress the emotion – pity."[39] This perceptual shift was visually articulated in the anatomical art of the nineteenth century, which exposed the hidden interiors of the human body with clinical

34. Arthur Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* 37, no. 4, (1998): 127-143.

35. Barrett, William. 1986. *The Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer.* New York: Anchor Books.

36. Ibid., p. xv.

37. Francis Bacon. (2000 [1620]) *The New Organon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 30.

38. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 28.

39. Ibid., p. 40.

precision, and in dramatic war paintings that rendered violence with stark immediacy.[40]

Virilio, in what he calls "scientific propaganda,"[41] identifies an ideological framework that demanded immediate access to reality and the elimination of interpretive distance—an impulse that has continued to shape modern European culture, aesthetics, and epistemology to this day. This epistemic shift helped to cultivate the "pitiless" aesthetics of modernity: an aesthetic sensibility stripped of empathy and defined by exposure, immediacy, and technological vision. Thus, the notion of *pity* for Virilio functions not only as an ethical reminder but also as a lost perceptual and even existential category – signaling the emotive and sensitive dimension of experience that modern science and culture have systematically suppressed or explained away through empirical evidence.

The aesthetic ideal of *immediacy* in visual art is not a modern invention; since Antiquity, painters have sought to depict reality as directly and convincingly as possible. One of the earliest legends of illusionistic power concerns the Greek painter Zeuxis, who was said to have rendered grapes so lifelike that birds attempted to peck at them—an anecdote that testifies to the ancient fascination with realism and the mimetic power of art. Yet classical realism operated within the framework of Aristotelian representation, or *mediation*: it did not abolish the distance between viewer and image, but rather staged a reflective encounter across that distance. This form of *illusionism* was not merely about visual accuracy but about evoking recognition, meaning, and emotional response.

The contemplative space it opened enabled the viewer to perceive not only the subject but also the *act* of representation itself, and thereby to comprehend, reflect, and learn. The artist's gaze, gesture, and technique—visible in brushstrokes, form, and composition—inscribed into the work a living, interpretive, and contemplative dimension. *Immediacy*, therefore, even in its ancient forms, was always mediated by artistic creation and by an implicit ontology of looking. With the advent of photography, however, this tradition of representational realism gave way to radically new level of immediacy – one that redefined the very cultural understanding of what an image *is. Reality*, once opposed to the illusionistic skill of rendering appearances, was now mechanically produced; accordingly, realism, once defined by the artist's capacity for illusion,

40. Historical examples include the anatomical drawings of Andreas Vesalius and Jean-Baptiste Marc Bourgery, whose detailed illustrations of the human body reflect the clinical gaze shaped by scientific rationalism. In the realm of painting, Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) offers a harrowing depiction of human suffering with stark realism, while works by Francisco Goya, such as *The Disasters of War* (1810–20), portray scenes of violence and atrocity with unflinching immediacy. These visual practices exemplify how the scientific and aesthetic impulse toward exposure, immediacy, and control began to override traditional ideals of representation, reflection, and emotional resonance.

41. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 50.

had itself become a function of the machine. For Virilio, photography became a technology of *mirror, light, and speed* – one that attained illusion by "'shooting' reality in its direct presence," as Walter Benjamin described, ""opening up the clear field where all intimacy yields to the clarification of details." This *clear field* is the primary promotional field of propaganda and marketing, of the technological syncretism within which the witness's least resistance to the phatic image is developed." [42] In this shift, the image ceased to be a surface of reflection and became a document of impact, compressing time, perception, and interpretation into a single act of exposure.

Aesthetically, both as representation and as medium, the image—through its technological and aesthetic potential—was pushed to its very limits. With the advent of photography, it was literally inverted through the "negative" and mirrored back as a direct imprint of presence. For Oscar Wilde, such mechanical precision would likely have marked the culmination of artistic stagnation: the ultimate point of boredom, the apogee of dreary realism. Yet it was precisely at this historical juncture that the visual arts faced a profound creative dilemma: whether to preserve figurative, creative, and representational forms of perception, or to "go through the mirror" – abandoning mimetic fidelity in pursuit of unbounded expression. This latter path led to an aesthetic of overexposure[43], dissolving the frame of representation and revealing the dimensions of perception and experience previously inaccessible, though at the cost of dismantling the symbolic and reflective distance that had long defined artistic experience.

Impressionism, as the *pioneer*, sought to apprehend reality through momentary perceptions of light, still striving to preserve a delicate equilibrium between form and intensity—before, as Virilio suggests, "the nihilism of contemporary technology wiped it out once and for all."[44] As the image shifted from a representational form to a mode of perception, it became a field of exploration, experiment, and manipulation. The ensuing twentieth-century movements—Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, among others—each in their own way challenged and dismantled the perceptual structures of representation in pursuit of immediacy, rupture, and abstraction. For Virilio, this metaphorical inversion and negation of representation amounts to nothing less than a war on art itself—a process he sees as masked, to varying degrees, by nearly all contemporary movements. From Cubism onward, modern art became defined by the disintegration of form and the abandonment of figurative technique—signaling not merely a stylistic evolution but a profound transformation in the cultural logic of perception. As Virilio observes, "if so-called

42. Virilio, Paul. (1994) *The Vision Machine.* Translated by Julie Rose. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 23.

43. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 38.

44. Ibid, p. 48.

old-master art remained 'demonstrative' right up until the nineteenth century with Impressionism, the art of the twentieth century became 'monstrative'," [45] whereby representation gave way to a "presentative" aesthetic dominated by immediacy, direct stimulus, sensationalism, and violence. For Virilio, this development does not constitute a liberatory rupture but rather the rise of a pitiless aesthetic sensibility—one that corrodes the contemplative and humane dimensions of art.

The story, the message, the body, the frame, the self, and other forms of perception and expression now became site of radical experimentation. Surrealism submitted the self to unconscious impulses and fantasies, while Viennese Actionism transformed the scientific experiment into a violent and destructive assault on the body. Anti-art inverted symbolic meaning, laying bare its raw, constituent materials. In negating classical forms of representation, these movements transgressed the traditional dualities of aesthetic experience – artist and audience, space and time, mind and matter, reality and abstraction. Transgression itself emerged as the principal measure of value, as aesthetic experience was redefined through immediacy, rupture, and intensity.

Virilio, in his critique of this transformation, describes how contemporary art increasingly abandoned demonstrative distance in favor of "monstrative"[46] immediacy — a spectacle of presence that displaces reflection with confrontation, and representation with raw exposure. In this shift, the aesthetic no longer seeks to deepen understanding, but rather to overwhelm the senses, destabilizing meaning. Virilio, following Walter Benjamin, demonstrates how new conditions of experience and collective perception have been profoundly shaped by technologies such as instantaneous photography, cinematographic newsreels, live coverage, and other interactive visual media. These mechanisms reconfigure perception by collapsing the distance between image and viewer and by replacing contemplation with immediacy. Within this horizon, art itself becomes a ritual of direct involvement, where destruction and transgression are no longer exceptions but constitutive elements of the creative act.

For Virilio, the issue is not merely that the arts have embraced science and technology, but that they have internalized the alienated, instrumental gaze — adopting experiment as a methodology and unveiling the *naked reality* as both aesthetic goal and epistemic truth. In this process, art forfeits its symbolic and poetic dimensions, surrendering its creative and imaginative capacities to the logic of exposure and immediacy. Science, he argues, "desires to be the metaphor of the world, while envisioning itself as a revolution of consciousness," [47]

---

45. Ibid., p. 35.

46 Latin verb *monstrare* — show; point out; *demonstrare* — show; demonstrate. Noun *monstro* — "monster," "monstrosity."

47. Paul Virilio. (1991) *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, p. 42.

displacing the creative, ontological and metaphysical registers through which human beings create meaning and orient themselves in the world.

Within aesthetic experience, the artwork cannot be disentangled from the form through which it is expressed; its representational mode is constitutive of its very meaning.[48] The medium is not merely a vehicle for content but a perceptual framework through which meaning is constituted. Since Aristotle, representation has been understood not only as an aesthetic category but as a fundamental activity of the human psyche – "imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learn his earliest lessons."[49]

And in *Poetics* (335 BC), Aristotle presents imitation (*mimesis*) as more than a means of representing the world as it *is*; for poets, it serves to elicit recognition and emotional engagement from the spectator. As he writes, "the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he' ,"[50] a process that potentially evokes "fear and *pity*."[51] In this sense, *mimesis* functions as a condition of human existence, linking aesthetic experience to the very constitution of humanness, for in the mirror of the other, we encounter a reflection of ourselves.

The rejection of representation inaugurates a radically transformed relationship between artwork and viewer, between art and *reality*, or indeed – between art and *life*. No longer functioning as a site of conscious reflection or imaginative inspiration, art is recast as a field of sensory and psychological stimuli, to which the viewer is passively, and often helplessly, subjected.

It becomes *too real* – or, in Jean Baudrillard's terms, *hyperreal*[52] – a simulation that substitutes for, and ultimately displaces, the *real* itself. In its attempt to escape the ennui of realism by negating the medium, art embraces immediacy and presence, transforming into something virtually real. In this process, often it forfeits its poetic and creative capacities, yielding instead to immersive spectacle, visceral intensity, intellectual abstraction, or ideological critique. As Virilio argues, this aesthetic shift from representative to the "presentative" art signifies the collapse of distance — an art that is "monstrative," overwhelming the viewer rather than engaging them. Such art can no longer be contemplated in the

48. "The medium is the message" — a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it conveys, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.

49Aristotle. (1999) *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Transl. S.H. Butcher. Project Gutenberg, p. 16.

50. Aristotle. (1999) *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Transl. S.H. Butcher. Project Gutenberg, p. 16.

51 Ibid., p. 43.

52. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981.

traditional sense; it must be directly absorbed, virtually consumed, or analytically decoded – yet rarely does it deepen our understanding of the world and *life* itself.

Art that takes the fractured present – the disrupted *here and now* – as both its subject and medium reverses the traditional logic of representation, virtually transmuting *reality* into fiction. This inversion undermines the reflective distance that once defined aesthetic experience, collapsing the boundary between artwork and world, art and life, also – artist and art.

Yet even in this reversal, contemporary humans cannot fully escape what Aristotle identified as the natural order of imitation—a fundamental mode of perception rooted in the human psyche. As he observes in *Poetics*, imitation shapes our earliest acts of understanding. Oscar Wilde recognized this enduring mimetic structure when he wrote of the Greeks: "Hence came their objection to realism. They disliked it on purely social grounds. They felt that it inevitably makes people ugly, and they were perfectly right."[53] In Wilde's view, realism fails precisely because it abandons the imaginative and expressive function of art in favor of dull replication, severing the vital link between perception and creative transformation, the beauty that is *behind* the obvious, as he writes – "Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil."[54]

Though speaking from different centuries, cultures, and perspectives, both Oscar Wilde and Paul Virilio articulate a profound awareness of the metaphysical, ontological, and ethical dimensions that underlie the nature and function of art. For Virilio, aesthetics and ethics are inextricably bound – embedded in the very structure of representation, even when we attempt to treat them as distinct or conceptually distinct. Wilde, by contrast, subverts the conventional hierarchy between art and reality, insisting that art does not mirror life but that life mirrors art. In this inversion, he exposes what is truly at stake in modernity's conquest by realism: nothing less than *life* itself. For him, realism confines the imagination within the narrow bounds of the "what is," producing its reality that is often dull, sterile, and ultimately pitiless—a mere repetition of surface appearances, stripped of creative transformation or ontological meaning.

Virilio, in this regard, pointedly asks: "How can we ultimately fail to twig that the apparent impiety of contemporary art is only ever the inverted image of sacred art, the reversal of the creator's initial question: why is there something instead of nothing?"[55] For him, the transgressive gestures of contemporary art do not constitute a liberation from tradition but rather its dark mirror—a desecrated echo of the sacred impulse at the heart of artistic creation.

Wilde, conversely, affirms that "the basis of life — the energy of life […] is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms

53. Wilde, Oscar. 1905 [1891]), "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p.33.

54. Ibid.

55. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 45

through which this expression can be attained. Think of what we owe to the imitation of Christ, of what we owe to the imitation of Cæsar."[56] In art, life mirrors its dreams, mythologies, and cosmologies; here imagination reflects and reshapes existence. Yet when life itself becomes both the material and the medium of art, the space for *catharsis* dissolves—for no longer mediated through form or fiction, the poetics of the tragic turns literal. The mirror is shattered, and tragedy is no longer staged: it is *real*.

Conclusion

In my view, the aesthetic and ethical upheavals discussed by Wilde and Virilio highlight a central paradox in the evolution of art. As art sought to liberate itself from the representational order of reality, it increasingly came to mirror reality directly – stripped of poetic distance, spiritual resonance, and reflective power. Wilde's ironic proposition that *life imitates art* enigmatically anticipates the rise of anti-representational, immersive, and often hyperreal cultural forms. Virilio, in turn, shows how the same technological and perceptual shifts have transformed art into a site of immediacy and, at times, pitiless confrontation. The rejection of *mimesis* has opened new expressive freedoms but also risks the loss of art's ontological and humanizing dimension. If art becomes indistinguishable from life—or worse, from raw information—it may no longer provide *catharsis*, contemplation, or lead to transcendence. The *broken mirror* thus symbolizes not fragmentation alone, but a call to restore the metaphysical and ontological dimensions of the aesthetic—dimensions that bear a sacral resonance inseparable from what is most deeply human. In this light, the future of art depends not on rejecting reality, but on reimagining how we mediate it through form, fiction, and reflection. Aesthetics, understood as the domain of the sensible, must be reclaimed as the field where aesthetic experience and ethical reflection converge—that is, where ontology, metaphysics, and ethics meet in the constitution of human existence, i.e., *life*.

56. Wilde, Oscar. (1905 [1891]) "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p. 40.

References

Adorno, Theodor W. *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader.* Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Stanford University Press, 2003.

Aristotle. (1999) *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Translated by S. H. Butcher. Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1974

Bacon, Francis. *The New Organon.* Edited by Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Barrett, William. *The Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer.* Anchor Books, 1986.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation.* Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations,* edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. Penguin, 2008.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press, 1984.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics.* Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History.* Princeton University Press, 1997.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image.* Translated by Gregory Elliott. Verso, 2007.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible.* Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. Continuum, 2004.

Russo, Rebecca. *Videoinsight®: Healing with Contemporary Art.* Damiani Editore, 2012.

Virilio, Paul. *A Pitiless Art: Conversations with Sylvère Lotringer.* Semiotext(e), 2010.

Virilio, Paul. *Art and Fear.* Translated by Julie Rose. Continuum, 2003.

Virilio, Paul. *The Vision Machine.* Translated by Julie Rose. Indiana University Press, 1994.

Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying." In *Intentions.* Brentano, 1905 [1891].