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**The role of the ‘approaches of mediation’ in the structural
preservation of the system of mass media**

**A study into the structural continuity of contemporary mass media based
on system theory**

A Master Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts (120 credits) in Visual Culture

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Abstract

The aim of this project is to highlight the structural continuity of contemporary mass media, despite the various changes, both technological and in relation to the agents of mass media, that occurred in the last two decades, following the advent of online journalism. The approach that will be pursued is a structural one, not content analysis. To prove the structural continuity, I am relying on system theory, as articulated by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. To expand his analysis, I am introducing the concepts of *approaches of mediation*, that are a result of the of the circular, continuous production of information within the social system of mass media. The approaches that will be discussed are the interpretation, the narrative, and self-representation. These concepts are borrowed from other fields, yet system theory is a language that unites various fields of inquiry, thus, as I will argue, these could be applied to the system of mass media as well. The method of the project is largely theoretical analysis of various concepts in relation to each other based on a range of theoreticians who articulated these concepts, but a number of *example* sections are included as well, where the effects of the approaches of mediation will be showcased. The examples are dealing with transgender representation in contemporary media. Transgender representation, due to its novelty, is effective in highlighting the importance of structural tools that are relatively static and can be applied to new phenomena as well. Furthermore, transgender representation also highlights the interconnected nature of visual culture and mass media, as well as the particular characteristic of the social system of mass media that makes phenomena visible or invisible, depending on structurally determined distinctions. The overall conclusion of the project is that contemporary mass media is still following the structure of the system of mass media, in particular when it comes to the approaches of mediation, despite the changes in content generation and media agents.

Keywords: system theory, mass media, transgender representation, interpretation, narrative, self-representation

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On February the eleventh, 2020, the former US NBA star Dwyane Wade shook the consumers of American yellow press by announcing, in a popular talk-show on YouTube, that his child, Zaya, is a transgender girl.¹ He was applauded strongly by the audience of the show, those who were present, as he expressed his utmost support towards his kid, no matter her identity. While it could not be more than a few dozen, another two and a half million watched the show indirectly from behind the screen over time, and another five hundred on YouTube expressed their support or contempt for Wade's announcement and pledge of support in the form of comments. A variety of newspapers responded almost immediately, with Vanessa Clark, a journalist of *VOX*, expressing her admiration of Wade's courage for standing up in support of his child, and expressed her opinion that this event might be a '*turning point*' in the fight for the acceptance of trans Americans of color.²

Eddie Scarry, an employee of the *Washington Examiner*, was more critical of Wade's act, dismissing the announcement as mere attention seeking in his article written one day after the event.³ Brad Polumbo, of the same online newspaper, pointed out that in his opinion, there is no child who knows for sure at the age of twelve, and especially not at the age of three, the age Wade claimed his daughter first declared her feminine identity, that they are transgender.⁴

As the information spread, more voiced their opinion. *BFoundAPen*, a user of the amateur writing platform Medium called out to the greater public as he proclaimed that *we* need

¹ TheEllenShow, 'Dwyane Wade's Candid Talk About Supporting His 12-Year-Old's Gender Identity', YouTube, 20/01/2020, [online video], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=58&v=AG9-Q6UabfQ&feature=emb_logo>, accessed 26/02/2020.

² V. Clark, 'Dwyane Wade's unflinching support of his trans daughter is a turning point', Vox, 14/02/2020 <<https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/2/14/21137163/dwyane-wade-zaya-transgender-daughter>>, accessed 26/02/2020.

³ E. Scarry, 'Celebrities are exploiting their transgender children for attention', Washington Examiner, 12/02/2020, <<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/dwyane-wade-is-exploiting-his-transgender-child-for-attention>>, accessed 26/02/2020.

⁴ B. Polumbo, 'Dwyane Wade is taking acceptance of his transgender child way, way too far', Washington Examiner, 09/02/2020, <<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/dwyane-wade-is-taking-acceptance-of-his-transgender-child-way-way-too-far>>, accessed 26/02/2020

more parents like Wade.⁵ In the meantime *Boosie Badazz*, an American rapper told furiously to the reporters of the *National Review* that he was refused entry to the gym he used to go to due to his ‘*opinion he expressed on social media about Wade’s child*’.⁶ On February the fourteenth, the British *PinkNews* reported excitedly about a spectacle that happened during Dwyane Wade’s retirement ceremony.⁷ Zaya Wade, the young transgender girl appeared on screen during the event, and the spectators in the basketball arena erupted in cheers and applause to the father. By the time this introduction is being written, the twenty-sixth of February, there appeared countless tweets from various users with the hashtags #ZayaWade and #ZionWade, the first being the name adopted by the girl while the other being the *deadname*, the name a trans person is given at birth. Under each hashtag, there are numerous short opinion pieces or visual, digital collages that express either support or contempt for Dwyane Wade’s announcement. Twitter cleverly sorts them by popularity, and indeed, some of the short works, generally those with creative visual content, including videos, carry thousands of likes and have been retweeted in large scale as well.

How can the phenomenon of Dwyane Wade’s announcement, and all that followed it, be approached from a scholarly perspective? Could this “public appearance” of a sort, as well as all the reactions from opinion articles to Facebook posts be treated as a singular phenomenon at all, considering that topics of great variety seem to have surfaced within the sentences of those reacting, ranging from the report of joy from a transgender journalist of color⁸ to criticism of gender ideology at large, presented in a rapping style on YouTube, shared on twitter.⁹ Dwyane Wade certainly managed to summon massive waves in the sizeable pond of contemporary media, and while it can by no means be called a still pond on other days either, Wade still managed to keep it swirling weeks after his first pledge of support towards his daughter, thus making the phenomenon of his public appearance relevant both from the

⁵ BFoundAPen, ‘We Need More Parents Like Dwayne Wade and Gabrielle Union’, Medium, 15/10/2019, <<https://medium.com/brian-the-man-behind-the-pen/we-need-more-parents-like-dwayne-wade-and-gabrielle-union-581d35f5c55b>>, accessed 26/02/2020.

⁶ Z. Evans, ‘Dwyane Wade On His Child: ‘She’s Known She Was Transgender Since She Was Three Years Old’, *National Review*, 19/02/2020, <<https://www.nationalreview.com/news/dwayne-wade-on-his-child-shes-known-she-was-transgender-since-she-was-three-years-old/>> accessed 26/02/2020.

⁷ V. Parsons, ‘Arena packed with basketball fans erupts with applause for Dwyane Wade’s trans daughter Zaya’, *PinkNews*, 24/02/2020, <<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/02/24/dwyane-wade-zaya-gabrielle-union-nba-miami-heat-american-airlines-stadium-applause/?fbclid=IwAR3R6uqvgK2ATHvXtN9MCtUr7APWL6y41QDX55gjec7KgbeuUPrwEjN-y3w>>, accessed 26/02/2020.

⁸ V. Clark, ‘Dwyane Wade’s unflinching support of his trans daughter is a turning point’

⁹ WTS with Uncle Nick, ‘Uncle Nick Dismantles Cardi B & Her Defense Of D.Wade's Son Transitioning!!!’, Twitter [medium], 25/02/2020 <<https://twitter.com/UncleNick212/status/1232093640606003200>>, accessed 26/02/2020.

perspectives of mediated storytelling, and of, at least in this case, scholarly interest. The story of Dwyane Wade's announcement of support will not be the main focus of this writing however, yet it serves as an example of how complex storytelling within contemporary media can be, from the multitude of voices and platforms involved to the variety of narratives and interpretations that can be found across the entirety of media.

1.2 Theoretical background and previous research

If my aim is to understand, to make sense of phenomena like Dwayne Wade's appearance and its media reception, I believe the best approach is to treat media as a social system, as proposed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Or to be more precise, the communication done by the mass media should be treated as a social system, but for simplicity's sake, I will refer to mass media itself as a social system throughout the thesis. System theory is a scholarly approach used across various fields of natural sciences and humanities. System theory treats phenomena as parts of larger structures, systems. According to Luhmann, social systems are self-created by ever recurring circular self-reproduction¹⁰, differentiated from the non-system by the boundaries set by the system itself¹¹, and arise when communication presupposes communication¹², thus it develops from itself in an autopoietic way. A social system, therefore, is a structure that reproduces itself alongside patterns set by the workings and function of the system itself and set apart from the rest of the world by the very patterns that make the system recognizable. The system's primary operation is the production of self-reference and self-preservation, which are acts forced by the patterns of the system's operation itself.¹³ In case of social systems, it means communication and production of information, which are being triggered by earlier acts of communication. Communication creates communication. Another action within the system, according to Luhmann, is hetero-reference or other reference, the act of referring to something external or something that is no longer active within the system, and

¹⁰ N. Luhmann, 'Introduction to System Theory', tr. Peter Gilgen, Polity Press, Cambridge, England 2002. p. 52

¹¹ Luhmann, 'Introduction to System Theory', p. 53

¹² Luhmann, *ibid.*

¹³ Luhmann, *ibid.*

thus, in either case, make it enter or re-enter the system.¹⁴ Luhmann stresses, referring to a biologist who perfected system theory, Humberto Maturana, that a system only refers or reacts to an external impulse if it is threatening its autopoietic existence, and only does so to ensure the continued positive feedback loop.¹⁵ Hetero reference is being done in the way of *structural coupling*, which allows the system to include or react to elements of the environment without compromising its own structure.¹⁶ Thus, the act itself is highly selective, only parts of the outside impulses are turned into intelligible information within the system, those that the system can integrate. Or, to put it simple, those phenomena of the outside are being observed and turned into information that can be made use of by the system. The act of structural coupling itself is being done according to the established patterns within the system. In case of hetero-references and structural coupling in social systems, the act of communication is not triggered by an earlier act of communication, but by an external impulse not yet to be considered communication or information within the system, but turned into such and in turn, acts as a trigger for the positive communicative feedback loop in the future.

In his book *The Reality of Mass Media*¹⁷, Luhmann considers mass media a social system, and describes news as the *structural couplings* created by the mass media, tools for media to react to external stimuli.¹⁸ News are used to trigger communication within the system, but only those parts of the outside impulses are being turned into news that can be related to from the perspective of media itself, thus this coupling is always selective.¹⁹ News are the external stimuli for the system, and since they point towards something that is exterior to it, they act as hetero-reference. The creation of topics to organize news, as well as the in-depth reporting to explain them is a communication that points inwards and is being done alongside patterns set by the media itself, and thus these constitute self-references.²⁰ These patterns, which determine all activity within the system, including the observation of the outside to provide news, the organization of news into topics, and the reporting to make news intelligible, are what make the system differentiated and recognizable.

Luhmann stresses that the external stimuli in itself are unintelligible from the perspective of the media, and thus from the perspective of its reader or viewer, because it is not

¹⁴ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 56

¹⁵ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 85

¹⁶ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 85

¹⁷ N. Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media (1996)', tr. Kathleen Cross, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, United States, 2000.

¹⁸ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', p. 12

¹⁹ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 13

²⁰ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 25

yet coded in the language of the system. The viewer or reader only recognizes the information once it is mediated alongside the ordinary patterns. Thus, only once topics are made and reporting is done alongside the patterns does an action or happening become a thing to understand.²¹ For the reader and viewer, according to Luhmann, '*media constructs reality*', and while it thus creates transparency, it also maintains non-transparency due to the selective way of coupling, the selective way of observing and absorbing of newsworthy phenomena.²²

Dwyane Wade's act of declaring support to his transgender daughter clearly functioned as a stimuli to media, if we look at it from the perspective of system theory, yet the background and exact nature of this support is unclear to us readers since the whole act happened in an already mediated environment. The coupling never allows the entirety of the external impulse to surface within the system. It has been turned into news, which triggered countless agents to respond to it, setting up a chain reaction which eventually lead to reactions and interpretations that can be quite far-reaching from the original story. Reactions within social media and traditional media appeared as well, often triggering each other, demonstrating that in contemporary times, the boundaries between these two are obscure. Yet, this network of various reactions makes perfect sense if the news of Dwyane Wade's announcement is seen as a trigger for further communication or information production within the social system. A hetero reference from media, the hosting of the Dwyane Wade in a talk show, is being developed into self-references of the social system after it has been incorporated into it.

What makes the analysis more complex in case of contemporary media is not the problem of the functioning of media as a social system. Structural coupling, hetero-, and self-references, in other words references that point to the phenomena itself, and references that connect the phenomena to other information within the system such as topics, all seem to appear in case of the example of Wade's story. Luhmann's theory, however, was created in the 20th century, an age before widespread internet and extreme multitude of agents within media. The structural genesis of contemporary media is boundary, as Luhmann emphasized. In case of any system, the boundaries should be clearly visible, as the system itself is signified by its own structure and patterns that guide its operation, and anything that does not bear the same structure is not part of the system. But can all forms of reaction towards a particular topic be united alongside patterns, ranging from well-written opinion articles to one-sentence reactions on Facebook? Can reporters of Vox and amateur authors on Medium, even excited users of Twitter be considered part of the same structure? Could the traditional categories, describing various

²¹ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 32

²² Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 103

parts of the mass media be no longer valid in case of this hybrid system, such as the television, radio, or advertisements in newspapers, especially if the structure of the mass media, as a whole, is concerned? Are these categories even necessary to describe the structure of the mass media?

The issue has already been recognized, and several solutions from various perspectives were proposed. The term *hybrid media* appears to be in widespread use among contemporary media theorists, although its meaning differs greatly depending on the perspective or method or the object of the analysis, that are adopted. For the British communication theorist Andrew Chadwick, hybridity within media, among other things, means the increasingly blurred boundaries between *hard news* and *entertainment news*, or in a more general sense, traditional media and social media.²³ Chadwick emphasizes that this does not only mean a less regulated interaction between what traditionally would be considered the social system of media and its background, but also means that agents within the system, for example journalists, regularly break established patterns and adopt techniques from the outside as well.²⁴ Luhmann does not put a particular emphasis on the role of agents within media, while Chadwick highlights their importance, and points to the fluidity of agents within the system, meaning that new agents can even join the structure from the outside.²⁵ The issue with Chadwick's analysis is that he primarily focuses on concepts that are describing the content of the mass media, not the mechanisms that produce the content itself. He does not differentiate between the descriptive concepts of the content and the concepts describing the system that produces the content. Concepts such as *entertainment news*, *hard news*, or even the agents who produce these are pointing towards the content that can be encountered when experiencing the mass media, not the structure. The hybridity of the mass media, in Chadwick's understanding, is therefore a hybridity of the content.

Chadwick also points toward a shift within the functionality of media and the purpose of its agents. With the increasingly greater availability of information, the '*job of the journalist*', as Chadwick highlights while quoting the British conservative columnist Laura Kuessenberg, is more of a curational work as opposed to gatekeeping.²⁶ In this case, Chadwick describes content, and the production of the content again, without examining the structure that unites all this into a system.

²³ A. Chadwick, 'The Hybrid Media System – Politics and Power', Oxford University Press, New York, New York, United States, 2013. p. 12

²⁴ Chadwick, 'The Hybrid Media System – Politics and Power', op. cit., p. 13

²⁵ Chadwick, *ibid.*, p. 17

²⁶ Chadwick, *ibid.*, p. 164

Ultimately, Chadwick places his emphasis during his quest to explain the *hybrid media system* on the conflict between old and new media and their respective agents, but also interdependence between them, as each influences the other when it comes to information generation or the selection of news.²⁷ As he points out, referring to Carolyn Marvin, the history of contemporary media is less about a technical evolution and more about the constant negotiation of power and authority among agents within media.²⁸ Chadwick's focus on the boundary issue can thus be characterized by an emphasis on the renewed function and various backgrounds of media agents, and the power-relations between them. The concept used by Chadwick, the '*hybrid media system*' is misleading, however. The hybridity of the mass media, in case of his analysis, primarily describes the content produced by the mass media, while the *system* refers to a unity of various agents, connected to each other by numerous power-relations. The structure that maintains the stability, the perseverance of any social system does not appear in Chadwick's analysis, therefore it is questionable whether this approach could yield any results when the continuity of the system of mass media, as described by Luhmann, is examined in contemporary times.

Others, like the computer scientist Lev Manovich, took a more literal approach towards the concept of hybrid media, and focused on the technical aspects of contemporary media. In his article from 2007, *Understanding Hybrid Media*, Manovich talks about an '*invisible revolution*' within the field of media, as well as that of visual arts, which is primarily a technical revolution.²⁹ He emphasizes that no new media was created during this revolution, which roughly took place at the time when internet took off.³⁰ Instead, Manovich points at a phenomenon he calls '*remix culture*', the creation of integrated experience, both in arts and media, with the usage of a multitude of various sources.³¹ Yet, as Manovich emphasizes, the revolution is not the appearance of this remix culture, but that of '*deep remixability*', the potential to mix and mash information or visual material endlessly.³² The analysis by Manovich, just like Chadwick's, primarily concerns the production of content within mass media, as well as within visual arts. He points at a revolution in the field of mass media, but comes to this conclusion through content analysis, and thus, instead of describing the operations of the system itself, he deduces the operation based on the nature of the content it produces.

²⁷ Chadwick, *ibid.*, p. 207

²⁸ Chadwick, *ibid.*, p. 23

²⁹ L. Manovich, 'Understanding Hybrid Media', manovich.net [medium], 2007, <<http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/understanding-hybrid-media>>, accessed 15/03/2020. p. 1

³⁰ Manovich, 'Understanding Hybrid Media', *op. cit.*, p. 3

³¹ Manovich, *ibid.*, p. 7

³² Manovich, *ibid.*, p. 8

Manovich points at a software revolution as the background for the changes he describes. Specifically, he points at the fact that with the acceleration of information via internet it became possible to use various software for specific areas together, often in fields far from the originally intended use.³³ This software revolution eventually changed cultural and mediative practices as well. Manovich highlights the field of architecture as a prime example of contemporary deep remixability, emphasizing that with the usage of software initially not meant for architectural use, the template-driven thinking changed into an architectural approach which can be characterized by the '*single continuous curve*', an approach adopted by architects like Zaha Hadid.³⁴ As a further consequence, according to Manovich the changes undermined the '*authority of narrative*'³⁵, and in general, template-, or pattern-driven thinking. In case of Manovich, the system and the background gets into an interdependent, yet still mystical relation as well, where it becomes hard to differentiate the agents and the technical practices used by established media and arts from that of amateurs, to the point that the *authority of narrative* and that of template-driven thinking is questioned, and thus the legitimacy of a system-based approach gets questioned as well. Whether narrative as such truly lost ground will be seen further down in the thesis, as I will strongly argue that narratives, and other patterns that guide thinking and information production are just as relevant today as they were before the technical revolution of the late 20th century. The issue with the article of Manovich, just like in case of the thoughts of Chadwick, is the obscured meaning of various concepts, and the lack of differentiation between the various fields and approaches to describe the nature of mass media. In both cases, the analysis of the production of content, regardless whether it is a technological analysis, or one that is based on the agents of the media, is being used to point at structural changes.

This indirect critique of a system-based approach, or structure-based analysis is not unique. While he does not criticize system-theory directly either, Peter Sloterdijk in his book from 2018, *What happened in the 20th century* speaks about '*spheres*' instead of systems when talking about social structures, and while these spheres are still based on positive feedback and are '*self-reinforcing spheres of activity*', it is the purpose and similarity of the activity itself, without the strict patterns and boundaries of that collective activity, is what binds spheres together.³⁶ Instead of a background, Sloterdijk speaks of a '*great interior*', and thus he

³³ Manovich, *ibid.*, p. 10

³⁴ Manovich, *ibid.*, pp. 16-17

³⁵ Manovich, *ibid.*, p. 16

³⁶ P. Sloterdijk, 'What Happened in the 20th Century?', tr. C. Turner, Polity Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2018. p. 6

circumvents the boundary problem and questions the legitimacy of the system-background (or culture-nature) dichotomy, and breaks the dualism, or at least binominal model of system theory.³⁷

The self-reinforcing spheres of activity are not systems, however, but content-based categories. Sloterdijk and the other other theorists mentioned in this section are basing their approach on reorganizing the theories surrounding the characteristics of content, and based on these characteristics, or even the production of individual content, they attempt to describe the system as a whole. This will not help in answering the question whether twitter-posts and medium articles about the story of Dwyane Wade and his daughter can be considered as part of the same structure, however. Analyzing the contents themselves, regardless of the results of Chadwick, Manovich or Sloterdijk, will not help in understanding the structure, because the content and the system itself are two different levels of mass media, or any social system in general. To understand what connects the various articles about Dwyane Wade with each other, and with the continuous, stable system of mass media, one needs to understand the system, not the particularities of the individual products. These can be used, however, to showcase the patterns that maintain the continuity, and circular self-reproduction of the system, as will be seen later in the project.

1.3 Research question

Under the previous subheading, system theory based on Luhmann, and a sample of other approaches were introduced to highlight the problems of contemporary media and media theory, with emphasis on the issue of boundary, that can be encountered when specific examples such as Dwyane Wade's appearance and reception are examined. The concept of *hybrid media* was introduced, both by Andrew Chadwick and Lev Manovich, to explain the dynamic changes in content and content sourcing within contemporary media, although the term hybrid media means completely different things in each case, making it impossible to apply for analysis. Chadwick emphasizes the changing importance and function of agents within the system of media, confusing the meaning of the content with the concept of systemic function, while Manovich, who also talks about the agents, puts his emphasis on a technical revolution, describing the way in content is produced, which is a mere self-reference in the sense of

³⁷ Sloterdijk, 'What Happened in the 20th Century?', p. 14

Luhmann. Manovich, indirectly, and others directly question the legitimacy of a system-, or pattern-based approach in explaining the changes and functions within a social structure because he insists on explaining a phenomena based on the analysis of its meaning, yet a system that produces that meaning can never be grasped by the analysis of its product. This is a cognitive crisis in contemporary media theory, the product and the system that creates it are two logically different entities.

When it comes to practices within media, Luhmann and system theory in general provide the fundamental tools that make it possible to understand and describe the processes that characterize this evolving social structure. In the next chapter, Luhmann's theory will be introduced in more depth and will be used as a framework for the rest of the thesis. The recognition of an *outside noise* as potential material for information-generation, and the process of turning it into an intelligible form within media is described flawlessly by Luhmann and can be applied to the analysis of Wade's story.

Instead of focusing on changes when it comes to agents, as proposed by Chadwick, or putting weight on the development of the functionality and technical aspects of media, as proposed by Manovich, I shall take a different approach that leads us to a systemic overview of both the topic and the theoretical analysis. I treat the technical changes as well as the multiplicity of agents as constants and parts of the system's structural evolution. Instead, I aim to prove that Luhmann's media theory is as relevant today as it was in the end of the 20th century and expanding it slightly to fit the purpose of application to both classical and digital media.

This means that on the surface I aim prove that the boundary of the system, which separates phenomena that bear the structure of the system and phenomena that does not, is still intact, albeit relocated in the sense that new agents and techniques entered the system, such as twitter users, or internet articles and videos. The second, more important question, which in itself enlightens the problem of the boundary issue, is whether certain structural patterns, or tools to maintain the structure of the media can be described, that are as relevant today as they were before the radical expansion and change of mass-media in recent times, keeping in mind the difference of the analytic levels between of content and systems that operate to produce content are different cognitive categories in the theorist's mind. Of course, I could argue that the specific way the system of mass media recognizes (duplicates), absorbs (reproduces), and develops (mediates) information could be in itself a proof of continuity if proven to be present in modern media. I am, however, concentrating my efforts specifically on the tools or approaches that can be found within media as well as other social systems that provide templates for the autopoietic generation of data. Or, more specifically, are the result of the

autopoietic generation of information. This way, I am simultaneously simplifying my argument as well as expanding it, because I can show something that is relevant beyond the particular system of social media, such as from the viewpoint of visual culture. Luhmann's theory of mass media, as will be discussed in chapter two, already refers to patterns, or in other words, reoccurring autopoietic operations, aided by tools of mediation, that act as constant in this self-perpetuating structure, but I aim to prove that these tools or approaches are universal and present in contemporary mass-media as guiding tools, and can be found elsewhere as well. I aim to show that concepts borrowed from art theory, literary theory, and western cultural tradition in general, such as the narrative, the interpretation or the act of self-representation double as theoretical approaches that guide the autopoiesis in social systems such as mass media. The language of system theory was made specifically to be a common language of natural sciences and humanities, one that connects various fields and concepts to each other. I would also like to expand it to the field of visual culture, which can only be done through the stable concepts of media theory.

To put it simply, I aim to solve the boundary issue, on the surface, by proving that there are abstract concepts that also act as guidelines for content generation within mass media, and their continued presence provides the stability of the structure of the system. By highlighting some of these, such as interpretation or narration, I intend to show that there is a continuous cultural tradition that directs the way of thinking on many levels, not just contained to the system of mass media, as well.

1.4 Delimitations and structure of the thesis

As for the limits of the scope of this work, it must be established that this thesis will be focused on one aspect of contemporary media, or media in general. The two conditions of contemporary media introduced by Chadwick and Manovich, the variety and power struggle of agents and the rapidly evolving technological environment, both referring to contents and their production, are not in focus of this writing. The reason is the structural approach that had been chosen to solve this boundary problem. Furthermore, while additional material shall be analyzed, the nature of the thesis will remain theoretical, and focused on highlighting patterns of mediation in an abstract sense. While a multitude of theories will be introduced, in line with the fact that the

approaches themselves show great diversity, the framework of this argumentation is system theory as introduced by Luhmann.

I would like to emphasize that while this project approaches an extremely wide and deep theoretical field, I wish to limit my analysis to one specific issue, and one specific solution to it. The issue, as established so far, is the temporal development, or change of social systems such as mass media, and the shift of the boundaries of the structure which is a consequence of this temporal nature. The solution is to prove that, among other structural constants, there are theoretical concepts that act as tools for social systems, or approaches to the social system of mass media, that provide structural continuity. Already in this sentence I hinted that there are more structural constants than these, and while I will provide a more thorough analysis of Luhmann's system theory in the next chapter, I will focus on the concepts I call *approaches of mediation*. Even when it comes to these, I merely provide a handful of examples, such as the interpretation, the narrative, and the act of self-representation to showcase the nature of these approaches. Interpretation or narrative, in terms of their nature or execution, also tend to change and develop, yet their presence is stable. Ultimately, the goal is to prove that there is a structural continuity in mass media because there is a structural continuity in general when it comes to the process of creating and structuring information. The scope of the thesis does not go beyond that, and thus it cannot provide a truly in-depth analysis of mass media, or the process of creating and structuring information in general. The introduction of the approaches of mediation, or more specifically the description of concepts such as the narrative or the interpretation as approaches of mediation or tools of a social system, is what new in the context of Luhmann's system theory, and thus these will be in the center of the analysis. I would also like to point out that this thesis serves as some sort of a theoretical starting point, upon which further, more particular argumentations could be built.

I would also like to point out that when I am going to discuss concepts such as the interpretation, the narrative, or self-representation, I am going to use a limited amount of theoretical work to introduce and explain the concepts. I do not aim to give a complete analysis of these ideas, because that would require many times the length of this thesis. I do believe, however, that relying on the specific authors I am referring to should provide a sufficient introduction to these concepts for the purposes of this project.

In the following chapter the theoretical framework of the introduction will be further expanded, including a proper establishment of the theoretical basis of the approaches of mediation in Luhmann's theory, and an argument about the concept of visibility and its relevance to the topic will be articulated, thus connecting this project to the field of visual

culture. Afterwards, in chapter three, the concept of the approaches to mediation will be introduced and the three chosen approaches will be expanded upon, followed by examples of media products that are displaying these approaches. Finally, a conclusion from the investigation shall be drawn. The introduction as well as the second chapter functions as frameworks, both theoretically and on the level of practical examples, while the third chapter is where the approaches of mediation will be examined further. While throughout the third chapter, there will be sections that connect the investigation to the framework, ultimately, it will be the conclusion where the circular structure of the thesis will be closed, and the approaches of mediation, described based on a variety of theories not necessarily closely associated with system theory, will be finally tied back to the original theoretical setting.

1.5 Methodology

In this thesis I primarily attempt to solve theoretical issues, thus the nature of its methodology, as well as its structural organization will be reflecting that. Unlike more practical projects, where the analysis of a particular phenomenon or object appears in the center, this thesis will be centered around philosophical thought. The background, as well as the theoretical background serves as a starting point to highlight a particular problem within the contemporary theory of mass media. The problem is then contextualized within the theoretical framework of system theory, based on Niklas Luhmann, which constitutes much of the second chapter. The main argument is not about the problem, however, but the solution, which is more than just an answer to the particular problem of boundary and continuity in contemporary mass media. The proposed solutions to this boundary and continuity problem are the approaches of mediation, and these will be examined with theoretical materials that might appear distant from the framework of system theory. Ultimately, however, they will be tied together. This thesis is not about the narrative or interpretation, but about the narrative and interpretation from the perspective of the functioning of the system.

Furthermore, both in the background and in the particular examples provided in chapter three, there are references to practical examples of contemporary mass media, focusing on the story of Dwyane and Zaya Wade, and on the issue of transgender representation in general. However, this thesis is not about transgender representation, even though it is inspired by it. It is merely there to show how the theoretical mechanism I am describing effect the tangible

reality of media. I believe that providing this practical undertone emphasized the theoretical content, even though the limited outlook on the issues of Zaya Wade and transgender representation leave these questions somewhat in the background. This is due to the limitations of the thesis. However, the theoretical tools it aims to provide should make it easier to approach practical issues such as these, as I will emphasize in the conclusion.

1.6 Relevance of the project

As stressed earlier, this thesis is primarily a theoretical project. The aim is to prove the structural perseverance of mass media by the introduction of what I call the approaches of mediation. This is, essentially, an expansion of Luhmann's theory of mass media, and his social system theory in general. Luhmann's work has practical relevance, however, in the sense that he attempts to make social systems, and, as will be shown in chapter two, specifically the system of mass media transparent and intelligible. To understand the practices of media as well as their consequences, one must understand its structure. This aim, which Luhmann also had, is applicable to this project.

The personal reasons for the goal to make this transparency accessible will be explained more in detail in the section of the third chapter called *the narrative*. Suffice to say, the reason why I choose the issue of transgender representation in mass media as the examples and practical undertones for my theoretical work is to directly tie theory to practice, theory to social struggle. The nature of these examples is telling of another characteristic of this work, as well as mass media in general. Transgender representation cannot be understood as merely a product of mass media, but also has to do with visual traditions. Therefore, the project must be interdisciplinary both on the theoretical, as well as on the practical level. I would like to emphasize that transgender representation in mass media is a particularly effective example to showcase the functioning of mass media as a social system. The phenomenon of the condition of transgender is a relatively new, visual phenomenon for the consumers of mass media, which functions as self-reference for transgender people, but is a spectacle for everybody else. The examples dealing with the representation of this phenomenon showcase how a spectacle is being created by the a system that produces spectacles from occurrences, and at the same time, they show how mass media and visual culture come together when it comes to the processes of the explanation, as well as the contextualization of an appearing visual phenomena.

The interdisciplinary nature of the project is particularly visible when the nature of the approaches of mediation is concerned, since concepts such as interpretation, the narrative, or self-representation are not exclusive to the mass media. In fact, these appear persistently in all fields concerned with the production of art, information, or representations in general. The point here is that the system of mass media cannot be approached in an isolated manner. The relevance of any findings related to it is relevant to other fields as well, and the other way around, too. By using universal concepts to describe the structural persistence of mass media, I also attempt to prove that this structural persistence is in a symbiosis with a structural persistence that can be applied to western culture or society in general. Therefore, in a theoretical sense, this project is not just relevant for the understanding of the mass media, but generally, for the understanding of social system theory, and of the western way of mediating and structuring phenomena.

The interdisciplinary nature of the project is further emphasized by the fact that the initial problem is within the field of media theory, but the way that is proposed to solve it in this text is drawn from philosophy, cultural history and visual culture. Indeed, the tools that are to be proven to maintain the integrity of this specific system, interpretation, the narrative, or self-representation, are ultimately tools for the representation of phenomena. In chapter two, the relevance of images and image-based thinking will be emphasized in contemporary culture. In *the narrative* section of chapter three, a historical, as well as theoretical connection between the visual and conceptual traditions in western culture will be shown. Ultimately, a parallel will be highlighted between media representation and visual representation, and this parallel is based on the same tools that are at work in either case. In chapter two, the role of distinction in system theory will be introduced as well, and its *analogy* in visual culture, the concept of visibility. The importance of visibility and invisibility will be stressed throughout the project in relation to the mass media. The thesis, as a whole, is relevant for visual culture because it can be seen as an extension of it, or advance of it, into the interdisciplinary field, even though visual culture in itself is already interdisciplinary. By emphasizing the relevance of representation, often appearing in the form of images, as well as the role of *visual distinction* in the form of the creation of visibility, I aim to show that the methodology of visual culture can help in understanding phenomena that are on the border of the discipline at best, such as mass media.

2 Theoretical frameworks

2.1 System theory

Dwyane Wade and Zaya Wade appeared together, united in the image of father and child facing a difficult and controversial situation in life, surrounded by the seemingly cacophonous sounds of society and media. They were finding themselves, for a time at least, in the center of one of the more pressing, yet at the same time seemingly irrelevant, cultural wars of our age, the conflict of transgender rights, and in extension, the conflict surrounding the concept of gender. By partaking in the talk show, the Wades turned their personal struggles into *news*, information that could be used by the various agents of media, from news agencies to social media users. This led to the formulation of a *topic* around the story of the Wades, which, according to the theories of Luhmann, could be of use to the greater system of media as a vessel of the circular production of information.³⁸ By turning this happening into news, or a visually recognizable image, it was made sure by the system that the actions Dwyane Wade and his daughter appeared recognizable and worthy of attention. But there would be no circularity, and indeed, no recognizability if the topic organized around the story of the Wades would not be connected to other topics. Transgender children seem to have *appeared* in large numbers in the Western world recently, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, and in turn, transgender people in general found themselves increasingly in the spotlight. A miniscule minority they may be, by being turned into visually and culturally established symbols of *gender transgression*, their stories, and the topics born out of those stories, lead deeper into a series of interconnected narratives about gender, a whole sphere of topics. While the current pandemic, Covid-19, certainly created a newfound irritation for the system of media, and for society at large, the issue of gender transgression does not seem to disappear from neither the media nor the public consciousness. According to Luhmann, the average person does not appear in the news very often, that place is reserved for the *exceptionals*, *criminals*, and those who in general are sources of conflict and irritation.³⁹ This points to the reason why *characters* such as Dwyane Wade and his daughter remain in the spotlight. Indeed, they appear as manufactured characters of the media instead of average people like the readers themselves, and thus, the distance and

³⁸ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 12

³⁹ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 72

uniqueness that is needed to maintain *irritation*, or interest, is provided. While the issue of *gender transgressors* such as Zaya Wade, sources of irritation, conflict or progress, depending on narrative, seem to be less relevant from a practical point of view in times of a global pandemic, articles surrounding the story of the Wades, and transgender topics in general, continued to appear in immeasurable quantities throughout the year 2020. This proves that topics with abstract qualities, capable gaining various narratives around them, are particularly pervasive. Indeed, I personally could not escape the circle and retreat to the comfort of observation from the outside either and gave interviews, as a transgender woman, amidst political attacks upon transgender rights in my country of origin, Hungary.

But what exactly is this large and overwhelming, or depending on perspective, rather entertaining structure that creates these series of interconnected topics, what entity unites all this? According to Luhmann, it is mass media, the primary source of information for society.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is a rather overwhelming structure, especially if one finds herself on the wrong side of the computer screen, because media is a '*self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing structure*', and there is no way for one to confirm their doubts about the content produced by it as the doubts themselves must be based on information coming from mass media itself.⁴¹ This, in practice, means that mass media, as a unified entity is creating and recreating itself from the information that was already produced by it before, and in turn, separates itself from everything that is not mass media by referencing that same information, and in extension, the production cycle. To confirm one's doubts about media, one must refer to media itself, as it is the most accessible source of information about the world and, due to its self-referential nature, itself. Thus, any doubts arising regarding the *validity* of the information or the way it is being produced must be proven based on information produced by the media itself. Indeed, it is an endless, self-perpetuating cycle, that is rather hard to observe.

Yet, according to Luhmann, mass media is not without its limits, and those limits characterize it. Due to the scale of its operations, the exchange of information, a vital process within any social system, is not a direct one between sender and receiver.⁴² This means that the receiver, reader or viewer of mass media is not present or known directly for the system, but is *assumed* to be present.⁴³ Here, Luhmann refers to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl's concept of the '*dual modality of existence*', meaning that the existence of truths, objects, or

⁴⁰ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 1

⁴¹ Luhmann, *ibid.*

⁴² Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 2

⁴³ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 4

people can simultaneously be a probability and an actuality⁴⁴. For the observer, actuality may only occur in case of a de-facto evidence.⁴⁵ This means that everything can exist, simultaneously, both as a probability, something that can be expected to exist, and as an actuality, if that expectation turns into tangible reality. So, a phenomenon, given the circumstances, might occur in an environment and if it does occur, it, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, becomes an actuality.

The indirect nature of communication towards assumed receivers about assumed topics of interest is the defining feature of mass media. This leads to several consequences, and one of them is that mass media is not only a system that does communicative operations, but also observing ones.⁴⁶ It observes the audience, even constructs them, by constantly making assumptions about them. It is done because the audience is not tangible from the perspective of media, rather, appears as something that is bound to exist, a probability. Indeed, people need to exist to receive information, but also must be monitored to see if actually present, with the use of surveys for example. The audience that is being observed appears to be removed from the system, there is a boundary between them and media. It is necessary because, as Luhmann argues in his essay *The Paradox of Observing Systems*, distinctions must be made between what is being observed and what is not.⁴⁷ By marking out the space outside the system, the space where the audience can be found, as the target of this observing operation, it inherently becomes one-sided as it only concerns itself with the environment. Luhmann argues that '*the world is observable because it is unobservable*', at least as a whole, thus distinctions between the observed and the not observed must constantly be made.⁴⁸ This is what he calls '*second-order observation*', an observation that always has a "dark side" and operates from a specific point of view towards a specific space established by distinction.⁴⁹

Furthermore the audience, and the world outside the system that contains it, does not have an object-like nature, but rather, in a phenomenological sense, appears as a *horizon*, and it is therefore only observable by making additional distinctions beyond the system-environment distinction.⁵⁰ The *horizon* is a theoretical space with temporal qualities where

⁴⁴ E. Husserl, 'Cartesian Meditations (1931)', tr. D. Cairns, Martinus Nijhof Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, United States, 1982. p. 60

⁴⁵ Husserl, 'Cartesian Meditations', p. 61

⁴⁶ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 5

⁴⁷ N. Luhmann, 'The Paradox of Observing systems', *Cultural Critique*, No. 31, The Politics of Systems and Environments, Part II., 1995 pp. 37-55., p. 44

⁴⁸ Luhmann, 'The Paradox of Observing systems', p. 46

⁴⁹ Luhmann, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 6

phenomenon, in this case, the audience for example, exists as a probability, and might be observed as an actuality. It requires further distinctions to heighten the chance of the observation of actuality, thus the *horizon* of probabilities outside is further sliced up into observed spaces. Each of these operations of distinction are second-order observations, meaning that only one specific part of the horizon-like reality is being observed, with the distinction itself being hidden, only to be revealed by another observing operation that is aimed at another slice, thus revealing the limited nature of the previous.⁵¹

Thus far, it has been argued, following Luhmann's ideas about the nature of the mass media, that due to the size of it, mass media communicates indirectly with a receiver that is assumed, but cannot be proven to exist, as it is not a direct communication. To legitimize its communicative operations, and learn about of the receiver, the system constantly seeks to observe the environment, the space that is not the system. This is the first boundary that is being established, the one between the system and the environment. It has a horizontal disposition, and can be observed piecemeal, according to Luhmann's second order observation. Constant distinctions, between what is currently being observed and what is not, are being made. It is a function of the system.

So far, all these references, all the observations can be considered hetero-references, a concept presented in the *introduction*, referring to communicative and observing acts that are pointing out from the system. But why is it essential for the system to observe the receiver continuously, why is it required to learn about them? I wrote in the previous, summarizing column that it is necessary for it due to the need to maintain the system's legitimacy of doing communicative operations. Any communicative act, regardless of it being direct or indirect, needs receivers who are willing to take part in it. They are not actually present in a tangible fashion, cannot directly express their interests, thus, as Luhmann argues, there must be a willingness on their part to *tune in*, and because of this, media needs to strive for *acceptability* in its operations.⁵² Ironically, it means that the system must assume that the receiver also observes it, not just the other way around. It must observe the receiver, observe an observer, and learn of their existence and behavior so that the system itself can mark out distinctions when it comes to the content it communicates. These distinctions are essential, because, despite the misleading way I used this concept so far, the receiver is not a singular term, and represents all sorts of potentially existing people who have different personal interests or backgrounds. Luhmann stresses that it leads to branching and broadening of the information offered,

⁵¹ Luhmann, 'The Paradox of Observing systems', op. cit., p. 46

⁵² Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 3

represented by a large variety of topics.⁵³ Indeed, even in case of quite specific topics, such as transgender issues, a variety of products can be found, from in-depth analyses to reports on celebrities reactions, all in variations catering to every political belief, age group or gender. Yet, at the same time, not every potential receiver has a singular, unique set of news that are of interest tied to them, they might share these, and at the same time, for them to even understand the news themselves as such, they much have previous knowledge of how the news that are being provided by mass media look like. This leads to the standardization of information, such as the structuring of news into topics and using appropriate and recognizable approaches of mediation.⁵⁴ Receivers are also, supposedly, sharing a common language and ethno-cultural background, and share interest in some of the bigger topics that are affecting many. As a result, the system must simultaneously maintain some degree of standardization, by setting the structure of topics or regulating what phenomena can be considered news, but at the same time it must offer a large variety of topics. When the system structures itself and sets up distinctions, sets up topics via said distinctions and references to previous topics, it does self-reference.

It seems that the operation of the system of mass media can be characterized by a circular flow of information between itself and the environment and is based on a number of assumptions and distinctions that are hard to follow. An indirect communication is going on, where the system assumes the receiver, and observes it so that it knows what it supposedly wants to see or read. It cannot observe the world as a whole, thus makes distinctions within it. Moreover, it expects the receiver to observe system, or more precisely, observe the utterances the system that are coming towards it in form of topics and news, so the system has to tailor those utterances further, via distinctions. A question remains, however, concerning the nature of what the system communicates to the various receivers. This information, the news, are structured into topics, but that is merely the form, not the content. The system has a relatively easy task when it comes to the search for information, as it can be found in the environment, and observed in the same way as the receivers are being observed.⁵⁵ The system not only observes the receivers to learn about their current interests, but more so to monitor any changes in the environment. Quoting the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson's definition of it, Luhmann characterizes information as difference or change.⁵⁶ To be precise, '*difference that makes a difference in some later event*'.⁵⁷

⁵³ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 3

⁵⁴ Luhmann, ibid.

⁵⁵ Luhmann, ibid., p. 18

⁵⁶ Luhmann, ibid., p. 19

⁵⁷ Luhmann, ibid.

Due to its horizontal disposition and the second-order observation that is being used for its observing operations, the world appears in the form of marked spaces where information is a probability and becomes actuality when it makes a difference, when it becomes noticeable for the system.⁵⁸ The spaces that are being marked for observation are not arbitrary, because difference, or '*information in mass media must be a novelty, but also to understand novelty there must be familiarity*'.⁵⁹ Earthquakes, wars, accidents, people of renown or infamy, culturally significant abstract issues are being monitored, and the marked spaces of observation are being set up within the world, to specifically keep an eye on these.⁶⁰ When a difference within these spaces, where their appearance can be assumed, becomes actuality, it is turned into news and put into topics, and funneled back into the environment towards the receiver. Earthquakes, accidents, and such, while in specific form happen only once, point towards new information or difference that can turn into actuality, and thus the circle goes on. In the meantime, the receivers are also being observed, their reactions, and the interests they develop based on what they previously saw or read determine the potentially new spaces of observation. Sometimes people, receivers themselves turn out to become a difference themselves, like famous individuals such as the Wades. Even regular readers can find themselves part of something that is being turned into information by the system, more as an exception than a norm⁶¹, such as when a transgender reader see themselves back, in an altered and generalized form. It is an endless cycle of hetero-references that trigger self-references, which in turn trigger more hetero-references. This is essentially a feedback loop. The system also acts a *distinction machine*, something that has all its operations based on distinction, and attempts to provide more distinctions, again, in the manner of the feedback loop. Through distinctions, it also controls the visibility of the environment, as well as its own structure.

According to Luhmann, the system acts as a '*window into reality*' for the receiver, but this reality is the one that is being constructed by the system itself via selective observing of certain typical events in pre-determined spaces of observation.⁶² This reality, as Luhmann points out, can be characterized by the '*repetition of experience*', the relative '*constancy of the framing context*', and the preference of '*conflict over peace*'.⁶³ The conflicts, the differences point towards new information, which can lead to '*self-generated uncertainty served by*

⁵⁸ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 20

⁵⁹ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 28

⁶⁰ Luhmann, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 72

⁶² Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 78

⁶³ Luhmann, *ibid.*

information'.⁶⁴ This goes on in an autopoietic manner, without goal or aim.⁶⁵ And its function, according to Luhmann, is not to provide information about the world, but to maintain some sort of a '*cognitive irritation*' through a circular production of conflicts and solutions.⁶⁶ In extension, it cannot be held accountable for the distortion of reality, as it is an automatized process.⁶⁷ The system of mass media produces stability by maintaining constant production of information and serves as a melting pot for other social systems, such as the social systems of law or science.⁶⁸

Whether the system of mass media is indeed innocent when it comes to the distortion of reality remains to be seen, but it must be understood that reality, as such, is being described as a *horizon* of probabilities by Luhmann, following the thoughts of Husserl, and can only be observed, constructed and turned into intelligible form by marking out spaces of interest. Luhmann does not speak about particular agents within mass media too much in his analysis, although he mentions *branches*, or sub-systems of media like entertainment news or advertisements.⁶⁹ But I would argue that it does not matter, and the technological tools that are being used in the system's operations does not matter either. What does seem to matter, concerning the stability of the system, is the maintenance of the circular reproduction of information as well as the continuity of its observing operations. Both require the marking or framing of space, in the environment as well as within the system itself. The outside is being observed through the small windows of space where a particular type of event, such as an earthquake, might happen, and inside, spaces, topics are marked where news about events like those earthquakes might appear, further branched into subtopics aimed at the specific receiver. These marking operations seem to be the key. Both in case of hetero-references and self-references, there seem to be a temporal continuity, as in both cases operations refer to previous operations like them. Luhmann refers to this phenomenon as the '*memory of the system*', some sort of a '*structural memory*'.⁷⁰ But what are the tools that are being used, as part of this structural memory, to assist the system in the unceasing operations of composing the topics inside, the marking out of the spaces outside to be observed and analyzed, as well as to provide the constancy of the framing context? I would call these *tools of the system*, or *approaches of mediation*, such as the narrative, that are there to guide the system in its endless structuring of

⁶⁴ Luhmann, 'The Reality of Mass Media', op. cit., p. 83

⁶⁵ Luhmann, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 98

⁶⁷ Luhmann, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 99

⁶⁹ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 82

⁷⁰ Luhmann, *ibid.*, p. 100

news, and at the same time, indirectly affect what, from the sphere of possibilities, is being included and observed. Regardless of the changes in technology, the composition of the agents in media, or the form in which news are being presented, whether they be articles of depth or twitter remarks, there seem to be a continuity in the patterns of the composition of information that we, the readers or viewers, can access about any given phenomenon, and these patterns appear to be shaped by the tools of mediation.

2.2 Visibility and the production of visibility

In this part of the chapter, I am going to argue that the concept of visibility plays an important role when it comes to mass media, and consequently, cannot be ignored when any statements are being made about its nature. The texts used here shall be different from Luhmann and system theory, yet, as I will argue, can complement it.

The reason why visibility is important in the context of contemporary mass media is not just because modern indirect communication is no longer dominated by text alone, but a combination of texts and other forms of media, such as pictures and videos, which have strongly visible qualities. For sure, among the examples mentioned in the introduction, there were traditional articles next to videos or even rap songs. Yet, far beyond these practical examples, *visibility* seems to dominate our contemporary culture. The American philosopher and scholar of visual culture, Martin Jay states in his article *Scopic Regimes of Modernity* that the modern era, from the renaissance onwards, is being ‘dominated by the sense of sight’.⁷¹ Jay also adds that, when describing society, various philosophers of modernity emphasize concepts that are, inherently, visual, such as Michel Foucault’s *surveillance* or Guy Debord’s *spectacle*.⁷² In his article, Jay proceeds with describing various important visual approaches that can be found both in art, and in Western culture at large, such as the ‘*narrative-based*’ traditions of art in renaissance and baroque Italy, or the ‘*description-centered*’ traditions of the Netherlands at the same time.⁷³ Contemporary visuality, according to Martin Jay, can be characterized by the ‘*madness of vision*’, some sort of neo-baroque, but in general, there seem to be no dominating

⁷¹ M. Jay, ‘Scopic Regimes of Modernity’, in. ed. H. foster, *Vision and Visuality*, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, United States, 1988, pp 3-29. p. 3

⁷² Jay, ‘Scopic Regimes of Modernity’, p. 3

⁷³ Jay, *ibid.*, p. 12

visual approach.⁷⁴ What seems to be apparent is that these visual approaches are not merely influencing art, but the general worldview of any given age or geographically determined area. Therefore, understanding visual approaches help in grasping any branches of culture and society, including media. This is particularly important in the modern era, because, as Jay pointed out, *sight*⁷⁵, and in extension, everything that is *visible* and thus can be connected, either directly or in an abstract sense, to sight, plays an important role. To my understanding, everything that is visible can be constituted as part of visual culture, and thus concepts that have an abstract connection to visibility can be examined within this field. Whether an earthquake or the story of Dwyane Wade and his daughter makes into the news, thus becoming visible for the reader in both an abstract and a direct sense, and the particular manner in which that visibility is executed, are questions of the nature of visibility, thus visual culture as well, alongside other fields such as media theory.

Could Martin Jay's ideas of dominant visual approaches, or '*scopic regimes*'⁷⁶ bring one closer to understand how the *structural memory of media*, and the tools it employs over time to maintain stability, function? After all, the social system of media does seem to appear as sort of a *distinction machine* which repeatedly makes things visible or invisible by setting up distinctions, and producing information based on observations which are defined by distinctions as well. The end products of media, as well as the whole process of its functioning appears to be related to the concept of images, which also have clear boundaries, composed, in most cases, with the usage of a special *visual distinction machine* called perspective, and tend to provide a limited, abstract snapshot of the reality they are based on. One could theorize that the dominant visual approaches mentioned by Martin Jay, which define the way images are being made in any given time and space, also influence the way products of media appear. This is most certainly so. However, the problem with these approaches is that they tend to change substantially, and often change in a rather rapid way. If visual approaches would also determine how media makes things visible or invisible, then contemporary mass media, with the new array of actors, technologies, and expressions, could hardly be likened to the media that existed during Luhmann's times. Yet, the *structural memory* of the system appears to be more static. I argue that there are approaches of mediation that, while do change to some degree in their nature, remain relatively static and stable in the end, so that they can provide reliable tools to help to distinguish and produce information and to make it visible.

⁷⁴ Jay, 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', op. cit., p. 19

⁷⁵ Jay, *ibid.*, p. 3

⁷⁶ Jay, *ibid.*

To further illustrate the connection of visibility and images to the particular way how contemporary mass media depicts and presents reality, I would turn to the American writer Susan Sontag's article, *The Image-World*.⁷⁷ Sontag begins her article with stating that reality has always been interpreted, and in a sense made visible, '*through the reports given by images*'.⁷⁸ They are not, however, mere tools of interpretation, their importance goes further than that. According to Sontag, they appear as interchangeable with reality, or act as substitutes for it.⁷⁹

Sontag argues that the consensus seems to be that the further we go back in time, the less distinguishable images appear to be from reality, like in case of beliefs that projected magical qualities into images.⁸⁰ However, she claims that those magical qualities did not disappear. Certain images, like photographic ones, still seem to carry some form of magic even today.⁸¹ She stresses the aspect of *acquisition* that occurs through the act of photographing, and points at the practice of the collection of photos by people about their loved ones.⁸² This could be explained by the belief that images carry the essences of the real.⁸³ On the other hand, it seems that images themselves can turn something real as well. Sontag points to a practice that is widespread in modernized societies, the practice of seeking photographs to be taken of us.⁸⁴ As if being photographed could lead to becoming visible, to assuming presence. Indeed, having photos in CVs or even on social media profiles seem to be more than mere decorations, these photos seem to represent the person behind them in an almost tangible way. In abstract spaces, such as social media or mass media, images and photographs appear to be more accessible than tangible presence. In a sense, image replaces the tangible reality. Sontag warns however, that looking at photographs does not bring reality closer, it brings images closer.⁸⁵ It makes a specific reality accessible that is being constructed by images. If we consider the importance of photographs in our lives, coupled with the fact that most of our interactions take place in an indirect space, through long-distance communication, it is easy to see how powerful images can be as carriers of information about anything, whether be it people or events. In the abstract

⁷⁷ S. Sontag, 'The Image-World (1988)', in ed. J. Evans, *Visual Culture: the Reader*, SAGE Publications, London, United Kingdom, 1999, pp. 80-95.

⁷⁸ Sontag, 'The Image-World', p. 80

⁷⁹ Sontag, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 81

⁸¹ Sontag, *ibid.*

⁸² Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 82

⁸³ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 83

⁸⁴ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 84

⁸⁵ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 86

spaces social media or mass media, images are more real than what we would assume as, in a practical sense, reality.

When describing this reality constructed by images, Sontag stresses that the world appears as '*depersonalized*'.⁸⁶ Distance and time does not seem to be a factor, anything in the world is immediately accessible anywhere. This is particularly true in the 21st century, an age after

Sontag's, but it seems that even in the second half of the 20th century, the production and distribution of images reached a scale where distance and time became a non-issue. Images, just like mass media, or together with mass media, make exotic things near and familiar things small, abstract and unnoticeable.⁸⁷ They simultaneously allows greater participation, in activities that could otherwise be inaccessible, and confirm alienation, because the form of participation offered by images is merely visual in nature, not tangible or reactive.

In the real world, anything can happen, but in the image world, if something happened, or more specifically, if something was turned into an image, it appears as if all things of that sort will *happen in the same way*, or will be turned into similar images.⁸⁸ To illustrate this process, Sontag recalls her experience of witnessing a medical operation in Shanghai, then witnessing it again in the form of a documentary.⁸⁹ She recalls that the documentary was harder to watch, because the focus, what was deemed interesting and worthy to make visible, was chosen alongside a pre-set narrative or pre-set pattern, with no option to interact. In contrast, watching a real event, happening in front of a subject would allow the choosing of focus, or even the act of looking away.

According to Martin Jay, our age is heavily dependent on sight, and extremely sensitive to all that is visible. Susan Sontag further reinforces this by showing the importance of images, tangible and abstract alike. Tangible forms of images are, for example, the photographs, and the abstract images are the expectations and symbols constituted by those photographs and other tangible forms of imagery. As Sontag points out, photographs themselves are materialistic in nature, and carry information about whatever that emitted them, but at the same time, casting shadows upon the same thing.⁹⁰ Indeed, my profile picture on Facebook allows a random observer to later recognize me, but at the same time, I use a generous amount of filters, as well

⁸⁶ Sontag, 'The Image-World', op. cit., p. 87

⁸⁷ Sontag, *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Sontag, *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 88

⁹⁰ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 93

as composition, to make certain aspects visible or invisible. In a sense, I create an abstract image, a symbol of myself, and do so based on the practice of photography. I make something materialistic in nature, a photograph, based on another tangible subject, myself, but what the photograph shows is hardly the tangible reality. Images have a double nature both in the sense of being tangible and abstract, and in the sense that they reveal and conceal at the same time. This is the nature of second-order observation. If something is to be observed, or something is to be shown based on previous observations, one must distinguish between what is relevant, what is there to be shown, and what is not. This is so because there is no way to represent something in its true form, there is no method to show the metaphysical essence of an object or person, there are only aspects that can be emphasized, or be made irrelevant.

There seem to be a similarity between the *modus operandi* of the social system of mass media, or more specifically, the products of it, and images. At least in the sense Sontag describes images. Mass media, according to Luhmann, is an unceasing, circular operation of observations and communication. The world outside the system, including the audience of media, is being constantly observed, and those observations are being turned into products to be funneled back, or to be shown, to the audience. Both the acts of observation, and the products that are being made based on them seem to depend on distinctions. Images also depend on observation and distinction, and provide a simplified and incomplete, yet recognizable representation of whatever they are based on. What seem to be, in both cases, an important act is the production of visibility, based on distinction. For there would be no visibility without invisibility, no accessibility without inaccessibility. As the human eye must distinguish between objects and colors, so must any form of representation or reproduction of reality must choose between, and rank in importance, each and every aspect, and show what is deemed important. Luhmann stresses that mass media, the *distinction machine*, does not distort reality by itself, for reality cannot be grasped without distinctions. What one must constantly be aware of, however, is that each news article, or each image representing a phenomenon, shows as much as it hides. If there is a similarity between images and products of mass media established, then the nature of the production of both must be similar as well. It appears that there are comparable aspects of all social systems. I would call the approaches of mediation, or in a more general sense, the tools of the system, the backbone of its structural memory, as such. Therefore, concepts that describe activities in western culture at large, such as interpretation, can tie various systems together, and bridge the gap between various disciplines.

I aim to answer two questions in this thesis. On one hand, whether Luhmann's approach to mass media could be relevant today at all, and more importantly, why. Both can be answered

in the same way. I believe what is constant in mass media, and in extension in the process of creating images and visibility, and ultimately, what is constant within the field of visual culture as well, is the production of representations of reality based on distinctions. A double distinction, to be more precise, one during the observing act, and one during the production of the representation based on that observing act. In the next part of the thesis, I will argue, based on Luhmann's *memory of the system* concept, that there are approaches of mediation that seems to be, relatively, constant when it comes to providing tools to the system of media, or to visual culture for that matter, to help the act of distinction.

3. The approaches of mediation

3.1 *A multitude of approaches*

Before discussing the concepts of *approaches of mediation*, I would like to clarify that it is not the aim of the thesis to show all the potential tools the system of media has at its disposal to regulate the distinctions, and the setting up of boundaries. I would like to demonstrate that these tools exist. In the end, distinctions follow patterns that are historical in scale, but not arbitrarily. They are being forced by the very function of the system, circular self-reproduction, mediation, observation, setting up distinctions. What Luhmann calls *memory of the system* could also be called *traditions of distinction*.

I am going to highlight three approaches, which guide the observation and the production of information. These are interpretation, narration, and self-representation. There could be many more mentioned, but due to the scale of this thesis, I am limited to examining these three. These three concepts are borrowed from the history of art, visual culture, literary theory, and culture in general. Therefore, when discussing them, I am using texts that are specifically examining the aforementioned concepts, and might not be, at all, connected to Luhmann or system theory. I would, however, stress that Luhmann, and system theory in general provide a framework to understand how mass media, and social systems in general, operate at large. The specific patterns that occur during these operations can be investigated using scholarly material that might differ from system theory. One of the reasons for that is the very fact that the systems themselves appear to act as sorts of cultural frameworks, within which various operations, approaches and distinctions appear to be valid. Indeed, the system of media must produce news and topics to all imaginable audience, from scholars to laypeople, and thus contains a vast array of materials and products that are different on many levels, connected only by the operation of the system itself.

I would also like to stress that the examples used here to provide insight into the workings of each approach of mediation are, in a way, incomplete. I must use distinctions myself. Each product of media that is going to be examined here will be presented in a way to highlight a particular approach of mediation. I will, however, aim to contextualize these examples, not merely to use them as decorations for the thesis. For that, it must be established that there is no such article, image or other product of media that has only one approach guiding

its production. Rather, in practice, each products of media are being influenced by a variety of approaches. Furthermore, due to the approaches of mediation are, ultimately, acts of distinction, these are generally hidden from the viewer's eye, or at least appear as non-obvious.

3.2 Interpretation

In this section of the text, I am going to examine the concept of interpretation, and argue why it can function as a tool, or approach of mediation. To explain and study the concept, I choose Susan Sontag's essay *Against Interpretation*⁹¹. In this writing, Sontag explores the origins of the concept and practice of interpretation and formulates a critique against it.

To explain the creation and history of interpretation, Sontag begins her essay with gazing back to the beginnings of art. She states that the earliest form of art must have been magical and ritualistic in nature.⁹² In contrast, the first form of art theory in western culture, which was made by the ancient Greeks, described art as mimesis.⁹³ The discussion of art in a theoretical sense arose from the need to determine the value of it, and the ancient Greek philosopher Plato did not find it particularly valuable.⁹⁴ He theorized that all tangible things are mere reflections of their transcendent idealistic forms, therefore all objects are mimesis. Art, in this regard, is the mimesis of the mimesis, a *trompe l'oeil*, and thus completely superfluous.⁹⁵ His opponent in this debate, Aristotle, did not challenge the description of art as mimesis of mimesis, but placed recreational value on it.⁹⁶ Sontag argues that while this particular debate about the value of art might have passed, western intellectual thinking continued to treat art as mimesis, or representation.⁹⁷ This lead to the separation of form and content within art theory, with content clearly being favored as the more important aspect of any given artwork. Sontag points out that the understanding of art as representation, where the content provides the *value*, lead to an eternal debate to defend art and defend individual pieces of art, and even though in the 20th century many forms of art appeared with seemingly no content or preference for

⁹¹ S. Sontag, 'Against interpretation (1966)', in. *Against Interpretation*, Vintage, London, United Kingdom, 2001, pp. 3-15.

⁹² Sontag, 'Against interpretation', p. 3

⁹³ Sontag, *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Sontag, *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 4

⁹⁶ Sontag, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Sontag, *ibid.*

content, the dominance of interpretation appears to be unbreakable.⁹⁸ This is the case because, to understand what the artwork represents, or the content refers to, one must interpret the artwork.

Sontag stresses however, that interpretation, in this context, is not to be understood in the sense of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's famous idea that there are '*no facts, only interpretations*'.⁹⁹ Instead, interpretation within the theory of art, and within western culture at large, is an '*act of translation*'.¹⁰⁰ It is about looking for clues in a text, artwork or phenomenon that might point at other phenomena, outside the scope of the one in question, connecting it to the greater network of culture. Sontag states that this practice begun in the late antiquity, with the end of the dominance of myth in Greek culture, and the beginning of a scientific revolution.¹⁰¹ A need seem to have appeared to re-actualize the old texts, to give them meaning in a contemporary sense. Sontag points at the example of the stoics, who reinterpreted Homer's myths to fit the moral standards of their age, and thus Zeus's adultery, and his rape of Leto, as it appeared in its coarse form in Homer's texts, became a symbol of the union of power and wisdom.¹⁰² It seems to be that old texts and artworks cannot be discarded, but at the same time, have to go through the process continuous reinterpretations, because their old meanings lose relevance. It is no different in our age, in fact, Sontag claims that the process has become more brutal, as interpretation is no longer an erection of a new layer upon old ones, but the '*excavation of truth*' from within the lines of old.¹⁰³ She describes the psychologist Sigmund Freud and the philosopher Karl Marx the most influential practitioners of modern interpretation, as both see their respective areas of interest, individual lives and social events endless sources of hidden truth to be brought into light.¹⁰⁴ She also stresses that the act of interpretation has no absolute value in itself, it must be evaluated as well, and while in some context it might be a liberating act, in other cases, it is just *cowardice*.¹⁰⁵

Sontag has a rather negative view on the contemporary project of interpretation. She argues that '*it poisons our sensibilities*'.¹⁰⁶ She describes the act interpretation as '*the revenge*

⁹⁸ Sontag, 'Against interpretation', op. cit., p. 5

⁹⁹ Sontag, *ibid.*.

¹⁰⁰ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁰¹ Sontag, *ibid.*

¹⁰² Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 6

¹⁰³ Sontag, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 7

¹⁰⁵ Sontag, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Sontag, *ibid.*

of the intellect on art, and on the world'.¹⁰⁷ According to her, the intellectual scheme to interpret everything aims to set up a '*shadow world of meanings*'.¹⁰⁸

Interpretation, as Sontag points out, seems to stem from a '*dissatisfaction with the artwork*'¹⁰⁹, or, if interpretation is being understood more broadly, a dissatisfaction with how a phenomenon appears to be. She also stresses that the reduction of art to content, or reality to meaning, violates reality. It turns artworks and phenomena into articles to use, into pawns of the '*mental scheme of categories*'.¹¹⁰

According to Sontag, '*interpretation does not always prevail*' in modern times.¹¹¹ When it comes to arts, she argues that avant-garde can be understood as a '*flight from interpretation*'¹¹², an attempt to return to the primacy of form over content, if there ever was one. She argues that abstract painting attempts to have no content at all, while pop-art is using content itself as form, thus uninterpretable. Ironically, from the seventies onward, when Sontag's essay was written, a new form of modern art, often called post-modern appeared, which started to emphasize content, and more importantly, context, again. At any rate, for Sontag, the emphasis of form over content in avant-garde art is a half-success, because the very notion of form and content, as separable entities, is a product of interpretation.¹¹³ Instead, she argues that film is what came to the closest to be completely bereft of interpretation, by producing '*a surface that is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can just be what it is*'¹¹⁴. While movies can certainly *suck in* the viewer and create a sensation of time-, and spacelessness, by our time, film doubtlessly produced an entire industry working on analyzing and dissecting it. Sontag herself points out that, at the time of the writing of her essay, film was relatively new, and thus the interpretation of it was in its childhood as well.¹¹⁵

Whether abstract art truly achieved the supremacy of form over content, or more importantly, whether it truly managed to flee from interpretation is questionable. Especially if the way how we, perceivers, interact with it, is concerned. Indeed, according to the Irish art critic Brian O'Doherty, modern art attempted to achieve the *perfect form*, that is in no need of

¹⁰⁷ Sontag, 'Against interpretation', loc. cit.

¹⁰⁸ Sontag, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 10

¹¹⁰ Sontag, *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Sontag, *ibid.*

¹¹² Sontag, *ibid.*

¹¹³ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 11

¹¹⁴ Sontag, *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 12

interpretation, and to become the physical manifestation of philosophical idealism.¹¹⁶ The goal, it seems, was to create objects that are *on their own*, perfectly separable from everything, including society and culture, and thus, in line with Sonntag's ideas, uninterpretable. Yet, Brian O'Doherty argues in his famous essay *Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space*¹¹⁷, that abstract visual art developed a symbiosis with the space it appears in. Ironically it became inseparable from the gallery space in which it exists.¹¹⁸ He emphasizes that with the heightened importance of space, space itself, or the context, has become content.¹¹⁹ When describing the modern gallery space, *the white cube*, O'Doherty highlights the sealed off, clinically whitely painted, perfectly regulated nature of it, where even sounds are policed.¹²⁰ It appears that this space was designed to '*forgo all socio-cultural traditions and to be bared down to nakedness*, ultimately, to embody *an abstract notion of freedom*'.¹²¹ But in the end, as O'Doherty claims, the space is hardly naked and unimportant, but the very tool that controls the gaze and attention of the viewer.¹²² The lighting, the composition of space, the location of the individual artworks are all there to guide, or to control the movement and gaze of the observer. To invite them to a ritualistic meeting with the artwork, to invite them to the ritualistic and intellectualized *dissection* of the artwork. Indeed, when the interaction with the abstract art happens in such a controlled manner, it can hardly be called a natural, *as it is* experience of the viewer. Avant-garde art, and modern gallery practice managed to turn the *form* into something that can be, or must be, interpreted. For if interpretation would not be necessary, neither would be the careful composition and control of space. Even in our daily life, we happen *to interpret the form*, so to say, depending on the context, when, for example, we encounter someone dressed in completely unusual clothes that do not match the given occasion at all. Clothing has no inherent socio-cultural significance in itself at all, it is just fabric after all, but the context dresses it up with layers of meaning.

Regardless, Susan Sonntag proposes that art criticism should be more *descriptive* than *prescriptive*, and it should strive for the preference of form over content.¹²³ Critics should provide accurate descriptions of the appearances of artworks, and that of the world as a

¹¹⁶ O'Doherty, 'Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space', p. 13

¹¹⁷ B. O'Doherty, 'Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space', Lapis Press, San Francisco, California, United States, 1976.

¹¹⁸ O'Doherty, 'Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space', p. 14

¹¹⁹ O'Doherty, *ibid.*, p. 15

¹²⁰ O'Doherty, *ibid.*

¹²¹ O'Doherty, *ibid.*, p. 39

¹²² O'Doherty, *ibid.*, p. 61

¹²³ Sonntag, 'Against interpretation', *op. cit.*, p. 12

whole.¹²⁴ Sontag emphasizes the importance of the sensory experience, and proposes that '*in place of a hermeneutics, we need more erotics of art*'.¹²⁵

But can interpretation be forgone at all? The short section I included about Brian O'Doherty's ideas, which might seem disruptive for the thesis at first glance, is not there merely to prove that the form, in the artistic sense, can be interpreted as well. More than that, the argumentation in his book highlights the nature of interpretation and complements Sontag's thought. In the environment of the gallery space, the form seems to be replaced by something else. Another *form*, if we accept the idea that avant-garde art succeeded, or at least attempted, to forgo the content. Indeed, in a way the entirety of O'Doherty's argument could be subsumed into the famous artwork of the French avant-garde artist Marcel Duchamp, the ready-made *Fountain*. According to O'Doherty, the artwork from 1917 turned the gallery space into content.¹²⁶ Or rather, the gallery space turned it into content. As described quite tellingly by O'Doherty, it transformed the rest of the gallery into '*wallpaper*'¹²⁷, framework, or background material. *Fountain*, in itself, is nothing more than a simple object, something with no content at all: a pissoir, placed into a room of an exhibition. Yet, at the same time, it is an artwork of great renown. It appears that the placement of this specific item into the specific environment turned it into something else, replaced the original function or meaning of the object with a new connotation. I would go ahead and state that the pissoir of Duchamp, placed into a museum, was interpreted by both the viewers and art critics, including O'Doherty, as an artwork. According to Susan Sontag, interpretation is an act of translation, actualization, adding of new layers of meaning, or simply the replacement of something sensual with abstract content. In case of the *Fountain*, something sensual, a tool for urination, was given a new meaning, that of the artwork. What is important to emphasize here is that this new meaning was achieved in the specific environment where the object was placed in. Art is institutionalized to the degree that, according to O'Doherty's argumentation, artworks are being created in accordance with the environment they are supposed to appear in.¹²⁸ The environment, the institution, the framework, the *system* is what provides the *Fountain* the status of an artwork. Only in the specific environment of institutionalized art can a pissoir be interpreted as a work of art. Duchamp was no doubt aware of this, as this ready-made was an ironic gesture.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Sontag, 'Against interpretation', op. cit., p. 13

¹²⁵ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 14

¹²⁶ O'Doherty, 'Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space', op. cit., p. 69

¹²⁷ O'Doherty, *ibid.*, p. 72

¹²⁸ O'Doherty, *ibid.*, p. 14

¹²⁹ O'Doherty, *ibid.*, p. 69

As Sontag proclaimed, interpretation appears to be an '*act of translation*'¹³⁰, an act of actualization of any given phenomenon. This actualization is either the modernization of an old text or idea, or simply the connection of a sensory phenomenon to the greater human culture via the attachment of some abstract value or meaning, as seen in case of Duchamp's ready-made. But what is being translated into what, or how is this actualization works?

To translate something is to make something intelligible. However, as Sontag pointed out, during process of interpretation, a '*shadow world of meanings*'¹³¹ is created, where the phenomena themselves, in their immediacy, sensory nature, and uniqueness are sacrificed. So, something that is intelligible, in a sensory manner, is being turned into something else with the loss of the immediate, sensual meaning. In case of the *Fountain*, the object was no longer understood as a tool for urination, but as an item with cultural value. However, as was pointed out before, this specific act of translation can only be understood in context of the institution, or the social system of art. Interpretation on its own appears to be a pointless act. Claiming, for example, that the glass of water next to me correlates to some philosophical meaning would sound utterly ridiculous. Yet, as Duchamp proved it, anything can be given abstract meaning given the circumstances and the environment. Thus interpretation, the translation of a phenomenon into something abstract, only works within social systems. It is a tool to translate something from the *vocabulary* of the sensual world, into the *vocabulary* of social systems such as the institution of art or mass media.

Interpretation, this act of translation, refers to other, similar acts of translations, and to culture itself. It seems that the production of interpretations is an autopoietic, self-perpetuating act. It is a tool to make objects from outside the system understandable from the perspective of the system, to translate them into the language of the system. It is important to note, however, that interpretation is not the only tool for that purposes. If Sontag's specific descriptions are accepted, the function of interpretation is to actualize something, or to give a new, abstract, and contemporary meaning to something. To put it simply, interpretation is used to replace the direct, sensory, or old meaning of a phenomenon with something else. It cannot, for example, be used to place a phenomenon into a temporal or spatial context aside from the act of actualization to the present, that is the department of the narrative, which will be discussed later.

Culture, visual culture, art in its institutionalized form, can all be understood as social systems that use interpretation as a tool of circular reproduction and re-actualization of content. In case of mass media, interpretation can be called a tool of mediation, or approach of

¹³⁰ Sontag, 'Against interpretation', op. cit., p. 5

¹³¹ Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 7

mediation. In the next sub-chapter, I will explore an example from mass media where the act of interpretation can be observed.

3.3 An example of interpretation

In this section I am going to look at an example of American yellow press to observe the appearance of the act of interpretation. For now, I am going to stick to the story of Dwyane Wade and Zaya Wade. I will examine NBC Today's article titled *Dwyane Wade and Gabrielle Union celebrate "wildly inspiring" transgender daughter*¹³². It is important to note that the article does not add anything substantial to the discussion surrounding the Wades in the form of new content. The article is a collection of interviews, social media posts and video references, its only function, on the surface, is to collect these in one place. This shows how much actors in contemporary media are convoluted, because in these cases, it is rather unclear who the real authors are – the one who wrote the article, or the ones who wrote the social media posts or did the interviews.

Dwyane Wade and Gabrielle Union celebrate "wildly inspiring" transgender daughter is an article made by NBC Today, the American news broadcaster NBC News's written yellow press section. As mentioned before, the article, which was written on the 23rd of September 2020, is a compilation of interview fragments and social media posts, which were collected from a wide timeframe. The article starts with stating that Dwyane Wade, and his wife, the American actress Gabrielle Union, stepmother to Zaya Wade, are celebrating their '*wildly inspiring*' transgender daughter after they have been chosen to be part of TIME magazine's hundred most influential people of year 2020. The article continues by quoting sections of the video released after the couple was chosen by TIME magazine, where Dwyane and Gabrielle talk about their experiences with Zaya, and the story surrounding her coming out as transgender. Gabrielle Union states that '*freedom exists in many different forms and that their household is blessed to have free children*'. She further emphasizes the elevating experience of '*watching truly free children, who do not need to ask for permission to exist*'. The article, written by Scott Stump, is being continued with a report stating that '*Union's embrace of her stepdaughter and others earned praise from Tarana Burke, the founder of #MeToo*'. According to Stump, Burke

¹³² S. Stump, 'Dwyane Wade and Gabrielle Union celebrate 'wildly inspiring' transgender daughter', NBC Today, 23/09/2020, <<https://www.today.com/popculture/dwyane-wade-gabrielle-union-celebrate-wildly-inspiring-transgender-daughter-t192342>>, accessed 28/09/2020.

praised Gabrielle Union further for standing up for the ‘*most marginalized of us, including Black women and girls and queer and trans folks*’. To remind the readers of the original event, the article presses forward by quoting sections of the interview made with Dwyane Wade on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* back in February 2020, when Wade pointed out that Zaya was originally ‘*born as a boy*’, but according to Dwyane, came home and said that ‘*I think I want to move forward and ready to live my truth. (...) I’d love for you guys to call me Zaya*’.

The article quotes Dwyane again, who stated that he is inspired by their kids, by ‘*the way they look at us, the way they look for us for leadership and guidance*’. Finally, the author ends the text with citing Zaire, brother to Zara, who emphasized the friendship and companionship between the two, and remarked on how they ‘*never left each other behind*’.

At first glance, this article is nothing less and nothing more, but a collection of interviews, statements and confessions from the various actors that play some role in the story of Zaya Wade. However, mass media is a social system, and a social system is a *distinction machine*. It makes things visible, and more importantly, it makes things invisible, the reason why I passionately believe that this whole problem could be considered as part of visual culture. As I argued, I believe that the tools of the system, or approaches of mediation in case of this specific system, are being used in the process of distinction, or the process of choosing what to show and what not to show. Furthermore, as I pointed out in the end of the second chapter, in case of the modus operandi of the system, there is a double distinction, because social systems are not just producing information, but also observing the environment. When a phenomenon such as Zaya Wade’s transition is being adsorbed by the media, the things that are being observed, and thus the things that appear in articles such as this at all, are already being selected with the help of the approaches of mediation, and later being presented according to those as well. In case of interpretation, the phenomena that “can be interpreted” will be observed to begin with, and later, when the article is done, interpretation, as a tool of mediation, will be the guidance for the text itself.

I would point out a series of expressions from the text. The concepts of *inspiration*, *freedom*, *free children* and *freedom of expression*, *support*, *leadership*, *guidance*, *friendship*, and *kinship* stand out. These all appear to be abstract cultural values. They could further be categorized into values with more of a personal context, such as freedom, and concepts related to social values, such as leadership, especially in the context it appears here, connected to the concepts of family and friendship. I want to emphasize that, on the surface, on the sensory level, the story of Zaya Wade is about a now thirteen years old transgender girl. Yet, as it appears, the story is much deeper than that. Simply for being transgender, Zaya seems to *inspire* her parents.

She also represents *freedom*, both freedom of expression and of existence. According to Tarana Burke, founder of #MeToo, Gabrielle Union stood up for ‘*most marginalized of us, including Black women and girls and queer and trans folks*’, simply for accepting her stepdaughter as she is. It seems that Zaya somehow represents all black girls and women, queer, and transgender people. Sure, Zaya is most certainly black, a girl, will likely become a woman later, queer and transgender, but at the same time, she is Zaya. She undoubtedly has a good relationship with her brother as well, but somehow, that is also connected to her being transgender in the sense that the friendship is specifically being emphasized in relation to this fact. As for being transgender, at least according to the segment of an interview with the father, the key seems to be that she was a ‘*born as a boy*’, and thus, the act of transformation from one gender into another seems to be emphasized.¹³³

As a reader I do not know, but I suspect that the thirteen years old kid also talked a great deal about her taste in clothes, her approach to makeup, or her favorite color. However, it looks like that such details of the interviews were highlighted which could be connected to the aforementioned abstract values.

But why? I believe the reason can be explained by the need for media to tune in the reader. Being transgender is a unique and rare condition that most of the audience has little knowledge about. To make the story interesting for a broad assortment of readers, it needs to have beacons to which people can attach themselves. This way, the story is relatable, because we share universal values such as freedom or family. Yet, *a shadow world of meanings* is being generated on top of Zaya’s story, or on the top of the story of being transgender. This specific condition is being actualized and universalized, in a way translated to some form of universally understandable language of values, to make it relatable. Statements like being transgender, Zaya Wade being transgender, Zaya Wade coming out as transgender, or Zaya’s family accept her as transgender, are being actualized and replaced by abstract meanings such as freedom, agency, kinship, or social responsibility.

Even the structure of the article reinforces this act of actualization, or act of interpretation. As mentioned above, this is a collection of interview fragments and twitter posts, which were, in a sense, torn from their contexts and collected in one place. I believe this act of collection was a conscious one, done specifically to gather various statements about Zaya Wade’s story, and the reactions of those connected to it. These statements, especially in the context of each other, seem to provide a cultural and intellectual framework to the story at hand,

¹³³ In contrast to the enduring narrative within transgender community, which stresses „correction” instead of „transformation”, or fulfillment instead of change.

because they can be interpreted as abstract concepts and values. These statements collected in the article appear to act in a similar manner to hashtags in social media, in the sense that both seem to summarize the meaning or essence of whatever story they are attached to.

Ironically, this hardly intellectual article summarizes well the discussion surrounding the “transgender question” in the Anglo-Saxon world. It should be noted, however, that if the article would have been a British one, and not an American, much less inspiring values would have been attached to the story of Zaya Wade. Regardless, concepts such as the freedom of choice, agency of a particular person, marginalization and social activism, the impact on social and familial relationships, and especially in case of children, the agency of the parents, which was referenced in the article by Dwyane Wade’s line ‘*the way they look for us for leadership and guidance*’, seem to dominate this discussion. It appears that there is a need for interpretation to make specific issues understandable that are too particular for the average reader. These matters need to be interpreted to be generalized, to be universalized, to be made intelligible for both the system, and for its assumed perceiver. At the same time, Susan Sontag rightly criticizes this practice for destroying the form, for dulling the senses, and for restructuring sensually observable phenomena into something abstract. The personal story of Zaya Wade, her mental and emotional struggles seem to be substituted by the abstract concepts of *freedom* and *agency*, and indeed, her personality is being replaced by the concept *transgender*, which acts as a magnet for abstract notions.

On the other hand, being transgender is the only thing that is interesting about Zaya Wade, from the perspective of the system of media. A system that is there to provide information, *difference* to its assumed readers. Being thirteen years old, preferring specific clothing or having a particular taste of music is completely irrelevant beyond the subject’s personal life, and could never be written an article about. As Susan Sontag pointed out in *The Image-world*, in the reality constructed by images, or to be more specific in this case, in the reality constructed by distinctions and visibility, exotic things appear close while ordinary things appear distant.¹³⁴

About Zaya Wade, people only know what was made visible by media, and in general, about being transgender as well. However, to understand the condition of being transgender, or generally, to understand any condition, one must observe it. Yet, systematic observation hardly seems possible for most people who are not exposed to transgender folks in a sensory manner and are only being exposed to what was made visible to them by the media. From this

¹³⁴ Sontag, ‘The Image-World’, op. cit., p. 87

perspective, being transgender is about freedom, agency, and a series of other abstract concepts. As a transgender person, I know that to understand this condition, if it can be understood and described at all, ordinary things such as emotional and mental struggles, or the taste in clothing, music or makeup are relevant. Yet, in the media, the concept *transgender* appears to be merely an excuse to generate content, understanding it from a phenomenological point of view is not important. This is due to the nature of mass media, which was not made for intellectual inquiries, but for circular production of information. The generalization and actualization of a particular topic via interpretation is a tool for this autopoietic production of data, and the loss of sensual elements, or even the phenomenology of being transgender seem to be acceptable loss which can be left in the shadows.

3.4 The Narrative

The second concept I am going to interpret in the context of the system of mass media is the concept of the narrative. I am not above interpretation; I do not entertain the false idea that I could possibly observe any system without using their very own tools. Even when I approached the article I used in the previous subheading to highlight interpretation in contemporary media, I myself used the tool of interpretation. This seems to be a recurring occurrence in this thesis, because I am actualizing concepts from the perspective of mass media. On the surface, I am aiming to bridge the mass media Luhmann wrote about to the mass media that is present today. I am doing this little more than two decades later, but when it comes to the technological details or the scale of mass media, with the advent of widespread internet, the differences, at least on the surface, seem significant. I am, however, attempting to prove through this bridging project that there are elements of mass media that persevere today, even in forms that were not considered media, or did not even exist a few years ago, such as twitter posts and YouTube videos. The approaches of mediation, the main focuses of the thesis, appear as constants in a sense. They do change, but their presence in the production and organization of media is continuous. However, the concepts I describe as approaches of mediation are concepts borrowed from elsewhere. Interpretation or narrative are mainly used in conjunction with art history, aesthetics, or literary theory. It appears as if I am re-actualizing these in a new context and use the tool of interpretation once more. Yet, appearances can be deceiving, and this statement is not entirely true. Instead, I am placing the system of mass media into a greater network of systems that, together, constitute human culture, or at least the culture of the western

world. The continuity of western culture is relying heavily on concepts such as interpretation or narration, and these concepts, or tools, are present in all social systems. To prove, or to observe this continuation, the example of contemporary mass media is excellent, because it appears to change rapidly, yet what it contains is relatable to the past.

What I established here is a narrative. To prove perseverance, I interpret acts of mediation or products of media as part of a greater structure that has temporal qualities, that has a history, and is inherently abstract. The original experience that led to the creation of this thesis, and heightened my interest in mass media, media representation, and images in media was the experience of being written about. Not personally, but in an abstract manner. As a transgender person, I encountered an ever-growing number of interpretations and portrayals, even narrations of my lived experience, and they had one thing in common. They had nothing to do with my lived experience. My lived experience was turned into an image, that image had abstract qualities attached to it, and then it was connected to a series of theoretical concepts. The process appeared familiar, yet the articles about transgender people were brand new. To find out why does the portrayal of transgender people is familiar, and yet removed from the sensual, lived experience, I must look for what connects new media with the old, or media with culture. How does the tangible turn into mimesis, an image, and then how does that image attain further theoretical qualities? In this section, where I am going to talk about the creation and nature of the narrative, I am also going to look at the transformation of image into concept, and concept into narrative. To do so, in the first part of this section, I am going to examine the Russian classical-philologist Olga Friedenberg's book¹³⁵, *Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature*¹³⁶.

Friedenberg begins her work with a search for the origins of concepts in Western culture and establishes that concepts are historical entities that are prone to change, and not a priori in nature.¹³⁷ They must have appeared together with the emergence of abstract thinking in human societies.¹³⁸ To follow the evolution of concepts, Friedenberg focuses her attention on ancient Greek culture.

¹³⁵ The original date of writing of this book is not known and it was first published in Russia in 1978. I am going to reference the publishing date of the copy I read, but it is very misleading, as the book must have been written before 1955.

¹³⁶ Friedenberg, 'Image and concept: The Mythopoetic Roots of Literature', tr. K. Moss, Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1997.

¹³⁷ Friedenberg, 'Image and concept: The Mythopoetic Roots of Literature', p. 21

¹³⁸ Friedenberg, *ibid.*

According to Friedenberg, concepts are ‘*a certain form of image*’.¹³⁹ They have a function of transferal, a translation of the concrete meanings of the image into abstract meanings, and thus, the rise of concepts lead to the development of metaphors and poetic figurality. In ancient literature and art, the separation of concept and image was not yet complete.¹⁴⁰ The disappearance of the concrete layers of these image-concepts has only begun with the ancient Greeks and was completed by the ancient Romans.¹⁴¹ Friedenberg stresses that during the early days of Western culture, the *conceptual* and the *mythical* existed together, with the former being made out of the latter.¹⁴² The first concepts directly represented the concrete image they were contained in, and an abstract essence as well. This can be understood with the Platonic concept of mimesis, where objects represent their essential counterparts from the idea-world, and art represents the objects themselves. An image refers to an image, which in turn refers to another, essential image as well. An image is a double of the original and has an ‘*essential sameness*’ to it.¹⁴³ Abstraction came into existence with the loss of this essential sameness, when the *I became a non-I*.¹⁴⁴ Thus, conceptual thinking begun with something that is essentially an interpretation, but was born out of the act of connecting images to other images which were bearing the *essential sameness*. It is important to note, as Friedenberg pointed out, that Western culture has a tradition to directly connect abstract thought to images.¹⁴⁵

The original concept, that existed in symbiosis with the image, had an appearance and an essence.¹⁴⁶ The appearance imitated the essence. In this regard, in the sense of the mimetic tradition, the appearance was an external, illusory form of something that really existed in the realm of the ideas.¹⁴⁷ Friedenberg stresses that according to classical logic, the appearance was a spatial extension to the essence, or in other words, the object or artwork appearing in front of the viewer’s eye was an external form of the idea, which was also in a way an object.¹⁴⁸ Platonic thought, that assigns an idealistic form, that exists in the theoretic, but nonetheless *real* world of ideas, to objects, exists on the border of mythical and theoretical thinking. Conceptual images continued to evolve during the classical period, and after a while, they no longer connected reality to reality, but reality to imagination, to the theoretical world. The ideas were no longer

¹³⁹ Friedenberg, op. cit., p. 20

¹⁴⁰ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 24

¹⁴¹ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 26

¹⁴² Friedenberg, ibid., p. 27

¹⁴³ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 28

¹⁴⁴ Friedenberg, ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 27

¹⁴⁶ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 30

¹⁴⁷ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 29

¹⁴⁸ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 30

objects, but abstract entities. Their connection to images continued, however, and those images still functioned as spatial extensions of things that were essentially nonexistent outside the imagination.

To summarize this section of Friedenberg's work, I would emphasize two ideas. Firstly, Western tradition prefers to connect abstract thought to images. A simple example of this is the appearance of a woman presented in any form of media, or even in case of direct observation. The "viewer" immediately adds abstract qualities to the view, such as femininity. To go a step further, Friedenberg also stresses that the image is a spatial, external extension of the theoretical. So logically, the concept femininity comes first, the woman standing right in front of the perceiver is merely an extension of it. Susan Sonntag also emphasizes this process, during which abstraction, the content, claims supremacy over the form, but she limits her examination to the history of interpretation. Friedenberg, on the other hand, suggests that the entirety of western thinking is based on this image-concept relation where the image is the external form of the concept, and this can be traced back to the period where the image was indeed an external form of something that is, in a philosophical sense, tangible, the idea. To refer back to the contemporary examples I have worked with, armed with this knowledge, I can somewhat resolve the aporia why, in case of transgender representation, the lived experience differs from what appears in a mediated environment. Because what appears as lived experience, or tangible form in media is merely a spatial extension of the conceptual world. When concepts such as freedom or agency are being connected to the story of Zaya Wade, in reality the story of Zaya Wade is what being connected to the abstract notions. In a sense, Zaya Wade is merely a decoration. And since westerners prefer to connect images to concepts, and the other way around as well, the phenomenon of transgenerness cannot appear, and cannot be understood without abstract, universal notions accompanying it.

Olga Friedenberg continues her book with the description of the origins of narrative. To explain it, she introduces the concept of '*biunity*'.¹⁴⁹ Biunity essentially means the union of two objects or notions that appear as contradictory, or act as opposites, but are united in a singular structure. Biunity is neither monolithic, nor dualistic, but *the unity of two in one*.¹⁵⁰ The original concept, which had an appearance and an essence, is a biunity, and so is art, which has form and content. Western thinking tends to look at concepts as biunities as well, such as light and

¹⁴⁹ Friedenberg, op. cit., p. 48

¹⁵⁰ Friedenberg, ibid.

darkness, man and woman, transgender and cisgender¹⁵¹. Understanding these notions is always being done together, for darkness cannot be comprehended without its opposite, the light, and neither does transgender mean anything without having a counterpart to be related to. Binomial, or binominal structures surface in ancient Greek literature with the appearance of direct and indirect speech.¹⁵² Through direct speech, the opinions or actions of the characters of the story are expressed, while through indirect speech the subjectivity of the author is conveyed, the spatial and temporal aspects of the story are highlighted, and a narrative is being set up. Direct and indirect speech appear in unison, the story is being constituted by the two, together.

According to Friedenberg, direct speech is a mimesis of an action, and it appears as a picture, devoid of time, a snapshot of reality.¹⁵³ Indirect speech is unlike snapshots, it refers to near and far, both in a temporal and a spatial manner.¹⁵⁴ It is with the indirect speech that narrative appears. Indirect speech refers to the far away and the temporarily removed, to the *non-present*, and in its first forms, it is similar to a '*vision*'.¹⁵⁵ The journeys of Odysseus, described in an indirect manner, are also mysterious journeys to the unknown, to the *non-present*.

The first narratives are binominal combinations of direct and indirect speech but appear at the time of the emergence the indirect.¹⁵⁶ A narrative requires active characters and actions, but at the same time, concepts such as goal, direction, or flow, which all have temporal qualities. There is an underlying conflict between the direct time, the present of the actions and characters, and the indirect time to which goal and flow refer to.

In the second part of this section, the concept of time, and its connection to the narrative will be examined more, and the nature of narrative will be defined further. To this end, I am going to utilize the book *Time and Narrative* written by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur.¹⁵⁷ Narrative in literature and art, as was already established by Friedenberg, is defined by having temporal qualities. Already within her conception of the narrative, there appears a rift between the time that can be attached to individual actions that are defining direct speech, Friedenberg calls this direct time, and the more indirect, removed time suggested by indirect speech.¹⁵⁸ Yet,

¹⁵¹ The „opposite” of transgender, or essentially, those who are not transgender, thus their identity and assigned gender at birth match, unlike in case of transgender people.

¹⁵² Friedenberg, op. cit., p. 51

¹⁵³ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 53

¹⁵⁴ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 58

¹⁵⁵ Friedenberg, ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Friedenberg, ibid., p. 62

¹⁵⁷ P. Ricœur, 'Time and Narrative', tr. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, United States, 1983

¹⁵⁸ Friedenberg, op. cit., p. 63

the two together constitute narrative. Ricœur attempts to solve this paradox, among other problems. He begins his work by reinforcing the idea that narrative always has temporal qualities, and states that '*time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of the narrative*'¹⁵⁹. He then continues the first part, or first volume of his book by attempting to show what *human time* means, and how narrative is being organized, and connect the two together despite some underlying paradoxes.

Ricœur relies in his analysis of '*human time*' on the work of the ancient Roman theologian and philosopher of the fifth century, Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. He specifically uses Augustine's eleventh book, the *Meditation on Eternity*.¹⁶⁰ Following Augustine's thoughts, Ricœur points at the philosophical issue of time, namely, whether it exists at all.¹⁶¹ Because, logically, the past does not exist any longer, the future is not yet, therefore does not exist either, and the present is rather hard to describe in a logically sound manner because time cannot really be stopped. Yet, at the same time, time can be measured, and words such as long and short appear to describe it.¹⁶² Furthermore, humans calculate the past, and assert what is true, and make predictions about the future. It appears that time exists in language, and Augustine finds a linguistic solution on the paradoxical nature of it. According to him, past and future act as adjectives, not as nouns.¹⁶³ They do not represent things that exists on their own, but instead, represent the temporal qualities that exist in the otherwise immeasurable present. Past is the recounting of events from the perspective of the present, and future is the prediction of events from the viewpoint of the now. Augustine describes these qualities as '*images of the mind*', and as such, past is an image in the mind created by memory.¹⁶⁴ Future, in a similar manner, is an image about what is likely to come, created by prediction. Past, future, and even present are inherently subjective, and created by humans. In contrast, eternity, represented by God, is not created.¹⁶⁵ Unlike human time, it does not have a before and an after. Eternity is forever still, while human time is never still, and prone to change, even the past.¹⁶⁶

Describing time as a human creation appears to be a rather solid argument, considering that there is no way to measure eternity, or any other manifestation of time that is not somehow connected to the present, and to humans. Ricœur argues that this human time, always created

¹⁵⁹ Ricœur, 'Time and Narrative', p. 3

¹⁶⁰ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁶¹ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 7

¹⁶² Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁶³ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁶⁴ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 11

¹⁶⁵ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 22

¹⁶⁶ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 25

continuously from the perspective of the present, is organized in the manner of the narrative. This includes history, which is being narrated from the contemporary point of view of any given time, and thus from a subjective perspective.

To describe the nature of the narrative, Ricœur relies on *Aristotle's Poetics*.¹⁶⁷ In a similar manner to Friedenberg, Ricœur looks at ancient Greece to find the beginning of narratives, and relies heavily on Aristotle's understanding of the structure of literature, specifically the tragedy. He finds a paradox, however, and stresses that these original literary works appear to have lacked any form of temporal qualities, aside from the beginning and the end, or the temporal '*wholeness*' of the works.¹⁶⁸ Ricœur nonetheless attempts to assign temporal qualities to these early narratives, as well as narratives in general. Referring to Aristotle, Ricœur states that the key elements of poetry were '*plot, character, language, thought, spectacle and melody*'.¹⁶⁹ There were two main activities that guided the formulation of poetic narratives, the act of '*mimesis*', and the act of '*muthos*', in other words, mimetic activity, and '*emplotment*'.¹⁷⁰ Mimesis is representation, while emplotment is the organization of events according to the logic of the artwork. In a similar manner to Friedenberg's understanding where direct and indirect speech constituted the early narrative together, these two established the poem and its narrative in case of Ricœur's thought. Referring to Aristotle's understanding of mimesis, Ricœur underlines that while in a similar manner to Plano's thought, Aristotle describes mimesis as representation of an object or action, but it is not an aimless representation, but one that is being done to advance the plot, and thus the mimesis of actions aids the emplotment of the poem.¹⁷¹

The internal connection of the plot is not chronological, however, but logical.¹⁷² To find out what the logic is, Ricœur quotes the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who, in the manner of an early form of phenomenology, describes the field of the poet as the field of the '*possible*'¹⁷³, while the field of the histories as the '*actual*'.¹⁷⁴ The *possible*, or more correctly, the probable '*should be sought in the organization of the events*'.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, as Ricœur establishes, the logic is the organization of the events itself, the plot, which needs to be typical, universal, and driven by actions. The actions themselves, the mimesis of actions, is what drives

¹⁶⁷ Ricœur, op. cit., p. 31

¹⁶⁸ Ricœur, ibid., p. 39

¹⁶⁹ Ricœur, ibid., p. 34

¹⁷⁰ Ricœur, ibid., p. 31

¹⁷¹ Ricœur, ibid., p. 34

¹⁷² Ricœur, ibid., p. 40

¹⁷³ This is a direct quote from the text; however, the correct form of the concept would be *probable*.

¹⁷⁴ Ricœur, loc. cit.

¹⁷⁵ Ricœur, ibid., p. 41

the plot, because if the actions that appear in the fiction refer to real actions, which typically tend to happen in a particular manner and order, then logically, these will happen in the fictional story as well.¹⁷⁶ The logic, therefore, is the particular order of actions that make the appearance of further actions a probability. It appears that the logic behind emplotment, the structure of the poem, and the narrative of it is a feedback loop, where the presence of actions suggest further actions.

But where is temporality in all this? Ricœur stresses that '*time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence*'¹⁷⁷, despite the paradox of the logic of emplotment, which forgoes time. To solve the paradox, Ricœur refers back to the nature of the plot, which is composed by mimetic activity aimed at actions, or to simply put it, is being composed by a sequence of actions. To understand the plot, or to understand the narrative, one must understand the concept of action.

According to Ricœur, actions have structural qualities, symbolic qualities, and temporal qualities.¹⁷⁸ To be able to be narrated, actions have a structural quality, because to distinguish actions, in the conceptual sense, from physical movement or activity, one must be able to connect these sequences to a greater network of actions.¹⁷⁹ A simple narrative of actions, as Ricœur points out, is a sentence like '*X did A in such and such circumstances, taking into account the fact that Y and B did that in identical or different circumstances*'.¹⁸⁰ The structural quality of the action is, therefore, the quality that allows people to compare them with other actions, because if there would be no comparison, action would be nothing more than a physical act of movement, for example, linguistically and conceptually indistinguishable from other physical happenings.

The symbolic layer of actions is the *translation* of simple action sequences into the language of culture. As Ricœur puts it, actions can be narrated because there is a network of signs, rules, and norms that can be assigned to simple physical happenings.¹⁸¹ To summarize, actions, which constitute narrative, have structural qualities in the sense that they can be compared to other actions, and tend to play out in a similar manner when executed in

¹⁷⁶ Ricœur, loc. cit.

¹⁷⁷ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 52

¹⁷⁸ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 54

¹⁷⁹ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 55

¹⁸⁰ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 56

¹⁸¹ Ricœur, *ibid.*

comparable circumstances, and they have symbolic qualities as well, because through norms, labels and signs, they can be translated into a conceptual, and universal language.

The temporal qualities of actions, as Ricœur stresses, manifest in the Augustinian manner.¹⁸² Simple sentences referring to actions, such as '*I will do that tomorrow*, or *I just realized*' all have temporal qualities, and these temporal qualities reveal themselves in contrast to the present.¹⁸³ In the first case, something will be done in the future of the present, and in the second case, something was done in the past of the present. Referring to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Ricœur emphasized the *within-time* nature of human actions.¹⁸⁴ Heidegger demonstrates this by the act of *caring*, something that takes time, and does not happen in a snapshot-like manner. Therefore, while actions appear as singular acts locked in the present, in reality, most actions are temporal in nature, and according to Ricœur, this '*constitutes the most elementary inductor of narrative*'.¹⁸⁵

The narrative, which is based on sequences of actions that are inherently temporal in the sense that they have temporal characteristics in relation to the present, is temporal. But Ricœur also stated, as quoted earlier, that time becomes human if it is articulated in the manner of the narrative. There seems to be a '*circle of narrative*', in the sense that narrative manifests if it is temporal, and temporal experience manifests if it is narrational.¹⁸⁶

To show how human time becomes understandable in the form of the narrative, Ricœur uses the example of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. Ironically, Freud's activity both proved an example for the act of interpretation for Susan Sonntag, and here, for the act of narration, thus he appears as some sort of a master of replacing sensual, descriptive phenomena with conceptual representations and structures. According to Ricœur, the patient tells bits and pieces of lived stories, dreams, and scenes to the psychoanalyst, who then turns them into a narrative for intelligibility.¹⁸⁷ The bits and pieces assume a structure in relation to each other, and assume temporal qualities in the sense that events that occurred in the past of the present, repressed stories of the mind, refer to events in the future of the present as well as the present itself, the actual reality of the patient's personality. Repressed stories of the past, and the actual reality of the present constitute a case history. Narrative models the human experience in the sense that

¹⁸² Ricœur, op. cit., p. 60

¹⁸³ Ricœur, ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ricœur, ibid., p. 61

¹⁸⁵ Ricœur, ibid., p. 60

¹⁸⁶ Ricœur, ibid., p. 72

¹⁸⁷ Ricœur, ibid., p. 74

it ‘*grasps together the details of actions into the unity of the plot*’.¹⁸⁸ The temporal qualities of human actions are emphasized and brought into unity with each other via the narrative.

Ultimately, the temporal nature of the narrative is not a descriptive temporality. Ricœur emphasizes that there is a temporal hierarchy within culture, that affects both the field of history, and that of narratology.¹⁸⁹ Historiography precedes the history of events, and the narrative precedes the chronology of happenings. The thread that holds the plot together, the sequence of actions with temporal qualities that refer to each other seems to be more important in the western way of writing history or fiction than the simple description of events next to each other. As a matter of fact, according to Ricœur, chronology does not have temporal qualities in the sense that the events referenced in a chronological manner do not constitute human time, as they do not appear as pasts of the present. Whether it comes to history or fiction, order has a primacy over succession, the inner logic is more important than the sequence of the events following each other in the descriptive sense.¹⁹⁰

The concept of narrative, when Ricœur’s analysis is followed, appears to have qualities of a system in the sense that it produces itself in an autopoietic manner, based on structural logic. It does not necessarily mean, however, that it cannot be understood as a tool used by other systems. If it understood as a tool, however, it is drastically more complex than interpretation. Narrative is a binominal union of direct and indirect speech in Freedenberg’s understanding, and is based on a sequence of interconnected actions with temporal extensions in Ricœur’s work. As a device, what can narrative be used for in the process of observing and representing phenomena from the perspective of a social system? Unlike interpretation, it is no mere translation of something into a universal, conceptual language, but also assists universalization since the function of the system is to make phenomena intelligible and universal. Intelligibility, in case of the narration of events, comes in the form of putting phenomena, or actions into an ordered structure where phenomena refer to each other, and attain temporal, or even spatial, qualities in reference to each other and the present. It is not just a *here and now, this means this*, but a *here and now, this means this in reference to this and this event that happened back then, or will happen in the future, because similar events were executed in a comparable manner*. Narrative is there to grant phenomena temporal and spatial qualities, as well as to connect them to other phenomena, ultimately, to lead to a unified plot that is intelligible to the receiver. Yet, according to Ricœur, the sequences of actions are organized

¹⁸⁸ Ricœur, op. cit., p. 76

¹⁸⁹ Ricœur, ibid., p. 85

¹⁹⁰ Ricœur, ibid., p. 226

according to the typical, thus the atypical remains invisible. In a similar manner, the temporal qualities of the narrative are manifesting in relation to the present, as well as to each other, and thus, due to the predetermined nature of the perspective from which the observations are done, some things remain in the shadows. In case of Friedenberg's understanding, the direct speech, the direct thoughts and actions of agents is being highlighted under the terms of the indirect flow of the story. The narrative, just like any other tool of the social systems, are based on distinctions, no matter how ordered and logical it appears.

3.5 Examples of the narrative

In this section, I am going to take a look at two articles of The Guardian, one by the British edition, and one by the American one, and highlight narrative elements, as understood based on the findings of the previous subheading, during the analysis of each. As with the case of the example of the interpretation, these analyses will be shortened and grounded in second-order observation, whereby I focus on aspects that are relevant to the thesis. I would argue, however, that these controversial articles, particularly the British one ended up being notorious, deserve a deep scholarly analysis, yet the limitations of the thesis does not allow me to fully explore their complexities.

So far, I relied on the story of Dwyane and Zaya Wade to provide a practical undertone to the theoretical sections of the thesis. However, this story has its limits. The previous example was perfect to showcase the process of replacing, or actualizing tangible phenomena, such as the coming out of Zaya Wade, with abstract and universally relatable concepts. The *how*'s and *why*'s of the story, the consequences of the individual actions as well as their temporal qualities, and the interconnected networks of phenomena that tie the plot together is only mentioned briefly in it. To expand my practical undercurrent, I am going to leave the example of the Wades behind, but I am going to remain within the topic of transgender issues.

The first example, published by the British edition of The Guardian on the 17th of October 2018, begins ominously with stating that transgender rights should be advanced without harming the interests of women, but a toxic debate about the question within the United

Kingdom made it hard.¹⁹¹ The article, which has no named author and is titled *The Guardian view on the Gender Recognition Act: where rights collide*, then continues with establishing the background of the debate. The author(s) state that in the United Kingdom, there is an option for transgender people to legally change their gender since 2004. However, there is a desire on part of the transgender community to reduce the complexities of this legal change, based on the examples of Ireland or Denmark, where the law allow people to “self-declare” their gender. This is the first instance where The Guardian appears to forgo the descriptive reporting of events and background, or at least leaves certain important elements invisible. The reason for the debate was not the changes in the Irish or Danish legal systems, but, as reported by another British newspaper, The Independent, rather a proposal of the then prime minister Theresa May, who intended to reduce the bureaucratic hurdles of gender recognition.¹⁹² The reason for the proposal, as stressed by the then reigning tory government, was that there were only five thousand trans people who managed to change their legal gender since 2004 due to the bureaucratic complexities, as well as the high costs. According to The Independent’s reporting, no clear numbers amount of transgender people living in the United Kingdom were, or are, known, although according to estimates, between 0.5 and 1 percent of any given society are transgender. This means between thirty-, and sixty-thousand people in case of Britain. The Irish and the Danish legal system were, therefore, only models for change, not reasons for change.

Nonetheless, The Guardian stresses the conflict between transgender activists and some feminist campaigners that arose following the announcement of May’s plans. The Guardian suggests a clear division between transgender people and feminists, although anti-trans sentiments are usually only voiced by a particular group of radical feminists calling themselves *gender criticals*, and constitute only the minority of the movement even in the United Kingdom, where their ideology is the most widespread. Furthermore, despite the undertones, the numerous polls which were made after 2018 about this issue suggest a general approval of the reforms among the women living in Britain, as reported, for example, by the Pinknews.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ The Guardian, 'The Guardian view on the Gender Recognition Act: where rights collide Editorial', The Guardian, 17/10/2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/17/the-guardian-view-on-the-gender-recognition-act-where-rights-collide>>, accessed 05/10/2020.

¹⁹² L. Buchan, 'Theresa May pledges to overhaul 'bureaucratic and intrusive' hurdles to changing gender', The Independent, 03/07/2018, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-gender-change-bureaucratic-legal-recognition-trans-lgbt-transitioning-a8428856.html>>, accessed 05/10/2020.

¹⁹³ R. Butcher, 'Majority of women support trans people's right to self-identify despite years of relentless transphobia, eye-opening polling finds', PinkNews, 09/07/2020, <<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/07/09/trans-self-identify-liz-truss-gender-recognition-act-yougov-polling-women-dawn-butler/>>, accessed 05/10/2020.

At any rate, The Guardian stresses that there is ‘*no right or wrong*’ side in this debate, only seemingly unsolvable disputes. On one hand, personal identity is at stake, on the other, legal rights and protections. They point out that there are a few instances in British law that recognize ‘*the conflicting interests between transgender women and other women*’, such as in case of rape support services, which the transgender activists want to make available for trans women, while “*some feminists*” throw their lot in with further restrictions. The Guardian also stresses that the case of transgender men is less controversial, as they gain access to other spaces designed for disadvantaged groups.

To get back to the debate about the gender recognition procedure at hand, The Guardian reports about the criticism labeled against this process by transgender activists, who find the practice humiliating, including the need for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, a common, but not universal mental “side-effect” of being transgender, and the need for ‘*two years of lived experience as their acquired gender*’. It is important to note here that since 2019, the World Health Organization no longer classifies the condition of being transgender a mental disorder, thus the diagnosis of gender dysphoria, in a medical sense, no longer exists.¹⁹⁴ On the other hand, The Guardian also points out that ‘*an easy legal way*’ to change one’s gender could allow, for example, male prisoners to access female prisons, and dominate women there.

According to The Guardian, transgender people also emphasize that these criticisms that are being labeled against a potential reform of the British gender recognition act are not grounded in logic and are based on transphobia. In a somewhat stereotypical sentence, the author(s) state that ‘*transphobia must be opposed, but misogyny, too, must be opposed*’. They continue by arguing that gender does not cancel out sex, and women’s oppression by men has a physical basis. They further emphasize that reproductive freedoms are under threat, and women’s rights campaigns face a backlash worldwide. Therefore, ‘*women’s concerns about sharing dormitory or changing rooms with male-bodied people must be taken seriously*’. The guardian also warns against the trend that single-sex spaces appear to turn into single gender spaces, and ends with the article with a warning that ‘*this complex issue needs to be considered carefully*’.

What unfolds here is no mere interpretation. There is no singular tangible phenomenon to attach abstract qualities to. Instead, there are actions, consequences, and actors, which together constitute a plot. A central act is drawn, the proposed reform of the gender recognition

¹⁹⁴ J. Ravitz, ‘Transgender people are not mentally ill, the WHO decrees’, CNN, 29/05/2019, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/28/health/who-transgender-reclassified-not-mental-disorder/index.html>>, accessed 05/10/2020.

process, around which various actors with opposing interests, and consequences with temporal qualities are gathered. The transgender people, who constitute one of the actors, wish the act to unfold. Their reasoning for it to happen is not clearly outlined, as Theresa May's reform is not mentioned in the article, although, considering the background of it, the announcement was probably known for the intended reader. The fact that the previous legal solution to the gender recognition issue was insufficient is not shown, however. Even though there were mere five-thousand successful recipients of gender recognition out of an estimated population between thirty-, and sixty-thousand, the de facto nonexistence of gender recognition in British law is not highlighted. I allowed myself to plug the holes in this narrative. The joke is on me, as I come from a country where there is no de facto or de jure gender recognition, and thus I cannot, at least in theory, access any public services, because on one hand, I am visibly not "male-bodied", but on the other hand, legally male. Therefore, I cannot approach this article or topic with perfect distance, and I do not aim to do that, either.

The other actor of the story are the people who The Guardian refers to as *some feminists*, but given the vagueness of this description, and the general tone of the article, the author(s) themselves could be recognized as such. Several potentially harmful consequences of the act are mentioned, including the invasion of female prisons by men, the access of rape counseling services and women's locker rooms by "male-bodied" people. Some less concrete consequences are referred to as well, such as the rise of misogyny, and the potential "denial" of sex-based injustices, which could lead to a backlash in the fight for women's reproductive rights, or in the fight against the oppression of women by men. As the plot unfolds, there appears a conflict between "transgender women and other women", and this tension is suggested to have dire consequences in the future. According to this narrative, Women's rights might also endangered on a wide scale as a consequence of the reform of the gender recognition act. The central act, the present of the story, the announcement of the reform of the gender recognition act appears to have temporal consequences, and temporal, as well as spatial backgrounds in the form of the original legal act and the potential solutions to its issues in other countries. But what is the inner logic that fuels the conflict surrounding the act, or fuels the conflicts between the actors encircling it? Here, the particular binominal nature of concepts suggested by Olga Friedenberg is in effect. Concepts in western thinking have both an appearance and an essence, a visual surface and a theoretical core. The guardian does not interpret the phenomenon of being transgender, but uses it in the sense of a concept, and attaches external forms to it. Transgender people are being described throughout the article with expressions such as *male-bodied* or *people with acquired gender*. These expressions are more visual than abstract, and act as

frameworks for the concept of transgender (women). When the concept transgender is imagined through this lens, it appears as a male. Specifically, as a male, because the whole problem discussed here stems from the issues of allowing transgender women to self-identify, transgender men appear as harmless or invisible. If transgender women are visualized as males, the internal logic of the plot becomes clear. It explains why the interests of transgender people can harm that of women, or why misogyny or patriarchy affect women and not transgender, at least as suggested by The Guardian. This is also the reason why rape counselling services appear as superfluous for trans people, if one is willing to step over the inconsistency presupposed by this, since men can be victims, too. Following this narrative, transgender women have *acquired genders*, and their “femininity” is merely an *identity*. A primacy of *biological sex* is established. It is important to note, however, that biology is far more complicated than that, and humanity understands the inner workings of the transgender condition, in a biological sense, at least since the nineties. A paper from The Dutch Academy of Sciences, among others, have already described and proven in 1995 that sexual identity, in the biological sense, is not merely driven by chromosomes or genitalia, but also by a particular part in the brain called the ‘*bed nucleus of the stria terminalis*’, which develops independently from the genitalia in a delayed manner, and appears in the feminine range in case of trans women, for example.¹⁹⁵ This description of sexual identity is far more complex than what The Guardian, or generally, media describes, despite the fact that this scientific paper is just an excerpt from more complex works. The very fact that the concept *sexual identity* is used is alien to media or public discourse, since it is a biological concept that is not biological sex, which is determined by chromosomes and provides information about the reproductive function of an individual, and neither is gender identity, which is a concept that can be understood in humanities and social sciences. The Guardian, however, attempts to assign simple images to concepts such as transgender, or gender in general. There is no need for deep scientific analysis or scholarly approach to keep the plot functional.

The problematic nature of the British article does not end by its simplified understanding of biology. The second article by The Guardian, released by the American editorial office, attempts to highlight this.¹⁹⁶ This text, which has its authors recognized, draws a parallel between the language used by the British article and that of Donald Trump, who is trying to

¹⁹⁵ J. Zhou et al., ‘A sex difference in the human brain and its relation to transsexuality’, *Nature*, Vol. 378, Letters to Nature, 02. 11. 1995., pp. 68-70.

¹⁹⁶ S. Levin, M. Chalabi & S. Siddiqui, ‘Why we take issue with the Guardian’s stance on trans rights in the UK’, *The Guardian*, 02/11/2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/02/guardian-editorial-response-transgender-rights-uk>>, accessed 05/10/2020.

'define transgender people out of existence' by claiming 'that gender is determined by the genitalia a person was born with'. Quite correctly, at least from my point of view, the American Guardian describes fear as a response from the transgender community to such language due to the potential loss of access to public spaces, something I personally experience to some degree. The authors also report about their experience that their transgender interview subjects, as well as some of their journalists, stopped cooperating with them as a result of the previous article, because for most readers, the differences between the British and American editions are not known. To make their position clear, they provide several scientific articles to prove that legal IDs pose no threat to "other women", and the conflict between trans women's rights and other women's rights is manufactured. They also provide evidence to prove that trans women suffer various forms of violence at disproportionately high rates, and suffer from economic marginalization as well, often fueled by the lack of access to the public sphere. The guardian of America establishes that *'trans women are also three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than cis people, which made it all the more troubling that the editorial pointed out that they can be excluded from rape support services in the UK. Like cis women, trans women are subject to gendered violence and misogyny'*, referring to the statistics of the American Center of Disease Control and Prevention.¹⁹⁷ According to these statistics, the exact percentages of those who experienced rape in their lives, according to a survey made in the United States in 2015, were thirteen percent in case of cisgender straight women, and forty-seven in case of trans women. The American journalists also point at the severe abuse of trans women who were put behind jails in male facilities. They conclude that no intolerance, including the one facilitated by the *some feminists* of the British Guardian, is a *legitimate reason for limiting the rights of trans women*, or to compromise their safety.

For the British Guardian, the gender recognition reform is a potential danger. It does not appear as an image or an abstract concept, but an action that has consequences for the future. A series of images, such as "male-bodied people" in women's locker rooms, prisons, or rape counselling services are drawn, and are connected to this action as potential consequences. The gender recognition reform, therefore, is not a singular event that happens, but something that has a timeline, in the sense that it has consequences. It is not a chronological timeline, but a narrative one, since the images attached to it have not happened yet, in fact, they would not even be remembered in a historical sense due to being too universal. There is a suggested internal logic, however, that can link the consequences to this event. One is the fear over the

¹⁹⁷ Human Rights Campaign, 'Sexual Assault and the LGBTQ Community', Human Rights Campaign [medium], <<https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>>, accessed 05/10/2020.

potential misuse of the possibilities of self-declared gender by men, and the other is the image of transgender women themselves, which is not clearly differentiated from men, either. Ultimately, the conflict between men and women, and transgender women and other women is what drives the plot, and as Luhmann wrote, conflict is the favored plot-driver of mass media. It is also important to note that, in a similar manner to Ricœur's description of Freud's practice, *bits and pieces*, scattered images from prisons and locker rooms, quite different spaces in practice, are being turned into a narrative via an internal, temporarily defined logic. The temporal aspect is not to be understood in the sense of a chronological time, but rather, a *logical time* driven by consequences, or as a human time, as Ricœur described, which is driven by the relationship of events to the present of the author. In either case, the temporal aspect is to be understood in relation to the plot. Another interesting characteristic of both the articles is the interplay between images and concepts. To echo Susan Sonntag's understanding that the world we perceive is built by images, I would point at the positioning of the concept transgender by the British Guardian again, alongside other visual elements. Transgender, in the sense of The Guardian's presentation, can be understood as a binominal relationship of surface and essence, and in the text, the visual aspects assigned to the conceptual seem to be more important, for the purposes of the plot. It is not the transgender that is the danger, it is the male-bodied. It is a shrewd journalist strategy, because, although for the careful reader it is clear from the context that the image male-bodied refers to transgender people, the appearance-essence unity is not clearly stated, and the image of male-bodied can refer to more than just transgender people. It could, potentially, defend the authors of the British article from the accusation of transphobia. It is a common tactic to blur the imagery associated to transgender people to attempt to appear uncontroversial, such as in case of the crossdressing serial killer trope, which in theory refers to some abstract crossdressing people, but in practical reality, can easily be applied to real gay or transgender folks. Aside from this binominal transgender depiction, images appear on the level of consequences, as well. The "prison scene" or "locker room scene" are all visual. A purely conceptual act, the gender recognition reform, leads to visual consequences. It appears that in the narrative drawn by The Guardian, visual and conceptual appear together both on the level of appearance-essence, and on the level of the abstract having tangible consequences, and potentially the other way around as well. I believe that the workings of these articles, as well as mass media in general cannot be understood purely as a conceptual, philosophical, or social-scientific issue, but also an issue of visual culture.

Another noteworthy aspect of the two articles, unsurprisingly, is distinction and visibility. Already in case of the concept transgender, only one specific image associated to it,

the image of the male-bodied, thus the article limits visibility. But more telling is to put the two articles next to each other. The British one completely forgoes the modelling of the consequences from the transgender point of view, while the American one heavily emphasizes them. If the reader reads the article of the British Guardian, I suspect that they would have no idea what consequences the lack of reforms would lead to at all, to the degree that the average perceiver would not even think about the consequences from this perspective. The American Guardian attempts to recontextualize each and every image of the first article, with pointing out the presence of violence, rape, and economical marginalization of transgender people as a result of the worldview and language used by people such as the author(s) of the British article. I would like to point out that both approaches are based on second-order observation, and neither paint a whole picture. With the choosing of focus, both texts leave certain details invisible. Furthermore, both seem to be logically sound when it comes to the wholeness and structure of their respective plots. There is a difference, however, the fact that the American Guardian backs their statements with statistics, and a series of references are being made, while in case of the British one, the statements are purely predictions and probabilities, suggests a somewhat more reliable narrative in case of the latter. Or more descriptive, at least. But whether narrative has to be grounded in statistics and be reliable is a question of personal expectations and ideological stances concerning the media, in either case, the stories themselves are logically consequent when it comes to their respective narratives. This is where the ultimate danger lies, the fact that with the usage of the approaches of mediation, one can make marginalizing or irrationally grounded descriptions and narratives can have terrible consequences. This statement shall be expanded in the conclusion section.

Narrative, the organization of events in a structurally logical, symbolically intelligible, temporarily relatable manner, appears to be in effect in contemporary mass media. The organization and depiction of phenomena into narratives did not disappear, regardless of the technological changes. As mentioned in the theoretical background section, Lev Manovich argues that what he calls deep remixability, the potential to mix visual material and information without technical obstacles, leads to the disappearance of the narrative, eventually. To me, it appears that deep remixability did not make narratives disappear, instead, it multiplied it. The mass media can now mix and mash anything with each other, but the structural or temporal soundness of these mixes must still be maintained, for it to be intelligible to the reader. Therefore, narrative is an essential tool to provide transparency, as well as to link phenomena to each other in case of the system of mass media. It has the same function in other systems as well.

Manovich points out that deep remixability is not just a technological change, but also affects social practices and imagination. If understood in this sense, then it did not lead to the disappearance of the narrative, either. On the contrary, it allowed narrative to *go wild*.

3.6 Self-representation

In this section of the thesis, I am going to explore the role of the *self*, the agent, and the identity in the operation of the system. And since the system duplicates, reproduces and mediates information from the background, it ultimately represents the *self* that can be found there. To understand what self and identity means, and how it is represented, I am going to rely on the book of Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*.¹⁹⁸ In this book, the French philosopher attempts to solve three philosophical dilemmas. Firstly, he attempts to prove ‘*the primacy of reflective mediation over the immediate positioning of the subject*’.¹⁹⁹ This is followed by the presenting of the concept of *self* in relation to identity, to highlight the two forms of identity, ‘*sameness*’ and ‘*selfhood*’, or in Latin, ‘*ipse*’ and ‘*idem*’.²⁰⁰ Thirdly, Ricœur discusses the aporia contained in the title, ‘*oneself as another*’, in relation to the ipse identity, or sameness.²⁰¹ To further explore these issues, as well as the nature of self, Ricœur divides his work into ten subchapters that concern the philosophy of language, the philosophy of action, narrative studies, and ethical and moral determinations of actions.²⁰²

To begin his analysis as well as to delve into the first issue, Ricœur examines the work of the 17th century French philosopher, René Descartes. To establish the concept of the self, Descartes uses the concept of ‘*cogito*’, meaning awareness or thinking.²⁰³ The self-awareness is supposed to prove the existence and philosophical constitution of the self. According to Descartes, self-awareness arises from doubt, and he proves it with a hypothetical situation where an ‘*evil genius*’ or ‘*great deceiver*’ creates a world of illusion where nothing is real.²⁰⁴ The only thing that is real in a situation like this, as Descartes establishes, is the self-awareness of the one who does the reflection upon this illusion. Ricœur argues that this constitution of

¹⁹⁸ P. Ricœur, ‘Oneself as Another (1990)’, tr. K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, United States, 1992.

¹⁹⁹ Ricœur, ‘Oneself as Another’, p. 1

²⁰⁰ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 2

²⁰¹ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 3

²⁰² Ricœur, *ibid.*, pp. 17-18

²⁰³ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 5

²⁰⁴ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 6

identity, which is based on the self-awareness amid illusions, is a point like identity without temporal aspects or mediation.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, cogito must function as a ‘*first truth*’, an absolute truth to be able to counter the illusory nature of the surroundings.²⁰⁶ Yet, even in case of Descartes’s analysis, self-awareness is not the *first truth*. Self-awareness, the ability to constitute the self in the mind of a person is thanks to its *essential sameness* to God, who is the one who constitutes the *first truth* and disperses all doubts. This relationship between the human mind and that of God is similar to the Platonic relationship between things and ideas, inasmuch that human mind constitutes the external surface of the essence, that can be found in God. In the end, Descartes establishes the self in relation to something, specifically, God.

According to Ricœur, the “final assault” against Descartes’s idea that cogito establishes the self was led by Nietzsche.²⁰⁷ The German philosopher argued that philosophy before him largely ignored the nature of the language, in which philosophy was uttered. Nietzsche stresses that language is figurative, and tools such as metaphors are not merely decorative in their function, but inherent to the structure of language. Not just to the structure of language, but to the structure of thinking in general, as it was discussed in the section about narrative, quoting Friedenberg who establishes that the origins of the concept can be found in the binominal structures of surface and essence, descriptive and conceptual qualities. Nietzsche argues that the cogito of Descartes is not independent of the illusions created by the *evil genius*, it does not constitute an exception to the generalized doubt, because it is uttered in the same, ultimately figurative and deceptive, language that also constitutes the illusory surroundings.²⁰⁸ Therefore, the self-awareness and doubt of the human mind is not independent of its surroundings, not independent of the machinations of the *evil genius*, but part of it. The self, and in extension, identity can therefore not be constituted as an immediate, ahistorical entity on its own, but only as something that is mediated through other phenomena. To quote Ricœur:

*To proclaim the phenomenal character of the internal world is, first, to align it with the so-called external world, where phenomenality in no way means objectivity in a Kantian sense, but precisely “arrangement, simplification, schematization, interpretation”.*²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Ricœur, op. cit., p. 7

²⁰⁶ Ricœur, ibid., p. 8

²⁰⁷ Ricœur, ibid., p. 11

²⁰⁸ Ricœur, ibid., p. 13

²⁰⁹ Ricœur, ibid., p. 15

The nature of the self, and the nature of identity is therefore fundamentally connected to the outside world, which appears illusory due to language, inasmuch as it is mediated through language, which uses simplifications and metaphors, and thus cannot relay the world in an objective manner. And since language and thinking is closely aligned, we cannot *objectively* describe the world, without structuring and simplifying procedures, and at the same time, we cannot objectively establish the self, on its own, without references and the networks it appears in.

In the rest of his book, Ricœur contextualizes the concept of self on various levels, using different philosophical approaches. He proceeds with establishing the notion of identification, in the sense of the philosophy of language.²¹⁰ To identify something, he argues, is to be able to linguistically clarify one of the things from those that are of the same type. This is not the identification of oneself yet, but identification in general. Ricœur establishes that the individualization of things in language could be characterized as the opposite of classification, a negative of it in the sense that an individual thing cannot be repeated and cannot be further divided.²¹¹ In general, individualization rests on the designation of certain characteristics, and aims to specify one subject, with the exclusion of all others of the similar type.²¹² This, however, only identifies the individual at large, not the specific individual. To identify the specific, Ricœur refers to the work of the British philosopher P. F. Strawson, *Individuals*.²¹³ Strawson argues in that book that to identify the specific, one needs to establish '*privileged particulars*', identifiers such as physical bodies, or personal motivations that are specific to one individual.

The self is not merely appearing in language, however. It can also be found in the theory of action, in the sense that the self, the individual, the agent appears to have a role in executing actions. As Ricœur pointed out already in his previous book, *Time and Narrative*, actions have a particular structure, and the agent is part of that structure.²¹⁴ To effectively grasp the structure of an action, as he argues, one has to ask specific questions that enlighten the chain that constitutes the action, such as '*who, what, why, where, when*'. The agent is referenced by the question who, and the other questions refer to other variables of the action. This question, as Ricœur points out while referring to Strawson, is answered by the '*ascription*' of an agent to an action.²¹⁵ Ascription is possible because agents can be identified uniquely in language based on

²¹⁰ Ricœur, op. cit., p. 27

²¹¹ Ricœur, ibid., p. 28

²¹² Ricœur, ibid., p. 30

²¹³ Ricœur, ibid., p. 31

²¹⁴ Ricœur, ibid., p. 58

²¹⁵ Ricœur, ibid., p. 89

their identifiers such as their physical bodies, or their mental predictions, like motivation. Ricœur also points out that ascription is different from attribution in the sense that it ‘*transforms the particular case into an exception*’, something that cannot be divided further or be repeated, ‘*and places on the same side as the capacity to designate oneself*’, specifically because of the exclusory nature of ascription.²¹⁶

So far, through the philosophy of language, Ricœur established that the self appears in relation to other concepts, or more specifically, as a difference to other concepts. It was also pointed out that self, as an agent, appears in the structure of actions because it is ascribed to actions. However, for a system to be able to use self, self-representation, or the representation of self as a tool for autopoietic production of information, the self must be examined in relation to other phenomena, or a chain of actions. As Ricœur established in *Time and Narrative*, narratives are based on sequences of actions that are organized by emplotment. And since the self, in the sense of an agent, plays a role in executing actions, it also can be constituted as part of the narrative.

The self, as described by Ricœur so far, is different from Descartes’s Cogito inasmuch as it is signified by other phenomena, in relation to which the self appears. However, in the philosophy of language or action the self is still constituted as an ahistorical concept, with a point like nature. Yet, when it is examined as part of a narrative, the temporal qualities of the self become apparent. It is a logical step to investigate the self in the narrative, since actions, where the agent, and in extension the self, can be constituted, are organized into narratives in western thinking and art. Ricœur argues that the self develops into the concept of *identity* when it is constituted by the narrative, and the temporal nature of self is reflected by the identity.²¹⁷ The word *identity* can also refer to a person, as well as to a group, and as it will be discussed later, the boundaries between the two are often blurred.

The two types of identity, sameness and selfhood, can also be established in relation to time.²¹⁸ Sameness, as Ricœur points out, could be described as ‘*sameness through time*’, and it is a ‘*numerical and qualitative identity*’.²¹⁹ Sameness is constituted by characteristics that were described as privileged particulars, such as numerical and qualitative identifiers of a person or a group, like the physical body of a person, or a typical look associated with a group, and these numerical and qualitative identifiers must have a relative prevalence through time. Sameness

²¹⁶ Ricœur, op. cit., p. 94

²¹⁷ Ricœur, ibid., p. 114

²¹⁸ Ricœur, ibid., p. 116

²¹⁹ Ricœur, ibid., p. 117

can only be understood through time, in the sense of sameness to a previous stage. Selfhood is similar in this regard. As Ricœur writes, it could be described as the ‘*permanence (of the self) through time*’.²²⁰ Selfhood can only be understood in relation to actions. It is not constituted by qualities, in fact it is independent from the sameness, and is contained in sentences such as *I will keep my word*, or the Heideggerian example of *I (will continuously) care for you*. Selfhood-identity is connected to the self in the sense that a person indicates that they will do something or they are doing something, and has a temporal quality, a permanence through time in the sense that these actions are happening through time. It is not connected to sameness because the particular qualities of the person doing the actions are not descriptive of selfhood, only the actions themselves.

In the narrative, sameness and selfhood appear together, and constitute the *narrative identity*.²²¹ The narrative identity, or the identity one acquires through narration, is constituted on one hand by ‘*acquired dispositions*’, such as values, norms, ideals, and models through which a person or a group recognize themselves *by*.²²² In particular, the recognition of oneself in heroes or role models is a form of the recognition of the self in another, or ‘*oneself as another*’. This is the sameness-part of the narrative identity, the perseverance of character through time, while the selfhood part is the ‘*self in promising*’, which refers to the promise of maintaining and executing actions in relation to the plot, in a way that is often characterized by the acquired dispositions themselves.²²³ Examples of this narrative identity will be examined further in the next section, but to give a simple illustration, one could imagine the narrated group identity *fashion models*, or the particular identity of the fictional person *Clarice, the fashion model*. When narrated, the fashion models, or the fictional Clarice are identified through their acquired dispositions, such as the trendy clothing or desirable bodies, but at the same time, they are expected to perform a role and execute actions associated with the acquired dispositions, such as the continuous performance of femininity. This is a second-order narration of the concept of fashion models, as well as Clarice, because from the perspective of the plot, only those acquired dispositions and actions associated with them are relevant which allow continuous identification. Whether Clarice likes dogs or not are irrelevant from the perspective of her being a fashion model. Clarice is only recognizable as a unique person through her privileged particulars, such as her body, and thus she is a “sub-category” of

²²⁰ Ricœur, op. cit., p. 118

²²¹ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 114

²²² Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 121

²²³ Ricœur, *ibid.*, p. 124

the fashion model, one that cannot be “divided further”. Characteristics and performance, in relation to the plot, constitute the narrative identity.

To further refine his analysis, Ricœur continues by arguing that the character, established by its narrated identity, is who performs actions in the narrative.²²⁴ The chains of actions constitute the narrative through emplotment, therefore the characters themselves are part of the plot and help its execution, and at the same time, their identities are being defined in relation to the plot. Only parts of their identities, both in case of sameness and selfhood identities, are relevant, those that are connected to the plot. When it comes to the role or performance in the execution of actions, Ricœur states that ‘*role can be defined only by the attribution of some probable, actual, or completed predicate-process to a subject-person*’.²²⁵ In fact, the very definition of the role or performance in relation to the narrative refers to the three stages of probability, actuality, and completion or incompleteness of an action.²²⁶ It is important to note at this stage that Ricœur establishes that an agent can also suffer from an action, not just execute it. Where sameness and selfhood collide in the narrative is here. The completion or incompleteness, the actuality, and the probability of an action is selfhood-identity in the sense that it is a promise that the given character or person will execute, or are executing a particular action, but at the same time, it is probable because the particular character has the qualities that make it probable that they will execute them. To return to my example, if Clarice, the fictional fashion model would state that she would *walk gracefully on the catwalk in ten centimeters high heels*, she would make a promise that she will execute an action, but at the same time, given the context, it is probable that she will do so because she is a fashion model. This part of her narrative identity is what Ricœur would call ‘*oneself as another*’, inasmuch as she is referred to the idealistic form of the fashion model, or has a sameness to the group of fashion models, who tend to walk gracefully in ten centimeters high heels on the catwalk.

To showcase how intertwined sameness and selfhood identities are in the constitution of the narrative identity, Ricœur points at fiction where sameness identity does not appear. In the novel of the Austrian writer Robert Musil, *A Man without Qualities*, the protagonist has no connections to the outside world, and his identity is defined purely by his actions.²²⁷ But his actions *make no sense*, so to say, because they appear in a timeless void removed from reality. Ricœur stresses that in reality, as well as in most fiction, the probability of executing actions

²²⁴ Ricœur, op. cit., p. 143

²²⁵ Ricœur, ibid., p. 144

²²⁶ Ricœur, ibid., p. 145

²²⁷ Ricœur, ibid., p. 149

made to be probably by the acquired predications, as well as the actual executions of actions together constitute the narrative identity of people or groups.

From the perspective of system theory, and the social system of mass media, narrative identity, or the self constituted by the narrative is important. Ultimately, the narrative identity of a person can be understood in relation to the particular composition of the plot, constituted by actions. In the previous section, it has been stated that the narrative, the organization of actions and occurrences through internal structure and temporal qualities can be used as a tool for continuous production of information within the system. The continuous production, or representation of the self happens in a similar manner, connected to the narrative. It applies to a general self, as well as to the particular “self” of an agent who make themselves appear in media, or even to a group who are connected through narrative identity. The self, either be it referring to a particular person or a group of people, does not appear in media in the sense of Descartes’s cogito, a completely removed, descriptively constituted self, but appears as a mediated, narrated form of identity. This is so because, as Luhmann stressed, there needs to be a form of recognizability in the representations of phenomena within mass media, so that the receivers can understand the message. Recognizability is achieved by the mediation and narration of identities, the representation of the self through narration, the connection of occurrences to other occurrences of the same type. Self-representation, or the representation of the self is a tool for media inasmuch as it is a narrated self-representation, thus can be connected to other identities, and non-personal occurrences as well. Narrative identity also has temporal qualities, and presupposes some degree of continuity through time, and thus it can be used for stable, continuous production of information throughout time.

The narrative identity, and its appearance in mass media also effectively showcases how visual culture works in relation to media. The selfhood identity, the promise of continuously executing actions, has no visual qualities. The sameness part, however, has plenty of it. The sameness-identity within the narrative identity could be constituted as a *visual identity* in the sense that most of the acquired dispositions are visual, especially if they are mediated through mass media, as it will be discussed in the next section. And it is the sameness identity that *enables* the selfhood identity within the narrative identity, the sameness to another of the same type makes it probable that actions will be executed or suffered through in a particular manner. Furthermore, the question of visibility in relation to the self is also highlighted by the concept of the narrative identity. When the self, or a person is narrated, its acquired dispositions and actions are highlighted in relation to the plot. The plot determines the section this observing and representing operation examines, and thus only the characteristics and actions of a person that

are relevant to the overall narrative are shown. In the next section, the process of the representation of the self will be shown in mass media through an example.

3.7 An example of self-representation

For the mass media, self-representation is the operation of the mediation of the self, of agents, of identities. It can be described as an approach of mediation because, if self-representation is understood in the narrative sense as defined by Ricœur, it provides a pattern alongside which occurrences, occurrences of the self, can be duplicated, reproduced and mediated by the system.

To stay true to the theme of the practical examples, the narrated representation of the self will be showcased through transgender representation in mass media. The narrated representation of the self, of agents and identities in relation to actions and time is the most crucial part of contemporary transgender representation. There is even an entire genre of YouTube videos dedicated to the mediation of self made by transgender content creators, one that centers the experience of transitioning. The particular example of transgender representation also effectively showcases the importance of narrated self-representation in media, because for a transgender person, as well as to others interested in this topic, there is no other representation available but that of the narrated one. Chances are, due to low amount of transgender people, that both transgender and cisgender people experience this phenomena through narrated media representation alone, and thus, the particular identity of a transgender person is directly constructed from the mediated narrative identities that are available for observation through the mass media. The example that will be shown here reflects on this heavily.

I am going to analyze parts of the Netflix documentary *Disclosure*.²²⁸ Being an audiovisual documentary, it is somewhat on the borderline of mass media. However, this documentary deals with issues in mass media, and is constituted by a series of interviews with various actors and actresses, producers and journalists, thus I believe it can be considered to be at the very least on the border of the system of mass media. Structurally, it certainly belongs to it.

²²⁸ *Disclosure* [medium], dir. Sam Feder, Netflix, 2020.

As was stressed earlier, the narrative mediation of the self is a crucial issue in case of transgender representation. Yet, in the first example, one cannot speak about narrative identity at all, whatsoever. Zaya and Dwyane Wade do not appear as narrative identities in the first article, because they do not perform a role. They are merely represented, or interpreted by abstract concepts, and thus only their sameness-identity is centered. In case of the second examples, the two *The Guardian* articles, narrative identities, as well as the narrative in general, play crucial roles. Transgender people, as a group, are being signified by their acquired predications, such as the male-bodied quality in case of the first *The Guardian* article, and these qualities lead to predictions about the execution or the sufferance of actions. My analysis at that point concentrated on the appearance of the narrative as a whole, however, inasmuch as it is constituted by the structural logic of actions and occurrences connected together, and the temporal predictions and qualities implied in those. *Disclosure*, however, specifically focuses on the narrative identity, and its role in the representation of the phenomenon of transgenerness.

Disclosure features a series of interviews with a variety of transgender people working in the movie or media industry. The interviews focus on transgender representation in media and film, as well as the personal relationship of those who are being interviewed with the narrative identities seen on screen, and the effect of these mediated identities in the formulation of their own identities.

The documentary begins with the American actress Laverne Cox stating that she would ‘*never have thought that we will live in a world where trans people would be celebrated, on or off the screen, never have thought that media would stop asking horrible questions and start treating us (transgender people) with respect. Now, look how far we have come...*’.²²⁹ The very sentence suggests that the celebration of transgender people, ‘*on and off the screen*’, somehow depends on the ‘*questions asked by media*’, or the images shown by media. The entirety of the documentary builds on this premise. Cox continues her interview, which is mashed together with other interviews as well as images from movies, with stating that ‘*I think, for a very long time, the ways in which trans people have been represented on-screen have suggested that we are not real, have suggested that we are mentally ill, that we do not exist. Yet here I am.*’²³⁰ This sentence suggests a dissonance between the personal constitution of the self and the narrative constitution of the self that appears within mass media. This dissonance, together with the further dissonance that is created by the lack of

²²⁹ *Disclosure*, 0.30-0.56

²³⁰ *Disclosure*, 2.25-2.42

transgender examples in real life and the problematic narrative identity of the transgender group mediated by mass media suggest a conflict in the process of the mediation of self for transgender people, which is examined in the documentary in detail.

Transgender identity does not appear as something one can identify with, or base themselves on in mass media or films. This was a problem for the American actress and writer Bianca Leigh, who recalls her experience as a kid of watching the movie *Dressed to Kill* from 1980, where she identified with the protagonist, not with the crossdresser, who happened to be her murderer and a serial killer.²³¹ She also points at the confusion between the various categories of the trans umbrella, with no clear distinction in media between transgender people and crossdressers. Trans activist Nick Adams adds that media and film taught the audience how to react to trans people, which includes fear and resentment, since trans people are associated with psychopaths and murderers. '*Why else would you dress up as a woman (while being a man)*', he adds, while summarizing this narrative.²³² This is a point of reference that has effects outside the realm of media and film as well. The American actress Jen Richards recalls a story when she managed to gather up her courage to tell about her transitioning to a colleague, who she described as educated and open-minded, and yet the colleague replied Richards by asking '*you mean like Buffalo Bill*', referring to the main character of the 1991 movie *Silence of the Lambs*, a transgender serial killer who collects skins of women to appropriate their forms.²³³ Since most people have no descriptive references of transgender people, this identity is only accessible through the narrative based mediation of mass media and art. This problem is further emphasized by actress and producer Rain Valdez, who recalls an occasion when she was watching one of these movies with her family, and their parents reacted with fear, realizing that if she is transgender, then she must be '*the bad guy*', and as a consequence, her mother tried to steer her into the direction of more masculine self-expression.²³⁴

Later in the documentary, Nick Adams points at another issue of transgender representation, or the lack of thereof in case of transmasculine or non-binary identities.²³⁵ He argues that humans were longing for representation throughout human history, '*from cave paintings to 3D Imax movies*'. But it is not just because of a need to see the reflection of ourselves, but also because of the need for reference points. Without reference points, one is

²³¹ Disclosure, 15.33-16.43

²³² Disclosure, 17.02-18.00

²³³ Disclosure, 18.59-19.30

²³⁴ Disclosure, 25.10-25.55

²³⁵ Disclosure, 27.50-28.50

in the state of the protagonist of the *A Man without Qualities*, without sameness-identity and no way to connect and integrate their personal experiences with society at large. This is an experience that is familiar to me, as in the cultural background I came from, I was not exposed to transfeminine identities either, fearsome, disgusting, revolting or otherwise, so the personal experiences I had which would later connect me to the transgender community in my twenties were hanging in the void, with no way to integrate them into my own narrative identity. Adams point at the general invisibility of men compared to women when it comes to visual qualities, and the lack of *selling potential* in transmasculine and non-binary bodies as a potential reason for the almost complete absence of these representations in film and mass media.

For transfeminine people, the images of the serial killer or the psychopath are not the only images that are available as self-reference. Bianca Leigh points at a contemporary trend in high fashion for women, which emphasizes hyper-femininity.²³⁶ She theorizes that this is coming from the designers of contemporary fashion, among whom gay men are overrepresented. To them, the inspiration comes from the LGBT night life, where they are exposed to ‘*street queens*’, trans women and drag queens, who themselves are inspired, or are working as sex workers. Sex workers themselves, in turn, must feminize their bodies to compete for customers, and thus the circle between high fashion and trans sex workers is complete. As a consequence, however, Leigh argues that for many viewers, trans women appear to be the negative influence for this over feminization of bodies, even though, at the bottom of the pile, they are doing it merely for survival. Indeed, trans women appear as sex workers, more often than not, on screen.²³⁷ Nick Adams establishes that the most common profession of trans women in film and other media portrayals is the sex worker, and admits that there is a large number of trans women who turn to sex work for survival in reality as well, but also points out that the socio-economical reasons for this phenomenon are not explained in movies. An exception to this is *Pose*, a series made by FX, where the reason why so many trans women must turn to sex work is contextualized. The truly remarkable quality of *Disclosure* in this scene is the series of interviews with a variety of trans actresses who explain that throughout much of their careers, they were only hired to play sex workers or crime victims. It seems that the representation that is visible on screen must be the only representation that could potentially be connected to a trans woman, or played by a trans woman, even if she is a professional actress.

²³⁶ *Disclosure*, 33.57-35.15

²³⁷ *Disclosure*, 35.20-42.00

The more complicated transfeminine roles appear to be played by male actors.²³⁸ Jen Richards points to a series of *Oscar* wins for trans roles, achieved by male actors. She argues that it reinforces the idea for the viewers that trans women are ‘*men with very good hair and clothing style*’. This goes to the point, as Richards recalls, that the directors of *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), a movie about a trans woman based on a real story, refused to hire a trans actress trying to get the role on the basis that she looked too feminine, despite the fact that the person on whom the protagonist of the movie was based on was described as a ‘*remarkably beautiful trans woman*’. Richards argues that other than conveying a false message, this practice also encourages male violence on trans women, which is all too widespread, because heterosexual men are afraid of homosexual intercourse due to social repercussions, and they see trans women as men through the lenses of media representation. She also points out that no matter how good these male actors portray transfemininity, or femininity in general, the characters they play are thus reduced to this act, or performance of femininity, and do not appear as whole persons with layered personalities. This does not happen, as Richards points out, when transfeminine roles are being played by transfeminine people, such as Laverne Cox, something that occurs increasingly more often in recent times.

The connection of men with transfeminine roles in film has consequences that are going beyond this area. The simplification of transfeminine bodies to that of maleness has a long tradition in mass media, an example for that is the ‘*male-bodied*’ expression used in the British *The Guardian* example. Showing a series of interviews with trans people, women and men alike, disclosure highlights that questions around trans people’s bodies seem to have dominated mass media for a long time.²³⁹ Even today, famous trans actresses like Laverne Cox are being questioned about the same topic. The only way trans people appear to have found to counter this narrative is asking their questions or educating the narrators about the problematic nature of the approach signaled by the questions about trans bodies.

The importance of narrative identity, or the narrated mediation of the self cannot be understated in case of transgender representation. There are so few transgender people, therefore the general population, including transgender people themselves, have no firsthand experience with this occurrence. Descriptive approaches are, consequently, hindered. Yet, even if they would not be hindered, Ricœur argues that the narrative understanding of events or history prevails over descriptive approaches.²⁴⁰ This is so because the narrative is

²³⁸ Disclosure, 1.00.20-1.03.28

²³⁹ Disclosure, 51.00-58.00

²⁴⁰ Ricœur, ‘Time and Narrative’, op. cit., p. 52

constituted by an internal structure of actions, their symbolic qualities, and on a temporal logic that connects these actions together, based on their own temporal qualities. It simply appears more logical than straightforward description, with no internal structure. This also leads to the practice that individual agents or identity-groups are being described, or even the agents themselves describe themselves, in relation to narrative structures. Narrative identity is a combination of acquired dispositions and probable actions that will be executed or suffered through based on those dispositions, but only those dispositions and actions are highlighted that are relevant for the plot. This is highlighted remarkably well in *Disclosure*, when the men playing the roles of trans women is discussed. In these situations, the only quality that is relevant for these actors is their ability to perform femininity. In a way, reducing transfeminine people to the performance of femininity is less cruel than to liken them to serial killers, yet it is still completely reductive. On the other hand, it makes sense for the plot. Nick Adams explains the psychopath and serial killer narrative by presuming that it stems from the question ‘*why else would you dress up as a woman if you were born as a man*’, So the entire trans experience, right from the beginning, centers around gender and its transgression. From the images of psychopaths to images hyper femininity, all acquired dispositions of transgender people are connected to the greater narrative of gender. The actions they commit, murdering other women, or the actions they suffer through, such as being murdered themselves, are understood in relation to this narrative. The identity of trans people on the screen or in the newspapers, as well as the identities of trans people themselves who have no other focal points but media, are being constructed in relation to gender.

Ricœur also points out that narrative identity is on the borderline of the historical and the fictional, and this could be illustrated here quite effectively.²⁴¹ The French philosopher explains this by phenomena such as the national identities, which are being constituted by historical and mythical stories. In case of transgender identity, it is similar. The presence of sex work in the history of the transgender community is undeniable but attaching hyper femininity to it without the contextualization is a fictional layer. In fact, most elements of transgender identity are fictional. It is important to note that *to narrate* an identity is not necessarily *to contextualize* an identity. Rather, it is to contextualize it from one specific angle, from the angle of the particular plot it has been connected to. The socio-economic history of the trans community, for instance, has almost no representation. Trans identity has only been contextualized through the lenses of gender, gender performance, sexuality, and

²⁴¹ Ricœur, ‘Oneself as Another’, op. cit., p. 114

biological sex. Furthermore, transgender identities are purely visual identities, even their performances are visual. When discussing a transgender person, the media, or the general population, immediately associates to images, such as the image of the psychopath, the prostitute, the hyper feminine person, or the male-bodied person. The execution of actions related to these, such as the practice of sex work or hyper femininity, are also quite visual. Consequently, the information that a trans person gathers about themselves is visual, as well, and thus they often construct themselves in this manner. This leads to the autopoiesis of transgender identity, and also highlights the nature of visual culture, which often exercises its influences through the vessel of mass media.

It is important to understand, however, that the system of mass media that creates these narratives is, at least on a structural level, amoral. It is merely concerned with continuity and autopoiesis. The narration of transgender identities or transgender experiences are a result of a certain internal logic. The only way to expand these representations, as has been pointed out throughout *Disclosure*, is by creating more narratives that have different internal logic.

In this chapter, the role of interpretation, the narrative, and self-representation, or more correctly, the representation of the self has been established in the continuous production of information within the system. These concepts are not internal to system theory but can be attached to it through the function of the system. The function of continuous duplication and mediation of occurrences forces patterns through which duplication and mediation happens, and these patterns could be described as the approaches of mediation. These three are not all the patterns that could be recognized, merely here to provide examples to this process. The practice of using interpretation or narration in the mediation of phenomena, within the social system or any other system, is a direct result of the autopoietic nature, and it also explains the prevalence of these practices themselves. Interpretations and narrations are being reproduced by the various social systems themselves.

4. Conclusions

The initial question, or issue that was brought up in the thesis is whether the multitude of replies to the announcement of Dwyane Wade about the identity of his daughter could be considered to be part of the same structure, namely, the mass media. With the advent of the internet and digital media, the boundaries between mass media and social media, and the boundaries of mass media in general became increasingly blurred. To reflect upon the blurred nature of mass media, theorists such as Andrew Chadwick or Lev Manovich began to theorize about '*hybrid media systems*'. To constitute this structural hybridity, they analyzed the content of the media. Defining the structure based on content also appeared in case of Peter Sloterdijk, who divided abstract structures made for content generation into content categories. However, analyzing content, or even analyzing the production of content in a non-structural way will not answer the initial question. To understand why twitter reactions, YouTube videos, or Medium articles could be considered as part of the same structure, one must understand the structure itself, and analyzing the content alone will not provide insights about the structure. Furthermore, to recognize a structure that connects digital media to classical media, this structure must persevere over time.

Niklas Luhmann created the concept of social systems to explain the structural perseverance of various social institutions over time. His system theory is connected to system theory in general, a language that is used across all intellectual fields. Social systems turn occurrences into intelligible information through observation, duplication, reproduction, and mediation. These processes happen continuously and trigger each other in the form of self-references. This creates the autopoietic self-reproduction of the system because it is not merely there to observe and mediate occurrences, but also to maintain itself. The concepts which I called approaches of mediation are a result of this continuous mediation, because over time, patterns are being forced by the operation of the system. These patterns also characterize the system.

Interpretation, narration and the narrative representation of the self are there to structure individual occurrences, and connect them to each other, with the purpose of making them intelligible. Without this structuring operation, individual phenomena would not be understandable, because they would lack references to other phenomena. This is the very reason why interpretation, narration, and the narrative representation of the self exist continuously to begin with, because they are used to structure and mediate occurrences. Their presence ensures that the products of mass media are recognizable and intelligible, no matter when or where they

are being created. The existence of these recurring patterns is what makes the system legitimate in the sense that it can be distinguished from what is not part of the system.

In case of the system of mass media, and of social systems in general, the discussed approaches of mediation play crucial roles in the production, organization, and mediation of the content. It is not the content that determines the structure, or the system, but the system that determines the content. Understanding the role of the various approaches of mediation makes it possible to understand how and why content appears in the way it does. To determine whether contemporary digital mediation of the story of Dwyane Wade is part of mass media or not, one has to look for the structural influences that can be recognized in these. Such as the appearance of the interpretation, the narration, or narrated self-representation in the products of this digital mediation. From a structural point of view, the concept of hybridity does not make sense, because the peculiarities of the content, such as its technological background or the agents who made them are irrelevant in the sense of whether they are part of the system or not. If they bear the structure of the system, if the patterns that are being forced by the operation of the system, the approaches of mediation, are visible in them, they are part of the system.

Interpretation, narration, and narrated self-representation are recognizable because they aid the continuous mediation of phenomena throughout all social systems, including the system of mass media. Their uninterrupted presence in contemporary products of media prove that those contemporary products are part of the structure that is called the system of mass media. Mass media, however, is but one vessel among many that bear these patterns of mediation.

An important operation of any social system is observation. Observation of occurrences, and observation of receivers. Observation is always limited to what is being observed, the entirety of the world cannot be observed at once. Distinctions must be set up to choose what is being observed. These distinctions are showing the same patterns as mediation, for example, in case of the narrative, only occurrences and aspects of occurrences are being observed, and later mediated, that have connections to the plot. This determines the content produced by mass media, or any other social system.

The social system of mass media, specifically, focuses more on the visual aspects of phenomena. On the external layer of things, in contrast to their internal, conceptual layers. This can be seen in case of the narratives and narrated representations of the self, where the acquired dispositions of agents, actions, or consequences are highlighted more than their context. An exception is interpretation, which, by its definition, functions as a tool to translate sensual phenomena to a universal, abstract language determined by culture. Visual aspects also bring about the issue of visibility, which is the distinction of the things that can be seen. Through

narrative and other patterns established by the systemic operations, it is determined what can be seen by the general population, and mass media mediates that, *what is there to be seen*. The world is mediated in a prescriptive manner through the system, not in a descriptive manner. And due to being an expression of visual culture in a way, mass media shows that visual culture is prescriptive over being descriptive, at least in the case when it is being mediated by the system of mass media.

The particular examples of transgender representation are extreme cases of this prescriptive nature. They are simultaneously being a novelty, at least for the western eye, and are barely observable due to the small number of transgender people. Therefore, this phenomenon cannot truly be described, only observed and mediated alongside patterns. Not just the image of transgender people is being generated by the system of mass media, but, to smaller or greater degree, the self-image of transgender people. This also exposes the problematic nature of this *distinction machine*, that is the system of mass media. It '*constructs reality*', as Niklas Luhmann argued, the reality that can be seen by people. Yet, there is enough self-awareness among transgender people to point at the failures of the interpretations, narratives and narrated representations of identities created by the system of mass media. Failures in the sense that they do not match the lived reality of these people. But can the system of mass media, social systems in general, traditions and patterns of representation be bypassed? Most likely not. The only way for a phenomenon to be duplicated and mediated in a more accurate way is to duplicate it and mediate it more. Nonetheless, to understand the content, or in this case, to understand transgender representations in media, one must understand how they are being created in the first place. Understanding the structural determination of the mediation of these phenomena leads closer to understanding the phenomena itself, because ultimately what matters is how the phenomena is being made visible. The *hows*, and not the *whys*, are relevant in this case, because social systems are amoral. They do not *create reality* for the receiver because they want to distort reality, they create reality because it is the nature of their operation.

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²⁴² In this section, references will be listed in order of appearance due to lack of authors, or the lack of applicability of authors.

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