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PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

War in a Society of Spectators: Ukraine 2022

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ABSTRACT

Russian society's perception of the invasion of Ukraine is strikingly incompatible with the actual events. This article reflects on the surreal representation of Ukrainian war in Russian media and its powerful grip on a large part of the nation. Socialised in a universe of propaganda and conspiracy theories, the Russian citizenry appears simultaneously cynical and gullible, and above all highly receptive to Kremlin's manipulations. Succumbing to this conspiratorial universe of meaning alters one's perception of the world. Thus, on the one hand, the feeling of reality is diminished, to the extent that the Ukrainian people's war suffering is rendered merely a performance by crisis actors, while the extensive destruction of Ukrainian cities is seen as staged film sets. On the other hand, the feeling of reality is heightened and charged with mysterious signification, generating a sense of a crystal-clear sight into the nature of politics and society. To understand the human experiential stance in this surreal world of virtual representation, the article engages with psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist's (2019, 2021) and clinical psychologist Louis Sass' (2017) exploration of schizophrenia in modern society.

KEYWORDS: Ukrainian war; Russian propaganda; conspiracy theories; schizophrenia; mediated reality; Vladimir Putin

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INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine shocked the global community with a sudden outpour of raw violence and destruction. Particularly unsettling is the fact that the deaths and suffering witnessed are not only unmotivated but are also inflicted on peaceful civilians. The defacement of everyday life is seen across Ukrainian towns and cities: lifeless bodies of civilians scattered on streets, children injured or killed by shelling, bombarded maternities and hospitals, mass graves, and numerous apartment buildings devastated. The torment of suffering, according to Emmanuel Levinas, is most unbearable when it is not given a meaning, when one realises that it is absolutely 'for nothing' (Levinas, 1988, pp. 157–158). Not only is this war absurd and the acute violence unexplained but, even more disturbing, it is unacknowledged, as it is mostly absent from Russians' awareness. What stands out about this war is the surreal way in which the invasion is represented in Russian media. Almost completely ignoring the enacted horrors, Russian media portrays the invading Russian army as welcomed by Ukrainians and praised for saving the country from the oppression of neo-Nazis and drug addicts. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the images and information available throughout the rest of the world. The contrast suggests an uncanny alternate reality. For instance, an internet search for the town of Bucha on Google returns images of destruction, death, and agony, while on Yandex (the search engine used by Russians) returns images of an unmarred happy town (Gaidau, 2022). In this context, the article meditates on the conditions of possibility for such a sharp disconnect to take place. It further engages with psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist's (2019, 2021) and clinical psychologist Louis Sass' (2017) exploration of schizophrenia in modern society, to reflect on the social consequences of this ontological disorientation taking place at such a large scale.

Historian Yuval Noah Harari highlights human language's unique ability to conceive and communicate information about things that simply do not exist. As far as we know, solely humans feel enticed to think and talk about an entire array of things which they have never actually encountered or experienced (Harari, 2014). Fiction, often disregarded in social sciences as trivial, rests at the core of society, enabling us to collectively imagine dimensions of the world that do not (yet) exist. For instance, we weave common myths about nations and states, and through them come together and cooperate as complex imagined communities (Harari, 2014). While fantasy can unleash creativity, it also holds a dark side. As discussed later in this article, it can lure subjects into accepting ideological oppression as a form of liberation and even as revolutionary behaviour.

Currently, humanity has reached a stage where a significant part of our social, economic, political, and cultural lives take place in virtual space, an ontological register where the information about concrete aspects of the world often blends with fantasy. Accessing both 'reality' and fantasy through screens and social media unavoidably weakens our ability to discern the separation between the two. For those of us not living in Ukraine, the war enters our awareness often through social media as an amalgam of facts, deep-fake, parody, and

conspiracies. In this evolving social context, humans' capability of joining together in collective dreams, could also become its Achilles' heel. That is the case, because not being able to distinguish between fantasy and reality or between truth and fiction, holds the potential to generate both disorientation and fragmentation of society. For example, these occurred when entire communities refused to accept that the COVID-19 pandemic was a real event; that Joe Biden won the US presidential election; and, most recently, that a devastating war in Ukraine is taking place. Old-fashioned propaganda mutates into insidious forms, especially in the hands of modern-day dictators like Vladimir Putin, who claims the absolute right in pronouncing, on behalf of the entire nation, fundamental ontological facts. For example, Putin deems artificial the state of Ukraine and Ukrainian identity while idolising the authenticity of the Russian state and identity. In addition, he referred to the war suffering of Ukrainian people in the town of Bucha as 'fake', dismissing their pain as staged and hence not worthy of care nor of compassion.

MYTHICAL LEADERS IN A MODERN WORLD

The difficulty distinguishing between what is real and fake is an element of uttermost importance in the Ukrainian war, requiring careful analysis. This situation is to a large extent associated with the unprecedented expansion of social media in our lives, infiltrating even the ethos and the purpose of the state (Lynch, 2017). It further impacts the public sphere, the nature of politics, as well as the relationship between citizens and the state, metamorphosing the role of citizen into that of spectator (Streeck, 2016). As the government and the democratic political system give way to the logic and values associated with the entertainment industry, active political engagement morphs into the passive stance of an observer, seeking within the political spectacle both amusement and existential validation. Politics, media, and entertainment are merging into a new powerful, mesmerising, and utterly confusing world.

This merger stands out in the case of Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky who, prior to his presidency, had an ample career as a comedian and an actor. Remarkably, he played the role of a high school history teacher, in the popular TV sitcom *The Servant of the People*, whose impulsive rant about corruption went viral. Consequently, he ended up elected as Ukraine's president on the show. The blend between fantasy and reality is uncanny in this case, as Zelensky did run for presidency in real life and won the elections with an overwhelming majority. Ukrainians felt connected to the well-known comedian and to his campaign, that to a large extent was informed by his TV sitcom taking issue with the corrupt Ukrainian elites. As the newly elected president, Zelensky proceeded to form his cabinet by appointing for key government positions his fellow actors and comedians (Roman et al., 2021). Hence, one could argue, fantasy bleeds into and moulds reality. Reinforcing the ease with which our minds transition from cinema, as the register of fantasy, to reality and from

reality back to fantasy, is illustrated by the attitude of Zelensky's newly acquired North American fans. With the war still ravaging Ukraine, they are proposing that a new movie be made about the Russian invasion, in which the American actor Jeremy Renner would play the role of president Zelensky, spotlighting the physical resemblance of the two men (Court, 2022). What stands out about this proposal is the fact that the real Ukrainian war and the cinematic war are both understood as holding a special entertainment potential, inevitably raising serious ethical concerns.

In Russia, crafting Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's persona also involved heavily both media and fantasy. Since the time of his appointment as prime minister, Putin has used his experience as a KGB officer to cultivate the image of a shrewd macho spy. Following the war in Chechnya and a massive TV makeover, recasting him as a strong military leader, Putin managed to win the presidential election and establish his signature style of leadership. Integral to his leadership is a pervasive and carefully engineered media presence. In fact, one of his first actions after becoming president was to put Russian television under his direct control, arresting or forcing into exile the existing media moguls (Pomerantsev, 2015). Putin transformed television into one of his most lethal and effective tools of power (Ostrovsky, 2017), as Kremlin succeeded to run both television and politics akin to one vast scripted reality show (Pomerantsev 2015). In addition, taking advantage of technological innovations, it has used 'troll farms' and bots to weaponise the increasingly popular virtual space. Adrian Chen (2015) investigated for *The New York Times* the Internet Research Agency located in St. Petersburg, an agency that employed hundreds of Russians to post pro-Kremlin propaganda online under fake identities, to create the illusion of a massive army of supporters. Namely, Chen (2015) writes about the elaborate and entirely fictitious news about a powerful explosion, claimed by ISIS, at a chemical plant Columbian Chemicals in Centerville, Louisiana and an outbreak of Ebola in Atlanta. In this context, Konstantin Kaminskij notices that the Russian information warfare transitioned from the old-fashioned Soviet propaganda to a high-quality form of entertainment that successfully hails the imagination and desire of many Russians and holds together the virtual Russian world (Kaminskij, 2022).

A REPRESENTED WORLD

As the attention of our contemporary society is mainly directed towards representations, at the expense of the world itself, the representation becomes privileged as most valuable and most real (Levin, 1988). Namely, we are witnessing the development of a culture of the image, which, with its limited ontological dimensions, takes priority over the complexity and unpredictability of our lifeworld. The transfer of social, political, and personal dimensions of our lives onto the plane of social media, compels us to think of ourselves and our existence at the level of the imaginary ontological plane. It also gives the impression that our lives are infinitely more manageable. Seated in front of our computers, we acquire an exhilarating feel

of not only space and time transcendence but also of omniscience and omnipotence. The sense of control, that one has at one's fingertips in the virtual world, is simply not possible in the three-dimensional existence. For instance, we access news from all corners of the world, retrieve instantly information on any topic of interest, friend and unfriend people with the click of a button, shop a vast array of products, access entertainment, or search for romance. The gained sense of agency and immediacy lures us into exchanging the depth and complexity of the embodied human existence for the two-dimensional plane of the visual register. However, the sense of agency gained is to a large extent illusory. Often, we confuse the passive consumption of fabricated information and our utter compliance with conspiratorial noxious logic, not only with agency but also with revolutionary behaviour. In addition, weakening our immersion within a primordial embodied flow of life predisposes the human mind to an oscillation between an exhilarating sense of absolute agentic capacity to an intense form of nihilistic despair, when both the self and the world suddenly appear devitalised, artificial, and empty. This oscillation is specific to schizophrenia, a condition that Iain McGilchrist (2019, 2021) and Louis Sass (2017) see as both an important and a worrisome characteristic of modern society.

SCHIZOPHRENIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

With the increased transfer of existence onto the realm of representation, human experiential stance is significantly altered. To understand this alteration, I engage with the work of psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist's (2019, 2021) and clinical psychologist Louis Sass' (2017) discussion of schizophrenia as impacting not only singular individuals but also the societal level. McGilchrist distinguishes between the left and right hemispheres of our brains' mode of engaging with the world. He argues that for us human beings, there are two fundamentally opposed realities (modes of experience), and that each one of them is of ultimate importance in bringing about the human social reality. The differences between the two are rooted in our bihemispheric brain structure (McGilchrist, 2019). The right hemisphere perceives individual entities as belonging to a contextual whole from which they cannot be divided. Its broader field of attention is open and coupled with the ability of integration over time and space, making possible the recognition of broad and complex patterns. It also deals preferentially with subjective lived experiences. By contrast, the left-brain hemisphere deals preferentially with a conceptually represented version of our embodied experience, containing static, separable, but essentially fragmented entities. This kind of attention isolates, fixes, and makes things explicit. In doing so, it renders everything inert, mechanical, and lifeless (McGilchrist 2019). McGilchrist investigates the extent to which our contemporary society is increasingly colonised by the register of representation and hyper-rationalism, emerging into a world structured according to the logic of the left-brain hemisphere. Hence, transferring human existence to an online two-dimensional reality, comes with consequences for our understanding of the world as well as for our brains. Instead of seeing what is truly present

as primary, and the representation as a necessarily diminished derivative of it, we see reality as merely a special case of our representation. One in which something is added in to 'animate' it (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 7). This is a world in which abstractions (words and images) are dealt with as more real/consequential than whatever is they represent, and the living is turned into something inanimate (McGilchrist, 2021).

Both McGilchrist (2019, 2021) and Sass (2017) share the concern that an increased reliance on the left hemisphere leads also to an increase in the prevalence of schizophrenia and of schizophrenic-like dispositions. According to Iain McGilchrist (2019, 2021), schizophrenia is a condition that is associated with hyperactivity in the left-brain hemisphere and impairment of the right-brain hemisphere. He explains that schizophrenia is a relatively modern disease, existent only since the 18th century. McGilchrist (2019, 2021) and Sass (2017) are not arguing that humanity is dealing with a sudden epidemic of schizophrenia, but instead with an accentuated reliance on the world as delivered to us by the left hemisphere, meanwhile dismissing what it is that the right hemisphere knows and could help us understand (McGilchrist, 2021). In addition, Sass identifies an eerie likeness between schizophrenia and the existential predispositions within modernity. These include the following: defiance of authority and convention; nihilism and all-embracing irony; a tantalising, uncanny, but always frustrating sense of revelation; pervasive dehumanisation; and disappearance of external reality in favour of the omnipotent ego or, alternatively, dissolution of all sense of selfhood (Sass, 2017).

According to both Sass and McGilchrist, schizophrenia's principal psychopathological features are not regression towards irrationality, lack of self-awareness, and a retreat into the infantile realm of emotion and the body but entail the exact opposite. That is, a sort of misplaced hyper-rationalism and a disengagement from emotion and embodied existence (McGilchrist, 2019). What emerges is a sense of radical alienness and a separation from the socially shared world, which is stripped of its usual meaning and sense of coherence (Sass 2017). Reality appears peculiar and eerie (Sass, 2017), attracting the gaze and enabling a feeling of profound penetration into the essence of things. This experience, involving a contradictory sense of meaningfulness and meaningless, of significance and insignificance, is referred to as the 'truth-taking-stare' (Sass, 2017, p. 26). Subjects in this state say that they find themselves, akin to scientists, 'not involved in the world, merely observing it from outside to understand its secret workings' (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 348).

OMNIPOTENCE THOUGH THE OTHER

In schizophrenia one might feel that there is no access to an outside of the realm of the Other and its overarching power of thought and representation, as the world comes to lack the ultimate unknowability that exceed our grasp. Jacques Lacan conceptualises the ultimate paternal authority as the Other of the symbolic order and as the Other of the unconscious,

further equating it with the authority of the language, the social law, as well as with the locus of truth and meaning. While this type of authority is constructed in the name of a symbolic locus, it nevertheless can find expression in an actual person who embodies it (Borneman, 2004). In a world structured by schizophrenic-like dispositions, one oscillates between two apparently opposite positions: impotence and omnipotence. Namely, either there is no self as all there is appears structured by the deadening law of the Other; or all that the one sees appears to be in fact part of the self, as in this case the schizophrenic identifies with the pervasive gaze of the Other (McGilchrist, 2019). The stance of omnipotence is accompanied by euphoric exaltation, while that of impotence is accompanied by dysphoria and profound ontological insecurity (Sass, 2017). To escape the later dreadful feeling, the schizophrenic subject gains existential reassurance when fully identifying with the gaze and stance of the Other. Accepting the Other's world view and desire as one's own allows respite in an unsettling schizophrenic world.

Returning to the case analysed in this article, the disconcerting oscillation between euphoria and dysphoria, brings insights into Russian society's puzzling attachment to the world designed around and to a large extent by Vladimir Putin. Putin occupies the position of the social authority figure, the pivotal figure in generating meaning and sustaining the social order. Bare-chested Putin, with his predilection for horseback riding, hunting, stroking tigers, ice swimming, and judo fighting, is a perfect embodiment of the traditional paternal authority (Pomerantsev, 2015). In addition, as the commander of the largest nuclear weapon arsenal on this planet, Putin envisions himself as holding in his hands the future of entire humanity, and repeatedly reminds the world about his apocalyptic destructive potential. The emphasis placed on the figure of the father (particularly in Lacanian psychoanalysis) stems from his ability to introduce and sustain a social order that is structurally different from the natural one. This further institutes the structure of society and a certain community of meaning (Stavrakakis, 1999). Putin, as the symbolic authority, above all, asserts both his supreme right and desire to shape the discourse through which his supporters understand the past, present, and future; the distinction between true and false; as well as the distinction between real and artificial. Indeed, he sees himself as a mythical hero and a historian destined to rewrite and restore the national history in his own image (Andelman, 2022). To that end, he wrote a lengthy essay, entitled 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', published on the Kremlin's webpage in Russian, Ukrainian, and English. The essay informed Putin's utterly chilling hour-long televised speech announcing the invasion of Ukraine. With this occasion, he proclaimed Ukraine an artificial state and Ukrainian identity as a distortion of the genuine Russian identity. He also decried that 'Russia was robbed' when Ukraine gained independence in 1991. One could interpret Putin's discourse as the articulation of the Other's Law, as he voices his desire for things to be a certain way and not another (Fink, 2000). It is important to specify that the moral Law, or the voice of conscience, which typically originates in the voice of the father, is experienced as an expression of the Other's desire (Fink, 2000). In Russia, Putin's public persona is rendered stern and closely associated with morality. His supporters

see him as a strong promoter of Christian Orthodox values and a relentless defender of motherland Russia, who is driven by deep paternal love. Thus, Putin legitimises his rule through his personality cult, using heroic and paternal images that portray him as the ultimate source of Russian vigour and prosperity.

RUSSIAN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Vladimir Putin sustains a universe of conspiratorial narratives exhibiting a deep sense of cynicism. These construe the world as burdened by insidious, malevolent figures such as Nazis, drug addicts, and corrupt Western leaders who are building noxious biological laboratories. Their imminent sense of doom resonates with what German psychiatrist August Wetzel's describes as 'end of the world' experiences. These tend to be culminations of sinister and uncanny mood-states. These states are also associated with the sense of being somehow at the centre of the dreadful happenings (Wetzel, 1922, as cited in Sass, 2017, p. 259). What particularly stands out here is the chillingly detached attitude maintained when contemplating such catastrophic end of the world scenarios. This is the case, Louis Sass argues, as the inner life of schizophrenia patients is often devoid of worldly emotions like sadness and joy, and instead it is infused with cosmic euphoria, anxiety, and ironic detachment. It is not uncommon for someone in this state of mind to describe the most horrifying catastrophes with utter indifference or even a trace of smile (Sass, 2017). For instance, we witness a chilling sense of emotional disengagement and affectlessness when envisioning the catastrophic destruction of human civilisation that the Sarmat (the new Russian heavy intercontinental ballistic missile) could cause. Stunningly, the TV hosts on the state-owned Russia-1 channel were giggling as they were discussing striking and destroying New York City in its entirety with this weapon (Bunyan, 2022). A similar disconcerting stance was adopted by Russian television host Dmitry Kiselyov in his rhetorical question: 'Why do we need a world if Russia is not in it?' (Mclaughlin et al., 2022). The casual conversations about apocalyptic forms of destruction, seen repeatedly on state-owned TV stations in Russia, show a profound lack of empathy that is indeed sinisterly cold and frightening.

The sense of doom, depicted by Russian propaganda, also stems from the existence of mighty villains who are secretly controlling societal institutions in the Western world to further their harmful purposes and pervert morals. If not deterred, these would bring about the enslavement or the very end of humanity. Noteworthy here is the stance of Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox church. He is a strong supporter of both Putin and the invasion of Ukraine. Kirill places the blame for the violence and destruction generated in war, on what he claims is Ukraine's perversion of Orthodox morals through its support of gay rights and gay parades. In his sermons, he referred to Russia's 'military operation' in Ukraine as a conflict deciding 'which side of God humanity will be on' (Patriarch Kirill, as cited in Kika, 2022, para. 2). Kirill warns that an alliance with the West necessarily involves adopting gay

pride parades. These are, in his opinion, so deeply sinful that failing to eradicate them would surely bring about the end of human civilisation (Kika, 2022). Paradoxically, while worrying about the 'sinful' parades, Russian Orthodox priests are nevertheless dutifully blessing Russian bombs and weapons of mass destruction (Rozanskij, 2021).

The Russian propaganda's exposure of the doom, corruption, and sin, inherent in both the Western and Ukrainian social orders, is followed by Putin's promise of a return to a state of plenitude, as he positions himself as both Russia's and Ukraine's singular saviour. His phantasmatic proposal of a return to an imperial Russia carries a profound sense of nostalgia, as it idealises a glorious past and expresses a longing for a home that is merely imaginary (Boym, 2001). This mythical return to a lost Eden (Boym, 2001) can only be achieved through Putin's mediation and by embracing his version of Russian identity and patriotism. Questioning or rejecting his version of the world comes with harsh punishment. In addition to intimidations, ordered murders, and numerous arrests, Vladimir Putin signed a new law into effect that calls for sentences of up to 15 years in prison for people who distribute 'false news' about the Russian military (Oremus, 2022). Despite his ruthless behaviour, Putin's persona looms over Russia as omnipotent and omniscient mythical figure. As such, he can provide for his supporters, through identification, a state of plenitude. The more threatening and confusing the world appears, the heavier is Russian society's reliance on the apparent strength of its mythological Other.

UNREALITY VISION AND CRYSTAL-CLEAR SIGHT

Peter Pomerantsev traces the extent to which Russian government worked intently on developing a sense of generalised mistrust in Western media and institutions, starting as early as the 1980s, when Radio Moscow broadcasted claims that the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) invented AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) as a weapon against Africa. More recently, it claimed that American factories were pumping out the Zika virus in East Ukraine to poison ethnic Russians; that the US is harvesting Russian DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) to create gene weapons; and that the US is encircling Russia with secret biological labs (Pomerantsev, 2019). The over-the-top fabricated stories hail attention as they centre around potent tropes in Russian society, such as Nazism, biological weapons, drugs, and involve poignant public figures, such as Hunter Biden, the son of the United States' president. The Russian government intentionally socialised Russians in a universe of propaganda and conspiracy theories, moulding a citizenry that appears simultaneously cynical about aspects of life that need to be implicit and gullible enough to espouse enormously improbable belief systems that are clearly delusional, and above all highly receptive to the Kremlin's manipulations (McGilchrist, 2021; Pomerantsev, 2015). Succumbing to this conspiratorial universe of meaning distorts one's thinking and perception of the world. Its inherent ontological confusion creates the condition of possibility for acquiring an 'unreality vision'.

Louis Sass argues that the unreality vision, a main symptom of schizophrenia, is a strange and enigmatic mood that infuses everything (Sass, 2017) and generates an oddly diminished feel of reality. It reveals an alien world of uniform precision and clarity but devoid of dynamism, emotional resonance, and sense of human purpose that prevail in everyday life (Sass, 2017). Life is rendered flimsy and false. People and places appear devoid of depth and authenticity. Objects, akin to the situation in *The Truman Show* (1998), could take on the look of stage accessories or pasteboard scenery. People could seem mere puppets, mannikins, or automatons, or else somehow in disguise (Sass, 2017). To further understand the receptivity to conspiratorial theories, it is worth recalling McGilchrist's (2021) claim that people with a left-brain deficit show a tendency towards confabulating and jumping to conclusions on little or no evidence. He argues that a failure of the right hemisphere to ground the self into the complexly unpredictable flow of life generates a need for closure as well as an acute intolerance to ambiguity and uncertainty (McGilchrist, 2021). One of the appealing features of Russian conspiratorial narratives is the fact that they are akin to simple maps that claim to contain/expose the bare truth about human existence.

Another noteworthy feature of Russian conspiratorial narratives is their poignant cynicism. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk defines cynicism as enlightened false consciousness, explaining that it exemplifies an unhappy consciousness in modernised form, further articulating an uneasiness that sees the modern world steeped in cultural insanities and false hopes (Sloterdijk, 2001). It entails a search for 'naked truth' and urges one to maintain oneself as a fully rational living being against the distortions of one's society (Sloterdijk, 2001). As such, even though it might appear otherwise, cynical fantasy formations provide the subject with a form of existential reassurance. Namely, although the cynic refuses to take part in the social world governed by the corrupt/immoral Western social authority, the cynic who believes to have had access to the 'naked truth' is vested with a sense of control and of an almost transcendental understanding (McGowan, 2004). Russian conspiracy theories about Ukraine assume an apparent comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the functioning of the human society in past and present, as if it were transparent, where everything could be understood, nothing could remain hidden. This is akin to an illusion of transparency, where everything can be taken in by a single glance (Lefebvre, 1991), as one could see behind the manipulations of the corrupt political order. Indeed, schizophrenics describe a feeling 'of crystal-clear sight, of profound penetration into the essence of things' (Sass, 2017, p. 26). As opposed to the devitalisation specific to unreality vision, in crystal-clear sight, one has the feeling of a heightened reality. Thus, the world appears charged with a mysterious force and laden with meaning, allowing impressions of profound revelation about the nature of society and politics to emerge. In addition, conspiratorial narratives create a sense of radicality for the subject. One gains a sense of existential reassurance through envisioning oneself standing separate from society's malefic ideological grip and claiming a coveted sense of agentic capacity.

LIAR'S DIVIDEND

Ukrainian war is brought to us in real time though videos of injured and lifeless bodies, explosions, destructions, and military assaults filmed by Ukrainians and disseminated widely through social media. Facing this plethora of images and recorded testimonials, the Russian government prioritised controlling what Russians see and what they are willing to believe. The space created by the state-owned media takes its audience to an alternate reality, portraying a strikingly sanitised take of the Ukrainian war. It excludes the haunting images of destroyed apartment buildings, hospitals, and theatres, of children and women severely injured. It also excludes images of civilian lifeless bodies lying on the streets or being buried hastily in common graves. It focuses instead on the military technology, the tanks advancing, the apparent successes of the Russian army, and what the Kremlin claims to be assistance provided to distressed Ukrainians. The only time that war destruction visually enters this sanitised space is when it is portrayed as 'caused' by the Ukrainian military; for instance, showing shelled buildings in the Donbas region and the explosion at the petroleum depot in Russia, or when the images are presented as 'staged provocations'.

Increasingly relying on media to connect and learn about the world, together with technological innovations that allow the creation and dissemination of deep-fake videos, generate an unprecedented ontologically confusing situation, as large communities accept fictional occurrences as real (Chesney & Citron, 2019). For instance, a confusing deep-fake video circulated, at the beginning of the Russian's invasion, showing the Ukrainian president asking his soldiers to lay down their arms and surrender the fight against Russia. Additional doctored videos circulated, portraying Zelensky as a cocaine addict (Loh, 2022). Prior to its invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government engaged in sustained efforts to instil in its national and international audiences the conviction that for the last eight years the Ukrainian government carried out a genocide against the Russian-speaking population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and that Ukraine is under the leadership of neo-Nazis and corrupt drug addicts. Furthermore, the Russian media fabricated and promoted narratives stating that the US has been developing biological weapons in Ukraine to be used against Russian citizens.

The sustained socialisation in this universe of fabricated information has significant social and existential consequences. Through is unreality vision and crystal-clear sight, it leads to an alteration of human perception, whereas what is exaggerated appears real and endowed with a 'manufactured authenticity', while what was once considered reality is perceived as devitalised, outdated, boring, and empty. Another aspect of concern is the impaired ability to make sense of the world when the very relationship between truth and false are disturbed. When Sergey Lavrov, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, declares that Russia does not plan on attacking other countries, as it did not attack Ukraine, even though at the time of his declaration the Russian army was relentlessly shelling several cities throughout Ukraine (Crane, 2022), communication is simply pushed far beyond the bounds of rationality. Similarly, after almost two months of a horrifically devastating war, the Kremlin's spokesman

Dmitri Peskov warns that 'If Ukraine continues its provocations by attacking Russian cities, Russia will be forced to declare war against Ukraine' (Peskov, as cited in Bolocan, 2022, para. 1). The baffling communication style is not without precedent. During the annexation of Crimea, Vladimir Putin went on international television and asserted that there were no Russian soldiers in Crimea, when everyone knew there were, and then just as casually later admitted that they had been there, and even publicly awarded medals to the soldiers whom he had earlier said hadn't been there (Pomerantsev, 2019). In the current Ukrainian war, Vladimir Putin insists that we are not dealing with an actual war but instead with a 'special military operation', undertaken with the purpose of de-Nazification of Ukraine. This statement is especially puzzling as Ukraine's current president is Jewish and has members of his family who fought and died in World War II against Germans. The bizarre logic is pushed further by the Russian press insisting that the devastation seen throughout Ukraine is inflicted by the Ukrainian people themselves, who are shooting at each other and destroying their own buildings and infrastructure, using the weapons that the Ukrainian government made available to those citizens willing the fight the invaders.

These are solely a few examples of Russian media's and government officials' statements displaying mind-boggling falsity, that calls the opposition between true and false itself into question. The bizarre beliefs they articulate are not simply unrealistic but flagrantly impossible, contradicting the laws of logic (Sass, 2017). Instead of having scope winning arguments, they are meant to deflect attention and create confusion. Their impossible logic is solidified by a general avoidance to provide concrete information, giving Russian politics a surreal quality that encourages those supporting Putin to trust his ability to magically bring about the best possible outcomes for motherland Russia. All these generate a world in which, as the Ukrainian war survivors recall, the Russian soldiers declaring their intent to liberate Ukrainians, as they proceed to rape, torture, and kill the very individuals they proclaim to save and liberate.

While some lies do involve affirmative claims that something occurred (when in fact it never did), what we also witness in the Ukrainian war are lies that take the form of denials (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The possibility of generating, manipulating, and disseminating false news gives the option of those accused of wrongdoings to create doubt about accusations, by using altered video or audio evidence that appears to contradict the claim. This is what Chesney and Citron call the 'liar's dividend'. The liar's dividend is enabled by the current pervasive truth scepticism. Recent years have seen mounting distrust of traditional sources of news. The expression 'fake news' is often used as a convenient substitute for an argument or an explanation when one is confronted with damaging factual assertions. As deep-fake news is increasingly a possibility to consider in everyday life, the public's cynicism is so pronounced that people simply have difficulty believing what their eyes or ears are telling them (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Hence, a new society develops where a guiding sense of

intuition as well as the trust in the unquestionable foundational domain of the realm of perceptual faith and in the plane of social engagement (Sass, 2017) are in serious jeopardy.

NOTHING BUT ACTORS AND FILM SETS

This ontological disorientation is used by the Kremlin in convincing the public to distrust accurate news reports about Ukrainians' war suffering. The Kremlin instead spreads false claims that Western media outlets have been broadcasting images and videos of 'crisis actors' and 'war film sets' as real events. Crisis actors refer to people who are merely playing the role of terrified or deceased war victims for the cameras. For instance, the accusation of employing crises actors was used to neutralise the impact of the unsettling images emerging from the aftermath of an attack on a maternity hospital in Mariupol. To create doubt and distract attention from the severity of the events, the Russian social media disseminated the statement that the images of an injured pregnant woman being carried out on a stretcher and of another pregnant woman (identified as Marianna Vishegirskaya) photographed fleeing in distress the destroyed maternity building, were both merely performances of the same crisis actor, who was pretending for the camera to be injured, when in fact she was well and happy. To give credibility to this claim, the post included an old image of a smiling Marianna Vishegirskaya promoting cosmetic products. 'Very realistic make-up', the Russian Embassy wrote to the UK in a Twitter post of this callously misleading story (Ahmed, 2022). In addition to previously discussed unreality vision, that leads to devitalisation, the Russian representation of the attack on Mariupol's maternity hospital is in line with another key phenomenon that Sass (2017) and McGilchrist (2021) argue is specific to schizophrenia, namely, that of fragmentation. Fragmentation results from a loss of global or Gestalt perception, deficits in contextual understanding, and difficulty discriminating familiar from strange stimuli. In the case discussed here, instead of one's concern focusing on the cruel act of bombing a maternity hospital, attention is brought to various distracting elements. The authenticity of these elements is brought into question. Hence, attention is diverted from the horrendous act of bombing pregnant women and newly born children, to disputing the authenticity of the pregnant women's suffering. Because the pain of war victims is difficult to convey as explicit facts, the aim is to cloud people's thinking about the war, so that they would tune out or focus on endless debates of aspects that are relatively trivial. Fragmentation renders things uncanny and overwhelmingly confusing (McGilchrist, 2021) and stifles the empathic bond that one might develop with the pain of the Ukrainians.

The disinformation about the attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol is unfortunately not an isolated case. This technique has been employed repeatedly in the Ukrainian war. For example, one viral video shows a news reporter speaking in German in front of rows of people lying on the ground in what look like body bags. As the camera records, one of the people in the bags rearranges his body position, showing that the person is very much alive. The video

was used by pro-Russia social media accounts to claim that Ukrainians are faking war deaths, and the Western media coverage of the war is staged. Similarly, old footage from a science fiction movie *Invasion Planet Earth*, shows a crowd of people running towards a camera in an urban square, after one of the filmmakers shouts 'action!'. The video has been portrayed by pro-Russia media as evidence that media outlets are falsely presenting footage of actors as images of fleeing terrified Ukrainians. An additional video, from a television series *Cantamin*, displayed on social media as alleged evidence of Ukraine using crisis actors, shows a woman applying blood-style makeup to the face of a smiling man (Dale, 2022).

The resulting impaired capacity to tell apart fiction from reality is an element of concern, especially in Russian society, where it became so acute that it impacts the ability to empathise with and care for members of one's own family. What especially stands out to me are the stories of those finding themselves in Ukraine during bombardments and calling their relatives living in Russia, to share their distress and receive much needed solace, only to encounter a stubborn distrust and cold dismissal of their war experiences. Their personal accounts are distrusted because they simply did not match what the Russian media was reporting at the time. Therefore, when confronted with inconsistencies between experiences in the real world and their representation, one privileges the world of representation, even at the expense of one's own relatives' wellbeing. Ukrainians describe anger and frustration as they are put in the situation of needing to prove the authenticity of their pain, anguish, and trauma of war to members of their own family. To better understand this emotional detachment and distrust of reality, I bring attention once more to the work of McGilchrist on schizophrenia. McGilchrist argues that in schizophrenia there is a curious 'demand for proof' for aspects of life that need to be implicit. How exactly could one clearly prove that one is suffering or demonstrate the authenticity of one's lived experience? When a basic bond with the embodied world is lost, sufferers describe a 'sense of separation, unreality, or deadening' (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 337), which is inherent in a stance of emotional disengagement and mental remoteness. What was once intuitively understood is forced out of its context and could be accessed only rationalistically. The tacit becomes focal, the implicit becomes explicit, and what should be intuitively grasped becomes a matter of calculation. Thus, the nature of the implicit subjective experience, at the core of human mode of being in the world, is rendered inaccessible (McGilchrist, 2021) and human interactions acquire a feeling of utter alienness. For instance, Alexander Serdyuk has stopped talking to his mother, as according to Alexander: 'She doesn't understand me. She says it's just Nazis killing each other, and that we are responsible for all this' (Tondo & Rice-Oxley, 2022, para. 2). Natalia Ivanivna has Russian relatives whom she wanted to alert when the bombing started: 'Fifteen minutes after the shelling started, I sent them a series of messages: "We are being bombed". The first question they asked me: "Who is doing the bombing – our army or yours?"' (para. 9). Artur Kolomiitsev, a young man from Kharkiv, speaks of his frustration: 'They don't believe this war is real. They believe we are bombing ourselves and that our government is on drugs' (Tondo & Rice-Oxley, 2022, para. 25). These examples speak of a generalised ontological unhinging that simply

undermines reality (Sass, 2017). With suspicion infiltrating and eroding the basic building blocks of reality, the world comes to be experienced unnervingly unreal (Sass, 2017). Consequently, people appear to be actors faking suffering and the fullness of life appears dried out. What was once alive is now experienced as only a shell or a mask (McGilchrist, 2021). In this context, I invite the reader to contemplate the Russian reaction to the horrendous images of war crimes emerging from Bucha.

THE HORRORS OF BUCHA

After Ukrainian forces liberated areas around Kyiv, officials and independent photographers reported finding numerous bodies of civilians scattered in the streets of the city of Bucha. Among these are the body of a man who was carrying a bag of potatoes before being shot, of a man killed while riding his bicycle, and another of a man who had his hands bound and a bullet wound to the head. Images of a mass grave located near the church in Bucha show additional bodies buried. Confronted with the horrific scenes, triggering an outpour of global condemnations, Moscow firmly rejected any involvement in atrocities. Russian officials and the Russian press argued instead that the images and videos were staged by Ukrainians with the use of crisis actors. Later, the blame was placed on the 'Ukrainian Nazis' and on the UK for having planned and committed the crimes. Russia's representative to the United Nations, Dmitry Polyansky, referred to Bucha as a 'blatant provocation by Ukrainian radicals' (Reuters, 2022a, para. 2), while Sergei Lavrov decried it a 'yet another fake attack' (Rimi, 2022), that Ukraine attempts to use against Russia. Russia's embassy in France posted on Twitter a photo of the destruction in Bucha, claiming that it shows a 'film set' (Reuters, 2022b). The Russian utter neglect of human suffering is reminiscent of the account by Demay and Renaux of a head-injured soldier according to whom the entirety of the First World War, in which he participated, was a make-believe, elaborate performance (Demay & Renaux, 1919, as cited in McGilchrist, 2021). The fact that these dismissive claims find a large supportive audience raise a warning sign that at the societal level we might be facing symptoms akin to those exhibited by right hemisphere-damaged subjects and schizophrenics. That is, a lack of an intuitive sense of reality, which is replaced with the feeling that life is nothing but 'play-acting' (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 313). A patient suffering with schizophrenia describes this perceptional alteration:

> I see things devoid of substance… They must be hallucinations and not real objects… Things act only on my eyes, not my brain. Doubtless I see everything, without doubt nothing is changed, except that things are not real… what I see is only a play, a Punch and Judy show; it is clumsy, vulgar, unpleasant and, above all, false; it doesn't really exist. (Sass, 2017, p. 229)

Another noteworthy reaction to this incident, comes from the Russian talk show host Olesya Loseva, who suggested that the town of Bucha had deliberately been chosen as the setting for staging horrific scenes to be attributed to Russian soldiers because President Joe Biden had previously used the word butcher to describe Vladimir Putin, so 'for Americans this

word should be clear' (Hill, 2022, para. 6). Here, once more, we encounter the process of fragmentation, namely diverting the mind from understanding the events in a context, and instead bringing attention to separate distracting details, such as the US president Joe Biden and his choice of words. In addition, we see at play another feature of the schizophrenic pathology. This is an abnormally heightened awareness of significance, termed the *apophanous* mood (from the Greek word apophany, meaning 'to become manifest'; Sass 2017, p. 33). In this eerie mood, the world resonates with fugitive significance. Every detail takes on an excruciating distinctness, specialness, and peculiarity as one starts seeing patterns and meaning in unrelated things (Sass, 2017). In the Ukrainian war context, a bizarre association is made between the unrelated town Bucha and the word 'butcher' that Joe Biden chose to describe Vladimir Putin. This association is endowed with a sense of laden meaning and elevated importance, to the extent that it claims to open an apparent path into seeing into the deep essence (nature) of the events analysed.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWPOINTS: REALITY CLASH, VOICES OF PROTEST, AND SOCIAL DUPLICITY

So far, this article has focused on the existential stance that accepts a complete identification with the desire and worldview of the Other. In the case analysed here, this entails fully accepting the world weaved by Russian state propaganda. While this viewpoint holds significant ground in current Russia, there are nevertheless important alternatives, germane to the Ukrainian war. For instance, such an alternative stance arises in the clash between the world of Russian propaganda and the actual situation in Ukraine. This soul-crushing experience is rendered through a Russian soldier's text sent to his mother in Russia, moments before he was killed in Ukraine. Ukraine's UN ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya read out loud the message in the UN General Assembly meeting. This is the text's translation from Russian:

> There is a real war raging here. I'm afraid. We are bombing all of the cities together, even targeting civilians. We were told that they would welcome us, and they are falling under our armored vehicles, throwing themselves under the wheels and not allowing us to pass. They call us fascists, Mama. This is so hard. (Crilly, 2022, paras. 8–11)

In emotionally moving instances, young Russian soldiers visibly disorientated, tired, and hungry are welcomed by young Ukrainians who share food with them and hand them phones to call their families in Russia. The soldiers inform their families that they ended up in the middle of a war as aggressors. While the soldiers were told that their mission was that of de-nazifying Ukraine, they realise that Ukrainians see them as Nazis. In this context, one could understand the reports about Russian soldiers self-sabotaging their tanks, refusing to fight, or turning themselves into Ukrainian custody. Aware of this situation, the Ukrainian Minister of Defense, Oleksii Reznikov, offered the Russian soldiers full amnesty and monetary compensation if they laid down their arms and surrendered voluntarily (*National Post,* 2022).

These developments reveal the extent to which Russian young men have been made part of an absurd logic of war, which they simply do not understand nor support. These are instances in which Ukrainians and Russians together, transcend and undermine the alienating social order, and connect with each other through their shared humanity and traumatic experiences.

A second noteworthy stance entails flat-out rejecting and exposing the hypocrisy of the official narrative about the noble intension of the war. To that end, especially in the first weeks of the invasion, numerous courageous Russians took to the streets in protest, demanding that a war in Ukraine not be fought in their name. In addition, Marina Ovsyannikova, an editor at Channel One television, staged a visible protest by barging onto the set of evening news, shouting: 'Stop the war. No to war'. She held a written message: 'Don't believe the propaganda. They're lying to you here'. It was signed in English: 'Russians against the war' (Reilly, 2022). The government counteracted Russian citizens' protests with mass arrests, intimidations, and implementing a law that punishes with up to 15 years in prison those who provide 'fake news' about the Russian army. Due to this law, Alexandra Skochilenko, a Russian artist that proceeded to replace price-tags with messages against the invasion of Ukraine in a Saint Petersburg shop, faces up to a decade in prison (Lloyd, 2022). Furthermore, several teachers have been turned in to authorities by students or parents for engaging in anti-war speech. We learn that students have secretly recorded instructors, who made negative comments about the invasion, before contacting the police (Sauer, 2022).

The harsh punishment for protesting the violence inflicted on Ukraine speaks loudly about the rigidity of the Other's Law. This very rigidity, prohibiting alternative ways of thinking and demanding that one fully embodies the national ideology, is prone to cause a third stance, one that anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1993) identified as 'social duplicity'. She argues that to survive an overbearing system, one constructs a public self that complies the society's scripted ways, and then in private one reveals a 'real' self, this self being very critical of the rigid system (Laing, 1960; Verdery 1993). Psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1960) took great interest in understanding the complex psychological dynamics of individuals living as divided selves and those experiencing a constant internal conflict between their two identities. In such cases, the hatred for the oppressive system is revealed through a tendency for the 'false self' to assume more and more characteristics of the persons upon whom the compliance was based, to the point that the impersonation begins to turn into caricature (Laing, 1960). Televised Russian state meetings, having Putin in attendance, stand out as absurd theatrical performances. Functioning as blatant materialisation of his mental and social isolation, Putin in his official meetings was seen seated across ostentatiously large tables, far away from other humans, apparently as a COVID-19 precaution. The interactions around Putin emanate an overwhelming coldness, a sense of unbridgeable distance between humans. This is a dehumanised world of structure, where human beings feel out of place and where obedience

is carried to such excess that we witness a sort of grotesque parody, as the 'false self' order tends to become increasingly theatrical and devoid of life (Laing, 1960).

Nevertheless, as Slavoj Žižek (1997) notes, if an ideological edifice is to maintain function, it must find a way to articulate its inherent antagonism. Thus, the dysfunction of the rigid Kremlin political system surfaces as a breakdown in the Russian official communication about the war. Reports emerged about the reluctance of officials to share with Putin basic facts about the war in Ukraine, and about several senior Russian intelligence officials having been detained, interrogated, and placed under house arrest. They were blamed for the failing military campaign in Ukraine (Stewart & Rose, 2022). There were additional reports about embezzlement of significant funds allocated to the war effort in Ukraine, leading to various shortages and difficulties for the Russian soldiers. Hence, one could argue that the absolute control of the Other is simply an illusion. Vladimir Putin, the former KGB agent with a specialisation in disinformation, paradoxically finds himself trapped in the phantasmatic ideas generated by his very web of lies, ending up inhabiting a surreal world disconnected from a shared reality, and hence his bizarre expectation that Ukrainians would welcome his troops and eagerly partake in his imperial dream. As discussed earlier, Putin asserts his absolute control over the Russian national fundamental narrative that orients society in envisioning its past, present, and future as well as in distinguishing between truth and fiction. Despite his desire for absolute control over the national discourse, it turns out that it is Putin who succumbs to its influence. This turn of tables is a cautionary message reminding us that the stories that we choose to tell are not solely tools to be used in communicating with or manipulating others, instead they have the power to constitute the very world that we live in, our community, the mode of engaging others, and our own selves. Persisting in weaving national narratives that portray the world as plagued by corruption, Nazis, and villains, adopting cynicism at the expense of empathy, repeatedly confusing the relationship between truth and fiction, and between real and artificial, could bring about profound long-term social consequences. These could alter our very humanity and the construction of or trans-generational collective self.

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