UiT The Arctic University of Norway

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To make and unmake souls

Fiction as a tool for dehumanisation and rehumanisation

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1 Introduction

> But would you want to share your country, much less your street, with any of Hollywood's Arabs? [...] Would you enjoy sharing your neighborhood with fabulously wealthy and vile oil sheikhs with an eye for Western blondes and arms deals and intent on world domination, or with crazed terrorists, airplane hijackers, or camel-riding bedouins? (Shaheen 172)

From 1991 to 1992, Mohamedou Ould Slahi fought against the Afghani communist government (Slahi 20). American popular opinion was, unsurprisingly, on his side. The Cold War was nearing its end, but anyone fighting against any communists were still cheered on by the American public at large. In fact, only a few years earlier John Rambo fought the same foes in *Rambo III* alongside the Afghani mujahideen, of which Slahi had been a part. A decade later, the group was no longer commonly referred to as mujahideen, but al-Qaeda, and the fact that Slahi had fought with *them* mattered much more than who he had fought *against*.

In November of 2001, Slahi was detained, handed over to the CIA, and would spend fourteen years in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. His previous title of "freedom fighter" had been replaced with "terrorist," and suddenly all methods were permitted to stop him and those like him: "We also have to work sort of the dark side, if you will. [...] A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any

discussions, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies if we're going to be successful" (Dick Cheney, September 16th 2001, qtd. in Inman 424).

The rapid public shift in perception of al-Qaeda in specific, and Muslims and/or Arabs in general, was of course due to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, though the stereotypical view of Arabs had never been particularly flattering. Jack G. Slaheen undertook the momentous task of watching every single Hollywood film that included Arab characters, from 1894 until the present, and found that only five percent of them did not feature Arabs as villains (Slaheen 189). However, there was still a massive shift in public perception post-9/11, as suddenly everyone knew about al-Qaeda, and hate crimes against Muslims skyrocketed, from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001. Even two decades later, the amount of hate crimes against Muslims is almost eight times higher than pre-9/11 (FBI 1). I will argue that these levels have been kept elevated, at least in part, by the kinds of portrayals of Arabs that the average Western person sees in their day-to-day life, as the kinds of fiction we consume changes how we think.

Just as novels by abolitionists are sometimes credited with helping turn public opinion against slavery—portraying slaves as complete human beings deserving of rights— novels written by differently motivated authors can have different effects. Consider the effects of a novel wherein the protagonist says to his "secretive Arab" enemy: "Anything I do to you can be justified, because anything I could do is totally insignificant compared

to what you *tried* to do" (Barrington 375).[1] Or when that novel refers to an Arab and points out that the Arab in question is *not* a member of al-Qaeda, but adds that he is "*just* […] one of the hundreds of thousands of Arabs who shared a hatred of America and an admiration of Osama bin Laden and everything he stood for" (Barrington 5–6, emphasis added). Or any of the other fiction which portrays Muslims/Arabs—the terms tend to be interchangeable in this context—as bloodthirsty monsters, who simply want to hurt and kill as many civilians as possible, with no particular motivation other than perhaps hatred. As the quote often attributed to Joseph Goebbels, chief propagandist of the Nazi Party, goes: "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it."

Among the most repeated lies are the generally accepted "truths" of antisemitism as an ideology. In summary, that Jewish people are, "for example, arrogant, legalistic, cunning, conniving, clannish, rootless, parasitic, power-grabbing, money-grubbing and so on." Which of these traits are focused on, Brian Klug argues, depends on the specific instance of antisemitism, "new traits might be added while others drop out" (Klug 451). In some contexts the charge of being rootless would hold very little weight, for instance, so that particular stereotype is put in the background while the charges of arrogance and money-grubbing are emphasised, or any other combination of the pool of prejudices. Behind all these stereotypes is, of course, the basic foundation of antisemitism: The idea that Jewish people are *other* in a way that is *hostile*, that they are not like "*us.*"

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[1]What the "secretive Arab" has done is cooperate with "renegade Russians" to plant nuclear devices "in major city centers" in order "to bomb America back into the Stone Age." (Barrington, James. *Overkill*. Pan Macmillan, 2007, back cover.)

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596–1598), the figure of Shylock looms large. In Shakespeare's time, portraying a Jewish man as unreasonably bloodthirsty and murderous could be done without fear of any sort of backlash, as antisemitism ran deep in the public consciousness. The vast majority of Shakespeare's audience would never even have met a Jewish person, as they had been banned from Britain for more than three centuries (Prestwich 343). Roderigo Lopes, a Jewish convert to Christianity, had recently been executed for supposedly plotting to kill Queen Elizabeth I, so antisemitism was at a particularly high level even for the time.[2] Despite Lopes having converted to Christianity, his Jewish past was enough for people to mistrust him from the start. In other words, public opinion was already against Jewish people, and for Shakespeare's audience, likely the only "Jewish people" they'd ever see were on the stage. And on the stage, non-Jewish actors played out the dominant stereotypes of their day, further dehumanising this *other*.

But fiction can also be a tool for *rehumanisation,* helping readers shed their preconceived notions of any given group. In the past 25 years, US support for gay marriage has risen from 27% to 70% (Gallup), in part because of positive portrayal of gay characters in media (GLAAD 2). While this is an imperfect measure of relative homophobia,[3] it nonetheless shows that, within the US, at least, the mainstream view has shifted enormously over the course of a single generation. The relatively recent

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[2]Stephen Greenblatt in his 2004 book *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* even argues that Lopes was a direct influence on the character of Shylock.

backlash against LGBTQ rights is not to be ignored, of course, but even with that in mind things are looking brighter than they were 25 years ago, in part because of fiction rehumanising gay people. From being villains, to vectors of disease, to anti-heroes, to witty sidekicks, it eventually came to the point where a character in a work of fiction can be gay and not have that define everything about them.

As Nussbaum put it, literature "cultivate[s] capacities of judgment and sensitivity that can and should be expressed in the choices a citizen makes" (Nussbaum 86). She argues that fiction exercises the narrative imagination, which allows us to imagine what living like someone else would be like, which in her view would massively increase empathy (10), allowing us to "see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society's refusals of visibility" (88). In other words, seeing a fictional injustice will prime us to recognise and understand similar injustices as they appear in real life.

 The Plot Against America, then, is an alternate history novel wherein Charles Lindbergh becomes president rather than Franklin D. Roosevelt, the US does not initially join WW2, and antisemitism meets increasing mainstream approval. The novel follows the main character, also named Philip Roth, as a child in the US from approximately 1940–1942, and shows the gradual escalation of antisemitic ideas: From unspoken prejudice,

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[3]Homophobic people *can* still support gay marriage, after all, and non-homophobic people *can* oppose it, though it is comparativel rare.

to open hate, to attempts at erasing Jewish identity, to the expulsion of Jewish people from certain parts of the country, all the way to antisemitic riots, assassinations and arbitrary arrests. It functions as a very clear example of rehumanising literature, as it explicitly shows the process of dehumanisation and its consequences, while also not presenting the aggressors as *inherently* evil.

The main drive behind Lindbergh's electoral victory is not antisemitism, and it is only to a small degree anticommunism; the main drive is isolationism, a wish to "preserve American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war [...] Your choice is simple. It's not between Charles A. Lindbergh and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It's between Lindbergh and war" (Plot 35–36). The fact that Nazi Germany is seen as a "safeguard against the spread of communism and its evils" (83) helps, but is not the main motivator. Quickly, the US and Nazi Germany sign an "understanding," in Nazi-occupied Iceland, guaranteeing peaceful relations between the two countries, with anyone who criticises this agreement being seen as a warmonger (Plot 57). The plot of the novel, then, follows Philip[4] and his family as they try to navigate the increasingly dangerous world they find themselves in.

It is also worth noting that not only does the main character share a name with the author, but the main character's family has the same names as the author—with the

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[4]For the sake of simplicity, the fictional Philip Roth will be referred to as "Philip" and the real-world Philip Roth as "Roth."

notable exceptions of Rabbi Bengelsdorf and Aunt Evelyn, some of the more antagonistic characters, and more curiously the cousin Alvin. The novel is very much in the autobiographical mode, which Roth says "was a spontaneous choice" (The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America' 1), but also helped his project of simply changing one thing, namely who won the presidency, and present the rest "as authentically American as the reality in [Arthur] Schlesinger's" history book (The Story 2). Roth also, in no uncertain terms, denied that *The Plot Against America* should be read as any sort of comment on George W. Bush or contemporary politics in general, and claims that it was simply a thought experiment; he refers to reading books politically when no politics were intended as "willfully violating the integrity of [the author's] imagination" (The Story 1). *The Plot Against America* is not, then, simply a contemporary novel in which Roth has replaced "Bush" with "Lindbergh" and "Muslims" with "Jews," but the pattern of prejudice can be generalised.[5]

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* is a clear example of a work of rehumanising fiction, specifically it rehumanises US Jews in the 1940s. It accomplishes this by showing that US Jews were not a group composed solely of downtrodden victims and starving children, but human beings with full inner lives. This is an important point because, however, well-meaning though it may be, a naive portrayal of suffering can be

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[5]The denial of real-world comparisons is clerly not a shield against criticism from supporters of George W. Bush, as Roth near the end of the essay refers to him as "man unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one, and who has merely reaffirmed for me the maxim [...] that makes our lives as Americans as precarious as anyone else's: all the assurances are provisional, even here in a 200-year-old democracy" (The Story 3).

dehumanising as well. When "[i]nequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma" (Dean 633), there is no imperative placed upon the reader to do anything other than feel bad. The victims are simply victims, and anything else about them is irrelevant.

The Plot Against America very deliberately undercuts this view, showing the US persecution of Jewish people through the eyes of a child, with comments from a grown-up Philip looking back on his life. By showing us the young Philip's meetings with people and their varying views on the persecution, and varying ways of resisting, the novel complicates the simplistic narrative brought on by simply showing passive victims of suffering.

What makes *The Plot Against America* so interesting from a literary theoretical standpoint is the obvious fact that the US persecution of Jewish people portrayed in the novel never actually took place, and neither did the dehumanisation that Roth, through his writing, manages to undo. Which is not to say there wasn't antisemitism in the US at the time; Henry Ford infamously allowed his his newspaper *The Dearborn Independent* to publish a series of articles based on the antisemitic hoax *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which purported to reveal Jewish plans of world domination (Singerman 71), and the German American Bund described in *The Plot Against America* did in fact exist, but antisemitism never reached the heights—or rather lows—described in the novel.

In a particularly polemical article, Walter Ben Michaels takes issue with the entire premise of the novel: Many of the forms of discrimination in the book did happen, he argues, but to Black people rather than Jewish people, and "[w]hy should we be outraged by what didn't happen rather than outraged by what did?" (Michaels 289). It is fairly clear that Roth consciously modelled some of the discrimination that his Jewish characters face in the novel on the real-life discrimination of African Americans, most obviously in the section where the family has rented a room in a hotel, months in advance, only to be denied the room once they get there and removed by police. Their only recourse, then, is the Evergreen, a hotel staffed by African Americans (Plot 72).

This is one of very few references that Roth makes to non-antisemitic racism, and it serves to equate the two: Jewish people are now treated in the same way African Americans are, though their form of apartheid is, as of yet in the novel's story, not formally enforced. Michaels is somewhat overstating the point when he claims that "[antisemitism] was never a very significant factor in American life—the fact that Jews were white was almost always more important than the fact that they were Jewish" (Michaels 290), depending on his definition of "very significant."

The fact that there can be a sort of "hierarchy" of privilege, and groups can move up or down that hierarchy depending on the socio-historical context, makes one reading of

the book very clear: The process of dehumanisation can apply to groups other than

Jewish people, and thus the fact that the specific persecution portrayed is fictional is

less important than it first seems. While antisemitism has a unique position among the

various forms of prejudice that exist, it shares similarities with all of them as well.

What I will be focusing on, then, is the aspect of dehumanisation/rehumanisation in

fiction. While mainly using *The Plot Against America* as an illustration, I will also

mention as a contrast other fiction which I will argue dehumanises, with the James

Barrington novel *Overkill* being a particularly clear example. I will not be quite as

optimistic as Nussbaum regarding the empathy-inspiring power of fiction, but I will

make the argument that fiction can help readers empathise with groups they otherwise

know little about, and I will argue that it can very much do the opposite if read

uncritically.

The first section of the thesis will define de- and rehumanisation more thoroughly,

while also introducing the arguments for and against fiction as an empathy-inspiring

tool, and showing that fictional portrayals of groups can make a measurable difference

in real life attitudes. The main text in focus will be *The Plot Against America*, which I will

argue is a prime example of rehumanising literature, despite potential flaws.

Antisemitism will be a major focus, obviously when explicitly discussing *The Plot

Against America*, but other forms of prejudice will also be discussed, primarily racism

more generally, alongside homophobia. Finally, in the conclusion, I will summarise what

we have seen of de- and rehumanisation, and argue that I have shown that fiction can be

a tool for both good and bad when it comes to changing someone's levels of empathy for

a group, and that this can have real-life consequences.

2 Defining dehumanisation

So, what exactly is dehumanisation? It is not simply portraying someone negatively, but specifically portraying them as not quite human, to exclude them from the species proper (Esses et al. 279). This can be done very explicitly, by comparing a group of people to animals, insects, diseases and similar. In the time before and during the Rwandan genocide, for instance, the Tutsi were characterised as "cockroaches," "snakes" and "hyenas" (Gourevitc 34). This comparison between the Tutsi and dangerous animals having been made, it was then "often accompanied by the suggestion, and sometimes explicit assertion, that it was permissible, if not required, to eradicate the Tutsi" (Machery 146). The Nazis constantly compared Jewish people to rats and other vermin, followed by increasingly explicit suggestions, as the propaganda worked its way into the public, that they should be treated as such. But in addition to such explicit dehumanisation, more subtle forms were also in use.

Sometimes referred to as *infrahumanisation* (Machery 146), this more subtle form of dehumanisation is less about comparing a group to animals, and instead about portraying the group as somehow not *properly* human, lacking some sort of essential quality to be *really* human, for example "civility, morality self-control, refinement [or] cognitive sophistication" (Esses et al. 280). Alfred Rosenberg, leader of the office for cultural policy and surveillance responsible for shaping much of Nazi Germany's "philosophical education," devised the strategy of claiming that Jewish people are

incapable of being genuinely creative.[6] Rather than being able to create something new, he claimed, they were exclusively "copycats" and "plagiarizers," with "no organic shape of the soul and therefore no racial shape," and their lives thus had no "metaphysical [or] cultural dimension and [were] hence animal-like" (qtd. in Steizinger 154).

These less explicit attempts at dehumanisation were, like the explicit ones, impossible to argue with as they are essentially unfalsifiable. It is unclear how one would go about showing that a group *does,* in fact, have an "organic shape of the soul," the power of the claims lay more in the authority of those who made them rather than in the persuasive power of the claims themselves, a point we will get back to. Similarly, in the now infamous 1996 speech in support of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (aka. the 1994 Crime Bill), Hilary Clinton had this to say, to justify harsher sentencing for crimes: "They're not just gangs of kids anymore, they are often the kinds of kids that are called superpredators. No conscience, no empathy" (qtd. in Machery 153).

Hilary Clinton did not invent the term "superpredator," however, that was political scientist John DiLulio, who in 1995 wrote that the new generation of criminals "kill or maim on impulse, without any intelligible motive," and while "the trouble will be greatest in black inner-city neighborhoods," due to children there "growing up in moral poverty," superpredators will appear even in rural areas. This new type of criminal, he claims, is "radically present-oriented," being incapable of even conceptualising the idea

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[6]Hence the Nazi association between Jewish people and so-called "degenerate art."

of cause and effect, "as several researchers have found, ask a group of today's young big-city murderers for their thoughts about 'the future,' and many of them will ask you for an explanation of the question." They are also "radically self-regarding," "not even moms or grandmoms are sacred to them," and "they place zero value on the lives of their victims." These superpredators not only already existed, he claimed, but the number of them would continue to grow, causing juvenile crime to triple by 2010. In other words, a new breed of criminal that, due to "moral poverty," has lost so many essential human qualities that, despite being children, they deserve no empathy, that "in deference to public safety, we will have little choice but to pursue genuine get-tough law-enforcement strategies against the super-predators" (DiLulio 3). As we now know, juvenile crime was already on the way down when DiLulio wrote "The Coming of the Super-Predators," and has now been dropping steadily for the past thirty years (Puzzanchera 1–2). Yet the harsher sentencing remains.

The strategy of dehumanisation as a way to decrease empathy for a group is well-documented throughout history. In 1680, the Anglican missionary Morgan Godwyn, arguing against the widespread opinion that "Negro's and Indians" should not be permitted to enter the church, wrote the following:

> Now to represent this more plausible to the World, another no less disingenuous and unmanly *Position* hath been formed; and privately (*and as it were in the dark*) handed to and again, which is this, That the *Negro's*, though in their Figure they carry some resemblances of Manhood, yet are indeed *no Men*. A Conceit like

unto which I have read, was some time since invented by the *Spaniards*, to *justifie their murthering the Americans*. (Godwyn 3, emphasis in original)

Godwyn is exaggerating somewhat by claiming that "the Spaniards" invented dehumanisation, but he is correct in describing the effect of dehumanisation, namely that it becomes easier to kill someone if they aren't human. Interestingly though, in arguing against the idea that "Negro's and Indians" are "indeed *no Men*," Godwyn claims that people who make that argument don't even believe it themselves.

2.1 The problem of humanity

Godwyn's argument goes as follows: If slave-owners *literally* don't view their slaves as human, "why should they be tormented and whipt almost (and sometimes quite) to death [...] were they (like Brutes) naturally destitute of *Capacities* equal to such undertakings?" (Godwyn 13). If slaves are not human, excessively punishing them makes little sense; only humans have moral agency.[7] Furthermore, slaves were obviously given jobs that no animal would be given. It would be a "pretty kind of *Comical* Frenzie, to imploy Cattel about Business, and to constitute them *Lieutenants*, *Overseers*, and *Governours*" (Godwyn 14). His point is clear: Slave-owners must actually think of their slaves as human, and their claim that slaves are *not* really human is a convenient lie they tell others to justify their actions. What he describes is an early version of *the problem of humanity*.

The problem of humanity, if left unsolved, would topple the entire idea of dehumanisation. Intuitively, Godwyn's argument seems very reasonable. Generally, animals aren't blamed for their actions. If they do something wrong "we may try to correct, manage, deter or restrain their behavior. But, ordinarily and ideally, we do not resent it. They are not moral agents" (Kate Manne, qtd. in Smith 356). Even if an animal does something particularly harmful, we would not ("ordinarily and ideally") refer to it as *evil*. And further, if an animal is harmful, the reasonable thing to do would be to simply kill it, rather than mistreat it. If a wolf attacks your family, you shoot the wolf.

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[7]A point we will get back to.

What you don't do is cage and abuse the wolf. It's a wolf, after all, punishing it for its moral failings would be nonsensical. A human who did the same, however, could be imprisoned, with all the petty cruelties that entails, and a good few people would say that was at least an understandable reaction. It's a human, after all, humans are supposed to know better. So how does this add up? When someone refers to their enemy as "vermin," are they simply demeaning them rather than dehumanising them?

There are many examples of people saying something to demean someone else, while seemingly not literally meaning the thing they're saying. Consider, for instance, a situation where person A says that person B is "not a real man." What does that mean? Typically, it would mean that A is some variety of gender essentialist who believes that B is failing to live up to the demands of his gender in some way or other (Butler 141). Perhaps B is a vegetarian, or a pacifist, or perhaps he paints his nails. But if you asked A to define what "a man" means, lets say they reach for a simplistic definition like "an adult human with XY chromosomes." If informed that B is, in fact, an adult human with XY chromosomes, A would not be surprised, and would not change their opinion that B is not a real man. B has lost his status as a man, in the eyes of A, and yet falls under the category of "man." Similarly, during the Rwandan genocide, if you asked the Hutu-led government to define "a human," they would almost certainly give an answer that would include the Tutsi, and yet deny that the Tutsi are really human if asked. This seems to be a contradiction. It is not possible to be human and non-human at the same time. So where does that leave us?

David Livingstone Smith solves this problem thus: Yes, it is a contradiction, but it is only a contradiction in the realm of logic (Smith 357). Consider the following simple syllogism:

Premise 1: Humans are defined by their DNA.[8]

Premise 2: Group X has human DNA.

Conclusion: Group X is human.

That is the inescapable conclusion; it would be extremely difficult to come up with a definition of "human" that excluded, for instance, Romani people and *only* Romani people. And yet dehumanising language concerning Romani people is still sadly common, in Europe especially (Nariman et al. 8). How can these contradicting ideas peacefully co-exist in someone's head? As Smith points out, people are perfectly capable of holding contradictory views (Smith 358). Much like someone might not believe in an afterlife, and yet visit a grandparent's grave to talk to them. If asked, the person would reply that they do not believe in an afterlife, and yet it is clear that *some* part of them does. Similarly, "group C is human" and "group C is sub-human" can exist simultaneously, one or the other taking precedence depending on the context. Consider this snippet from an interview of a woman who participated in an anti-Roma attack:

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[8]A simplification for the sake of the argument, practically any definition could have been used here.

The interviewee told a journalist, shortly after the pogrom, "On reflection … it would have been better if we had burnt more of *the people*, not just the houses. We did not commit murder—how could you call killing Gypsies murder? Gypsies are *not really people,* you see. They are always killing each other. They are *criminals, sub-human, vermin*. (Bridge 14, emphasis added)

The contradiction is clear. First the Roma are "people" who should be burnt, then it is not murder because "they are not really people," then they are "criminals"—a label only applicable to people—and then they are "sub-human, vermin." The reason given for the Roma's loss of humanity is that "they are always killing each other," i.e. a lack of regard for life that is extreme enough for them not to be a part of the human race, in the view of this woman. If asked, she presumably could have come up with several more reasons that Romani people do not count as being human, and no doubt she would have been sincere, and yet she cannot help but to refer to them as one would refer to any other humans. The woman was clearly confident enough in her views to share them with a journalist, because the fact that the views don't line up with each other logically doesn't matter as long as it works well enough psychologically.

2.2 The use of dehumanisation

Being able to recognise human faces is, for most people, an innate trait. It's such a sensitive ability that we see faces even in wood grain, in clouds, and in coffee grounds; two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth is all we need, and sometimes even less will suffice. And this is not an ability we can decide to disable, "[w]hen we look into the eyes of another, we cannot help but see another human being," and this fact "triggers inhibitions against doing violence to them" (Smith 235). Throughout the years, it being difficult to hurt other people has proven to be advantageous to the species, so most people will only do so in an extreme situation, when they are defending themselves or their loved ones. Or, more precisely, when they *believe* they are defending themselves or their loved ones. If someone points a gun at you, the fact that it later turns out to be a toy gun does not matter there and then, you will feel just as threatened as if it were real. In other words, the *existence* of a threat is irrelevant, what is relevant is the *perception* of a threat.

Post-9/11 thrillers are an especially clear example of this. Suddenly, after the terrorist attacks, the otherwise good protagonists in fiction started using torture as a means of extracting information from the bad antagonists (Holloway 20). Representations of torture rose on American TV dramatically, from 102 between 1996 and 2001, to 642 between 2002 and 2005. Another big shift was that, while the torturers used to be "Nazis and drug dealers," suddenly the torturer "was most likely the hero of the program" (The Parents Television Council, qtd. in DiPaolo 198).

Often the protagonist would feel conflicted about doing engaging in torture, but it would turn out to be the right decision in the end, as the antagonist's evil plot is foiled. As with Jewish people in the time of Shakespeare, most people who read or watch post-9/11 thrillers have not seen torture being done in real life, and thus the fictional representation becomes their only "experience" with it. Thus, repeated exposure to torture being used "for good" in fiction makes it "banal or unsurprising, part of the routine run of things in everyday life," and turns it into "a legitimate tactic in the war on terror" (Holloway 22), a form of necessary violence like any other. And the reason torture is seen as acceptable in those contexts is that the protagonist has no other choice, because the antagonist does not give him any other choice. The antagonist is so bent on, generally, killing civilians that nothing the protagonist says or does can change their mind, except for torture. Torture thus becomes acceptable because the enemy has no regard for life, a basic human quality they are both inhumane and inhuman. And in post-9/11 thrillers, the enemy is generally a group of Muslims.

We need not go to deeply into the United States' de facto legalisation of torture, largely of people suspected of being Muslim terrorists, except to note the explicit inspiration taken from the TV series *24*. In *24*, counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer routinely finds himself in scenarios where torture seems a moral obligation. On average 12 times per season (Celermajer 90), he ends up in a "ticking bomb scenario": He has person X in his custody, X has information that could save many lives, and the only way to get that information is to torture X. The standard framing of the scenario, as the name implies, is

that X has planted a time bomb somewhere, that will go off in a relatively short amount of time unless Jack Bauer can disarm it first, and many innocent people will die if it does.

The moral dilemma then becomes: Is it permissible to torture X in order to save the lives of many innocent people? Here we have another logical contradiction, namely that a 2016 survey found that 66% of people agreed with the blanket statement that the use of torture is wrong—however, when asked if torture can be used in interrogations, only 48% said no (Red Cross 10). In other words, people both believe that torture is wrong, and that torture can be used in order to gain "important military information." The implication being that it is wrong, but sometimes necessary in order to avoid something worse, a utilitarian view of ethics that is, on its face, reasonable.

However, this hypothetical scenario does not neatly map onto reality. In fiction, we can know for sure that X has the necessary information to stop the bomb from going off, while in reality it is possible that our Jack Bauer has the wrong person, rendering the torture pointless. The other assumption of the scenario is that the information can be gotten through torture, and through torture alone, that no other means would work, which carries within it yet another assumption, namely that the information revealed during torture will be truthful. In Slahi's memoir, we see a clear example of this not being the case as he splits his time in indefinite detention into two parts: Pre-torture and post-torture. In the "pre-torture era," he denies the accusations against him and tries to prove his innocence, while in the "post-torture era" he writes: "my brake broke

loose. I yessed every accusation my interrogators made" (Slahi 14). Then there is the fact that a state engaging in torture will be seen as untrustworthy, the practice of torture no longer being taboo will lead to it spreading as the state will have to either recruit or train torturers, "thus inevitably infecting the organizations within which torture occurs" (Darius Rejali, qtd. in Celermajer 92).

Coming back to *24*, then, there is evidence that it directly contributed to increased use of torture. Not only conjecture based on the fact that it routinely portrayed torture as justified, but episodes of the series were "cited in lieu of legal precedent when White House advocates strove to justify the effectiveness of torture as a means of extracting information" (DiPaolo 196). To further illustrate the point, during a 2007 law conference in Ottawa a Canadian judge said he was glad that not all international security agencies subscribe to the mantra "What would Jack Bauer do?" To which Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia replied:

> Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles. [...] He saved hundreds of thousands of lives. [...] Are you going to convict Jack Bauer? Say that criminal law is against him? 'You have the right to a jury trial?' Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don't think so. (DiPaolo 198)

In a 2014 study, Piazza et al. asked participants to rate 17 animals on 20 traits, whether the animal was intelligent, clever, powerful sensitive, aggressive, and so on. They were

then asked to assess whether the animals had moral standing or not. As expected, the more agency an animal was perceived as having the more likely it was to be ascribed moral standing, but what the study also showed was that the more harmful an animal was, the less moral standing it would be seen as having (qtd. in Machery 151). In other words, dangerous animals are more acceptable to hurt. An *other* being perceived as dangerous is not an essential part of dehumanisation; a group can, for example, be subtly dehumanised by being portrayed as child-like and ignorant, but the worst consequences tend to follow when the *other* is seen as a threat.

Slahi was aware of this this, so in the "pre-torture era" he did his best to be friendly and courteous to his captors whenever possible, comparing himself to a slave and noting that "slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master's house" (Slahi 247), which is to say he hoped that they would eventually recognise his humanity. But instead, the guards "came to see [him] as nameless, sometimes even faceless. […] They were so busy hiding themselves they couldn't see the most basic things about the men they were questioning" (Slahi 527). Putting bags over the heads of prisoners, then, served both a punitive function and an aesthetic function: The guards did not have to see the faces of the people they were keeping detained. In the words of Daniel Roux: "When the mask of cultural hegemony slips, we encounter the walls of the penal institution, its barbed wire, and its blankly functional architecture, mute and unseeing" (Roux 430).

2.3 How to dehumanise

As has been mentioned, it is very difficult to look at a human face and not see it as such, triggering our inhibitions against hurting other people, and people get around this "limitation" by, at least in that moment, not considering the *other* to have the moral standing generally ascribed to humans. Most of the time we trust what our senses tell us: If something looks like an apple we assume it is an apple, if something looks like a book we assume it is a book, if someone looks like a person we assume they are a person, unless we have reason to believe otherwise. If someone we trust tells us that it is in fact not an apple but a wax representation of an apple, we adjust our thoughts accordingly, ignoring that our senses tell us it *is* an apple: We have seen through the ruse. If someone we trust tells us that what we see is not a book but a storage box camouflaged as a book, we will do similarly. It certainly looks like a book, but we "know" now that it is hollow, because we have been told it is.

Arguments from authorities are generally what convinces people that a group of people are not, in fact, fully or properly human. "Authorities," in this context, can mean anything from politicians to talk show hosts, religious leaders, actors, or anyone who, for whatever reason, are granted more respect than others. If a famous person says something, it is more likely to gain traction than if they weren't famous. People are especially likely to trust these authorities if they "are led to believe that relying on [their] own untutored perceptions might be dangerous or even catastrophic," hence a common start to a tactic of dehumanisation being to

produce propaganda to frighten us into believing that these people present a serious physical threat to ourselves and all that we hold dear—that they are diseased, violent, destructive, or depraved. Once we have come to fear the marginalized group, we are likely to be more receptive to the seemingly authoritative claim that these people are not really people at all. Under such circumstances, it is tempting to reject what our senses tell us and to trust the experts' claim that these others are dangerous, subhuman beings that need to be repelled, incarcerated, or exterminated. (Smith 358)

Despite believing what these authorities say, namely that the group is not properly human, our senses still tell us that they are, leading to internal conflict which, in Smith's view, increases the ill will towards the group even further (Smith 360). Whether or not this analysis is correct, dehumanisation does lead to a group of people being discriminated against, to either a small or large degree, as their moral standing is removed, leading to what Wulf D. Hund refers to as *social death*: "This term describes a power relation in which the members of racist societies consider themselves entitled to ignore the sociability of their victims." In the context of American slavery, this was realised by imagining Black people to be "barbarous, heathenish, impure, or inferior, lack[ing] substantial elements of humanity" (Hund 231). This had the double effect of not only justifying slavery, but also giving White people of lower social standing a reason to feel that they are part of the same "community" as the White ruling class, despite having very little in common with them other than skin colour (Hund 239).

This strategy of dehumanisation is not isolated in the United States, of course. Colonial racism was eventually turned inward, back towards Europe, in a process sometimes referred to as European internal colonisation (Baranowski 24), eventually culminating in the Holocaust. Jewish people were declared to be subhuman, evil, vermin, and so were a host of other groups, often conflated with Jewish people: Communists, Romani people, LGBTQ people, and the catch-all "anti-social elements." Thus the imagined community of "Whites" crumbled, as nobody was safe from what ended up being a "complex ideology of social marginalization and exclusion" (Hund 241). The propaganda was strong enough that even "ordinary Germans" (Goldhagen 401), people who were otherwise reasonable, fell for the propaganda and in the end considered anyone outside the *Volksgemeinschaft*, non-Aryans, to be less than human. In the words of Timár, "what makes it possible for ordinary perpetrators of dehumanization […] to become what they are is the political and social system (the machine) that renders what is ethically unjust (the everyday perpetration of dehumanization) "normal" and legal" (Timár 14.3.2).

Since the beginning of the so-called war on terror, dissident voices have noted the rise of islamophobia and the decrease of civil liberties, especially for Muslims targeted by the US but also for US citizens in general, as the use of various government practices that were previously illegal or unaccepted rose, such as what "the Bush administration dubbed enhanced interrogation […] Along with a curtailing of civil liberties at home, there ensued Guantanamo, as well as the infamous black sites where various regimes,

under the auspices of the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), carried out illegal programs and, after the U.S.'s invasion of Iraq, Abu Ghraib. There was increased domestic surveillance, as the government stirred the public to a heightened state of alarm. The Patriot Act enabled eavesdropping on US citizens, military tribunals in lieu of client-attorney meetings for some foreign nationals, tattletale visas and other previously unacceptable or illegal government activities" (Cantoral 693).

But, as illustrated with *24*, propaganda is not only spread through official government channels. In a particularly brazen example from an episode of the conservative family drama *7th Heaven*, love blooms between the characters Roxanne and Bill, and after sharing their first kiss they somehow end up talking about the invasion of Iraq:

> Roxanne: It's not our war. What, we can develop chemical weapons but no one else can? [George W. Bush] shouldn't even be president and he wouldn't be the president if his brother weren't governor.
>
> Bill: I couldn't agree less, love. (Kisses her.) Listen to me: I have almost twenty years of experience in an area you know nothing about. You think Saddam Hussein didn't have anything to do with September 11? You're naive, very naive. And you can drop that stuff about how he got elected. At this point, who cares? He's the president and a good president. A decent man, a real leader. It takes a leader to make a decision. And Thank God he decided enough of Saddam Hussein. So, we really rock. And you know what: most of the people of Iraq are very glad we're there. (Kisses her.) Am I boring you?

Roxanne (shakes her head): Nuh-uh.

(*7^(th) Heaven*. Season 8, episode 14, 26.1.2004, qtd. in Cantoral 696)

The uncritical repetition of pro-war talking points and the baffling admission that it doesn't matter to him whether or not George W. Bush was elected legitimately or not, while "wooing the audience by way of erotic narrative" (Cantoral 696) is noteworthy in its shamelessness.

Sometimes propagandists are completely open about what they are doing, such as executive vice president of A+E Studios, Barry Jossen, who talked about their then new fiction series "chronicling the 2004 'Black Sunday' ambush of a U.S. Army platoon in Baghdad [...] through a humanistic viewpoint of those who protect and serve their country" which "traditional documentary series" can not provide. Jossen said that it is "a populist approach to storytelling, and it makes sense to tell stories that celebrate the American military [...] [to] provide audiences with clear-cut heroes in a TV environment where characters often blur the lines between good and bad [...] reflecting the very real military conflicts covered in the news" (Umstead 12). In other words, the US military are "clear-cut heroes." However, the executive vice president of Nat Geo assures readers that "the support for the military in these shows is really apolitical. [...] when you look at the military and celebrate the sacrifices and the challenges that the people who serve go through, it really is bipartisan" (Umstead 13).

The novel *Overkill* is similar in its worldview, namely that Muslims—and, in *Overkill*'s case, Russians as well—are unambiguously evil. Rashid the torturer learned "his trade in the back streets of Baghdad," and his "speciality [is] 'shwai shwai noum' or 'sleep slowly', slicing through the victim's spinal cord with a thin and extremely sharp knife. [...] Then they would prop the limp body against a wall or tree and leave it. The man could take days to die" (Barrington 5). We also learn that the keffiyeh is "a potent and visible symbol [of] unswerving allegiance to Osama bin Laden," and that although a Muslim may have a "Western appearance," they are "still at heart a sand Arab" (Barrington 7). Not a novel for enjoyers of subtlety, our introduction to the Russian villains is also a scene wherein they torture an innocent man to death, as he laments that he will never again see "the rocky shores of his native Northumberland" (Barrington 11).

Dehumanisation is a gradual process of eroding a group's moral standing until someone can declare, like the head of the Nazi party's court: "The Jew is not a human" (Buch 15). In Nazi Germany, it started with excluding Jewish people from public welfare, then banning them from educational institutions, banning art made by people even suspected of being of Jewish descent, removing their legal protections, and isolating them from any social life until the Nazi part could, during the pogroms of 1938, "treat Jews publicly as non-persons who could be robbed, mistreated or killed" without fear of major opposition; they had been "condemned to a shadow existence" as people who do

not count as people (Longerich 46). However, it seems that due to the impossibility of fully suppressing the fact that humans look like humans, dehumanisation can never be complete.

3 Rehumanisation

A German soldier who took part in the mass execution of Jews in Poland, writing under the pseudonym Franz Kastenbaum, recalled the following episode:

> The shooting of the men was so repugnant to me that I missed the fourth man. It was simply no longer possible for me to aim accurately. I suddenly felt nauseous and ran away from the shooting site. I have expressed myself incorrectly just now. It was not that I could no longer aim accurately, rather the fourth time I intentionally missed. I then ran into the woods, vomited, and sat down against a tree. To make sure that no one was nearby, I called loudly into the woods, because I wanted to be alone. Today I can say that my nerves were totally finished. I think that I remained alone in the woods for some two to three hours. (Qtd. in Browning 67–68)

In other words, despite having been so thoroughly propagandised to, so buying into the narrative of Jewish people not being people, something in him rebelled. After killing three people in quick succession, he simply had to stop, to get away, to be alone. He seemingly does not understand exactly what happened, except that his "nerves were totally finished," but in later years people have tried to figure that out.

Goldhagen believes that Kastenbaum's reaction is simply "aesthetic revulsion at the ghastliness of the scene" rather than Kastenbaum realising that he is murdering human beings. That Kastenbaum sees "the exploded skulls, the flying blood and bone, the sight

of so many freshly killed corpses of [his] own making" and finds the violence in and of itself horrifying (Goldhagen 201). That is presumably part of it, but it cannot be the entire explanation. Studies have time and again shown that butchers working in slaughterhouses tend to have higher levels of psychological disorders than most other occupations (Yildis et al. 319), yet it pales in comparison to executioners, even those who use bloodless means of execution (MacNair 48). The fact that it was a grotesque scene presumably didn't make things easier for Kastenbaum, but there seems to be something more.

Browning attributes Kastenbaum's "nerves [being] totally finished" to part of his "struggles with his moral sensibilities,"(Browning 68). Indeed, Goldhagen implicitly includes this possibility in his analysis, by mentioning that the "freshly killed corpses" were "of [Kastenbaum's] own making," and thus somehow worse. If it were a purely aesthetic revulsion, the identity of the killer would be irrelevant, simply witnessing the murder would be equally bad. In the view of Hannah Arendt, what mass executioners like Kastenbaum had to overcome was no so much their *conscience* as the basic "animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering," a pre-moral, uncontrollable reaction, and if possible to direct that animal pity away from their victims and towards themselves instead, for the "horrible things [they] had to watch in the pursuance of [their] duties" (Arendt 106).

Retired US colonel Dave Grossman, founder of the Killology Research Group, does not offer an explanation for exactly why Kastenbaum felt he had to flee the execution, but notes that "[t]he eyes are the window of the soul, and if one does not have to look into the eyes when killing, it is much easier to deny the humanity of the victim. The eyes bulging out 'like prawns' and blood shooting out of the mouth are not seen. The victim remains faceless, and one never needs to know one's victim as a person" (Grossman 128). In other words, both the aesthetic revulsion and the feeling that one is killing another human being is lessened by not seeing the victim's face at the time of death, putting some distance between oneself and the fact that a murder is being committed.

Psychological distance can also "help" in that regard, such as Heinrich Himmler's *Sprachregelung*, or "language rules." Not unlike today's "enhanced interrogation" and "extraordinary rendition," Nazi Germany had its own vocabulary of euphemisms, eschewing "killing" for "evacuation" or "special treatment," while Jews sent to the forced labour camp Theresienstadt, for later transport to concentration camps, were described as being "resettled" or "working in the East." These language rules "proved of enormous help in the maintenance of order and sanity in the various widely diversified services whose cooperation was essential in this matter."(Arendt 84–85). The gas chambers too, Arendt surmises, were a way to put physical and psychological distance between the killers and the killed.

One might ask, why was all that necessary? The constant propaganda, the euphemisms, hiding away the murders so nobody has to see them. The answer seems to be that, thankfully, completely dehumanising a group of people is nearly impossible. Without sufficient distancing, we simply "cannot help but see another human being" when we look at one, which triggers inhibitions against doing violence to them. It is simply very difficult to harm another human being (Collins 79). As noted, this inhibition can certainly be overridden, for example in self-defence, or if we are convinced enough that, despite seeming human in all ways, the victim is in fact *not* human, but a form of "animal pity" nonetheless seems to remain.

During his trial, Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organisers of the Holocaust, freely admitted that he had sent millions of people to their deaths, but at the accusation that he had personally beaten a Jewish boy to death "he showed unmistakable signs of sincere outrage." The impersonal, remote, indirect killings were one thing, but the claim that he had personally killed someone with his bare hands was the only thing that caused him "real agitation" (Arendt 108), as if the lack of distance somehow would have made *that* murder a much greater sin, perhaps because Eichmann would then have to kill someone while seeing and feeling their humanity.

Dehumanisation, as mentioned, appears to be a process that can never be completed, not fully, but even in its incomplete form it can cause great harm, meaning that strategies have to be developed in order to counteract it, in order to *rehumanise*.

German Jews fleeing Nazi Germany in 1939 were largely not granted asylum in Canada, the Immigration Director at the time saying that the attempt of Jewish people to get into the country reminded him of what he "ha[d] seen on a farm at hog feeding time when they are all trying to get their feet into the trough" (qtd. in Abella & Troper 88), and further noted that, when it came to the amount of Jewish refugees Canada should accept, "none is too many," in part because he believed it was a plot by US Jewish people to get their families onto the continent.

Esses et al. saw that similar rhetoric was being spread about refugees in modern times. The specifically noted the "children overboard" incident in Australia, where it was claimed that Iraqi asylum seekers had deliberately thrown their children off their boats in order for someone to come and rescue them, at which point the asylum seekers would supposedly latch on to the rescuers and get their help to secure safe passage to Australia. This became a focus during the 2001 federal election, and many people at the time noted that this did nothing but exploit, and increase, the public's fear of immigrants. Painting asylum seekers as a group willing to sacrifice their children to gain advantage implies such a radically different value system from the rest of humanity that they could not be trusted, the implicit reasoning went (Michael Leach, qtd. in Esses 275).

It is hardly surprising that negative portrayals of asylum seekers in media, news included, negatively influences people's perception of them (Hier 493). Most people in

Shakespeare's England did not know any Jewish people, so they assumed the stereotypes they saw were accurate enough. In the words of Shaheen:

> When it comes to the Middle East, many Americans are ignorant about the history and plight of the Palestinian people. One reason is that moviegoers may mistakenly believe reel Palestinians, those ugly make-believe film "terrorists," are real Palestinians. Should this be true, then what must viewers think of Palestinians after exiting movie theaters? (Shaheen 186)

Similarly, most people today do not know any asylum seekers. Thus they can be portrayed as enemies at the gate, as an invading "them" who are at war with "us." Such a straightforward narrative in news also serves to shock consumers, and every single negative act done by an asylum seeker can then be blown into front page news. The common use of war metaphors "makes it conceivable to treat defenceless human beings as dangerous enemies and seems to justify a war-like reaction to them" (El Refaie 368). Again we have the theme of repetition: Hearing something over and over again makes people get used to the idea, and slowly but surely increases the chances of them believing it (Fazio & Sherry 1151).

And consumers can forget, when news reports are all the input about asylum seekers that they have, that news reports by necessity cover events that people are interested in reading about, generally extraordinary ones. "We should not expect reporters to

inundate the airwaves with the lives of ordinary Arabs," says Jack Shaheen, lecturer and film scholar, but adds that "filmmakers have a moral obligation not to advance the news media's sins of omission and commission," and make up for the almost universally bad press given to Arabs. (Shaheen 189). If we generalise "filmmakers" to "media creators" and "Arabs" to "*others,*" we start to approach an ethics of rehumanisation.

Part of the explanation for how media influences people can be found in the implicit social cognition model of media priming (Esses 281). The model supposes that media acts as a way to make associations between two concepts in memory; e.g. constantly seeing the words "refugee" and "terrorist" next to each other, or "Jewish" and "greedy," or "gay" and "groomer," or any number of other unsavoury associations. The way the model works more specifically is that the two concepts are brought to the mental foreground at the same time, and eventually, with enough repetition, the association will become automatic.

It will come as no shock that thinking of people as not fully human reduces our tendency to treat them well, and dehumanising refugees in specific has been linked with support for anti-refugee policies, resistance to centres for asylum seekers, and increased anti-social behaviour against refugees (Costello et al. 223). If only humans have social standing, and refugees aren't fully human, "people may feel justified in not applying to refugees the moral rules, values, and concerns about fairness that apply to humans" (Esses 283). Even if person A, a non-refugee, talks to person B, a refugee, and A is

unfailingly polite, if A has a mental association between refugees and animals it will statistically be apparent in a video recording (Strack & Deutsch 244). Strack and Deutsch hypothesise that, out of a desire to appear non-prejudiced, some people (especially in a research environment) will attempt to disguise their prejudices, but body language is more difficult to control (Strack & Deutsch 226).

3.1 How to rehumanise

We have now established two particularly important points: It is difficult, if not impossible, to fully dehumanise someone if you can see them, and media portrayals of groups of people influence how the readers/viewers/listeners think of that group. The obvious solution, then, would be to include rehumanising portrayals of that group in media, but does that work? Somewhat surprisingly, it seems like the answer is a qualified "yes." As already mentioned, a study commissioned by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation found that "exposure to LGBTQ people in the media is related to greater acceptance of LGBTQ people and support of LGBTQ issues," as well as more knowledge about LGBTQ identities (GLAAD 2).

Another example came with the election of a Liberal government in Canada in 2015, which radically changed official communication about refugees. Indeed, part of Trudeau's election campaign was a promise to accept 25 000 Syrian refugees, a goal that was met, despite some delay (Esses 285). Government channels started showing pictures of refugees in ordinary, day-to-day situations, a website was made where citizens could learn how to help the refugees and read some of their life stories. There turned out to be a direct correlation between the more positive messaging and the average person's opinion towards refugees (Gaucher 229). Of course not everyone were influenced, in particular not those who distrusted the government, but on average it was a success.

And it is not only news reports or government-funded websites that can help humanise groups, but fiction too, much like it can dehumanise. Lynn Hunt even argues that the birth of epistolary novels where the characters were "regular people" helped readers realise

> that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings, and many novels showcased in particular the desire for autonomy. In this way, reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through passionate involvement in the narrative. Can it be coincidental that the three greatest novels of psychological identification of the eighteenth century—Richardson's Pamela (1740) and Clarissa (1747-48) and Rousseau's Julie (1761)—were all published in the period that immediately preceded the appearance of the concept of "the rights of man"? (Hunt 39)

Readers learned to empathise across social boundaries, and in the mid-1700s, when generally speaking only the most privileged 40% of the population was literate, this meant increased empathy for the middle and working class. Peculiar to the epistolary novel specifically is that there is no narrator who speaks, as it were, "from outside" the story; generally speaking the novel is entirely composed of letters sent to and from characters, possibly with a few pages from a diary or journal included, but the entire text is as if we are reading someone else's private correspondence—a fact which some

readers viewed with "joy and amazement," and others with "concern [and] disgust" (Hunt 42).

Regardless of the potentially voyeuristic nature of the genre, the fact that we as readers appear to have access to someone else's private thoughts radically humanises them, "[t]he reader simultaneously becomes [the main character] even while imagining him-/herself as a friend of her and as an outside observer" (Hunt 44). Male readers too empathised with female main characters; regarding *Julie; or the New Heloise* (1761) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, they "identified with Julie herself" rather than any of the male characters: "Her struggle to overcome her passions and live a virtuous life became their struggle" (Schneewind 4). Sarah Fielding, a contemporary author, had the following to say about Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa* (1748):

> Most truly, Sir, do you remark, that a Story told in this Manner can move but slowly, that the Characters can be seen only by such as attend strictly to the Whole; yet this Advantage the Author gains by writing in the present Tense, as he himself calls it, and in the first Person, that his Strokes penetrate immediately to the Heart, and we feel all the Distresses he paints; we not only weep for, but with Clarissa, and accompany her, step by step, through all her Distresses. (Qtd. in Hunt 49)

Being able to identify with someone different from oneself goes a long way towards keeping dehumanisation at bay, and French philosopher and author Denis Diderot said, of reading *Clarissa*, that "[i]n the space of a few hours I went through a great number of situations which the longest life can hardly offer across its entire duration [...] I felt that I had acquired experience" (qtd. in Slegel 164).

American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, too, thinks highly of the empathy-creating powers of literature, which she refers to as developing a narrative imagination. In her somewhat ominously titled 1997 book *Cultivating Humanity*, she argues for a world in which everyone recognises the worth of human life and recognises the common human traits even of "people who lie a great distance from us" (Nussbaum 9). For this ideal to come about, there are three capacities people must develop: First, capacity to critically examine oneself and one's culture, to not accept things simply because they are tradition, to live the Socratic "examined life;" secondly, the capacity to see oneself as not just a member of a local community, but a member of the human race, and not assume things about people who are different from oneself; and finally this capacity for narrative imagination.

The idea of the narrative imagination includes the ability to imagine oneself in the shoes of someone different from oneself, to be "an intelligent reader" of other people's stories, and being able to understand that they might have different emotions and desires due than oneself (Nussbaum 10–11). And, because it is difficult to be able to see things from

someone else's perspective in a literal sense, Nussbaum argues that reading fiction is excellent training for recognising other people's interiority. Being a classicist, Nussbaum often draws on the ancient Greeks, and notes that Herodotus in particular viewed other cultures with interest, taking seriously the possibility that they might have something to teach Athens about social values (Nussbaum 86), and Nussbaum connects this too with the narrative imagination: Learning about others increases our ability to identify with them.

Narrative imagination, then, is for all intents and purposes the same as rehumanisation: The ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes, to "see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding" (Nussbaum 88). She in fact makes several of the same points as were made in the 1700s regarding epistolary novels, namely that fiction can show characters with a rich inner life, which "teaches" the reader that other people in the real world have that too; a sort of cure for solipsism. One might, for instance, have very little sympathy for homeless people, but by reading a story—real or fictional—about how someone became homeless, one can hopefully come to the realisation "if I were unlucky, that could have been me," and then come to "how would I wish to be treated in such a situation?"

Author Ralph Ellison believed, similarly to Nussbaum, in the empathy-improving power of fiction, arguing in the introduction to *Invisible Man* (1952) that by portraying

inequality, a novel "could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us afloat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic idea" (Ellison XXIV), and fight against what he saw as a tendency to deny the common humanity of all people.

This too has to be done carefully, however. Blindly advocating for the fundamental similarity of all people could lead to a form of appropriation of the voice of an other group, so the readers feel like they always "[know] what they mean and how they feel," without considering the fact that intercultural differences do exist (Spivak, qtd in Timár 14.2.2). Or, in other words, "[i]magining what it means to be someone other than ourselves might (just) still be the 'core of our humanity,' but unless we reckon with the chequered history of that 'humanity,' generous imagining will remain just that: imagining" (Stonebridge 8). The potential problem, then, is to "wrongly" empathise with someone, imagining that they share your beliefs, values, and so on, but that is not the only pitfall.

3.2 Pitfalls of rehumanisation

As it is with all things, attempts at rehumanisation do not always succeed. Attempts at producing empathy can, if handled poorly, lead to simply producing pity. If all you hear about someone is that they live in poverty that might make you feel bad, but it's very difficult to empathise with such a vague generalisation (Adichie 2:47). Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie noted that if she had grown up in the US, she, like the other Americans, would think that "Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and of incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner" (Adichie 5:44). In other words, a radically different kind of place, where the people, by necessity, could not have had anything in common with her, as a hypothetical American.

One fairly typical pitfall is the following type of narrative: Evil people far away are doing something bad to good people far away. Then a stranger from North America or Europe shows up, bands together with the good people, becomes one of them, and teaches them how to defeat the bad people. One of the good people die, but in the end the good people triumph, and the American/European has learned from his experiences.

That would be a typical *white saviour* narrative, or what Elizabeth Anker calls a "human rights bestseller:" A novel that hearkens back to an imagined past in which the benevolent colonial powers were on a civilising mission (Anker 36), using the codes and

conventions of colonialist rhetoric while doing so. To avoid moral complications, such narratives generally employ a black-and-white "high morality," where who is good and who is bad is entirely unambiguous, reducing people to be either saviours, savages, or victims, with no overlap between the three categories (Anker 38). The obvious problem is that very few people fit neatly into saviour/savage/victim trichotomy, while the second problem is that it gives readers the impression that half the population of the area in question are made up of savages, fully dehumanised people, "ogre[s] bent on the consumption of humans [...] cruel and unimaginable" (Mutua 202). Which leaves the other half of the population to be victims, sympathetically innocent but utterly powerless, "nameless, despairing and dispirited [...] desolate and pitiful" (Mutua 229). And if it is the case that a nation is made up out of the effective but evil and the ineffective but good, a saviour from the outside becomes necessary, to come and make things right. As the late 19th century missionary A.H. Barrow put it, is the saviour's duty to "go forth as pioneers of Christianity and civilization into the cheerless and dark places of the earth" (Barrow, ch. 20).

It's worth taking a detour to an example of such a "human rights bestseller," namely Amitav Ghosh's 2005 novel *The Hungry Tide*, and its character Piyali "Piya" Roy. Piya, an American with Bengali ancestry, travels to the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal to conduct research on dolphins (Ghosh 42). Initially, she is critical of and does not understand the local culture. However, she establishes a connection with the inhabitants through Fokir, a fisherman, despite the two not sharing a language. Fokir ultimately sacrifices himself to save Piya's life, and she uses her connections to establish

a dolphin conservation project in his honor. This initiative utilizes indigenous knowledge to protect humans and employs community members, in contrast with the government-led tiger conservation programme which is shown to ignore the fact that people in the Sundarbans are regularly being killed by the very same tigers the state is helping thrive.

Piya triumphantly accomplishes her task of saving the dolphins, leaving readers with the impression that what the Sundarbans needed was an American-Bengali outsider/insider to come in and mix her Western knowledge with the local one to create a seemingly perfect synthesis. The novel portrays deep sympathy for Piya and Fokir, but the nameless villagers do not enjoy the equivalent treatment, sympathy is cultivated unevenly, "directing our attention to some types of human beings and not to others" (Nussbaum 101) not in an obviously malicious way, the novel just isn't very interested in them. Surprisingly, the issue of the tigers remains unresolved, despite that being a major plot point. Thousands of people live in a tiger reservation, and Piya feels that they do not have the right to kill tigers that invade their villages, because that is a slippery slope to harming "people who're poor and unnoticed" (Ghosh 246). The assertion remains unchallenged in the novel.

In the worst case, "human rights bestsellers" end up justifying a kind of neoimperialism, an updated version of paternal colonialism, such as what happened with NATO in Afghanistan. Initially the goal was to remove the Taliban government, but as time went

on the goals grew to include a wide range of, in theory, positive goals "from nation-building to public health to women's education" (MacMillan 62). These are all good objectives in and of themselves, but it is not clear that military intervention is the best way to go about achieving them, it is not clear that an outside force should dictate them, and it is not clear that "the claim that the wars of the twenty-first century have been fought to expand the global sphere of human right" is correct (Holloway 23).

We also find an example of a form of paternal would-be benevolence in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While she was by all accounts a genuine abolitionist, she still wrote lines like the following about Black people, praising "their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childlike simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness." While this is presumably meant to be a positive description, showing Black people to be "natural Christians," it also deprives them of "the complex form of life that she'd be prone to assign to white Americans" (Machery 153).

Another famous example comes from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*. In it, Crusoe, shipwrecked on an island, benevolently takes a local man he calls Friday to be his slave. Timár notes that it is interesting that what has been called "the first English novel" is "predicated on the dehumanization and concomitant enslavement of the non-European other" (Timár 14.4.1). The novel does not frame the dehumanisation of Friday as problematic, however, and if read uncritically the reader might become complicit in

the dehumanisation, "[in] other words, it is the absence of critical distance between author and narrator and the absence of any moral reflection on the part of the narrator that has the most potential to yield naïve readings sympathetic with the narrator protagonist" (Timár 14.4.2). What is required is being attentive to Defoe's narrative technique, to notice what is happening and recognise it, in order to ward off dehumanisation in the future.

Coming back to *The Hungry Tide*, the main problem is, in my view, the fact that it overly simplifies reality, which can be contrasted with the polar opposite of a "human rights bestseller," namely Chris Abani's 2007 novella *Song for Night*. The novella depicts the journey of My Luck, a child soldier, as he attempts to reunite with his squad after a mine explosion separates them. However, it is subsequently uncovered that My Luck died in the explosion, the narrative we have been following has been his ghost wandering around while recounting his memories. My Luck, during the narrative's progression, has sexually assaulted a civilian, although he was coerced into doing so at gunpoint, and later comforts himself with a romantic interest:

> "I will save you," she said.
>
> And she did. She became my girlfriend and that night and every night after that, whenever we raided a town or a village, while the others were raping the women and sometimes the men, Ijeoma and I made desperate love, crying as we came, but we did it to make sure that amongst all that horror, there was still love. That it wouldn't die here, in this place. (Abani 58)

Rather than simply being redeemed by love, however, My Luck instead wonders if what he has heard about child soldiers really can be true: "If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice? [...] Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivaled only by an orgasm?" (Abani 93) As Nussbaum points out, "If we can easily sympathize with a character, the invitation to do so has relatively little moral value; the experience can too easily deteriorate into a self-congratulatory wallowing in our own compassionate tendencies" (Nussbaum 98).

The novella, then, becomes a reverse bildungsroman: the story of a child who is dead before the narrative even begins, who neither learns nor grows but simply wanders until he can wander no more. His crimes are not excused, but they are explained, and he never at any point fits into the saviour/savage/victim trichotomy: He is all three, as most people are, and the novella manages to convey the complexities inherent in the life of a child soldier.

4 *The Plot Against America*

> [T]he function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that would happen, i.e., what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. [...] For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars. (Aristotle 12)

With all that established, we can move on to Philip Roth and his 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*. Philip Roth was born into into a second-generation immigrant family, and rose to become one of America's foremost authors. After completing an MA in English Literature, he enlisted in the army but was almost immediately given a medical discharge due to a back injury he received during basic training. He then returned to academia, where he taught creative writing at several universities, before being employed by the University of Pennsylvania where he taught comparative literature until his retirement (McGrath 11).

The publication of his 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint* propelled him to fame, dealing as it did with explicit sexual themes and "coarse language," with Australia going so far as prohibiting import of the book (Brauner 47). In more recent times the quality of the novel has gotten less controversial, however, with it even ending up on Time magazine's list of the 100 best books of the 20th century (*Time* 42).

Roth often set his novels in the past, though rarely going further afield than the early 20th century US. In fact, he was extremely interested in his home country, stating that he was "an American writer in ways that a plumber isn't an American plumber or a miner an American miner or a cardiologist an American cardiologist. Rather, what the heart is to the cardiologist, the coal to the miner, the kitchen sink to the plumber, America is to me" (Reading Myself 110). While he often played with history in his novels—his first novel narrated by the recurring character Zuckerman featured a woman who is suspected of being Anne Frank in hiding in the US—in *The Plot Against America* he fully enters the mode of alternate history fiction, or *allohistory*.

In the novel, Roth questions the idea that history is set in stone, specifically that historical events where somehow inevitable, by creating a "what if" scenario, placing a fictionalised version of himself and his family into an alternate version of WW2 America. As mentioned in the introduction, the crucial historical change is that Charles Lindbergh wins the 1940 US election rather than Franklin D. Roosevelt, which sends the country in a markedly different direction, where they do not join the war and instead sign a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, the so-called Iceland Understanding, notably a country that is under Nazi occupation (Plot 57). In part because Nazi Germany did not become the enemy, antisemitism does not carry the same stigma in Roth's US as it did in the real world, and Jewish people reasonably react: "All the Jews could do was worry" (Plot 55).

Again, somewhat like the epistolary novels, the historical veneer of the story makes it feel more "real," and the reader, with an outsider's view, presumably recognises the kind of society that rampant antisemitism can lead to, each step of the way. Roth was interested not only in the role that history plays in people's lives, but also in making the reader examine their own history, saying that "history claims everybody, whether they know it or not and whether they like it or not" (The Story 3).

The novel, seen through the eyes of a young Philip—he is only seven at the start of the novel—and narrated by an older Philip, then revolves around how Roth the author's family might have dealt with the hypothetical situation, where an increasingly fascist government wins the election in a landslide. The rhetoric is that this new government will protect "American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war" (Plot 30). Lindbergh also sees Hitler as "the world's greatest safeguard against the spread of communism," and with that threat out of the way US citizens should be pleased with a future that consists of an "independent destiny for America" (Plot 83–84).

Though the boundaries of history and fiction are blurred, not much focus is given to the wider ramifications of the US staying out of World War 2. Instead, the focus is almost entirely on Philip's family, and the "perpetual fear" they find themselves under with the

new government in power (Plot 1). Philip's father, Herman, is the main character that is most outwardly outraged at the creeping fascism he sees. From not being allowed to rent a room in a hotel by an antisemitic receptionist—backed up by an antisemitic policeman when Herman tries to protest—to his employer's participating in the "Homestead 42" programme, a government-run scheme supposedly to integrate Jewish people properly into the country, by spreading them to mostly rural areas where they will be the only Jewish people (Plot 192), supposedly modelled on the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed small farmers to buy large swathes of lands cheaply from the government as long as they cultivated it.

Homestead 42 is advertised as being for the benefit of Jewish people, but we as readers can see the blatant attempt at destroying Jewish communities and lessening their ability to participate in democracy, in a sort of extreme gerrymandering: By spreading Jewish people out, their votes will be lost in a sea of pro-fascism, much like its counterpoint the "Good Neighbor" project, which sends non-Jewish people to live in previously Jewish areas (Plot 259).

Another attempt at destroying Jewishness is the "Just Folks" programme, which is more subtle and insidious: It is a programme by the newly created Office of American Absorption that sends mainly young Jewish boys to temporarily live with a sort of host family to learn how to work in a farm—which Herman identifies as what it is. "The only purpose of this so-called Just Folks is to make Jewish children into a fifth column and

turn them against their parents" (Plot 181). Philip's brother Sandy spends a summer enrolled in the programme, and when he comes back the programme has evidently succeeded, it has "weaken[ed] the solidarity of the Jewish social structure" (Plot 259) to the point where Sandy has started looking down on his family as "ghetto Jews" (Plot 182).[9]

Philip's family also feels the war personally, as Herman's nephew Alvin comes to live with them, sharing a room with Philip. Alvin, a committed Marxist anti-fascist (Plot 51), had volunteered for the Canadian army to fight in Germany, but had his leg blown off and was sent home (Plot 94). Living with and treating Alvin, alongside watching his father break down after seeing Alvin's injury, matures the young Philip quickly; he feels that he "would never return to the same childhood" (Plot 111).

Roth had used his own name in books before, both in literary memoirs and novels, but *The Plot Against America* is the first time he used the actual names of his family members in fiction. He did it in order to bring his parents back from the grave" and "to imagine how they might have conducted themselves under the enormous pressure of a Jewish crisis such as they never really had to encounter as native-born New Jerseyans"

_____

[9]A particularly revealing dialogue between Philip and Sandy goes as follows, showing how rapidly the latter's cultural norms were eroded while living on the farm: "Did you eat sausage? / Yeah. He makes the sausage, too. They grind it in a sausage grinder. We had sausage sometimes instead of bacon. It's good. Pork chops. They're good too. They're great. I don't really know why we don't eat it. / Because it's stuff from a pig. / So what?" (Plot 97)

(The Story 2). He also wanted to make the story more real, to "trick the reader, at a certain point in the reading, into believing it," trying to make the reader "forget that this was an invention" (Freeman 3).

Not all the characters are real, however, especially notable exceptions are the wounded cousin Alvin, the snobbish aunt Evelyn, and the fascist collaborator Rabbi Bengelsdorf. While the names are inventions, however, there is some evidence that Alvin at least is based on a real person, as Roth mentioned that he spent a lot of the war "worr[ying] over the welfare of cousins who were off in the war zone, and writ[ing] them long 'newsy' letters to keep up their morale" (Reading Myself 9). By mixing fact and fiction in such a way—a form that has grown increasingly popular—Roth blurs the line between "what was" and "what if," further inviting readers into his alternate world, to view the characters as real people one can empathise with—and in a sense, they are.

4.1 Earlier criticism

Of the contemporary criticism *The Plot Against America* received, about half the critics were most interested in "putting Plot into the larger context of Roth's career while the other half seem more concerned with reflecting how it interprets the presidency of George W. Bush" (Kraus 10). It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, compared to Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, the very "ur-text of American antifascism" (Vials 13). It has much the same premise, namely that a fascist defeats Roosevelt in a presidential election, though here it is the fictional Senator "Buzz" Windrip (Lewis 31). Windrip is far more blatantly authoritarian, however, as he dissolves congress, puts political enemies in concentration camps, and creates an army of essentially paramilitary "private troops" loyal to him personally, numbering in the hundreds of thousands (Lewis 101).

In a review for the New York Times, the *The Plot Against America* was considered somewhat hard to take seriously due to the "tabloid melodrama" nature of its title, and its "absurd and lachrymose" vision of a fascist America. While not praising the novel for its view of American politics, the reviewer did give it credit for taking a serious look at the "anxious, ancestral, midnight fear [of persecution] of the American Jews which is old, old, old" (qtd. in Sokoloff 307). Another critic thought the novel "reveals more about its author's politics […] than it does about American life," but still took a lesson from it: if you forget the past "you might find yourself, in the future, living in an America that you hardly recognize at all" (Anastas 7).

Literary scholar T. Austin Graham praises the fact that the novel, despite being historical, removes the reader's foreknowledge of historical events. As Jason Cowley observes, "[o]nly in retrospect does history appear to have shape, narrative, direction and meaning. The present as it is lived never feels like that; it feels complicated and confused, a rush of pure sensation" (qtd. in Sokoloff 309). In Roth's words, part of the aim was "to turn the epic back into the disaster as it was suffered without foreknowledge, without preparation, by people whose American expectations, though neither innocent nor delusional, were for something very different from what they got" (qtd. in Graham 126). This lack of foreknowledge of roughly how events will unfold, common to other historical fiction, makes it "difficult to make entirely confident judgments about people and institutions," as it would have been for those who lived through it (Graham 127), increasing readerly empathy, and making it easier to imagine ourselves in the shoes of a persecuted group.

Somewhat bizarrely, however, Graham goes on to say the following:

> But Roth's frightened Jews are as threatened by their own inflexible world-views as they are by those attributed to gentiles. Their tendency to conflate Lindbergh's Republican Party with Hitler's Nazis actually increases the possibility of an American Holocaust even as it seems to warn against it, for by failing to imagine truth as it inevitably exists between extreme ideological poles, the Jews do not comprehend the nature of the threat that may actually be approaching. (132) […]

That some Jews are able to live free of "insular clannishness" and "xenophobia" bolsters the argument that millennial suffering can be left behind, and that it is Jews like Mr. Roth—not Lindbergh's gentile supporters—who have made the nation's political discourse so polarized and mistrustful. (136)

It is difficult to comment on this, as it seems to be based on a profound misreading of the novel. It is very unclear to me where Graham would have gotten the impression that Jewish people thinking Lindbergh was a fascist for signing a deal with Hitler in 1940 is what made the discourse surrounding Jewish people "so polarized and mistrustful."

While it is true that "the *most* aggressive anti-Semitic persecutions in Europe are often alluded to in the novel, [although] the *full extent* and character of the coming European Holocaust has not yet become clear at this historical moment" (Graham 133, emphasis added), Nazi Germany was at that time obviously and openly persecuting Jewish people, and already in 1934 the dehumanisation had gone far enough that a tabloid newspaper run by prominent Nazi politician Julius Streicher could devote an entire issue to these "criminals, murderers, and devils in human form" who he claimed were "enticing Gentile children and Gentile adults, butchering them and draining their blood [...] and using it to practice superstitious magic. They are charged with torturing their victims, especially the children; and during the torture [...] they cast spells against the Gentiles" (qtd. in Smith 187).

There was even international outcry against this issue of *Der Stürmer*, which was further used as propaganda: Clearly, Streicher claimed, the worldwide protests were proof of the "sinister influence of international Jewry" who wanted to hide "the truth about their horrific blood practices" (Smith 187). As Jeffrey Herf summarises it, "the ordinary and daily experience of all Germans included exposure to radical anti-Semitic propaganda whose unambiguous intent was to justify mass murder of Jews. 'Ordinary' men and women saw and heard a kind of radical anti-Semitism that was extraordinary even against the background of centuries of anti-Jewish hatred" (Herf 12). I can only tentatively conclude that Graham was perhaps being deliberately polemical.

Schweber draws attention to the particularly American version of fascism portrayed in the novel, with its "heartland isolationism; rugged frontier individualism; plain-spoken, agrarian folk idolatry" which gives it a "terrifying realism" (Schweber 133). He also, interestingly, refers to it as a contemporary fable, noting that "great fiction withstands the test of time precisely because it carries contemporary currency regardless of the era" (Schweber 135), a point that Martha Nussbaum would heartily agree with. He does also draw some parallels to the modern day, noting the still existing strain of conspiratorial antisemitism, pointing specifically to Virginia Congressman James Moran's claim that the US would not have invaded Iraq "were it not for the Jewish community's strong support for the war" (Schweber 135).

4.2 How *The Plot Against America* portrays dehumanisation

The dehumanisation present in *The Plot Against America* is what we have referred to as infrahumanisation, i.e. the more subtle kind. Rather than Jewish people being compared directly to animals, they are accused of lacking fundamental human qualities, such as morality. One of the first things Roth puts into the mouth of his fictionalised President Lindbergh is a speech that the real-life Lindbergh made, where he blames three groups for "warmongering" against Nazi Germany: the Roosevelt administration, the British and the Jewish people. Jewish people specifically are accused of, through their "their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government," attempting to manipulate the US into war due to their "natural passions and prejudices" (Plot 21).

This of course ties back to the age-old prejudice which consists of the belief that "Jews [are] a cohesive, politically active subject—that is, a group united on a global scale by racial bonds that transcended any allegiance to nation-states" (Herf 7), a very old prejudice based on the supposed "rootlessness" of Jewish people (Klug 451). Despite living in the same country as "us," the conspiracy theory goes, they are not "us," they are "other," and do not have "our" best interests at heart; they are seen in this context as "pulling the strings of virtually any evil: capitalism and communism, Washington and Moscow, godlessness and the most devout faith. Anti-Semitism is a total, universal theory" (Schiffer & Wagner 81).

Lindbergh also makes reference to Jewish people's "inferior blood," which is supposedly diluting the US's "inheritance of European blood" (Plot 22). This mimics the rhetoric of Joseph Goebbels, who wrote that Jewish people were particularly dangerous because they sought to "annihilate peoples" and "destroy races," turning "blood comrade against blood comrade" (qtd. in Herf 38). In this view, taking Jewish people "out of circulation" was not terror but "social hygiene," just as "a doctor takes a bacillus out of circulation." It also bring to mind a less tangible accusation, namely that the "Jewish spirit," i.e. cultural participation by Jewish people, brings harm to the "native" intellectual landscape, in an "alien and illegitimate way," unless measures are taken to stop the "Jewification"—often by banning Jewish people from teaching positions (Hafez 215).

The second instance of dehumanisation happens when Philip's family comes to a hotel in Washington, D.C., where they have made a reservation several months in advance. The manager apologises, claims there has been a mistake, and says they cannot stay there. Confused, Herman asks Bess, his wife, if she has the letter where their reservation was confirmed, but it doesn't matter. We quickly learn why, as the manager not so subtly implies that the family stole a bar of soap from the room. In other words, he has been "trained" to believe that Jewish people are inherently untrustworthy thieves, as he knew nothing about Philip's family other than the fact that they are Jewish—and they did not, for the record, steal any soap.

The following example is significantly less explicit, and that is the previously mentioned Just Folks programme, though its sinister natures is hidden behind the blandly bureaucratic description of the programme as "a volunteer work program introducing city youth to the traditional ways of heartland life," simply a way of "encouraging America's religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society" (Plot 84). The programme targets Jewish children exclusively, however, and carries a not entirely hidden implication: Jewish people, by virtue of their Jewishness, cannot be real, proper American citizens.

Homestead 42 seems at first to be merely an extension of the Just Folks programme, a more radical way to break up Jewish communities at a larger scale, "as though Jewishness were not to be amputated from the body politic, as in German-held lands, but rather absorbed into that body's blood stream, digested, and diluted" (Toker 47). However, as the antisemitism in the novel grows more explicit and aggressive, more or less spontaneous antisemitic riots start happening across the country. The US gets its own *Kristallnacht* as

> shops were looted and windows broken, Jews trapped outdoors were set upon and beaten, and kerosene-soaked crosses were ignited on the lawns of the fancy houses along Chicago Boulevard and[...] in the little dirt yards of the poorest Jews on Pingry and Euclid. In midafternoon [...] a firebomb was thrown into the front foyer of Winterhalter Elementary School, where half the students were Jewish, another into the foyer of Central High, whose student body was ninety-

five percent Jewish, another through a window at the Sholem Aleichem Institute —a cultural organization Coughlin had ridiculously identified as Communist— and a fourth outside another of Couglin's "Communist" targets, the Jewish Workers' Alliance. Next came the attack on houses of worship. [...] as evening services were scheduled to begin an explosion went off on the steps of the prestigious Chicago Boulevard temple Shaarey Zedek. The explosion there caused extensive damage to the exotic centerpiece of architect Albert Kahn's Moorish design—the three massive arched doorways that conspicuously exhibited to a working-class populace a distinctively un-American style. Five passersby, none of whom happened to be Jews, were injured by flying debris from the facade, but no casualties were otherwise reported. (Plot 246)

Antisemitism and anticommunism in the novel are, as they historically were, close ideological allies, and as they are conflated even more "ordinary people" get wrapped up in the rioting, both as perpetrators and as victims. Note too the inclusion of the phrase "none of whom happened to be Jewish" regarding the victims of the bombing: Roth is making the clear point more famously made by Martin Niemöller, that a fascist system of violence, once entrenched, will not stop at persecuting one enemy, but simply expand its list of enemies over time, most commonly rendered as "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out— / Because I was not a socialist" (Holocaust Memorial).

With all the rioting going on, Homestead 42 is not only a destruction of community, but a possible death sentence: while the violence is not technically state-promoted, the dissolution of Jewish communities and isolation of individual Jewish families renders them powerless to defend themselves against extremists; their right to self-defence is effectively taken away along with their right to self-determination. To illustrate this point, Roth has the mother of one of Philip's friends be found dead after a Ku Klux Klan attack, "the burnt-out car containing [her] remains was found smoldering in a drainage ditch alongside a potato field in the flat country just south of Louisville (Plot 304).

The blood libel, too, makes an unwelcome appearance in the novel. In its historical form it has generally consisted of an accusation that a Jewish person or group of Jewish people have been kidnapping Christian children and using their blood for some mystical ritual, sometimes baking it into matzohs. In the novel it comes in a simplified form from the character Joey, an Italian child who became Philip's neighbour as part of the Good Neighbor project, who attributes the death of a horse to "a Jew like you," who supposedly drank the blood of this horse. When Philip asks why anyone would do that, Joey matter-of-factly replies: "Jews drink blood" (Plot 318). Near the end of the novel the blood libel is brought up more traditionally, when Mayor La Guardia says: "Now we read in the Chicago Tribune that all these years clever Jewish bakers have been using the blood of the kidnapped Lindbergh child [...] How it must please the Führer to be poisoning our country with this sinister nonsense "(Plot 290).

This is perhaps the furthest the novel goes in portraying explicit dehumanisation, implying either that Jewish people are a subtype of vampires or that they are so far removed from normal morality that they drink the blood of children.

4.3 How *The Plot Against America* employs rehumanisation

Leona Toker claimed that the characters in the novel arrange themselves in "a paradigm of motifs familiar from the literature of the ghettos, interim traps of World War II," where Herman becomes a model of "menchlikhkayt," Bess plays "a run-of-the-mill everywoman [who is] a natural leader," Rabbi Bengelsdorf is the person who uses "the traditional policy of conciliation-cum-alleviation," Aunt Evelyn represents "the specifically female type of corruption known from literary portraits of *Judenrat* mistress-secretaries who would make changes in lists of deportation in return for fur-coats and jewels," and the Wishnows are "the doomed;" all "trapped in the patterns of Jewish history" (Toker 46).

If the characters were merely stereotypes, however, the novel would fail; for readers to care about the narrative, they need to care about the characters. Which is why, despite the characters arguably fitting archetypes in the broad strokes, it is how they are written that makes them come alive. Herman's idealism, for instance, is reflected in his mantra "All men are created equal" (Plot 67, 71), which unsurprisingly does very little in the face of prejudiced people. He is stubbornly anti-fascist, almost to a fault, as Alvin blames him for "sending" him off to the war where he lost his leg. This leads to a particularly gruesome fight, with the result that

> Alvin's prosthesis had cracked in two, his stump was torn to shreds, and one of
> his wrists was broken. Three of my father's front teeth were shattered, two ribs

were fractured, a gash was opened along his right cheekbone that had to be sutured with almost twice as many stitches as were needed to close the wound inflicted on me by the orphanage horse, and his neck was so badly wrenched that he had to go around in a high steel collar for months afterward. The glass-topped coffee table with the dark mahogany frame that my mother had saved over the years to buy […] lay in fragments all across the room, and microscopic crumbs of glass were embedded in my father's hands. The rug, the walls, and the furniture were speckled with chocolate icing […] as well as with their blood, and then there was the smell of it—the airless, gag-inducing slaughterhouse smell." (Plot 273–274).

Herman is unflinching in his convictions, but he has little sense of diplomacy and can resort to bare aggression, but we as readers grow to understand him alongside Philip, and his actions end up making sense once we have a handle on his internal world. We see how his "circumstances shape not only [his] possibilities for action, but also [his] aspirations and desires, hopes and fears" (Nussbaum 88), and how those circumstances include the knowledge of centuries of antisemitism. This makes him, understandably, pretty skeptical of those who downplay or accept it.

Then there is Philip's mother, Bess, an altogether more pragmatic person. She is just as outraged as Herman, but does not hold Herman's immovable belief that somehow their constitutional rights will protect them under a fascist government. She instead urges the family to move to Canada, where antisemitism has not taken hold (Plot 183). She too

can resort to violence if angered, however, such as when her son Sandy compares his father to Hitler, and she "smack[s] him across the face." An action that so disturbs Philip that he thinks to himself: "She doesn't know what she's doing," I thought, "she's somebody else—everybody is" (Plot 181).

Both Bess and Sandy's violent acts against their younger family members hearken back to the point I brought up in relation to My Luck from *A Song for Night*, specifically that sympathising with a character that is entirely sympathetic holds very little value in "training" the skill of humanisation. Characters must, to a greater or lesser degree, do things that we recognise as wrong in the abstract, and it is our job as critical readers to understand why they did it. In doing so, we see what Wayne Booth refers to as "respect before a soul," a text that does not lead us to see "our fellow citizens with disdain" or "debase human dignity," but shows "the variety of human goals and motives" (qtd. in Nussbaum 100). In *The Plot Against America*, we are invited to meet the characters as people we are supposed to understand.

Even Rabbi Bengelsdorf, the novel's minor antagonist, remains human. We understand all too easily how he fell into being a fascist collaborator: First by sincerely believing that Lindbergh is not, in fact, antisemitic, and wishing to "crush all doubt of the unadulterated loyalty of the American Jews to the United States of America. [...] [He] want[s] Charles Lindbergh to be [his] president not in spite of [him] being a Jew but because [he *is*] a Jew—an *American* Jew" (Plot 40). He seems to sincerely believe that by

showing himself to be "a good Jew" he can change the US perception of Jewish people nationally.

He eventually gets a job in the Office of American Absorption, responsible for Homestead 42, Just Folks and the Good Neighbors project, still believing in Lindbergh, as he tells Herman: "Admittedly, before his becoming president he at times made public statements grounded in anti-Semitic cliches. [...] I am pleased to tell you that it took no more than two or three sessions alone with the president to get him to relinquish his misconceptions and to appreciate the manifold nature of Jewish life in America" (Plot 108). At some point, however, he must have noticed he was on the wrong side of history, such as when he went to a White House dinner with Nazi official Joachim von Ribbentrop, but by then it would have been too late to back out (Plot 183). He displays "an alarmingly wilful blindness [as] Roth has already made more than clear that Lindbergh's attitudes and policies locate Jewish Americans in the social space African Americans occupied in the Jim Crow South of actual American history, which required nothing less than a nationwide Civil Rights Movement to begin to dismantle (Busch 154).

Bengelsdorf keeps quiet during the antisemitic riots, presumably out of a sense of self-preservation (Plot 248), but as the government spirals into authoritarianism he learns, like most other collaborators, that being "one of the good ones" never works, and he is arrested by the FBI "under suspicion of being 'among the ringleaders of the Jewish

conspiratorial plot against America'" (Plot 291) after Henry Ford demands his arrest due to him supposedly manipulating Lindbergh's wife like a "Rabbi Rasputin." Despite his collaboration one cannot help but empathise, but it is a "difficult empathy": "when we are invited to identify with a perpetrator, we have to engage […] with the potential evil in ourselves," and with "the victim within the perpetrator" (Timár 14.3.1). Bengelsdorf was, after all, manipulated too.

After Bengelsdorf's arrest, Lindbergh's wife, after his unexplained disappearance, manages to convince everyone to go back to business as usual pre-Lindbergh. This is radically different from the analysis in *It Can't Happen Here*, where the character Karl Pascal says that "[the president] isn't important—it's the sickness that made us throw him up that we've got to attend to" (Lewis 101). This has struck many critics as an unconvincing deus ex machina, like Richard Ned Lebow who rightly points out that "[readers] are given no reasons why such a complacent and antiwar American public did such an abrupt about-face" (Lebow 241). Elaine B. Safer argues that the ending might be more than it initially seems. While she does concede that it is a deus ex machina—Lindbergh simply flying off never to be seen again—she compares it to Dickens's use of deus ex machina in *Oliver Twist*, when the titular character out of nowhere gets an inheritance: "The suggestion is that it would take a miracle for a pauper like Oliver to prosper in nineteenth-century England. Therefore, *The Plot*'s

implied meaning is, as Michael Gorra puts it, 'that the narrative machinery is the very opposite of reassuring'" (Safer 160).[10]

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[10]Interestingly, she draws on three examples of the fact that "at times the United States is capable of frenzied, violent actions that can destroy people's civil rights," and mentions that this behaviour was apparent in "Americans' extremist and unconstrained behavior […] with regard to the Vietnam War, McCarthyism, and *the mad crusade for political correctness*" (Safer 148, emphasis added).

5 Conclusion

> Herein doth also concur every Man's Sense and Judgment touching other
> Creatures, nothing doubted (tho *Black*) to be of the same *species*, with the *Whiter*:
> As is seen of Birds, which do often differ much in the Feather, yet nevertheless
> are one and the same in kind. But, alas! for this the poor *African* must be
> Unman'd and Unsoul'd; accounted, and even ranked with *Brutes*. If Slavery had
> that force or power so as to unsoul Men, it must needs follow, that every great
> Conqueror might at his pleasure, make and unmake Souls. (Godwyn 28)

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock exclaims: "the curse never fell upon our nation till
now / I never felt it till now" (*Merchant* 3.1.85–86). For the first time, he felt the full
weight of the antisemitism of the world he lived in. Similarly too, Philip's family are
forced to reckon with radical public antisemitism for the first time, and we as readers
are right there with them, back in the alternate 1940s. *The Plot Against America* does
portray dehumanisation, but it portrays it critically, as opposed to *Robinson Crusoe*,
Overkill, *24* and countless other examples.

Through Philip, we feel the increasing and justified fear, as he eventually dreams of
erasing his entire history and pretending to be a deaf-mute, non-Jewish orphan, in order
to be safe from the antisemitic mood that has captured the US (Plot 317). Essentially a
sort of spiritual suicide, what he dreams of is to become "nothing and nobody," to never

communicate with anyone again, simply working in a factory until he dies. The very first sentence of the novel is: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear" (Plot 1). Fear has become a habit to Philip, fear "surrounds [him] and forms a backdrop of [his] experiences and interpretations of the world" (Svendsen 56). While the novel is, of course, alternate history, it also truthfully depicts Roth's memories of antisemitism from his childhood, its "ultimate aim [being] humane consideration of the plight of American Jews, and, through a realistic portrayal of ordinary people's daily lives," articulating" the complexity of history" (Liao 74). We as readers, hopefully, gain a better understanding of dehumanisation through it.

"Tragedy works in a manner similar to vaccination," Lebow writes, a not unpopular opinion, as readers "experience the powerful emotions of tragedy second hand and in a stylized and less virulent form. They are not overwhelmed by these emotions and their consequences the way the characters in the drama are and are thus in a position to use reason to reflect upon their meaning. They can learn from what they have seen and experienced. In tragedy, confrontation with chaos is intended to be *a profoundly civilizing experience* (Lebow 243, emphasis added). This is a literally ancient idea, dating back at least to Aristophanes. Fiction in general, and tragedy in specific, was seen as an important part of the "moral education of young adults," showing them "the bad things that may happen in a human life, long before life itself does so" (Nussbaum 93).

It has been noted that fictional texts have "a persistent implicit influence on the way we view the world, and that these effects may last longer than the effects of typical explicit attempts to change beliefs by presenting claims and arguments" (Appel & Richter 129). Also, the human brain is not very good at differentiating between factual and fictional narratives, and often integrates information from fiction into "real-world knowledge;" when reading fiction we are "mentally transported into the fictional world" and our "mechanisms for critical evaluation of text information are partly neutralised" (Appel & Richter 120, 128). This is a cause for both celebration and worry. As mentioned, fiction can be an experience which rehumanises a stigmatized group, but it may also simply reinforce the dehumanisation, intentionally or not. It is all well and good that "perceptions, attitudes, values, and behaviors are influenced by the stories we consume, from the perception of crime to our attitudes on homosexuality" (Schlegel 194), but what if, for instance, gay love is portrayed as evil?

This is where the idea of reading critically comes in. As Holloway points out, human rights are not something inherent "in the fact or experience of being human. [They] are fabrications, entitlements that are historically and socially invented, codified, and allocated" (Holloway 35). In other words, human rights themselves are a social construct, a sort of shared fiction, a story that people must learn in order to believe, and readers must exercise their knowledge when reading fiction that turns out to be dehumanising. One doesn't have to ban *Robinson Crusoe*, or even *Overkill*, one only has to be wary of unthinkingly buying into their worldview, as one should be with all texts.

The Holocaust would not have been possible without "a decades-long and centuries-old preparatory anti-Semitic discourse," and we "a racist discourse that threatens to become highly dominant in society must be exposed as such" (Schiffer 83). I will add that not only is this true of racist discourse, but any discourse that discriminates against ethnicity, sexuality, gender, disability, caste, or similar. Critical reading involves approaching texts while being aware of dehumanising tropes; "[if] we can expose these methods of building, presenting, and performing [the story] then we can unmask an illusion," showing the dehumanised caricatures to be little more than reflections of "uncertainties inherent in our ideologies and myths" (Semmerling 208).

Sadly, dehumanising ideologies tend to stick around, and can resurface under the right socio-political conditions with the right propaganda, as they have become "entrenched in ways of life, which makes them difficult to displace or disrupt" (Smith 191). As we have seen in recent years in the US, it did not take much for homophobia to resurface, this time under the guise of the "parental right" to not have your children learn about the existence of LGBTQ people, and the resurfacing of the idea that gay people interacting with children, even their own, means they are paedophiles, that they are outside the boundaries of human morality, in the realm of monstrosity.

Closer to home, in Europe, prejudices against Romani people are still flourishing even among self-proclaimed anti-racists; they are often portrayed as some sort of nomadic vermin, like a plague of locusts, coming to more prosperous cities to beg, steal and make it filthy (Nariman 4). How quickly we forget that the Romani people, too, were targeted by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. Anti-Roma racism remains a curious blind spot, an example of the "hierarchy of racisms: some are more unacceptable than others" (Zia-Ebrahimi 328).

Research on so-called "narrative persuasion" shows that fiction can play a major role in influencing people's world-views, but barring a centralised system that decides which books are dehumanising and which are rehumanising, and bans the former, it remains unclear whether this is a net positive or a net negative. A story that shows the dreadful results of *not* murdering prisoners, for instance, as a prisoner "lunges for a grenade […] and blows himself and the rest of Castle's unit to smithereens" after Castle has advocated for keeping him alive, is not conducive for an attitude of respecting other people's humanity. "In this moment, the *Punisher* is born, and Frank Castle loses all willingness to give a murderer a second chance" (DiPaolo 116). But if enough people are media literate enough to see through dehumanisation, the rehumanising power of fiction should win out in the end.

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