

## “I believe in the power of good”

Good Society 2.0 in David Bowie, The Lord of the Rings and Yellowstone

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## Preface

*You don't see it on your way to work, in the fields, or on the mountain, but there's a war being waged against our way of life. They'll tell you all the reasons why our way of life are bad for this country, bad for our future. How it's immortal that you live here, work here, grow food here. They will tell it so much you might even start to believe it yourself.*

- John Dutton in *Yellowstone*

This text is to all of those who believe in the Power of Good, who believe we can make the world a better place. There is always something good to fight for!

À Christophe: Aucun mot n'est nécessaire pour décrire la valeur de votre soutien. Merci du fond du cœur!<sup>1</sup>

Imagination and creativity are everything!

<sup>1</sup> To Christophe! Words are superfluous to describe the value of your support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

## Abstract

This paper employs a combined conceptual framework of Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* and Bourdieu's *doxa* and *habitus*, to demonstrate the importance of using mainstream fiction in the discussion of Good Society 2.0. Applying Greima's actantial model on a material consisting of David Bowie's collected catalogue, *The Lord of the Rings/The Hobbit* films and the TV show *Yellowstone*, the paper focuses on the conflict between plasticity and elasticity – and what positive syntheses we can identify from this conflict. Locating the early Frankfurt School in an updated contemporary context, the paper serves as a groundbreaking attempt to broaden the sociological discipline by providing **a starting point for a new direction in sociology**. Through a modernised methodology, the paper represents the beginning of a new wave of sociological analyses – which open new windows for further studies regarding cultural production, consumption and its societal consequences.

**Key words:** Marcuse, Bourdieu, Mainstream fiction, doxa, habitus

## Sammanfattning

Genom att använda Marcuses begrepp *One-dimensional Man* Bourdieus *doxa* och *habitus*, tillsammans med Greimas *aktantmodell*, påvisar denna text vikten av att använda *mainstream fiction* i diskussionen om det Goda Samhället 2.0. Utifrån ett material bestående av David Bowies samlade katalog, Sagan om ringen/Hobbit- filmerna samt TV-serien *Yellowstone*, fokuserar denna text på konflikten mellan plasticitet och elasticitet – och vilka positiva synteser vi kan identifiera utifrån denna konflikt. Att använda populärkultur är en strategi för att placera den tidiga Frankfurtskolan i en uppdaterad samtida kontext, samt fungerar som ett banbrytande försök att bredda den sociologiska disciplinen genom att vara en startpunkt för en ny riktning inom sociologin. Genom en moderniserad metodologi, utgör texten början på en ny våg av hur man kan göra sociologiska analyser – som i sin tur öppnar nya fönster för vidare studier kring kulturproduktion, konsumtion och dess samhälleliga konsekvenser.

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Front images: [David Bowie](#), [Yellowstone](#) & [The Lord of the Rings](#) (Retrieved 2023-11-22).

# Disposition

Beginning with an introduction, chapter 1 includes purpose, research questions and a brief background of the empirical body. This background serves to illustrate the relevance of using mainstream fiction when addressing the idea of the good society. Using mainstream fiction is part of my attempt to show the sociological value in artistic expressions that are considered a 'box-office' or in other ways have reached a worldwide audience. Films, TV-shows or rock icons are not only widely known, they are also accessible due to the increasingly growing use of social media, streaming sites and platforms like YouTube etc. Having such an empirical body is a pioneering way to update the sociological analyses in respect of societal narratives and their impacts on the individual.

Chapter 2 presents a review over previous research, followed by the theoretical framework in chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the methodological framework together with the applied analytical tools, while chapter 5 presents the main results, followed by an analysis. Finally, chapter 6 presents the main conclusions and windows to future research.

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# Prologue

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 1987 David Bowie did a concert in Berlin which came to have a crucial impact on the political state in the, at the time, divided city of Berlin. In front of *die Reichstag*<sup>2</sup>, the stage was set up with the large speakers deliberately directed towards the east parts of Berlin. A bit into the concert, just before commencing the song [Heroes](#) (Retrieved 2024-01-14), Bowie suddenly [spoke](#) in German: *Wir senden unsere besten Wünsche an alle unseren Freunde, die auf der anderen Seite der Mauer sind!*<sup>3</sup> This simple act was indeed an occasion for Bowie to emphasise the unifying power of art. German journalist Christoph Lanz told BBC that “[r]ock and pop music has an incredible power and the concert is one of the most powerful examples of that [...] it was the first time youth in East Germany “got so sick” of living under authoritarian rule that they “started to shout ‘The wall must go’” (Nicholson, 2020:para 2). The result of this was a [small riot](#) (Retrieved 2024-01-06) with people chanting [Mauer weg!](#) [Tear down the wall, my translation] pleading to Gorbatsjov to release them. Thus, Bowie’s concert became a crucial act of civil unrest in the events of the Berlin wall’s fall in 1989 – to the extent that he was officially thanked in a Tweet by the German Foreign Office: “Good-bye, David Bowie. You are now among #Heroes. Thank you for helping to bring down the #wall” ([GermanForeignOffice](#), Retrieved 2024-01-06). From this context, we could ask: What is a good society? The answer here would be how Bowie, in a split of a second, introduces the song *Heroes*, talking freely to those listening on the other side of the wall. He talks with compassion, solidarity, but from a critical point of view *without* being



ideological. He just reaches out his hand to those forbidden to attend the concert other than standing behind a wall...At this intersection lies an idea of what a good society is.

Figure 1 Source: [Nicholson](#) (Retrieved 2024-03-13)

<sup>2</sup> Parliament [My translation]

<sup>3</sup> We send our best wishes to all of our friends who are on the other side! [My translation].



# 1 Introduction

One of my earliest memories of **the good society** was while watching the childrens programme *Barbapapa* (Tison & Taylor, 1970) on TV during the mid-1970s. Each episode always carried an explicit ideological message, be it freeing zoo animals, joyous education or sustainable housing etc. (Lowe, 2014:227) – or helping rescuing people from a burning house:



Figure 2 [Barbapapa](#) transforming into a staircase. Source: YouTube (Retrieved 2024-03-14).

Little did I know then that this lovely, pink and soft figure would now become an illustration for the discussion about what I call **plasticity** and **elasticity**. As seen in the image above (fig.2) *Barbapapa* is capable of transforming into *any* shape and form – but with the *exceptions* of colour, structure and mass. Although transforming into a staircase, he is still a *big, soft and pink staircase*. Because of these aesthetic delimitations, *Barbapapa*, to me, appears *plastic* rather than *elastic*.

If locating *Barbapapa* in a wider context, we could refer this aesthetic constrains, as *ideological* constrains, delimiting his agency – or said differently, they are defined and delimited by *other* individuals and powers. To me, this is a simple way to describe the rather complex issue of **plasticity**. *Barbapapa* can only change and transform to a certain extent – an extent defined by *someone* or *something* else. The **elastic** individual, however, isn't bound by such constrains, as creativity intersects various and heterogenous elements that can be associated with new forms, attitudes and performances.

So, what I'm trying to show here is my observations of plasticity and elasticity in society today. Another way to illustrate this is to

use the metaphor of water. Famous Martial Artist and philosopher Bruce Lee once said: “Be formless, shapeless, like water [...] Now water can flow, or it can crash!” (Lee, 2020, n.p.). We can either let the water run freely or try to *delimit its course* by building dams. Hence, we can be plastic like *Barbapapa* or elastic like Bruce Lee. Now, why is this a sociological problem, you might ask? – to which my reply would be **conflict**, as a restricted freedom is only a ‘pseudo-freedom’. True freedom is, as opposed to pseudo-freedom, similar to what German philosopher Ernst Bloch once referred to as home [*heimat*], or a place where we can say: “[h]ere I am human, here I am entitled to be” (Bloch 1996: xxix). In the pseudo-free world, there are only so many ways to allow your potentials as “[y]ou do not allow yourself to be totally yourself. Society does not allow you to be totally yourself” (Lee, 2016:30).

## 1.1 The Good Society 2.0

If translating ‘home’ into instead talking of society, we can talk about two types of society: society A and B, in which A equals the **plastic**, and B equals the **elastic** individual (see fig.3). The essential difference concerns **the ability to move**. Whereas the plastic individual is only able to move, expand or shrink *within* its predestinated sphere, the elastic individual holds greater possibilities of moving in and out of *several* spheres. Hence the difference between agencies.

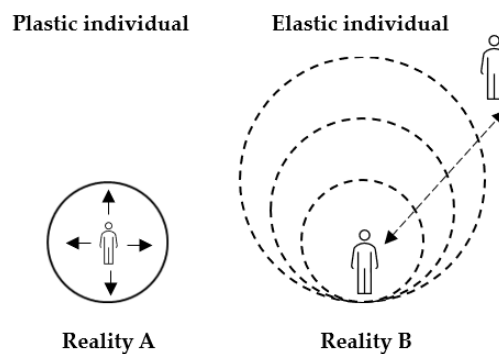


Figure 3 Difference concerning agency. Plastic versus Elastic individual. (My model)

My sociological view of arguing for the good society 2.0 lies in my desire to analyse and illustrate where we are, but even more, *where we're heading*. To do so, I will refer to the concept of **creativity**. For me, what is essential when discussing ideas of the good society is the questions about promoting

**creativity, subjectivity, emancipation**, while simultaneously allowing and encouraging **critical viewpoints** in line with a sense of ethics and justice. Other than (obvious) ideas of friendship, loyalty, freedom and love, to enable an elastic and autonomous individual, the freedom of creativity is vital. British philosopher Martin Hollis once wrote “[w]here Plastic Man has his causes, Autonomous Man has his reasons” (Hollis, 1977:12). *Et voila!*<sup>4</sup> – here is the conflict, or as Hollis would say, a conflict between “those who are busy with social construction of reality and those who are *concerned* with this construction of reality” (Hollis, op.cit.:12.). Said differently, the plastic Man is busy, while the Elastic Man is concerned about this business...

One way to discuss this sociologically oriented conflict is to use **mainstream fiction expressions** such as film, TV-shows, music, drama etc. alike what Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek once said: [i]n order to understand today’s world, we need cinema, literally. It’s only in cinema that we get the crucial dimension we are not ready to confront in our reality” (*The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* [Žižek](#) (Retrieved 2023-12-18). Inspired by these words, I find fictional expressions as essentially useful when discussing questions like society, ideology, norms, visions, subjectivisation<sup>5</sup> etc. Fiction holds so many layers or both revealing or hiding discourses, as well as including, excluding or marginalising individuals *and* illustrating how visions of good society are being opposed or challenged by other counter visions. Another way of approaching the value of fiction is found in Russian actor Konstantin Stanislavskij’s belief that theatre should have a **social** and **educational** function, or in plain words: function as ‘tipping-points’ for social change. As such it can attract a ‘new’ audience by establishing a new paradigm shift in which “[t]heatre is not a luxury in the life of the people, but a necessity” (Allen, 1999:93).

Although Stanislavskij referred to the Russian Revolution, we can still appreciate the power of culture, creativity and mainstream fiction as being even *more* important today as we live our lives mainly through mainstream fiction (TV, Netflix, HBO and other streaming services), music, mass media, social media (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Instagram etc.). We spend

<sup>4</sup> Here we are! [My translation].

<sup>5</sup> The process of becoming a responsible, autonomous individual able to feel and think freely [My annotation].

an increasingly amount of time with mainstream expressions whether it is the constant ear buds that has become a second pair of ears with music, sound books, TED talks, or binge-watching TV-shows on various streaming services, or getting stuck on You Tube, scrolling our favourite videos. My approach to this increasingly common practice is to locate this paper into an 'updated' sociology by including hyperlinks and iconography. This will give you instant access to the material via mainly YouTube-links. From a deeper perspective, using iconography provides the 'reading' a depth and dynamic, alongside with opportunities for involving the reader, in terms of audience, in the research process – which corresponds to a more collaborate way of approaching science (cf. Fluehr-Lobhan, 2008).

In line with Lindgren (2014:47), there is an almost necessity in the contemporary sociology to combine sociology with popular culture, when acting within the field of cultural sociology, as this provides a three-dimensional relation between the text, the visual and the interpretation of these elements. The fact is: we are exposed to mainstream expressions *all the time* – and what concerns me is that in all this 'noise' we rarely discuss the *positive* aspects of mainstream - lest not forget the *creative* and *emancipatory* elements. This, let us say, more balanced way of viewing mainstream fiction provides us with two options: it is either a tool for indoctrination and ideological propaganda, *or* a channel to *increase* individual's ability to develop a critical thinking and reflections – and function as **inspiration** to social change.

*Et voila!* We are now approaching the very core of this study: how to use fictional, mainstream expressions to discuss the ideological conflict between the plastic and elastic individual, contextualised in society anno 2024. To do so, I will use what German American sociologist Herbert Marcuse referred to as the **dialectic**<sup>6</sup> **between one-dimensional and multidimensional man**. The idea of good society that is underpinned in media need not just be about the binarity of Good versus Evil, but rather pointing at the complexity of this conflict, or 'game'. "The fact that they start

<sup>6</sup> As in the Marxist idea of contradictions, conflicts and possibilities of social change, and the Hegelian thought of *Telos* (Greek τέλος, meaning goal or end [My annotation]), or essence (Feenberg, 2017:3).

refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period. Nothing indicates that it will be a good end" (Marcuse, 2007:261).

## 1.1 Purpose and research questions

The overall purpose is to use fictional expressions to discuss the idea of **the Good Society 2.0**, by illustrating the conflict between plasticity and elasticity – and what *positive* syntheses we can identify from this conflict (as in articulations towards the good society). In line with critical theory, the purpose also involves emphasising the relation between ideology, consciousness and the question of truth, from a critical point of view, as I claim we are increasingly exposed to what Marcuse refers to as "responding to and contributing to the preservation of a false order of facts" (Marcuse, 2007:149). In the case of culture in contemporary debates on culture, there is a danger that it is increasingly consumed by an ideological apparatus focused on one-dimensionality which "is *everywhere* in all shapes" (Marcuse, op.cit.:10). Although Hollywood often is accused of being the King of illusions with its long history of producing entertainment and amusement for 'the common man' – nowadays we see expressions of this in all parts of the world, whether is Bollywood, Nollywood<sup>7</sup>, streaming sites or social media.

Today's society can be said to rest upon three major aspects access, realtime and reciprocity. Access to information and material has become heavily important *and necessary* for providing and exchanging ideas, thoughts, opportunities etc. on a digital basis. The digital society is moving increasingly faster, and access is an important element of this movement. This also involves realtime, as in providing immediately and instantaneous access to social interactions, discourses and exchange of information and communication. The digital era we are now a part of, also implicate reciprocity as important, i.e., mutual exchange and online collaboration as part of how we shape every-day-digital interactions in the modern society (Giddens, 2007:375ff). This does not just involve culture production but will have implications for individuals in society at large.

<sup>7</sup> The Nigerian film industry, being the second largest in the world after Bollywood [My annotation].

The main issue here is that with an increased globalisation and instantaneously, the bigger the possibilities for this expansion of the culture production apparatus. Some may find this to be progress, while I find it far more complex and sometimes even worrying – especially in the case of plasticity and elasticity. To help me explore these dilemmas, I will use an empirical body consisting of the catalogue of David Bowie’s songs, the film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* hexalogy (a six-parts series [My annotation]), and the American TV-show *Yellowstone* season 1-5 (see Appendix 1). This body will help me address the following questions:

1. How does the empirical body portray the conflict between plasticity and elasticity?
2. What positive syntheses can be identified from this conflict?

## 1.2 Background: Bowie, Hobbitses and Cowboys – a brief overview

This section will serve as an overview, rather than resumé, of the aspects most essential for this paper. Thus, I will continuously refer to Bowie, Hobbitses and Cowboys as representing **actants**<sup>8</sup> as they function as bearer of the narrative – that is their shared denomination. That is also the beauty (and strength) in having such a diverse empirical body; they are all heroes with the same purpose: to provide possibilities for social and individual change.

### *David Bowie*

David Bowie, born as David Jones in 1947 in Brixton, grew up in this suburb outside London, imprinted with a ‘post-war Britain’ grey and dull milieu, marked by “the tiresome ennui of lower-middle-class 1950s Britain, its staidness, deference and lack of splendour” (Buckley, 2005:11). This, together with a family largely affected by mental illness (both mother Peggy and half-brother Terence, who later committed suicide, suffered from schizophrenia). This mixture of post-war, mental illness, the emerging American rock ‘n’ roll

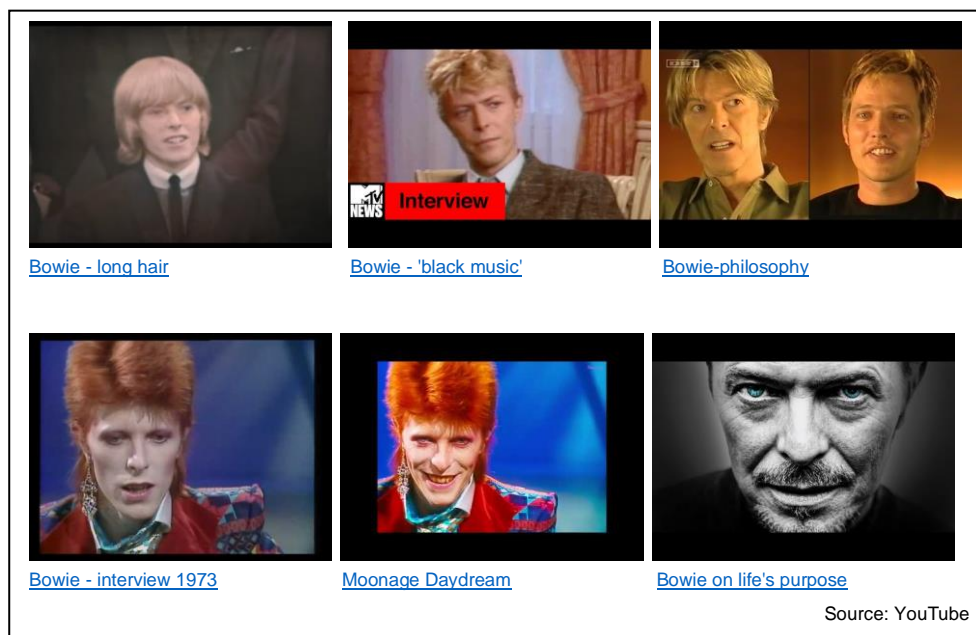
<sup>8</sup> According to Lithuanian literary scientist Algirdas Julien Greimas, **actant** is an integral structural element upon which the narrative revolves. Greimas divide actant into three binary pairs: Subject - Object, Helper - Opponent Sender – Receiver (Hébert, 2011:71).

and 10-year older Terence' interest in jazz and literature, came to shape Bowie's early creative explorations, while beginning to "uncage the colours" (Buckley, op.cit.:1).



Figure 4 [The faces of David Bowie](#) (Retrieved 2024-01-11)

Over the years to come, Bowie invented not only music and artistry, but also various *personas* (theatrical masks, roles, personalities), like Ziggy Stardust, Aladdinsane and Thin White Duke, just to mention a few – and of course the most famous one: David Bowie. With more than 50 years in the limelight, Bowie has been a creative phenomenon and inspiration, even after his death on 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2016.



This also includes him being a master of small, but significant events. One of these ‘tipping-points’ took place July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1972, on the British TV-show *Top of the Pops*. During the song [Starman](#) (Retrieved 2024-01-15), Bowie suddenly puts his arm around guitarist Mick Ronson – an act that many viewers perceived as clearly sexual.



Source: YouTube

This small act, led to a dislocation of attitude among the British teenagers, who felt like “Oh my God, maybe other people are a little bit like I feel inside” (Trynka, 2012:162) – or what I refer to as ‘tipping-point’ embodying the emotions of a whole generation, who wanted to be just as sexual, dangerous and rebellious as Ziggy! All this together makes Bowie not just a rock star icon, but even more an **actant**<sup>9</sup> with possibilities to encourage societal and individual change. Being this larger-than-life icon, the music sometimes becomes second to Bowie’s sociological function as vehicle for change, and predictor of future societal events, or as he says himself: “I’ve always felt like a vehicle for something else, but then I’ve never really sorted out what it was” (Leorne, 2015:120).

### ***Lord of the Rings – a film adaption***

When New Zealand director Sir Peter Jackson decided to adapt the works of British author J.R.R. Tolkien, he ended up with six films, of which the first three are known as *The Lord of the Rings trilogy*, consisting of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003). The three films were shot simultaneously in New Zealand between 1999-2000 with an extensive budget of \$281 million. This work is considered as one of *the greatest and most influential film series ever made*, with a box-office more than \$3.000 billion. Other than being a huge monetary success, it was also technically pioneering, introducing highly technical digital tools, advancing

<sup>9</sup> As interpreted from Lithuanian linguistic Algirdas. J Greimas’ definition, meaning a character advancing the narrative [My annotation].



the art of motion capture (the process of recording movement of objects or people), and to create massive battles scenes ([The Lord of the Rings](#) Retrieved 2024-03-08). Except for being hugely acclaimed (including 17 Academy Awards), as an exciting adventure film, it was also a very careful, respectful and close adaption of Tolkien's writings, causing the United States National Film Registry to select *The Fellowship of the Ring* for preservation due to its culturally, historically and aesthetically significance. A fantastic tribute to Tolkien, who in 1951 expressed a wish that other creative minds should one day come to the world of Middle-earth, to which Jackson and his team responded: "[w]e are proud to be part of an archive that celebrates and preserves the art of visual storytelling, for generations to come" (Tartaglione, 2021:para7).

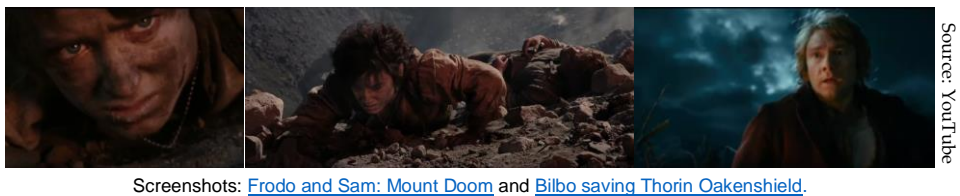
Following up the success, Jackson did yet another three films, called *The Hobbit trilogy: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), *The Desolation of Smaug* (2013) and *The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014). Based on the Tolkien novel *The Hobbit*, the films act as a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings trilogy*, shot in similar conditions in New Zealand between 2011-2013, with even more extensive technological tools, such as computer-generated faces and performance capture. Alike its predecessors, *The Hobbit trilogy* became a huge box-office with *An Unexpected Journey* solely grossing more than \$1 billion ([The Hobbit](#) Retrieved 2024-03-08).

The central plot in the hexalogy centres around the binary pair **Good** versus **Evil**, symbolised by the 'Ring of Power.' While the Lord of the Rings trilogy focused on the Hobbit *Frodo's* quest for destroying this Ring in the volcanic-like fire of *The Lonely Mountain* in the land of *Mordor*, the Hobbit films focused on another Hobbit: *Bilbo*, and his quest to steal the *Arkenstone* from *Smaug* the Dragon. This stone was stolen from the *Dwarfs* by *Smaug*, now sleeping in the depths of the *Dwarfs'* former Kingdom *Erebor*. *Bilbo* is hired by the *Dwarfs* in terms of burglar, whose assignment is to 'steal' the *Arkenstone* back to the *Dwarfs* so they can re-claim their Kingdom. Although having two different goals (*Frodo* destroying the Ring, and *Bilbo* 'stealing' the *Arkenstone*), they share the same goal of killing the Evilness embodied by these two objects. Their main opponent is *Sauron*, or the Dark Lord of *Mordor* (The Black Country), threatening to reign all of Middle-Earth (including *The Shire*, the home of the Hobbits) with Evilness. To enhance the adaption,

Jackson uses a soundtrack to embrace Tolkien's sense of mythology and fantasy. Other than Canadian composer Howard Shore, Jackson included highly well-known pop-artists like Annie Lennox, Ed Sheeran and Enya:



The common theme of the Big Quest against Evilness supercedes the advanced technology, and instead enhances the aura of an Odyssean-like mythological fairy tale. Such a Quest holds parallels to e.g., Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, or American author Stephen King, who both use the dramaturgy of the protagonists being a child slaying the monster. In the case of Tolkien, this 'child' is depicted by the all-good-hearted Hobbits, who never gives up until justice is served.



### ***Yellowstone - a modern cowboy story***

Good versus Evil is also a central theme in the American TV-show *Yellowstone* – a neo-Western drama premiered on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018, created and directed by Taylor Sheridan (who is himself a former cowboy and wrangler). The main plot centres around the Dutton family, owner of the Yellowstone Ranch (the largest one in Montana), situated on Paradise Valley at the borders of both Yellowstone National Park and Broken Rock Indian Reservation. The main narrative concerns the Duttons conflict with greedy developers who want to exploit the land in favour of a resort and adjacent airport, while the Head Chief of Broken Reservation, *Chief Thomas Rainwater* plans to 'take back' the valley.

The show has had an accelerating growth in viewership from 5,5 million people in season 1 to 12,1 million watching season 5 – and this is in USA alone. Globally, the popularity spread as an increased number of

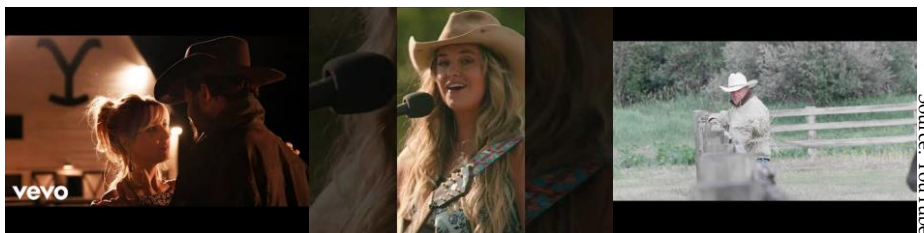
streaming services are buying the show (Schneider, 2023; Rice, 2022; [tv.parrotanalytics.com](https://tv.parrotanalytics.com); [www.allente.se](http://www.allente.se). Retrieved 2024-02-26). Another effect the TV show has brought is the impact on the state of Montana, contributing to both attracting tourists, while increasing tax incomes, creating job opportunities and increasing the income of the residents in Montana. "The television show *Yellowstone*, filmed in and around Montana's Bitterroot Valley in the western part of the state, has had a significant effect on the desire of people to visit our state" (Barkey & Weddell, 2023:17).

Furthermore, *Yellowstone* has become a paradigm shift in respect of what the audience demand, as there is a growing tiredness of shows depicting a life they have little in common. Instead they appreciate shows like *Yellowstone* as it depicts the every-day-life of 'average' people, in 'average' cities. This indicates an increased interest for the 'working-class' individual, in a sort of "rise of blue-collar stories that highlight the working class of farmers, ranchers, industrial workers, tradesmen [...] understandably appealing to those who feel their voice is rarely heard by the mainstream media" (Petty, 2024:para10). Another implication is the increased conflict between small-town issues and the wealthy, coastal elites (ibid.). Although not being explicitly ideological, *Yellowstone* has still been subject for politically oriented discussions whether it is a 'red state' drama or not. Right wings voters may indeed find support in the character *John Dutton* (played by American actor Kevin Costner) who pines for the 'good ol' days'. However, the show raises issues that might concern *any* viewer, regardless of ideological support, issues like land stewardship, business interests, environment pollution and exploitation – "all played out against a gorgeous Montana backdrop" (Murray, 2022:para 7).

Avoiding an explicit ideological stance, *Yellowstone* simply depicts a modern, Hemingway-portrayal-like epic saga of the old man and the sea - although situated in the mountains of Montana. As such, the main character *John Dutton* embodies the whole idea of preserving nature and timeless values from exploitation and extinction. *He* is not the villain here – he just wants to fight for what he believes to be morally right: to protect the land, the nature, the autonomy of the ranchers, the Indians at the Reservation, the people of Montana. As such, this 'old man' is in constant struggle against

‘the sea’ represented by industrialisation, modernity, profit, exploitation and, in the end, dehumanisation. Creator and Director Taylor Sheridan talks of this in the sense of kingdom, king and morality. Can you be both a ‘king’ and still act upon morality? Does the concept of moral really exist, or is it just about replacing one moral with another? “So does morality factor into the defense of the kingdom? And what does that make the king? And at the end of the day, that’s really what the show is about” (Interview in *The Atlantic*, Pappu, 2022). To Sheridan, it is important to allow the protagonists and ‘heroes’ to “be flawed, and really question what they’re doing morally, ethically, and keep them really human” (Interview in *Variety*, Huver, 2018: para 4).

Alike The Lord of the Rings films, music is a backbone, enhancing the simple, moral and ethical-driven life of Montana, its people and surrounding nature. This moral and ethic can be contextualised within what I call *primalness*. Although set in a modern time, it constantly fuses traditional practices and rites with the cowboy and native of today – heavily supported by traditional country music (*Americana* [my annotation]) playing a vital role.



Zach Bryan:  
[The Good I'll Do](#)

Lainey Wilson:  
[Watermelon Moonshine](#)

Kevin Costner & Modern West:  
[Won't Stop Loving You](#)

Now, you might ask what a rock ‘n’ roll icon, a fantasy story and a neo-Western have in common? The main reason is their similarities rather than differences. They all share ideas of the good society, based on moral and ethics – a society in which we not only live in, but also dream about...or maybe want to forget. The diversity within this common denominator implies that ideas and approaches can be shared across unexpected horizons, whether it’s Bowie, a Hobbit or a cowboy. In this argumentation, **creativity** plays a vital role together with **timelessness**, in the sense of creativity being timeless. The way my empirical body articulates and illustrates different

matters provides opportunities to critically understand normative dimensions of cultural contents *during specific periods*.

Creativity also provides possibilities to combat ideologies, indicating a close relation between creativity, philosophy and artistic expressions such as film, art, music etc. Art, as a whole, provides possibilities for creating timelessness by moving between time and place, elaborated by e.g. French philosopher Giles Deleuze. To him, the revelation of time as a duration, involves the tension between virtual and real simultaneously constituting the past and present. "The beguiling magic of cinema is that it presents the creation of time" (Luzucky & Smith, 2023:7). By **creating** time, we create both past, present *and* what is yet-to-come. This aspect of creativity and movement allows my empirical body to function both as critical witnesses *and* advocates of the good society, indicating that we can use it to gain sociological understanding and comprehension of how the world was, is...and can be.

### 1.2.1 Summary of main points

The essentials of chapter 1 highlights three main points:

- I. Plasticity and elasticity, as well as ideas of the good society – from a broader sociological discussion of ideological representations of our contemporary society,
- II. the relation between fiction and reality, supported by Marcuse's theoretical view on media production -combined with my specific interest in aesthetic and subjectivity
- III. the function of mainstream fiction as 'tipping-points' in respect of social change.

## 2 Previous research

The mapping of previous research is divided into three overarching themes: 1) **mainstream fiction and ideology**, 2) **mainstream and the audience**, and 3) **popular culture as means for societal change**. This progression has a dual purpose; to provide a general image of what has been done and identify important *scientific gaps* in previous research. To ensure a scientific valid review, the majority of the articles are peer reviewed, while mentioned anthologies/books are published by mainly universities.

### 2.1 Mainstream fiction and ideology

A general tendency within the relation between mainstream fiction and ideology is the articulation of **critique against the cultural industry**. During the early Frankfurt School<sup>10</sup>, its pioneering thoughts about culture production and consumption were mainly articulated in negative terms. What these thinkers formulated was a view on culture that more or less neglected or diminished the value in popular culture. As such, they considered popular culture, its producers *and* consumers to be both voices and victims of a quite strong ideological manipulation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Adorno, 1997; Jameson, 1979). To them, popular culture *only* served to manipulate the masses (Jameson, 1979) though ideologically created stereotyped images. "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:94), indicating manipulation as tool for transforming the audience into numb, passive and conformist, falling into the veils of illusion. "[t]he fact that the concept of human life ever existed is already forgotten" (Horkheimer & Adorno, op.cit.:126). Such a view on culture further indicates a function of creating imaginary images as solutions to 'real' problems (Jameson, 1979). Salient in this view is the use of *promesse du bonheur* [promise of happiness, my translation], in the sense of the paradoxical relation between lies and truth: the masses cannot follow the lies without *some shreds of truth* (Adorno, 1997).

However, among the Frankfurt School, we can also find ideas

<sup>10</sup> (The Institute for Social Research, founded in Frankfurt at the Goethe University 1923. [My annotation]),

approaching popular culture from a more positive point of view, mainly articulated through the concept of *flâneur*<sup>11</sup> (Benjamin, 2002; Benjamin, 2007; Baudelaire, 1970). The *flâneur* here becomes a counterforce to the prevailing ideologically ideals be *reversing* the meaning of popular culture. Instead of someone being intoxicated by the masses, while trying to duplicate them, the *flâneur* uses these masses to create a new society through creativity, benefitting from the force of this constant movement (Benjamin, 2002).

If looking at recent research, we can notice a quite dramatic shift from the early, rather dogmatic neglectance towards popular culture, into a much more open minded and diverse point if views. Although e.g., *Telling lies: the interviews of David Bowie* (McCarthy, 2019), discusses elements like manipulation and ideological indoctrination, it focuses on David Bowie's intentions to *reveal* this manipulative function though his work, by claiming popular culture and mass media *may in fact not be true* (McCarthy, op.cit.:90). This more positive attitude towards popular culture also involves keeping the idea of the *flâneur* as a game changer. "*As Long as There's Me. As Long as There's You*": *Trauma and Migration in David Bowie's Berlin Triptych* (Junyk, 2021), locates the *flâneur* in the context of Bowie using his memories and reflections to compare the European political situation during the mid-70s with 2013. To Junyk, this is one way to address Bowie as using the *flâneur* as means for societal change.

Another approach to contextualise popular culture within societal change is to look at specifically at films and cinema (Benjamin, 2007). Recent voices to address that is found in *Art, Cinema and Society: Sociological Perspectives* (do Nascimento (2019:9), arguing that other than holding great possibilities of mediating existing, central patterns of meaning, moral values and to enforce ideologies, films and cinema also function to exclude or marginalise opposing groups or ideas. In the specific case of film/cinema industry, Hollywood and Disneyland serve as two major symbols for the Americanisation of the contemporary popular culture in terms of creating imaginary realities, in which we are all naïve, numb children as the 'adults' are elsewhere (Baudrillard, 1992:205).

A recent attempt to update these thoughts are articulated in

<sup>11</sup> Someone who walks around with no specific plans other than just watching the surrounding people and society. [My annotation].

*Slavoj Žižek and Film Theory: A Subjective Study of Todd Philips' Joker* (Ud Din & Shah, 2023), focusing on *superstructure*. The authors discuss manipulation and indoctrination, in which mainstream functions as *telling us what to do*. This differs quite heavily from the dogmatic Frankfurt School as Ud Din and Shah uses popular culture (as in a box office film) to show how such films can be used as 'eye-openers' and counter forces to ideologically driven manipulation. Central to the authors is the concept of **inter-passivity** – however arguing that films can be used to *reverse* the dislocation from subject to object. By pointing at the ideology critique in *Joker*, the authors point at the complexity of films being dualistic in the sense of either being a lackey to manipulative forces, or a 'tipping-point' towards societal change, by illuminating how films can be produced to think *for* us (producing ways to believe, think and act etc.), or even telling us when it is appropriate to laugh, as in *canned laughter*. "We do not laugh at a joke in television because we are exhausted from a tiring day, so the television has set its own laughter that laughs for us" (Ud Din & Shah, op.cit.:24).

*Att se och synas. Filmutbud, kön och modernitet* [To see and be seen. Cinema, Gender and Cultural Modernity] (Lindell, 2004), uses the film *Breaking the Waves*, by Danish director Lars von Trier, to discuss gender issues. Drawing on theories on cultural modernity and how popular culture can be a potent vehicle for raising gender problematics, films can also be tools for maintaining historically long-lived reiterations of power structures – as in the case with *Breaking the Waves*, according to Lindell. This idea of history repeating itself through contemporary films, is somewhat challenged in *Populärkulturstudier: Att vetenskapliggöra den omedelbara upplevelsen* [Popular culture studies: To scientificise the immediate experience] (Lindgren, 2005). Arguing how the contemporary 'fine art' has incorporated artists like Frank Zappa, Any Warhol or Quentin Tarantino, is also to point at the transformation of popular culture into becoming the new leader on the cultural arena. One result of such a dislocation is a marginalisation of 'fine arts' depriving it from its former suppressive power. This can be seen as a direct response to German sociologist Jürgen Habermas' idea of 'fine art' offering possibilities to bring modern society together, as a source of solidarity (Coleman, 2016:189).

Another take on solidarity is presented in *Mitt namn är Shaft En*



*populärkulturell ikon i tre olika skepnader* [My name is Shaft. Three times Shaft as a popular-cultural icon] (Ehrström & Dahlstedt, 2020). Focusing on the fictive character *Shaft*, the authors argue for the value in using film to discuss time, place and race, in relation to the political polarisation of the American society. Being set in three different films, *Shaft* becomes a symbol for the African American community during 1971, 2000 and 2019. As such, films can be used as tools for exposing us to civil rights movement and active African American protests, during a period of “neoliberal ideals, and in current times, with heightened polarization and strongly voiced Black Lives Matter protests” (Ehrström & Dahlstedt, op.cit.:313).

## 2.2 Mainstream fiction and audience

Central in mainstream fiction and popular culture is **the audience**, the consumer. *Art, Cinema and Society: Sociological Perspectives* (do Nascimento, 2019), emphasises this in terms of *watching* being a powerful tool for analysing social processes. Imperative here is the question of **agency** as the audience is in charge of *what* to watch and *how* to watch. “What is “watched” is the same for each individual, although what is “visualized” (through imagination) is unique to each one” (do Nascimento, 2019:6). Watching is also an essential tool for mirroring the audience’ minds, while evoking reflections (Liu, 2021), of which David Bowie’s own television consumption is considered an inspiration, when contextualised within watching patterns (October, 2019: Stratton; Palmer, 2020; Tate, 2020). “It doesn’t matter who puts what in the TV, by the end of the year there’s a whole format that the TV put together” (October, 2019:106).

Locating Bowie’s fascination for the screen (both TV and film), in terms of mimicry, adaption, allusion, reworking and imitation, he is explicitly considered a ‘tipping-point’ – especially in the context of musical genre Glam Rock (Tate, 2020). Its reversed style, attempting to *reveal* consumerism, lack of authenticity and false facades of a society increasingly converting into a big theatre. From that perspective, Bowie serves as both rock star, movie star *and* artistic chameleon, carrying his cultural power of his image onto the screen (Palmer, 2020:174).

Audience is also essential in terms of **subjectivisation**<sup>12</sup> and **agency**. In the case of David Bowie, this is articulated through his use of *personas* as means for challenging the structures of popular culture and identity issues (Devereux, Dillane & Power, 2015). *Personas* here function to illustrate the society shaped by popular culture, while simultaneously enhance Bowie as a symbol for a necessary constant movement and transformation (Usher & Fremaux, 2015:56; Mendes & Perrott, 2020).

The essentiality of the audience is emphasised in terms of **'bottom-up'-perspective**. *Scenes from an Audience: The auteur* (Van Belle, 2019) and *"It's No Longer Your Film": Fictions of Authorship in Lynch's Mulholland Drive* (Alsop, 2019), put focus on this in relation to **agency**, in respect of **cinema memories** and **periodisation**. This involves our cinema memory always being performative (Van Belle, 2019) based on physical place and social context (like the physical cinema). As such, our memories, perceptions, reactions and interactions are *always* conditioned, affecting temporal situations. Central here is the argument of dislocating the relation between *auteur*<sup>13</sup> and audience. Having a **'bottom-up'-perspective**, the audience is given an extended agency, meaning they *precede the auteur's own approach* to his creation (Alsop, 2019:51). This would imply the *audience* to be the real author/creator, generating increased possibilities of **subjectivisation**, while generating potential 'tipping-points' (Ud Din & Shah, 2023; Jorgensen, 2010).

To elaborate this, a third party is added to the equation: *the producers and intermediaries* (Heinich, 2022; Martel, 2010), especially in respect of aspects of moral and ethics (Laugier, 2021). Today we get our moral 'education' via box-offices, popular novels, binge watching TV-shows on streaming sites, implying we should take popular culture more seriously, as we can benefit from its depictions of society on an easily accessible manner. It also implies the value of popular culture in terms of *shared experience*: "subjectivation that takes place through sharing and commenting on public and ordinary material that is integrated into ordinary life" (Laugier, op.cit.:266). The idea of popular culture serving as educator of moral and ethics is further enhanced by characters like *John Dutton* in *Yellowstone*,

<sup>12</sup> The process of becoming a responsible, autonomous individual who is able to think and act freely. [My annotation].

<sup>13</sup> A film maker with such a personal and unbounded approach that we often consider the film maker as 'author' of the film [My annotation].

appealing to the audience in terms of inspiration and wanting to ‘mimicry’ the moral of the character (Maldonado & Mattheis, 2022:75).

## 2.3 Popular culture as means for societal change

Popular culture as means for societal change is nothing new in sociology, and several attempts have been made to illustrate the value in using this tool. From a Scandinavian context, popular cultural has been emphasised from different settings, however all sharing the idea of using cultural to understand society and existential matters. Despite focusing on hip-hop as a subculture, rather than musical genre (Berggren, 2021), films as tools for depicting existential dilemmas (Axelson, 2008) or children’s theatre as means for enhancing children in the relation audience-*auteur* (Lidén, 2022), they all depict popular culture as potent tool for societal change. As such, popular culture functions as delimited ‘case’ from which we can zoom out and cover more general issues like racism, gender and sexuality (Berggren, 2021:7). This is in line with advocating the flexibility between micro-macro perspective as means for broadening the sociological horizon by employing what is often considered ‘non-scientific’ empirical material (Larsen, 2011:392).

This indicates an increased ‘globalisation’ in the approach to popular culture. Other than class, gender or ideological manipulation, questions of racism and sexuality gain increasingly greater grounds. One such a dilemma is whitewashing in the film industry (Higgins, 2023), while another is to use Bollywood films [the Indian film industry, my annotation] to discuss the situation of women’s status in relation to e.g., #MeToo and similar movements (Sheetal & Smita, 2023). Globalisation is also salient in terms of speed, as popular culture is rapidly moving towards an omnipotent globalisation resulting in not one mainstream but *many* – depending on its localisation (Martel, 2010; Dawson, 2021).

Contemporary research thus advocates a ‘global ideology’ involving a greater diversity allowing ‘local voices’. This challenges the idea of *soft power* or the fact that although Hollywood may no longer have sovereignty over the global popular culture, the technology and innovations used in today’s film industry still have their origin in Hollywood (Martel, 2010; Dawson, 2019). However, the global success of e.g., *Lord of the Rings*,

points at 'local voices' such as the New Zealand director Peter Jackson, are able to challenge this *soft power*. Jackson's strategy of fusing classical *mise-en-scène*<sup>14</sup> with the latest cinematic techniques, while favouring New Zealand as primarily set for filming, could be considered a challenge to the 'American' domination (Dawson, 2019). In terms of **event films**, Jackson's *auteurship* also enhances other globally interested aspects such as pollution, exploitation and accelerating industrialisation (Ekman, 2012; Pagello, 2010). This allows an increased interaction between film and audience by combining technology, narration and cinematic abilities beyond horizons imprinted with language and cultural practices (Pagello, 2010:234-35). Another way of approaching the value of global ideology is to use popular culture as instrument for **protectionism** as means for fighting territorial exploitation, extinction of indigenous cultures, and monetary profit based on imperialistic-oriented practices. One example of such advocates for protectionism is the TV-show *Yellowstone*, illustrating the complexity of history repeating itself and how *Yellowstone* becomes a strong representative for **resilience**. "It also affords space, time, and voice to Native American modes of resilience and acts of resistance – verbal and otherwise" (Rabitsch & Pyrka, 2022:96).

Thus, what has happened in the aftermath of the Frankfurt School is a dislocation from dismissing popular culture as *only* being lackeys of manipulation and indoctrination to instead becomes a powerful voice of agency and subjectivisation. This involves new ways of approaching the very crafts of contemporary filmmaking, transforming it to the so called 'cyber reality'. This increased digitalisation however also have negative implications, as digitally 'fake' trailers etc. might change the rules of the game with negative effects on creators and audience (Voces Fernández, 2015). Another game changer is how Bourdieu use French 1900<sup>th</sup> century painter Édouard Manet's art of naked women. By re-locating Manet in a contemporary setting, Bourdieu illustrates the reiteration of how 'fine arts' still categorise and shape culture and creativity through prevailing societal manuscripts (Bourdieu, 2017).

In terms of 'tipping-points', the music event Eurovision song Contest (ESC) has risen as a powerful actor in respect of the queer

<sup>14</sup> Place on stage. My translation.

community, challenging traditional norms of 'good behaviour and taste'. From being a post-war music event advocating peace and unity, ESC has now, more or less, being claimed as essential symbol for queer, drag and the whole LGBTTIQA+ movement (Rosenberg, 2020). The gender aspect is also the topic for analyses on the NETFLIX TV-show *Sex Education*, turning towards an audience of queer teenagers and how this TV-show plays a significant role for identity-formation for LGBTTIQA+ youth. As the characters in *Sex Education* uses various to popular culture-tool to explore desires, forbidden fantasies and gender expressions, mainstream fiction can advantageously be used as a positive instrument for identity-formations (Vázquez-Rodríguez *et al.*,2021). In line with queer-movements, feminist scholars have increasingly turned to mainstream culture, due to a resurgence in popular culture at large. This coincides with a rise in feminism activism who uses popular culture as a channel for discussing issues of violence, sexual harassment, reproductive injustice etc. *One* way to approach this is to look at lyrics of female-performed songs in Sweden and Denmark between 2017-2018, pointing at a majority of neoliberal feminist themes, followed by more radical and liberal feminist traditions (Feo & Lundstedt, 2020).

The question of taste set in the context of children's culture consumption indicates a lack of cultural legitimacy as children's activities such as comics, cartoons and videogames, do not count as 'proper, fine art'. It is not until adults consume such cultural expressions that we call comics 'art'. This indicates a concern in respect of dividing the significance of cultural expressions in children and adult, leaving the 'children's audience' without agency (Aquatias, 2017:15). Children and agency are also a topic in *The Portrayal of Mental Illness in Popular Children's Programs on Netflix: A Content and Thematic Analysis* (Donohue & Swords, 2024) exploring depictions of mental illness in children's programmes on NETFLIX. A majority of these programmes labeled the characters suffering from mental illness as *crazy*, *insane* and *nuts* while depicting them as dangerous, unpredictable and untrustworthy. Being portrayed as an isolated aggressive villain who is 'nuts' calls for examining even closer how contemporary mainstream fiction depict mental illness in childrens programmes (Donohue & Swords, 2024:102).

## 2.4 Reflexive comments

What the review of previous research implies is a clear shift in how contemporary scholars approach popular culture compared to the early Frankfurt School. Indeed there is a strong critique against societal manuscripts, dogmatic norms and the manipulation of the masses, *however*, as this critique is even more powerful articulated today, the main difference is that *today popular culture is seen as a valuable instrument for illustrating both societal dilemmas and possibilities of change*. This involves an increasingly interest for questions concerning **agency**, **creativity**, **subjectivisation** and the dislocation from *auteur to audience* – indicting popular culture being a resourceful tool for educating moral and ethics as a way to create the good society. To me, this is a valuable, even necessary step to take to enable us to embrace the advantages of mainstream fiction instead of reproducing the dichotomy of fine art versus the art of the populace. Ever since the idea of the *flâneur* (Benjamin, 2002), there has been a straight progression towards popular culture being part of scientific analyses – and as such, acting as ‘tipping-points’ for societal change. The ontology of this actual paper coincides on various occasions with this progress, i.e., how to use mainstream fiction to approach, at least, the idea of good society 2.0. – based on an increased ‘bottom-up’-perspective, blurring the lines between *auteur* and audience, between children and adults and between gender, race, culture and socio-economic class.

What this paper also agrees on is the magnitude of popular culture: today *everyone* has access to films, TV-shows, novels, music, music videos on YouTube – *everything* is there for *everyone* to share and be part of. This paradigm shift in consumer behaviour will have implications for creating ‘tipping-points’, which a majority of previous research show. The ‘global ideology’ of popular culture implies that the bigger this culture grows, the narrower the distance, meaning today *everything* is accessible on YouTube, NETFLIX, Spotify etc.etc. This is an important note as this globalised ideology involves a constant growing amount of culture productions *and audience* – which calls for a growing sociological focus on popular culture to approach societal dilemmas.

However, in relation to this actual paper, I have identified two major gaps which I find necessary to discuss in relation of updating the good

society into a contemporary setting. Although no identical studies have been made, compared to this actual paper, previous research has touched upon several similar topics, but with the absence of:

- I. a clear focus on the tension between **plasticity** and **elasticity**
- II. an explicit 'up-dated' discussion of moral and ethics

Here is also where this actual paper takes another turn, compared to previous research as this paper enhance the necessity of elasticity as prerequisites for a good society (involving agency and subjectivisation). In this elasticity, elements of moral and ethics are essential. Referring to traditional myths and fairy tales, we need to 'up-date' moral and ethics to fit our contemporary society and what mainstream fictional expressions we currently face. Alike David Bowie's constantly changing his *personas*, our view on moral and ethics also needs to be *elastic* – not plastic. Having identified these important gaps, this paper contributes to broaden even further the sociological discussion of good society contextualised within contemporary popular culture, mainstream fiction, mass media and social media. *One* way to illustrate this contribution is the elaboration of two parallel processes (fig.5):

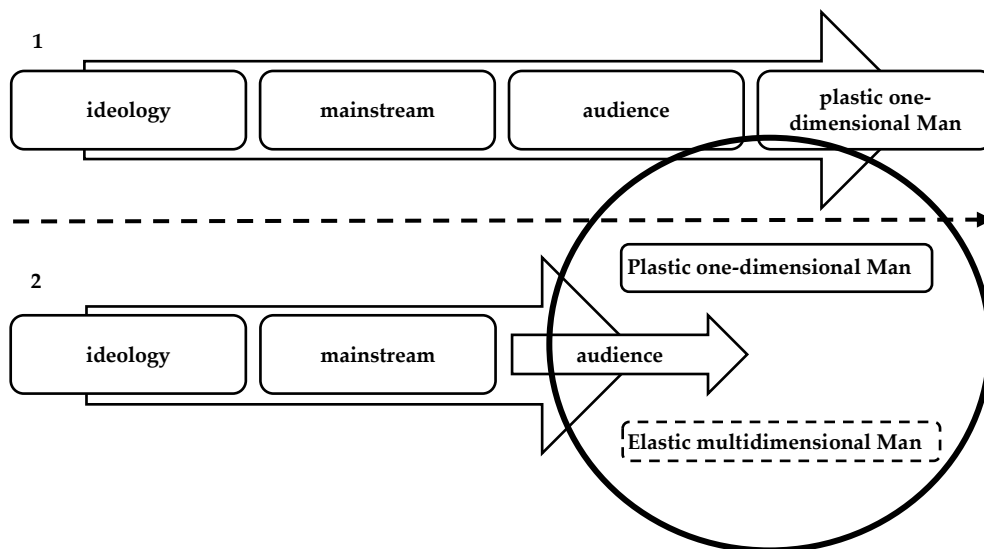


Figure 5 Process 1 indicates a movement towards the plastic one-dimensional individual, while process 2 indicates a movement of either the plastic one-dimensional individual *or* the elastic multidimensional individual. (My model).

Process 1 illustrates the early dogmatic views on popular culture at large, while process 2 illustrates the 'new' wave in sociological analyses, pointing at the complexity and duality of popular culture. This paradigm shift is imperative and something this actual paper fully supports, as process 2 allows for an increased possibility of creating agency and subjectivisation through mainstream fiction. Hence this paper advocates a critical perspective towards the plastic society at large and dogmatic 'hard core' theorists who choose to neglect the creative, positive power in popular culture.

An important remark here though: this paper does *not* imply a dislocation from Right to Left, Poor to Rich or White to Black etc. – instead elasticity and good society 2.0 rather imply how popular culture and mainstream fiction can be used to **unite individuals towards multidimensionality**. This is evident in how previous research covers a variety of sociologically relevant topics like gender, children vs adults, feminism, mental illness, agency etc. – an important progression moving away from earlier dogmatic view on Hollywood and 'the American way' *only* being an abomination. The 'global ideology' embracing a multitude of approaches to popular culture, from hip hop to box office event films to American neo-western TV-shows. This indicates a greater awareness among sociologists and other scholars of the multifaceted value in employing mainstream fiction as empirical material. But – what is lacking is the vital focus on elasticity and an updated view on moral and ethics – situated in the good society 2.0. Hence, positioning myself in a general discourse of good society and societal change, this paper simultaneously functions as a more 'niched' contribution enhancing the relation between popular culture, plasticity and elasticity.



## 3 Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical framework combines three concepts: German American philosopher Herbert Marcuse's **One-dimensional Man** and French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's **Doxa** and **Habitus**. To give an overview of both their immanent relevance as well as for this specific paper, I will draw their main contributions to the discussion about the conflict between plasticity and elasticity, mainstream fiction and good society. The framework also illustrates Marcuse representing the ideological dimension of this paper, with special focus on mass media and mainstream culture, while Bourdieu represents the subject of the audience, its practices and actions.

### 3.1 Marcuse: One-dimensional Man

Essential in Marcuse's concept of **one-dimensional Man** is the chronological process **culture production** → **culture consumption** → **positive thinking**. This is essential when trying to depict *and explain* the conflict between plasticity and elasticity. Marcuse's focus on pointing at the dangers with **singularity**, as in **delimiting our ability to think, question and act**, generates the dislocation from **false consciousness** → 'true' consciousness, luring the individual into a state of **false freedom** and **false satisfaction**.

By referring to **objective alienation**, Marcuse argues how mainstream can serve as a tool for the individual to 'actively' re-shape its subjectivity into objectivity. As such, mainstream fiction implicates the creation of an ideologically desired state of 'freedom'. Important here is Marcuse not considering freedom as a purely individual phenomenon, but rather a *communal* one, profoundly rooted in social and political institutions. Instead freedom is naturally integrated in the idea of good society "in which human will and reason ensure the maintenance of free community" (Wainwright, 1987:37). Objective alienation and re-shaped subjectivity represent how individuals increasingly identified themselves within an existence that has been imposed upon us. Hence the transformation from illusion to reality, in which violent forms of alienation wipes out all traces of humanity. The individual "has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence" (Marcuse, 2007:13).

This ultimate result from the process of culture production and consumption, will inevitably lead to an increased conflict between plasticity and elasticity, dividing society in two groups: dominant and oppressed. The **dominant group** oversees the ongoing manipulation, represented by mainstream fiction, mass media and other indoctrinating cultural media. To Marcuse, four aspects are of utter significance: **culture production, mass consumption and mainstream fiction**, and **positive thinking**.

**Culture production** is a powerful (and sometimes violent) tool for gaining increasingly social control. This production begins already *before* its mass production of various mass media and their centralised control. Here Marcuse points at a double strategy: 1) we can either see how it equals social classes in the sense of worker and employee enjoying the same programme on TV or read the same magazine, or 2) we can identify a fundamental ideological function to the “extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population” (Marcuse, 2007:10). This is addressed in terms of **political universe** – the last stage of the historical project called society, whose sole purpose is to control and rule. Hence this political universe having no place in the elastic sphere (fig.3).

Referring to the Frankfurt School, Marcuse approaches mass media and culture production in a sense of rationality and capitalism, pointing at the political universe functioning primarily to incorporate new modes of social control which produces both “a decline in the revolutionary potential of the working class and a decline of individuality, freedom and democracy, as well as the stabilization of capitalism” (Marcuse, 2007:xxiv). His argument to how technological rationality has transformed into political rationality indicates that technology and production solely function as totalitarian tools preventing *any* signs of opposition (Marcuse, op.cit.:xlvii). This is also where I and Marcuse part ways as I believe in the possibilities of finding opposing, revolutionary-oriented voices in society – especially in mainstream. Only the last 10 years has provided us with a variety of examples that have potential to make social difference; the film *Joker* (Phillips, 2019), exposing us to a strong societal critique, the TV-show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (Murray, 2009), taking drag culture into our living rooms, or the globally successful TV-show *The Handmade’s Tale’s* (Miller, 2017) depiction

of a totalitarian, dystopic society. Although not standing on the barricades, these examples still have potentials to inspire actions for social change.

Regarding **mass consumption and mainstream fiction**, Marcuse defines this as a dominant social administration using mass consumption of culture production into transforming plurality into singularity – while articulating such a singular existence being equal to a ‘good life’ (Marcuse, 2007:259). In relation to the plastic and elastic sphere (fig.3), mass consumption á la Marcuse, advantageously can be located within the plastic sphere. The idea of singularity is also vital in reflection to my empirical body, and how it portrays culture production and the conflict between plasticity (singularity) and elasticity (plurality). Hence mass consumption functioning to control individuals by distracting them from ‘real’ social problems. Mainstream fiction has the same significance, functioning as examples of “hidden sources of repressions and neglected transformative possibilities” (Bronner, 2017:100). This might appear a bit too dogmatic, compared to my own approach viewing fiction from a more dualistic point of view, involving both negative *and* positive implications in terms of social domination or change.

Marcuse, to a certain extent, articulates relevant ideas describing the individual being sucked up into the social apparatus with the result of not only *becoming*, but also *identifying* with society. Here I locate a dilemma as such a one-sided approach risk to not seeing the forest for all the trees. Hence the risk in failing to acknowledge the dwelling potential in mainstream fiction. His argument of the more consumption, the more objectification, embodiment of prevailing norms and ideals – and ultimately de-humanisation, illustrates the increased transformation from subject into servants to the prevailing power. “This is the pure form of servitude: to exist as an instrument, as a thing” (Marcuse, 2007:36) – a clear Marxist-oriented critique, indicating how the consumer-driven society, its consumerism, advertisement, ideology and mass culture integrate individuals into the prevailing capitalist system (Marcuse, 2007:xxx).

Defining **positive thinking** as a totalitarian way of thinking, only acknowledging the ruling rationality, it represents a system in which opposing voices are silenced via the incorporation of **false truths of positive thinking**. As such, society denies *any* alternative way of thinking about

reality, preventing *all* possibilities of social change. Marcuse refers to this as the triumph of positive thinking, based on a one-dimensional philosophy, covering *all* reason and the power of *negative thinking*, or “the triumph of the one-dimensional reality over all contradiction” (Marcuse, 2007:128).

Contextualised within reversibility, Marcuse’s use of **negative thinking** indicates both *positive and creative* implications for the individual. It functions as a tool for raising opposition to the prevailing social *status quo*. However, the attempts to fight back this violent technological oppression often ends with the individual *actively* subordinates to the “things which shape their life [...] by accepting the law of things [...] the law of their society” (Marcuse, 2007:13). This would imply how Marcuse considers society to be based on hegemonic powers in which the citizens freely and actively support the increasing one-dimensional society.

### 3.2 Bourdieu: Doxa and Habitus – a combination

To complement and deepen Marcuse’s theoretical platform, Bourdieu’s concepts of doxa and habitus will serve to point at the immanent relation between Marcuse and Bourdieu – but also at the complexity of the matter. This theoretical combination furthermore serves as illustrating the conflict between plasticity and elasticity, as both doxa, habitus, and positive thinking, can be seen as hindrance to achieve a ‘good society’. There is a logic relation between One-dimensional Man and the concepts of Doxa and Habitus (fig.6), with doxa and habitus functioning as a superstructure, shaping and sanctioning both culture production and consumption – and ultimately the desired outcome: One-dimensional Man.

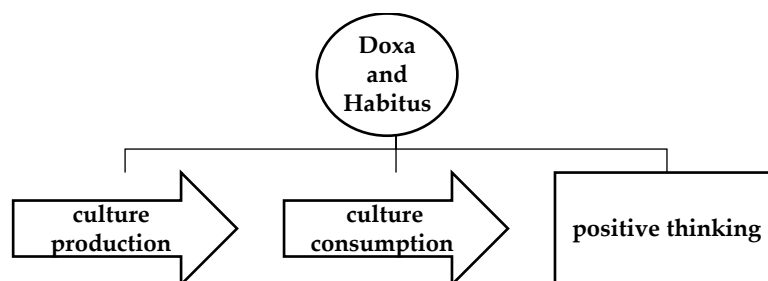


Figure 6 The relation between Doxa and Habitus sanctioning and dominating the process of culture production, consumption and positive thinking. (My model).

### 3.2.1 Doxa

Defined as a set of fundamental beliefs which, so self-consciously dogmatic and 'obvious' that we tend to never question them. Being apparently natural beliefs or opinions, intimately linked to *field* and *habitus*", doxa contributes to "its reproduction in social institutions, structures and relations as well as in minds and bodies, expectations and behaviour" (Deer, 2010:119-20). Hence taken-for-granted social assumptions and non-questioned 'truths'.

This holds similarities to Marcuse's ideas of culture production turning us into 'Hollywood-like' one-dimensional stereotypes according to a certain ideological order. Contemporary examples of such practices are seen everywhere on film, TV, social media etc., in terms of culture production destroying our possibilities to think and develop a 'free' mind. Fundamental here is what Marcuse calls a *position of strength*. Today cultural production has reached a level of domination never seen before while "conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living" (Marcuse, 2007:xl). This indicates how doxa successfully has been internalised within the individual who sees no other order but the one-dimensional. Hence the non-reflected production and re-production of orders and practices. *Et voila!* Here we have evidence for doxa being successfully dictating the *right way* to think, feel and act (Maton, 2010:57; Deer, 2010:120). Doxa becomes normality because of its dominating *ensorship*, determining what can and cannot be said. "The more effective this censorship is, the less apparent it becomes and the more it appears as the axiomatic, natural 'way of the world' of *doxa*" (Jenkins, 2007:156).

### 3.2.2 Habitus

Defined as dispositions (or properties) of social agents, individuals, groups or institutions, habitus involves a **structured and structuring structure**. This indicates an agenda of behaviours directed towards "certain ends without being consciously directed to these ends, or determined by them" (Bourdieu, 1990:10). Two central aspects are emphasised:

- the relation between **social structure** and **the individual's actions**
- the ways the **external social** and the **internal Self** are united and shape one another.

Distinguishing **structured** (former and current circumstances, e.g., upbringings, education etc.) from **structuring**, habitus shapes the individual's current and future practices in a systematic way. This gives a system of dispositions consisting of different properties, generating perceptions, appreciations and practices.

A necessary note is the element of **durability** and **transposability**, meaning habitus functioning within a variety of the social scene. Durability, however, doesn't imply a static state of existence, rather we should see it in the light of a combination of past, present and future. This combination illustrates habitus as simultaneously durable *and* transposable phenomenon – *dependent* on what doxic truth is currently 'governing' society. Central here is **disposition**, in the context of bringing together structure and tendency. Socio-cultural patterns are being shaped and re-shaped through both the results of socially organised actions and behaviours – *and* how this creates a way of being that we *believe* is the normal (Maton, 2010:51). Hence **durable** being a central element, indicating habitus operating over time, while simultaneously being transposed due to temporal aspects. Cultural production today may not be the same as in the 1960s, for example, but the foundations remain the same: to incorporate individuals into ideological desired behaviours delimiting their agency and subjectivisation. However habitus cannot act alone, as it needs to be accompanied by capital and field as shown in the equation below (Maton, 2010:51):

$$[(\text{habitus}) (\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

Unpacking this equation, we can understand practice being the result from the relation between a person's dispositions (habitus) and positions in a field (capital) – all within the current state of play on the social arena (field). Meaning, the individual is steered into certain behaviour because of the *obscure, unconscious and double relation* between habitus and field (Maton, 2010:51.). This further indicates the complexity of the elements defining our practices and actions, explained by Bourdieu as "the physical and social spaces we occupy are [...] structured and it is the relation between these two structures that give rise to practices (Maton, op.cit.:52). Hence the outspoken **relational perspective** represented by practices being the result of *relations between* one's habitus and one's current circumstances (ibid.) Salient in

habitus is the division of culture into 'fine and lesser fine art' (fig.7) – inevitably divide people into different groups with different status.

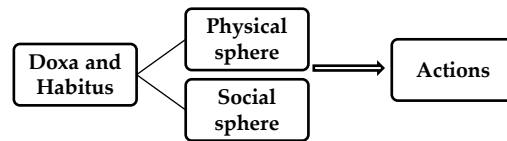


Figure 7 Doxa and habitus conditioning the individual's two different spheres, resulting in unconscious actions and practices. (My model).

Intellectual bourgeoisie residing within 'fine art' will inevitably distinct them from the populace. And this is important, as the bourgeoisie reflect themselves against the 'mainstream' populace – and vice versa. As such, both groups actively re-produce a doxic division of people. A further complexity is the division between *condition* and *knowledge*, explained by Bourdieu as on one side we have the conditioning part, while on the other side we have the cognitive construction. Thus, habitus contributes to constitute "the field as a meaningful world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:127). This would imply that not only individuals' sphere is divided, but also their minds by being told a different meaning depending on what social level they are located within. Noticeable though is while Bourdieu refers to doxa and habitus being aspects of a constant process, this process also provides constant **possibilities of choices** based on what are available, our disposition (habitus), and how we *embody* this habitus. Hence doxa, habitus and sphere being simultaneously durable and transposable (Maton, 2010:51-2).

In the case of fiction, Bourdieu calls this acting under *mauvais foi* (bad faith), implying that the individual act unconsciously, yielding to external social pressure by adopting false values and norms (Grenfell, 2010:161). The result are individuals disowning their sense of freedom as autonomous human beings (Childers & Hentzi, 1995:103). This *mauvais foi* is also a central part of the doxa we all must obey.

Here a distinction is necessary between *my* view on habitus and Bourdieu's, as mine differs from Bourdieu's more dogmatic-oriented view. Bourdieu's early definitions located habitus in a more 'transposable' setting, with systems of durable, transposable dispositions and structured structures. These structures served to regulate individuals 'perceptions and behaviours

(but without the obedience to rules) (Bourdieu, 1977:73). Later on, he turned to a more 'stable' approach locating habitus in a system based on inequality (in the social space) – and as such preventing flexibility and change. to me, I find this conflicting in respect of agents and agency. If habitus is re-produced and maintained, that would imply some sort of *active* agent, however, based on Bourdieu's reasoning, I would rather talk of the *passively* active agent, with really no agency other than the one, delimited by doxa and the 'rules' of the different fields. So, we can still talk of agents and agency, but in terms of passive agents and delimited agency.

However, as habitus contains both agents and agency, implies the *potentiality* of using habitus in a *positive* sense of creating social change, using mainstream fiction as 'tipping points'. The duality of society implies that habitus *per se* is not 'evil', it is not the Devil's apparatus, it rather depends on the extent we understand it, and are prepared to 'put up a fight', seriously trying to dislocate the apparent unconsciousness into consciousness. This positive approach to habitus is far from the positive thinking described by Marcuse, advocating habitus to be dualistic in terms of stagnation *or* change. Here **temporality** plays a vital role as society anno 2024 uses mainstream fiction to a larger extent than before – indicating habitus might being more flexible than described by Bourdieu.

Although having a static foundation, its articulations might be increasingly flexible according to changing social currents and tendencies. Temporality is also quite essential and relevant as it the conflict between plasticity and elasticity involves temporality in terms of *status quo* versus progression.

### 3.2.3 Theoretical relevance

Contextualised within the good society, plasticity and elasticity, the combination of Marcuse and Bourdieu is highly relevant and applicable. Although being sufficient tools on their own, their combination illustrates the advantage of considering doxa and habitus to be an extension of One-dimensional Man. Marcuse systemic level needs to be contextualised within the individual level. This will facilitate the understanding of the processual relation of ideology, production, re-production, doxa, habitus and one-dimensionality (fig.8).



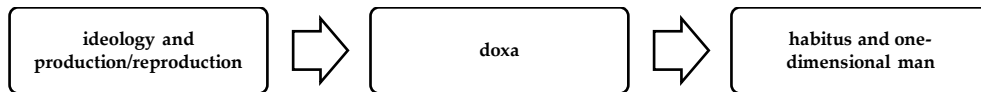
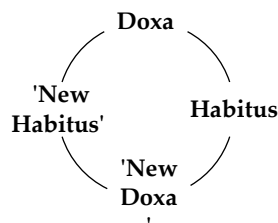


Figure 8 The relational process between ideology, doxa, one-dimensional man and habitus. (My model).

When talking about the chronological process of **culture production** → **culture consumption** → **positive thinking**, we need to involve what is initiating the process (ideology and doxa) as well as the outcome (habitus and one-dimensionality). As such, we end up with a combination of both circularity and linearity.



**culture production** → **culture consumption** → **positive thinking**

Figure 9 The circularity of doxa and habitus resulting in the linear process of production, consumption and thinking. (My model).

The specific wordings **circular** and **linear** rimes well with fiction, in the sense of narratives and myths containing both progression *and* a circularity (as in preservation of values and ethics to shape the future). These notions are also valuable in terms of reversibility, indicating possibilities to reverse the circularity into another outcome than plastic and one-dimensional.

### 3.3 Critical reflections

My own position in relation to the theoretical framework is structured from three aspects:

- I. a **structural and individual** relational perspective, with Marcuse on the systemic level (production and system), and Bourdieu on the individual level (habitus).
- II. the connection between **the Frankfurt School and ideology**
- III. the **aesthetic focus** (Marcuse approach to media and body, and Bourdieu's approach to cultural norms and patterns).

German American author Paul Mattick's emphasis claims Marcuse to be both generalising and pessimistic in his critique of the technologically driven, totalitarian and capitalistic society. As such, Marcuse is often accused of being far too utopic in his ideas about the ideal society, lacking concrete tools for how to achieve such a good society (Mattick, 1972:8). Furthermore, Mattick objects towards Marcuse's unrealistic descriptions of existing conditions, by claiming them to be just observable *tendencies*. The Marxist-driven critical theory lacks concepts to bridge the gap between present and future. It doesn't express neither promises, nor show any success – it just remains negative. As such, Matticks considers critical theory to be only a *beau geste*<sup>15</sup> (Mattick, 1972:8-9). Referring to this critique is a strategy for position my own theoretical niche, compared to other directions within the sociology of popular culture.

Combining Marcuse with Bourdieu can be somewhat problematic. The critical theory-driven Frankfurt School emphasises modern culture in terms of hegemonic manipulation on *all* societal levels, concerning *all* social classes (Jameson, 1979). This challenges Bourdieu's view on a strict hierarchical class perspective (Gartman, 2013), as critical theory seeks to liberate humans from overarching hegemonic circumstances (Horkheimer, 2002). However the main collision lies in the concrete issue of diversity in the culture of modern society. While Bourdieu talks in terms of ranking, hierarchy and dominant classes distributing power, the Frankfurt School instead focuses on how culture production and consumption hides inequality "by creating the illusion that all members of society are basically equal" (Gartman, 2013:1-2). Although colliding ideas, I still claim the value in combining Marcuse and Bourdieu, as both thinkers emphasise issues concerning **agency** and **subjectivisation**.

Critics towards Bourdieu mainly focuses on doxa and habitus, with special focus on delimiting agency and possibilities of change while ignoring the constraining effects social contexts have on individuals, as well as debating the seemingly unconscious formation of habitus (Couldry, 2005:357). If *fields* are able to change, be fluid and dynamic, so should doxa and habitus, pointing a direct critique against Bourdieu's static definition inevitably affecting the individual (Sayer, 2010, Couldry, 2005, Webb *et al.*,

<sup>15</sup> Noble but meaningless gesture. My translation.

2002). Bourdieu is also criticised for neglecting the significance of class, as he 'writes them off' as agents of historical changes, while simultaneously doing the same with the bourgeois (Mattick, 1972:7).

There is also the concern of Bourdieu being dogmatic, rather 'closing' than 'open'. For instance, British researcher Anthony King (2000), raises concerns about unconsciously internalising doxic truths and habitus, will simultaneously generate no individual agency, or ability to understand 'the danger'. To King, this prevents all attempts of social change, as we would be unable to see and understand problematic issues (King, 2000:427). The foundational problem with this *hysteric* dogmatism, sidestepping rather than solving the issue with habitus, is to King similar with blocking any social change. "If every individual is constrained by his habitus [...] the objective conditions will simply be reproduced (by the habitus) and no social change will take place" (King, 2000:428). This points at the fundamental paradox as any social change would require "knowing active individuals who would creatively rethink the principles of their actions" (ibid.).

The critique against Marcuse and Bourdieu points at the important complexity involving one-dimensionality, doxa and habitus – which I to a certain extent agree with. Although the necessity in emphasising the violent power related to ideology and manipulation, we should not oversee the power in humanity. Individuals *are* capable of looking at society with critical eyes (of which this paper is one of many examples). Indeed precautions needs to be taken against doxic truths, but at the same time embrace the idea of *change is still possible*. We cannot just give up! This is also why I disagree with the critique against Marcuse about lacking fundamental tools for advocating social change. On the contrary I find his discussion about technology, production, consumption and positive thinking as potent instruments for revealing hidden ideological agendas and 'false truths'.

*One* way to overcome the obstacle of Marcuse being far too abstract in his formulations, is to combine him with doxa and habitus, as that will help bringing Marcuse 'down to earth'. What I do find problematic though, is the dogmatic approach towards agency as this becomes paradoxical to me. We cannot, on one hand, express critique towards society, while on the other hand claim we have no possibilities to change society. Marcuse's somewhat *too* dogmatic arguments about the totalitarian,

technological society, might indicate a risk of *not* acknowledging other, non-technological driven issues like ethnicity, gender etc. To defend Marcuse, we could claim the totalitarian technological society functioning as an umbrella, dominating *all* other issues that might occur.

Finally, a few words on critical theory. To me, critical theory is highly important and necessary in discussions about plasticity, elasticity and good society. *However*, I would personally advocate a more 'open' view as in acknowledging positive implications to a greater extent, which I believe critical theory may be lacking. Viewing mainstream fiction and cultural production as having *only* negative implications might, to me, cause a somewhat bias view of both mainstream fictions, *its audience*, and its *auteurs*.

## 4 Method

Having a **critical approach**, in line with my interpretations of the **Frankfurt School**, I will focus on how to approach mainstream culture production as tools for manipulation and indoctrination – *as well as* social change. This involves mainstream culture in terms of ‘tipping-points’ – without neglecting its ideological functions of manipulating the ‘masses’ out of monetary and hegemonic interests, crushing all possibilities of creativity and autonomy (Schuetz, 1989:4). Furthermore, I will address the importance to incorporate literature and art in academic reflections (Benjamin, 2007), to reflect upon rational processes. This is important from a general point of view when discussing the sociology of culture.

Essential is also the assumption that “opposition to mass society meant opposition to mass culture” (Bronner, 2017:79). Although mainstream fiction often is considered favourising right-wing ideologies, there is also the idea of mainstream holding potentials to bash capitalism, intolerance and social elitism (ibid.). However, precaution is needed to avoid a far too standardised tendency, risking undermining necessary critical reflections. Culture production and culture industries indeed may integrate “all opposition by its very nature” (Bronner, 2017:79), which is why we need to embrace every attempt of individuality, artistic creation as tools “to withstand the plastic surgery of the prevailing economic system which carves all men to one pattern” (Horkheimer, 2002:273). To establish a balanced discussion involving both negative and positive implications whether mainstream fiction being beneficial or not, we can use Marcuse. Although he might appear negative and dogmatic on one level –on a deeper level he articulates both hope and trust in the power of humanity: “people can make themselves the architects rather than the victims” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018:224).

Hence, my approach to mainstream fiction employs **critical hermeneutic**. This involves identifications of ‘hidden ideological agendas’ depriving us from agency and possibilities of change *as well as* identify hidden *possibilities* of agency towards social change. This perspective also

draws my methodology towards a **triple hermeneutics**<sup>16</sup> by shifting focus from not only interpreting my empirical body, but more importantly, use the hermeneutic to reveal hidden ‘messages’ that can serve both ways. To complement this methodological framework, I will use **conversation** with focus on the **narrative** aspects in my empirical body.

## 4.1 Conversation and Narrative

The key argument centres around the importance of employing art and literature, combined with critical theory to support my position in respect of good society, plasticity and elasticity. When approaching the idea of good society 2.0, it is necessary to also incorporate new forms of material that corresponds to society anno 2024.

Initially, I will employ conversation in the sense of the Latin origin<sup>17</sup> in terms of walking side-by-side with the empirical body, while having a conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:72). As conversations may have several approaches, this paper emphasises the narrative element. This is in line with Art-Based Research Practice (ABR) in the sense of art containing powers to evoke, inspire, spark emotions, awaken visions and imaginings, and to “transport others to new worlds” while illuminating untold stories (Chilton & Leavy, 2014:403). Treating my empirical body as a **conversational partner**, implies creativity as it steps out of the screen, the speakers or headphones, and suddenly becomes alive. Using the wordings *empirical body* is part of my strategy of transforming it from object to subject.

The narrative element originates from storytelling. Everyone in my empirical body has a story to tell – creating two essential questions: ‘Tell me what happened?’ and ‘then, what happened?’ (Bryman, 2021:542). A narrative approach emphasises meaning, temporality, social structures – and plot (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:268). This approach also indicates a focus on three key elements: **chronology**, **plot** and **characters**. Every narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end which constitutes the very structure of the

<sup>16</sup> Three stages of hermeneutic interpretation: 1) **simple** hermeneutics: our interpretations of ourselves, our subjective, our intersubjective reality and the meaning we assign to this, 2) **double** hermeneutics: interpreting *other* individual’s perceptions of themselves and reality, and 3) **triple** hermeneutics: critically interpreting unconscious processes, ideologies, power relations, dominance etc. In other words, to reveal hidden ideological agendas (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018:264).

<sup>17</sup> [Conversatio](#) (Retrieved 2024-02-27), meaning ‘con’ (with or together) and ‘versare’ (to turn).

narrative – and the importance lies in unfolding the chronological structure to find its explanatory power (Ricoeur, 1984). The essence of the relation between a narrative and temporal character of human experience transforms time into becoming “human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (Ricoeur, 1984:52). Bringing together factors such as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances and unexpected results (Priori, 2014:367) releases the *dramatic energy of the narrative*. “Can there be activity in dramatic or any other inaction? If there is, of what does it consist?” (Stanislavskij, 1964:152). This is essential when analysing mainstream fiction, as there are elements of passivity *as well as* activity and creativity – both on screen, the stereo, *and* within the *auteur* and the audience.

#### 4.1.1 Greimas actantial model

As analytical tool, I will employ my interpretation of Lithuanian literary scientist Algirdas J. Greimas **Actantial model** (Greimas, 1973). To Greimas, *all* phenomena can be considered as **actants** (human/non-human) – which corresponds well with storytelling and narratives in respect of **creative structures**. ‘Things’ like “concepts, ideas, and institutions in the material world can influence the direction of unfolding events every bit as much as conscious human subjects” (Priori, 2014:367). Hence actions leading to structures, conflicts *and* creative standpoints. Applying actants in the analysis is useful for two reasons:

- I. it enhances the narrative components.
- II. it facilitates the identification of the conflict between plasticity and elasticity.

The Actantial Model also **creates** a sense of ‘bringing the material to life’ by transcending it voices beyond the frames of their author, director or creator. As such, it evokes activity, not only from me, but from everyone reading this paper. Thus, my conversation with the empirical body has the ability to creating new conversations and thoughts. From that point of view, the Actantial Model is a powerful tool for creating and visualising syntheses.

The model itself consists of six foundational actants, or three

binary pair: **sender – receiver, subject – object, helper – opponent**. This is complemented with three types of axes. **Project, Communication** and **Conflict** (Greimas, 1984:287).

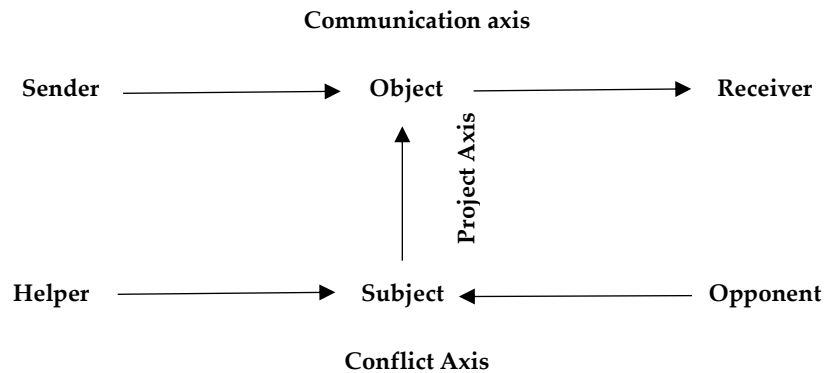


Figure 10 Greimas' Actantial Model, presenting actants and their Axis. (My model).

In relation to the Actantial Model, narrative functions as reconstructing the stories that are told, providing a dense, rich and coherent narrative (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:268). The analysis of such reconstructions is done by focusing on **structure, intrigue** and **genre**. Structure, in its turn, can be divided into a number of sub-components, of which I will focus on *orientation* (information regarding place, time, actors and activities), *plot* and *coda* (summary and re-connecting the narrative frame into the current time) (ibid.).

## 4.2 Operationalisation

With the intention to open up the process of interpretations rather than 'closing it' within fixed, established frames, **quadri-hermeneutics** or **reflexive hermeneutics**, will be applied. Briefly, this refers to having a multidimensional, interacting and open reflective 'eye' when interpreting my material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018:389). Doing so, will facilitate the creation of syntheses, while emphasising the *multi-* aspect of my analysis, as in unification, multidimensionality, autonomy and elasticity. However, as I am not only interested in critically revealing hidden agendas and ideologies by using what Ricoeur (2002:122) calls the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, I also want to go beyond the empirical body to understand underlying intentions. In line with Ricoeur, I see no conflict between explanation and understanding, instead I agree with Ricoeur that they should be regarded as



two moments in a dialectic process. Another similarity with Ricoeur is my approach to subjectivity, locating the human subject in the centre. The human subject uses language (in all sorts of expressions) to, not only understand life, but even more, to change and improve it (Miegel & Johansson, 2009:190-1).

Still, employing a critical hermeneutic approach implies aspects I need to take into consideration. As a researcher, I live in *my own world*, which inevitably will affect my interpretations, no matter how hard I try not to. Such subjectivity will have consequences for reliability as it might be difficult for others to reach similar interpretations and conclusions. However, this need not be a major issue considering *quadri-hermeneutics* working *in favour* of subjectivity. We don't *always* need to reach same conclusions or consensus. Consider it like this; when two people watch a film, we can see the film as dualistic: same film, two interpretations – that do not need to interfere with the film. On the contrary, this dualistic interpretation rather *opens* new, doors to how we understand ourselves and the reality we live in. Furthermore, critical hermeneutics enables me to reflect upon what ways I can discuss certain scenes or songs (or even parts in a song), not only reflecting over what I *see*, but also what I hear and feel. Such a detailed examination can be the relation between soundtrack and photo, or facial expressions as depicted in *Lord of the Rings* or *Yellowstone* etc. This provides possibilities for comparing different actants or roles in my empirical body – and what functions they hold in the sense of plasticity, elasticity and good society.

#### 4.2.1 Convenience sampling

Using **convenience sampling** is often considered a non-probability sample (Bryman, 2021:175-6), which might be problematic because of its **subjectivity**. However, most scientific samples are frequently based on convenience sampling. *One* reason is that probability sampling demands heavy preparations as well as being both difficult and costly (Bryman, op.cit.:176). This convenience sampling is combined with **theory-based sampling**, as in the samples enabling a theoretical elaboration in line with previous research and theoretical framework (Marshall & Rossman, 2006:71). Essential aspects in connection with the selection are 1) the empirical body's international

success, and 2) the possibilities of evolving a critical basis, viewing the empirical body as both ideologic, and creative.

#### 4.2.2 Selection<sup>18</sup>

Initially I listened through the Bowie catalogue, with special focus on songs involving social critique. After reading the lyrics, I watched available music videos on YouTube, finally ending up with a total of 29 songs (between 1969-2016). I then continued by watching the *Lord of the Ring* hexalogy, while reading the scripts (available online). The next step was to watch all 47 episodes of *Yellowstone*, following the same procedure as with the *Lord of the Rings*, finally deciding on 14 scenes. During this phase, I constantly had a notebook beside me to make jottings of important details (see Appendix 2), helping in identifying verbal and non-verbal elements, plot, chronology and narrative (Emerson *et al.*, 2011:177).

Next step involves downloading and convert relevant clips on YouTube, using free mp3/mp4 converters on Google. To facilitate the comparison between my three different materials, I used a separate notebook and file for each one. After this quite extensive work, I began the next phase: the interpretation and analysis of my selected materials. To provide a thorough, rich and creative presentation of the samples (cf. Geertz, 1973), I continuously use hyperlinks, videos or screenshots from YouTube. Such a strategy will facilitate a creative three-folded interaction between the samples, my interpretations and the reader's (as in *audience*) interpretations. This is in line with my intention to encourage creativity, inviting the 'audience' to be actively involved in the analysis.

Examples of selections based on:		
Visual appearance	Light	Corporeality
		
Yellowstone SE4E1	"Desolation of Smaug"	"Jump They Say"

Source: Screenshots YouTube

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 1.

The difference between verbal and visual expressions in respect of ‘meaning’ is significant. Although being expressed the same way, whether it is textual or visual, this ‘meaning’ will be *perceived and realised* differently (Holm, 2014:381). Here the element of *mytheme*, in the sense of phenomena that carry the structure of a narrative, is central as it reflects other *mythemes* in other narratives, enabling to identify discourses and syntheses (Carlshamre, 2005:13). This is a crucial step as different authors/directors/creators/*auteurs* depict same *mythemes* using different strategies and expressions. Alongside my interpretation of interpreting *David Bowie*, *Peter Jackson* and *Taylor Sheridan* in terms of *auteurs*, is my understanding of how to *apply* my samples. Although my **subjectivity** is constantly present, this also means I am staying close to the empirical body as ‘we’ constantly dive deeper and deeper into the conversation’s different layers, emotions and visualisations.

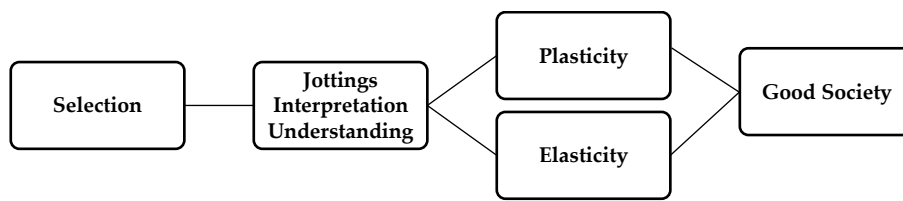


Figure 11 Illustration of the analytical strategy. (My model)

Here a few words on the value of applying a **subjective sociology** are necessary. Social circumstances are always being constructed by individuals and groups, in different historical contexts. As such, we could argue that *all* social phenomena are foundationally subjective. I, as researcher (and human being) have the ability to create my own understanding of the phenomena I chose to study and *reflect upon* through different study processes. This subjectivity often takes place without our knowledge, resulting in a presumption that the world **is** as it **seems to be** (Månson, 2020:74, 119). In line with this subjectivity, I intend to follow a four-folded process of **study**, **explain**, **understand** and **change** society (fig.12).

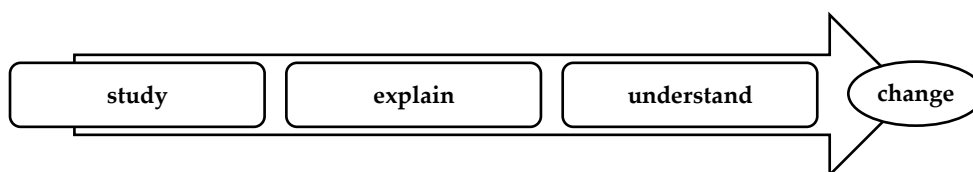


Figure 12 The four-step-process towards social change (My model).

Such a holistic approach needs to also involve the element of change as outcome, providing new insights and new contributions to the sociological discipline. Being aware of the tension between my subjective approach and the objectivity of the structures (ideology, politics, and other hegemonic powers), my position as **advocating a subjective sociology** is emphasised. This is in line with creativity and its power to create circumstances for reflections and critical standpoints, enabling to look at structures from 'outside', which makes me return to the spheres of plasticity and elasticity (fig.3). To embrace the possibility of achieving an elastic reality is also to embrace the importance of subjectivity.

### 4.3 Reflexive and ethical considerations

Before organising my empirical body, I also considered other fictional expressions. For instance, Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar's film catalogue is both interesting and relevant in terms of social critique. However, in this case, I found Almodóvar far too focused on negative aspects to fit my discussion about the good society. Questions concerning the LGBTQIA2S+ community, or the transition between the Franco-era and the new democratic Spain are indeed interesting, but do not fit the frame of my specific focus (and does have a more narrow and 'hard-core' audience). (Other material I considered was e.g., *Rambo*, *James Bond*, *Joker* or *The Dark Knight Trilogy*). Choosing *Lord of the Rings*, in favour of *Game of Thrones*, *Merlin* or other 'medieval-oriented' films/TV-shows, is above all based on its gigantic international success and close relation to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien

Regarding music, I thought about e.g., Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell's catalogue. However, I don't find them having the same sociological impact compared to David Bowie, in respect of his *personas* and cultural impact over a long period of time. As such Bowie represents timelessness and flexibility. As for TV-shows, there were several candidates, such as *Orange Is the New Black* and *The Handmade's Tale* just to mention a few. As I wanted a show that was sort of 'complete' involving society, humanity, autonomy and freedom, I chose *Yellowstone*. Also, being a somewhat 'forgotten' genre, and still gaining such a huge success, makes it quite interesting to analyse, as it stands out from the rest of dystopic depictions of

society, illustrations of criminality or the idyllic version of the Wild West.

### 4.3.1 Ethics

Although being a theoretical study some ethical considerations need to be mentioned. Besides the codex of reliability, honesty, respect and responsibility (Allea, 2018:4), awareness of what impact I which to achieve is crucial. A critical approach indicates that **I am not neutral**, but still need to be reflexive towards my subjectivity by reflecting on how I want the reader to receive and react to my analysis. There is a risk of being far too critical and ideologic – and thus risking becoming the very aspects I am criticising. Hence the need to always remind myself that I too is a product of the doxa and habitus I criticise, calling for precautions to avoid bias (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Carlbaum, 2012).

One strategy to avoid such bias is thick descriptions with intentions to let the *material guide my analysis* – and not the other way round: I’m dancing with the empirical body letting *it* be the one who leads. Still, even more essential is to strive for always having an ‘open mind’ towards the result, furnishing opportunities for understanding rather than establishing fixed ‘truths’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018:27). To enable such openness and avoiding being bias, I will follow the process below (fig.13):

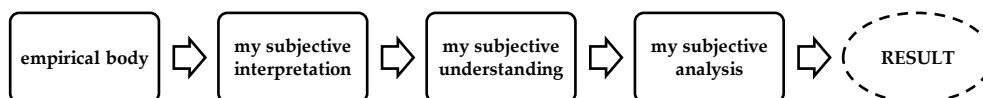


Figure 13 My analytical process resulting in an ‘open’ result. (My model).

Inspired by Polish British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, I agree that “[t]he job of sociology is to see to it that the choices are genuinely free, and that they remain so [...] for the duration of humanity (Bauman, 2000:216.). Involving my role as researcher choosing an empirical body of films, TV-shows and lyrics, I need to make a point of standing outside the narrative (Naryan, 2012:96). Hence, I need to take precautions of my desires to steer the conclusions into a, for me, desired direction (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

Ethics in relation to studying **fictional expressions** need to

consider mainstream fiction mainly produced to be consumed and interpreted by the public audience, of which **I am also a part**. Another vital aspect is that it is **not the actors/artist** that are being analysed, but rather the **creativity, aesthetics, script, dramaturgy, scenery** and **visual images** the mediate. This calls for awareness of legal issues when using someone else's material, although being a public product. To avoid legal issues, I will use the material in accordance with the Act on copyright to literary and artistic work (SFS 1960:729), 1 Ch. 22-23§, and Act on amendment to the Act (1960:729) on Copyright to Literary and Artistic Works (SFS 1993:1007).

Worth mentioning is that **who we are** often defines **what we choose to study** – which is related to ontological questions (Eldén, 2020) and tendencies, or risks, to unconsciously steering my formulations and conclusions into a corner of 'what I look for' and 'what I want to see (or not see)' in my empirical body. Here, again, I need to consider the question of neutrality. However, I'm inclined to agree with Bauman's idea of the impossibility of being neutral. "A non-committal sociology is an impossibility" (Bauman, 2000:216). Hence whatever conclusions I draw, the reader will certainly be affected. Still, although advocating subjectivity, I still need to acknowledge the eventual effects my conclusions might have, as well as maintaining a scientific intention to avoid bias and manifest-like conclusions (Thurén, 2019; Lindgren, 2009).

Finally, as my empirical body consists of texts *someone else* have produced and made official, I need to be aware of **plagiarism** – meaning, I need to distinct *their words* from *my analysis*. Considering it a dance or a dialogue between my material and myself, I need always to identify *who is talking* at the moment. This will enable me to ensure the distinction between already published texts and my own voice (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017:65).

#### 4.3.2 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are concepts that need to be addressed because of their complexity in respect of questions of oppression and power, as in a consensus-based scientific view setting the frame for what is considered valid and reliable. This view can stand in conflict with other, more creative-oriented views on what is valid and reliable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:295). When doing such subjectivity-based research as emphasised in this particular paper, it might be difficult to fulfill an **internal** (credibility) and

**external** (transferability) validity – meaning, it can be difficult for others to find similar results if doing a similar type of research (Cho & Trent, 2014:680). *However*, questions like Did I present a critical view? Did I reflect and question my findings? Did I reflect upon my choice of empirical body, theoretical framework, methods? Was I following ethical and scientific frames when communicating my findings? Did I answer my research questions? might strengthen the validity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:298ff). Still, validity is also a social construction, a ‘truth’ that is based on a pragmatic consensus, which I as researcher is obliged to follow -which ultimately could be conflicting with my creativity (ibid.).

As for the **reliability** (dependability) and **objectivity** (confirmability) (Cho & Trent, 2014:680), subjectivity could be an issue. To avoid problems related to this, it is necessary to provide thick descriptions, and present a systematic and meticulous analysis, as well as being transparent regarding selection and operationalisation. This also involves fulfilling two foundational approaches: to be **critical** and to be **creative** (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019:276-7). The creative approach is of utter significance as my combination of mainstream fiction contextualised within plasticity, elasticity and good society should be seen as pioneering, and *inspiration* for conducting similar studies. Furthermore, I do not see any need for other researchers to reach the *exact* result as I have presented – instead my analysis should rather be seen as an indication towards *a direction* – which other researchers can use to create new syntheses or hybrids. Thus, I would put my analysis and result in the context of **cultural hybridisation**, meaning the mixture of existing phenomena giving birth to new social and cultural practices, without completely wiping out the old ones (Stanford Friedman, 1998:85).

## 5 Result and Analysis

The disposition of this chapter begins with the result, representing my **understanding** of the empirical body, focusing on 1) the significance of **grammar**, 2) **the colour white**, and 3) **cultural hybridisation**. These three aspects indicate how mainstream fiction hold two major functions:

- I. **a critical voice** raising concerns about societal problems,
- II. **a forum advocating creativity and ethics** as solutions to these problems.

These functions further indicate the necessity in approaching mainstream fiction from a holistic point of view. To be critical is not enough as it needs to be used in a **creative** way, advocating other, complementing practices and solutions. Although being aware of the many elements of manipulation and indoctrination, there is a risk if these elements overshadow the power in creativity, humanity and autonomy. *One* way to address this is to look at my empirical body enhancing the significance of the *auteur*. We do not need to read Tolkien to get 'the message'. In fact, a film adaption might serve to provide 'a message' even better as it involves more layers than a novel, in the sense of dramaturgy, scenography, sound, visualisations and syntheses. Mainstream fiction (especially successfully ones) creates interactions on a bigger scale, compared to only author and reader, evoking cinematic memories (Van Belle, 2019), concert memories, discussions and reflections, while ultimately functioning as 'tipping-points' for social and individual change.

Based on an ontology that art and culture production simultaneously have powers to serve as critique against ideological issues, and being a vehicle for societal change, the analysis represents my **interpretation** of the result. This interpretation enhances two essential aspects: **reversibility** and **primal conservatism**, functioning as 'tipping-points' and *counter force* to the ideas advocating mainstream fiction only serving to maintain an ideological *status quo* (in respect of manipulation and control) (Ud Din & Shah, 2023; Palmer, 2020).



## 5.1 The significance of grammar

Grammar is a salient theme throughout the empirical body, however with different focus and implications. David Bowie mainly uses grammar in terms of pronouns as representations for ideology critique. As such, the pronouns function as 1) a critical voice against the plasticity that runs the societal narrative, and 2) a tool for **changing this narrative**. This duality is evident in how Bowie uses pronouns as metaphors for *both* the State *and* the individual – mirroring the societal narrative *fâce a fâce*. However, he also introduces a third element, referred by me as **the internal encounter** (Gabrielsson, 2018:34), involving two agents: the socially constructed identity (**plastic**) and the autonomous one (**elastic**). This ‘play’ with pronouns illustrates the complexity of the actantial model as the same pronouns can hold different functions as **actant**. This is a deliberate strategy from Bowie to ‘confuse’ the audience into reflections and contemplations upon who is *really* in charge.

They say He has no brain [...] They say He has no eyes. They say He has no mouth. They say look at him climb. They say ‘jump’. (*Jump They Say*, Bowie, 1993)



Then I ran across a monster. Who was sleeping by a tree. And I looked and frowned. And the monster was me (*The Width of a Circle*, Bowie, 1970)

The quotes above illustrates the depth – and *progression* – in Bowie’s work. What starts with an explicit conflict between **They** (the State) and **He** (the individual), suddenly transforms into a conflict between the pronoun **I** – or the socially constructed identity versus the autonomous one. This progression functions to illustrate the individual as both ‘perpetrator’ *and* victim – a duality that illustrates the consequences of a society driven by doxic ‘truths’, making the individual co-worker in societies quest for plasticity and one-dimensionality. The magnitude with this technique is how it exposes us to an existence in which **we** actively create ourselves to be our worst enemies, or ‘monsters’.

The Lord of the Rings hexalogy, also uses grammar as critical voice, with special focus on **the internal encounter** (Gabrielsson, 2018), represented by the character *Sméagol/Gollum*.

He will never be rid of his need for it. He hates and loves the Ring, as he hates and loves himself. Sméagol's life is a sad story. Yes, Sméagol he was once called. Before the Ring found him. Before it drove him mad. (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Jackson, 2001)



Source: YouTube

**He** and **himself** indicates the conflict between the Hobbit once called *Sméagol*, now having become the monstrous creature *Gollum*, due to the power of the Ring driving him mad with greed. This is also an example of 1) **the dialectic of our own internal plasticity and elasticity**, and 2) **the necessity of ethics**. Already in the name (*Sméagol/Gollum*) we are exposed to this immediate dialectic and ambiguity – and the dislocation from human → non-human. **We are all Sméagol and Gollum**. We can all mirror ourselves (Liu, 2021; October, 2019) in this seemingly non-human creature, and question *who will look back?* – a powerful tool for mirroring our own immanent duality between plastic and elastic. In the films, this is simplified by depicting *Sméagol* as naïve and childish, while *Gollum* is the calculating, cunning ‘parent’. Translated into the vocabulary of societal critique, *Sméagol* represents the autonomous individual who just wants to feel free, to play games and help ‘the Hobbitses’, while *Gollum* is the adult (the State) correcting *Sméagol*, by telling him to behave and subordinate himself to ‘the rules of a doxic society’. As such, *Gollum* appears as the seemingly ‘sane’ voice (aka The State). *Sméagol/Gollum* is also a powerful illustration of the consequences of the dislocation from human to a non-human ‘device’ only serving the plastic society.



Source: YouTube

The Return of the King (Jackson, 2003)



Source: YouTube

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey (Jackson, 2012)

The two scenes above are explicit examples of both the internal encounter, and how the technique of mirroring can serve as ‘tipping-points’ by simply



**entities** (cf. Studley, 2018:8) emerges. *Yellowstone's* ontology of involving both humanity, animals and nature as *persons to be protected from exploitation and monetary interests*, are in themselves strong voices for societal critique – as well as strategies for changing the narrative.

**Kayce:** I like having somebody to fight for [...] when you fight for people, they care.

**Monica:** [...] I think a thing can care. I think the land cares. (*Yellowstone*, SE3 E10, Sheridan, 2020).

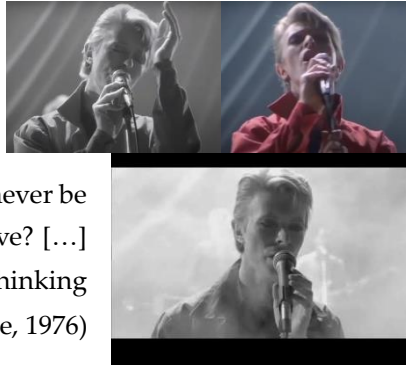
Here the adjective **Land** becomes a powerful **actant** as it represents both conflict axis *and* communication axis by being an exploited 'thing' and a 'thing' with its own **agency**.

## 5.2 The colour White

The colour **white** plays a significant role in all the empirical body – mainly from a binary perspective of through dark we can understand light. What is interesting with the colour white in this particular context is its meaning. My own experience of the 'real' world often tells me that white is either related to religious contexts or conservative, ideological ones. *However*, my empirical body shows a quite different meaning, functioning as a strong **actant** indicating change and progression – from a circular perspective. By this I mean recalling and reflecting upon elements like moral and ethics – asking oneself: what would be the right thing to do? This 'right thing' is quite free from ideological or religious agendas, but rather goes down on a deeper, almost 'archetypic' sense of mythology of what is right and wrong. From that perspective, creating a plastic society would be 'wrong', whereas an elastic one would be 'right'.

In the works of David Bowie, this is articulated in quite simple formulations – in both lyrics, dramaturgy, scenography and the use of *personas*. One such *persona* of specific importance is *The Thin White Duke* functioning as bearer of love. Looking at the song *Station to Station* (Bowie, 1976) the lyrics tell us a story of a journey towards love, by pointing at **remembrance** as important element for creating understanding of how the world was – and can be again. This is enhanced in the music video to the song, using a dramaturgy of mirroring dark and light.

The return of the Thin White Duke. Throwing dart in lovers' eyes [...] one magical moment, such is the stuff from where dreams are woven [...] Once there were sunbirds to soar with and once I could never be down [...] and who will connect me with love? [...] It's not the side effects of the cocaine. I'm thinking that it must be love. (*Station to Station*, Bowie, 1976)



Source: YouTube

Three elements are salient here: 1) the technique of mirroring the narrative (dark versus light), 2) the aspect of **remembrance** and 3) **happiness**. All these three aspects serve to providing keys to happiness. It is *not* the white cocaine representing the drugs of a plastic society, that will save us – but rather the magical moments provided by the *White Duke* to help us weave dreams from. What Bowie does here is simply to *reverse* the very meaning of white by locating the ‘currently happy’ plastic society within the frames of black-and-white, while painting the elastic society in bright colours.

Another way to depict the colour white is how the Lord of the Rings hexalogy sees a connection between white/light and **hope** (similar to Bowie's *persona Thin White Duke*). This is especially emphasised in how the character *Gandalf the Wizard*<sup>20</sup> changes his appearances from *Gandalf Grey* to *Gandalf White*. In *The fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001) and all three *Hobbit* films (Jackson, 2012; 2013; 2014), he is depicted with attributes of grey, ragged, worn-out clothes, hair and beard unattended and a tired, strained gaze. However, during the battle with the monstrous demon *Balrog*, he falls into an abyss, appearing to be dead, only to re-appear in *The Two Towers* (Jackson, 2002) as *Gandalf the White*.

The way *Gandalf* is being re-born into an even more powerful and authoritative wizard, is a way to depict **white as the colour of hope**. By mirroring Darkness against Light in the sense of *Gandalf's* metamorphosis from the rugged grey wizard into the serene, mystified and ‘pure’ wizard, we could talk of white in terms of **primal pureness**. This grammar of

<sup>20</sup> Gandalf the Wizard is a central character throughout the Lord of the Rings hexalogy. He acts as a guide, guardian and helper to both Frodo and Bilbo on their quests for destroying evilness. [My annotation].

adjectives (primal, pure) indicates a sense of mythological moral and ethics often seen in fairy tales and fiction.



Source: YouTube

The Fellowship of the Ring (Jackson, 2001)



Source: YouTube

The Two Towers (Jackson, 2002)

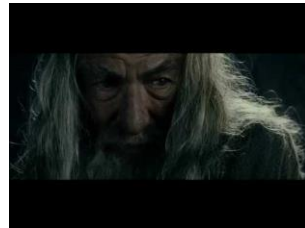
By mirroring Death against Life, white represents hope in terms of 're-birth', depicted in several scenes throughout the hexalogy of Lord of the Rings – all sharing the denominator of white/light functioning as **actant**, helping the individual **making the 'right' decision**. Will we be hard plastic or soft elastic?

**Gandalf:** End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path. One that we all must take. The grey rain curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass. And then you see it [...] White shores. (*The Return of the King*, Jackson, 2003)



Source: YouTube

**Frodo:** I wish the Ring had never come to me ... I wish none of this had happened. **Gandalf:** So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Jackson, 2001)



Source: YouTube

The colour white is also recurrent in *Yellowstone* as part of the conflict between plasticity and elasticity. One scene depicts this quite explicitly by reversing the idea of 'white-collar' – as in white, male, privileged and rich. *John Dutton* dressed in a white, tuxedo shirt discovers a group of Chinese tourists photographing a Grizzly bear standing alone on a field within the Yellowstone Ranch. Here we are immediately confronted with reversibility: *Dutton* being the seemingly 'white-collar' American guy scaring the tourists of his land by threatening them with a rifle. *However*, the 'real' white-collars here are the Chinese tourist exploiting everyone and everything – because

they can! To *John Dutton*, the grizzly bear is not something to exploit, but rather revere as equally important as humans. This is also director Taylor Sheridan's way of 'playing' with concepts like the 'American way', imperialism, protectionism, moral and ethics. Meaning, using reversibility, he challenges us into asking ourselves who the *real bad guy is?* This 'playing' with prejudices, transforming the 'white-collar' stereotype ranch owner into *de facto* fighting **against exploitation and imperialism** (Rabitsch & Pyrka, 2022), is yet another illustration of mainstream fiction functioning as 'tipping-points' for societal change. Other than ideology having a grammar, **ideology also has a colour.**

**John Dutton:** You see that fence? That's mine. That f\*cking fence down there, that's mine too. Everything this side of that mountain, all the way over here, mine too. You're trespassing. Trespassing. [...]

**Guide:** Says that it's wrong for one man to own all this. He says you should share it with all the people. **John Dutton:** Yeah. This is America. We don't share land here. (*Yellowstone*, SE1 E7, Sheridan, 2018)



Source: YouTube

### 5.3 Cultural hybridisation

The empirical body contains cultural hybridisation from various approaches, and by cultural hybridisation<sup>21</sup>, I refer to a mixture of phenomena consisting of old and new social and cultural practices (cf. Stanford Friedman, 1998:85). In the empirical body, this is illustrated via a **linear circularity**, similar to figure 9 – however with another outcome. Instead of positive thinking, the results point at **negative thinking** as the outcome of cultural production and consumption. This is a way of reversing the content of the doxa-habitus circularity.

What Bowie does in his work is to refer to **archetypic elements**, in the Greek context of pristine, or primeval, sense of think, feel and act. This

<sup>21</sup> Type 1: mixture of existing phenomena generating new practices, Type 2: mixture of phenomena consisting of both old and new practices, and Type 3: mixture of on-going practices (Stanford Friedman, 1998:85).

takes its form of Bowie often returning to themes of love, freedom and autonomy. Fusing these timeless, pristine, themes with a contemporary setting, he presents a powerful hybridisation acting as ‘tipping-points’. Due to his extensive career and multitudes *personas*, Bowie possesses the ability to fuse his own phenomena, creating a cultural hybridisation out of his own role as David Bowie. An explicit example of that is the songs *Ashes to Ashes* (Bowie, 1980) and *Hallo Spaceboy* (Bowie & Eno, 1995), in which he re-uses the character *Major Tom* from *Space Oddity* (Bowie, 1969).



Source: YouTube

Ground control to Major Tom. Your circuit's dead, there's something wrong. Can you hear me, Major Tom? (*Space Oddity*, Bowie, 1969)



Source: YouTube

Do you remember a guy that's been in such an early song? [...] We know Major Tom's a junkie [...] hitting an all-time low. (*Ashes to Ashes*, Bowie, 1980)

Pristine and archetypic elements are also the case in the Lord of the Rings hexalogy, with a clear hybridisation of ancient myths and societal issues of hegemony, imperialism, pollution, exploitation and de-humanisation. Although using spectacular effects and a ‘medieval’ setting, there is the shared denominator we also find in Bowie’s work: the fusion of old and new to **create progression towards the good society** (or at least the idea of such a society).



Source: YouTube

Great kings of Men. Then Sauron the Deceiver gave to them Nine Rings of Power. Blinded by their greed they took them without question, one by one falling into darkness. Now they are slaves to his will. (*The Fellowship of The Ring*, Jackson, 2001)

In a mythological setting, the scene above also contains highly contemporary problems of greed and imperialism, making this single scene into a relevant



sociological 'tipping-point'. Other than hybridisation, we can also identify traces of **grammar** (mainly adjectives) and **the colour white** (mirroring darkness). The question of pollution destroying both nature and humans, is also a recurring theme, creating hybridisations. With obvious references to WW1, WWII or any other modern war, the mythological idea of death spreading like hot lava from a volcano, is fused together with the image of the contemporary war. As such, places like *Mount Doom* or the *Dead Marshes* function as **actants** contextualised within cultural hybridisation.

**Sam:** There are dead things! Dead faces in the water!  
**Gollum:** All dead. All rotten [...] The marshes. Yes, yes that is their name. this way. Don't follow the lights. Careful now! Or Hobbits go down to join the dead ones and light little candles of their own. (*The Two Towers*, Jackson, 2002)



Source: YouTube

In *Yellowstone*, the very essence of Sheridan's *auteurship* builds on fusing traditional, Native rites and culture with the 'modern cowboy'. This fusion indicates not only the co-existence of these two 'cultures' but even more its circularity. The approach to a holistic worldview, becomes increasingly embodied in the 'white-and-blue collar' cowboys, co-operating with the native Americans in creating a progression towards the good society. Essential here is the way Sheridan as *auteur* incorporates traditional rites as **helpers** in different contexts. One such helper is the Lakota *Han̄bléčeyapi* ceremony [*Cry for a Vision*], functioning as establishing a connection between human and non-human (nature, spirits etc.), that help individuals to gain knowledge of the Great Spirit ([Aktá Lakota](#), Retrieved 2024-02-21). From that perspective, cultural hybridisation is also a **trickster**.

**Lee:** He said pray for a vision. But I don't see you praying [Laughs] So what are you doing here? You need help? Let me in. I can help you [...].

**Kayce:** They told me not to.

**Lee:** [Laughs] I'm your brother. Let me in, your f\*cking child! Look at me! [Screams] This is your vision. This is your destiny! [Screaming] (*Yellowstone* SE4 E10, Sheridan, 2021)



Source: Private

**Woman:** Come on. Through the doors. Close them behind you or there's no telling what could be waiting for you when you get back. What do you see?

**Kayce:** Two paths.

**Woman:** Look down the left one.

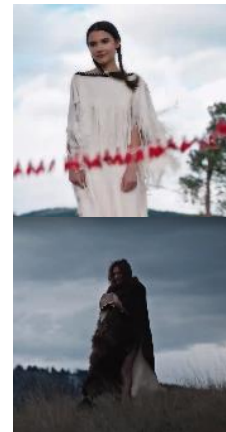
**Kayce:** Oh, God.

**Woman:** Now look down the right. Tough choice.

**Kayce:** Can you help me make it?

**Woman:** I can help you walk the path. But you must choose it.

(*Two paths*, in *Yellowstone*, SE4 E10, Sheridan, 2021)



The scenes above depict the duality in **trickster**, being both **opponent** and **helper**. This is also a good example to illustrate the need for individual **agency** to be able to follow the 'right' trickster: Lee or the White Native woman. Regarding agency, in the scene with Lee, agency is not very explicitly articulated, while the other scene is **all about agency**. Hence the latter scene is an illustration of the elastic society.

They are also strong representations of Sheridan's *auteurship* as he steps away from the standardised traditional 'American' way of telling a story. *Kayce*, the Buffalo Bill look-a-like image of Cowboy, is given **agency to take part** in transcultural activities, while staying humble and respectful towards the Natives. A small, but powerful post in the discussion about imperialism, exploitation and plasticity: a narrative of mutual interaction between cultures. British author Rudyard Kipling once wrote, "Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling, 1940:233) – and here we see one of the essential strengths in *Yellowstone* the ability of creating syntheses, fusions and hybridisations of different ontologies. Hence **ideology can be cultural hybridisation**.

## 5.4 Analysis

Turning to the interpretative part, the result indicates three common denominators:

- I. **Reversibility**
- II. **Primal conservatism**
- III. **Mainstream fiction as actant**

### 5.4.1 Reversibility

In connection with circularity, the result points at the semantic difference between 'looking' back and 'seeing'. To achieve **reversibility**, understanding only is not enough as we need to also 'see' necessary elements and tool to create reversibility from a plastic to elastic society. From that context, reversibility is all about circularity. Remembering the circularity of doxa-habitus (fig.9), circularity *per se* is not the problem. Circularity cannot be avoided, but we can reverse the 'message' and **can change both content and outcome** – which my empirical body shows many indications of.

When talking about **plasticity** and **elasticity**, we could use the dramaturgy shown in the empirical body, in terms of Darkness versus Light. Currently we are living within a circle of dots of light. All objects inside the circle draw our attention as everything outside, in the dark, is invisible to our eyes. "The outlines of such a circle are so sharp and the encircling shadow so solid that you have no desire to go beyond its limits" (Stanislavskij, 1964:291). What we see here is in fact that what we *believe* to be light is actually the opposite. To twist our perceptions of reality, darkness is disguised in light. Hence the perfect image of **plasticity**. The circle of light, with its sharp edges, keeps us out of danger – a safety consisting of one-dimensionality (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:94; Benjamin, 2002; Jameson, 1979). The more singular we become, the safer we will be.

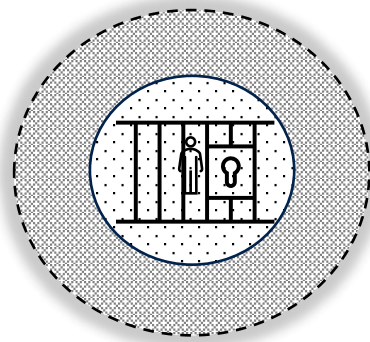


Figure 14 The circles of light and darkness. (My model).

To reverse this circle into instead becoming an elastic one, we can use **grammar**, **colour** and **cultural hybridisation**. The way pronouns are mirrored against each other give alternative ways of *seeing* and understanding (Liu, 2021; October, 2019). We can also use grammar, colour

and hybridisation to avoid 'emotionally loaded' wordings like ideology, power, hegemony, indoctrination, manipulation etc. This strategy within the empirical body indicates openness, rather than framing the discussions within fixed, dogmatic frames. Using pronouns, for example, is a simple way of **creating** possibilities of interaction between creator and audience – as the audience can see themselves in the different grammatical contexts. This interaction is vital for creating agency and dislocation from object to subject (Van Belle, 2019; Ud Din & Shah, 2023). Of great significance in this agency is the idea of *flâneur* – in the positive sense of building 'a new society' (Benjamin, 2002). Doxic truths feed on the unawareness of our every-day actions and practices. The lies continue to live and grow because we *do not see them*. Becoming a *flâneur* is to create agency and prerequisites for change (Benjamin, 2002; Junyk, 2021).

Important here is that reversibility is not bound to just *one* sphere, as in the case of **plasticity** (fig.3) but is open for **creating multiple spheres**. This is a well-known practice in fairy tales and myths, the possibility to move between 'worlds' and dimensions. It is also largely visible in my empirical body. Although knowing it is 'just' fiction, we can anytime step *out* of the film etc. and apply it on our contemporary society. We do not need advanced scientific theories to create change, we can just open a novel, watch a music video on YouTube, binge-watch a TV-show or snuggle up in the sofa with some popcorn and a good film! *Et voila!* 'Tipping-points' may come in all sorts of shapes!

When Bowie performed in Berlin in 1987, it was indeed set in a political context of the 1970s and 1980s – however, what caused the essential impact was the quite simple, British gentlemanly greeting to the audience on the other side. "We send our best wishes to all of our friends who are on the other side!" This sentence alone made Bowie almost a proxy between his desire for a better world, and the contemporary ideological tendencies in Europe, affecting politics all the way to the White House. Just six days after the concert, in West Berlin, former US President Ronald Reagan, famously said: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" ([Mr. Gorbachev](#), Retrieved 2024-01-06). That is the power of mainstream fiction.

### 5.4.2 Primal conservatism

Referring to Primal in the Latin sense of *primus*, [first. My annotation], illustrates the significance of pristine roots and origin - a sort of original state of humanity, or the source from which all creativity emanate. This is necessary to distance **conservatism** from more traditional interpretations of political tendencies. Where politically coloured conservatism is all about imperialism, colonialism, liberalism and privatisation in the sense of Thatcherism, Reaganism, or any other right-wing-oriented – a **primal conservatism** focuses on re-claiming autonomy, creativity and subjectivisation (Ud Din & Shah, 2023; Bloch, 1996). This idea can be referred to the early days of the Frankfurt School, already in the 1930s raising concerns about the accelerated manipulation and social indoctrination (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Benjamin, 2002; Jameson, 1979). The cultural industry is rapidly transforming the individual's mindset to fit a prevailing societal agenda (Baudrillard, 1992) – mostly conducted by the 'American way' (Martel, 2010) – delimiting the individual's **agency**, by doxa and habitus.

What the result indicates is the need for not just circularity from a reversed perspective, but also adding content to this reversibility. Only reversing one doxa to another one, is not enough – we need to add content working *in favour of the elastic society*. Essential elements of such a content are moral, ethics, aesthetics and what Marcuse (2007) refers to as negative thinking. As such, primal conservatism works in favour of plurality, rather than singularity. This is an important remark, as sociological discourses often focus on explaining and understanding sociological problems (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Benjamin, 2002; Jameson, 1979; Baudrillard, 1992; Marcuse, 2007) – but not equally much discuss change and what content to be used as tools for change (fig.12). I largely agree with the academic agenda criticising mainstream for being an advocator for manipulation and plasticity - but only to a certain degree. Sometimes, I even find it a repulsive to degrade the audience into only an object awaiting whatever screen direction the societal manuscript tells them to follow – only laughing when the producer tells it to (Ud Din & Shah, 2023). Lest not forget the power in humanity and creativity – which my result repeatedly illustrates.

One attempt to change the content and character of the manuscript is to use circularity to look 'back' to move forward, meaning: what do we **need to change the narrative?** (fig.12). 'Goodness' never abandoned us, **we** abandoned goodness – so what do we need to re-unite with 'goodness'? Although using different approaches, the result articulates the same ideas of pristine values of moral and ethics to be the road back to 'goodness' (Laugier, 2021; Maldonado & Matteis, 2022). As shown in the result, this involves both cultural hybridisation and thinking in terms of personhood for non-humans (Studley, 2018; Rabitsch & Pyrka, 2022). Hence, the question of plasticity versus elasticity reaching beyond humans only. The good society is a place in which we live "*with* the Land – not *on* the Land" (*Yellowstone*, SE4 E5, Sheridan, 2021). Having such an ontology, the result raises the issue of 'who came first?', meaning the modern, progressive society does not ask that question, but rather 'who among these people can I manipulate and ideologically create into a replica?' (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Benjamin, 2002; Jameson, 1979; Baudrillard, 1992). Circularity, in terms of going back to pristine, original roots, does not *per se* mean to reactionarily *conserve* them, rather it is about using this primacy to peel off everything that is in favour of positive thinking and singularity (Marcuse, 2007). This will encourage necessary 'tipping points' for changing the societal narrative.

What my result does is to 'sell' us an alternative ontology, involving humane-friendly elements based on profound and pristine values. However, this is also a bargain based on voluntariness, subjectivisation and plurality as counterforce to the plastic society. We cannot avoid the circularity of doxa and habitus, but we can fill it with alternative content. It does not *have* to be all greed, violence, exploitation, lies, manipulation, indoctrination, fragmentation and ultimately de-humanisation – it can be something else! We are *both Sméagol* and *Gollum* – but why do we always choose *Gollum*? Here the result, emphasises the traces of this long-forgotten primacy, articulated in creature *Sméagol* – as to ask us: Why not choose another path? Why not return to when the world was 'good' and being a subject was worth something? This is an also a good example of fiction creating cinematic memories, experiences and perceptions (Van Belle, 2019; do Nascimento, 2019), encouraging a dialogue between audience and *auteur*.

As such, primal conservatism is indeed all about 'bottom-up'

(Van Belle, 2019) from many layers: the audience, the *auteur* and the subject's agency to choose morally and ethically ways of acting in this world (Laugier, 2021). Having that perspective, circularity in terms of primacy plays a vital role in dislocating positive thinking into **negative thinking** (fig.6).

### 5.4.3 Mainstream fiction as actant

Recapitulating the Actantial Model (fig.10), the result shows clear evidence of how mainstream fiction advantageously can be considered an **actant** – both in the manipulative way of *promesse du bonheur* (Adorno, 1997) and as encourager towards *negative thinking* (Marcuse, 2007). The essentials of being an actant is that mainstream have every possibility of **creating agency**. Although the individual is 'attacked' from all sides by the societal narrative, it still has the *possibility* of opening up its sphere, creating the necessary agency to dislocate objectification to subjectivity.

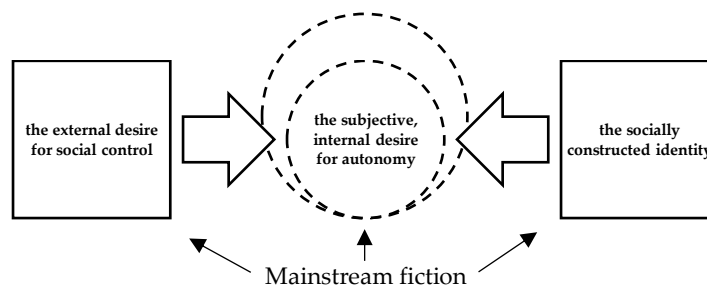


Figure 15 The closed plasticity conflicting the open elasticity. (My model).

As seen above (fig.15), mainstream fiction works both sides, it is rather a question of *how we choose to use it*. The plastic society does not ask for permission to fill our brains with *promesse du bonheur* – **we allow ourselves** to be lied to – ultimately causing the **mental meltdown** Bowie describes in his songs.

They'll split your pretty cranium. And fill it full of air  
 [...] But brother you won't care You'll be shooting  
 up on anything. Tomorrow's never there. (1984,  
 Bowie 1974)



Source: YouTube

Because of recurrent doxic 'truths', *mauvais foi* and *promesse du bonheur*, shaping our ideas of happiness, we 'shoot up' anything, becoming junkies

on lies. We have created a need for becoming what Bowie refers to as *The Voyeur of Utter Destruction (As Beauty)* (Bowie, Eno & Gabrels, 1995). However, just as much as mainstream fiction can produce and re-produce *promesse du bonheur* and *mauvais foi* it can also *produce alternatives*. This is also indicated in the result: the need for a more nuanced discussion about the pros and cons of mainstream fiction - especially in the case of **agency**. Although the critical voices of the Frankfurt School might be a bit 'outdated' as recent research shows a greater interest for painting mainstream fiction in more positive colours, plasticity still holds a firm grip on the individuals.

One critical counterforce is the idea of *flâneur* (Benjamin, 2007; Junyk, 2021), which in its turn indicates a sense of **periodisation** (Van Belle, 2019). Walking the 'streets' of my empirical body involves both interaction, reflection, contemplation and **agency** in terms of having the possibilities to choose our own soundtracks of our lives. That is a major intention with the conversation between audience and *auteur* – from a 'bottom-up' perspective (Van Belle, 2019; do Nascimento, 2019). The *auteur* might act in a certain way, but the responsibility of choosing the 'decent' thing to do (Maldonado & Mattheis, 2022; Laugier, 2021), lies in *our* hands. Hence the audience has the ability to *precede* the *auteur* (Alsop, 2019).

However, the result also points to the complexity of considering mainstream fiction as actant. Mainstream fiction *per se* is neither good nor bad, its character as actant lies in what content the *auteur* wants to mediate. As such it can be both **helper** and **opponent**:

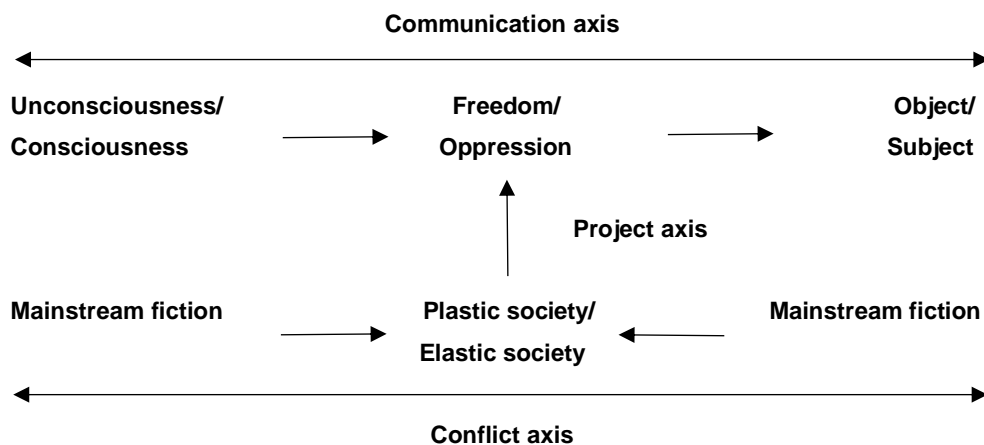


Figure 16 Modified Actant Model. (My model).



Thus the role as actant differs depending on content (fig.16). If the **sender** is **unconsciousness**, then it will communicate freedom to the object (**receiver**), or vice versa. The same goes for the **project** and **conflict axes**. This is however also the strength of the result: it has indeed an agenda towards the good, elastic society – but it is also an illustration of mainstream having potential of being a ‘lackey’ for the ‘American way’ and imperialistic domination (Martel, 2010; Jameson, 1979; Baudelaire, 1970; Baudrillard, 1992). As such, my empirical body expresses an outspoken social critique – **without being ideological**. Instead it focuses on the interaction *and creativity* between audience and *auteur*, to illustrate strengths and weaknesses with mainstream fiction. It *can* be a forum for re-producing an agenda of positive thinking and doxa (Marcuse, 2007; Deer, 2010) – but it can also be *something else*.

This is a crucial remark: by avoiding telling what this ‘something else’ consists of is a deliberate strategy to point at the value of creativity and agency. Instead of being ordained a doxic truth, my result raises the importance of creating one’s own subjectivity, autonomy and identity (fig. 17) – a process in which mainstream fiction as **actant** becomes essential.

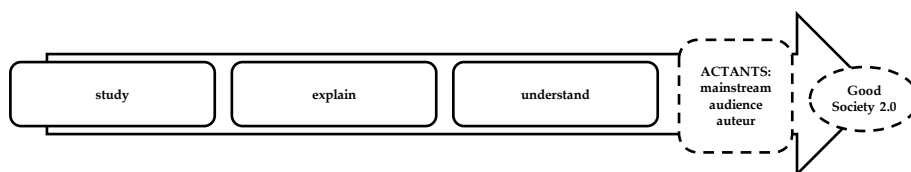


Figure 17 A modified four-step-process towards social change. (My model).

As seen in the modified process above (fig.17), mainstream fiction (in terms of actant), is a strong contribute in the process towards the Good Society 2.0. To further enhance the variety and multidimensionality of the last two steps, they are marked as **open**. This is in direct contrast to the closed plastic sphere (fig.3).

## 6 Conclusive discussion

This paper set out to answer two questions: 1) How does the empirical body portray the conflict between plasticity and elasticity? and 2) What positive syntheses can be identified from this conflict? In relation to these questions, the result pointed at three central themes: **reversibility**, **primal conservatism** and **mainstream fiction as actant**. These themes indicate the central idea of mainstream fiction being an essential and necessary resource when discussing sociological relevant topics like ideology, society, identity, cultural production, cultural consumption and what consequences this brings for individual and society. Using mainstream fiction as analytical resource, enables to locate the idea of good society in an updated, contemporary setting – while simultaneously updating sociological discourses and analyses. From this we can draw three major conclusions:

- Ideology can be contextualised within both **grammar**, **colour** and **cultural hybridisation**, indicating the necessity in locating societal critique in a broader, updated discourse of how to reach the idea of Good Society 2.0.
- The circularity of doxa and habitus needs to, not only be reversed, but **located within new social processes and consequences**, by taking the foundational ideas of the Frankfurt School to a new contemporary societal level. This will broaden sociological analyses in respect of cultural production, consumption, doxic truth and norms.
- The complexity of mainstream fiction functioning as **actant** is a valuable source when discussing the significance of **agency**, **interaction** and **subjectivisation**, in respect of creating ‘tipping-points’ and societal change.

### 6.1 Depictions of the conflict plasticity-elasticity

The conclusions point at mainstream fiction serve as a valuable resource to approach the conflict between plasticity and elasticity, while contributing to a shift regarding the sociological mindset. Although the classic thinkers (e.g. Marx, Durkheim and Weber) are highly vivid parts of sociological analyses,

we need to combine them with an 'updated' mindset, involving ways of approaching sociology from a modernised contemporary setting. This is evident in both this actual paper as well as contemporary previous research. Still, sociological analyses of societal issues can increasingly benefit from involving to an even higher extent popular culture as empirical material. To me, this is imperative to create an 'updated' understanding of the contemporary society, its problems and how to move towards the elastic-driven good society 2.0.

The ways the empirical body depicts plasticity versus elasticity indicates sociologically relevant ideas of how to approach **reversibility**, discussions of ideology and cultural hybridisation. This also involves how the empirical body locates plasticity and elasticity within the circularity of doxic norms and truths. This emphasises plasticity and elasticity as useful elements when discussing society and important 'tipping-points' for creating societal change. By contextualising plasticity and elasticity within discourses initially raised by the Frankfurt School's dogmatic-driven theorists, implies the necessity of creating *assemblage points* where 'old' and 'new' sociological ideas can meet. As such, we can use the conflict between plasticity and elasticity as creative syntheses towards the good society 2.0. Mainstream fiction, popular culture and mass media at large can advantageously be used by sociologists to even more present a clear focus on aesthetics, ethics, ideology and the relation between ideology and its various forms and shapes that indeed have impact on individuals, their agency and their possibilities of subjectivisation.

Such hybrids, or assemblage points, help in discussing accelerated and fluid habits of consuming *and* producing culture changes equally rapidly. Although foundational doxic truths, false promises of happiness etc. are still quite omnipresent in our mindsets, a growing parallel tendency towards *alternative* ways of thinking and acting also exists. Today, the *auteurs* do not have all the power (Van Belle, 2019; Alsop, 2019) – and more importantly, they seem to willingly shift roles, allowing the audience to **create agency through increased interaction**. Hence a growing collaboration between *auteur* and audience in creating necessary 'tipping-points' and societal critique – which is evident in the increasingly amount of box offices articulating strong societal critique against the very same

phenomena already discussed by the Frankfurt School. My question is: Why do not sociology in general take 'advantage' of these successes to a greater extent? Although several attempts have been made (as seen in chapter 2), there is this problematic void concerning an explicit discourse of plasticity versus elasticity – in relation to morally and ethically 'education' (Laugier, 2021).

If looking at the discipline sociology of popular culture at large, I agree with Swedish sociologists Fredrik Miegel and Thomas Johansson's attempts to define culture sociology as the 'slash' between culture/society (Lindgren, 2014:27). What this actual paper does is locating mainstream fiction as **yet another slash: culture/culture sociology/mainstream fiction/society** – supported by the findings of the empirical body. Although scholars (see chapter 2) have contributed to a progressive movement, involving also what was formerly considered populace-oriented box-offices, the **explicit articulation of plasticity versus elasticity from a moral and esthetical perspective** is still not sufficiently formulated. This calls for the need to approach plasticity and elasticity by locating it within an updated context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This means approaching popular culture from an even broader perspective. Indeed *Joker* (Phillips, 2019) has been well credited (nominated for 11 Academy Awards, winning 2), and subject for scientific studies (Ud Din & Shah, 2023) – but why not study more extensively *Dances with Wolves* (Costner<sup>22</sup>, 1990) (nominated for 12 Academy Awards, winning 7)? Studies from the mid-1990s (Lake, 1997; Bowden, 1991) must surely be of sociological interest to update in respect of reiterated issues concerning indigenous culture, 'Americanisation', imperialism etc. Or an updated approach to actor/director Clint Eastwood, actor Johnny Depp, the catalogue of Rolling Stones, the American TV-show *Saturday Night Live* etc.? Or the dislocation of content in children's programme from the 1970s to 2024? Or romantic comedies' impact on women's attitudes to love (cf. Gabrielsson, 2022)? Etc. etc.

Another central finding is how the *auteurs* or creators use the technique of mirroring narratives (Liu, 2021; October, 2019), indicating our understanding of embracing elasticity also involves to *understand and reject*

<sup>22</sup> Costner recently won a Golden Globe Award for his leading role in *Yellowstone* 2023 [My annotation].

plasticity. This binarity is of special significance in respect of evoking reflexivity and contemplation of *one's own* thoughts, behaviours and social practices (do Nascimento, 2019; Alsop, 2019; Devereux *et al.*, 2015). As such, the *audience* is given opportunities to reflect themselves in e.g., *Sméagol/Gollum*, or Bowie's pronouns, to explore their immanent duality or ambivalence – and by that evoke a critical view on society at large and their own behaviour and agency. False promises of happiness and doxa are successfully disguised, depriving us from agency, autonomy, subjectivisation – and **elasticity**.

Thus, incorporating popular culture to an even greater extent, from an **interdisciplinary** approach (building academic bridges rather than walls), is a necessary aspect to consider when approaching ideas of the good society. This is also one of the main points with this paper – to emphasise the relevance of, to a greater extent, studying popular culture and mainstream fiction from the perspective of one-dimensionality, doxa, habitus, agency, subjectivisation etc. If not, we might risk becoming the very same perpetrator we accuse, meaning: if we continue to divide audience into fine art and populace/mainstream – how are we ever going to reach, at least, the *idea* of the good society? David Bowie could not have said it better when he refused being 'knighted' by former Queen Elizabeth II, by simply stating: "I would never have any intention of accepting anything like that. I seriously don't know what it's for. It's not what I spent my life working for" (McCarty, 2023:para 6).

## 6.2 Positive syntheses towards the Good Society

Returning to the Actantial Model (fig.18), the empirical body points at two major syntheses advocating a progressive direction toward the good society:

- I. Creations of necessary 'tipping-points', providing possibilities for changing the societal narrative by reversing it towards an elastic-driven one.
- II. Updating the discourse of the good society by incorporating contemporary tendencies of how cultural production, distribution, consumption *and* consequences work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence a 'new', updated approach to how to create a progressive sociology needs to be elaborated.

Having the role of **actant** (whether it is helper, opponent, object, sender etc.), mainstream fiction holds the essential function of communicating both negative and positive implications. As seen in the model (fig.18), several functions can be identified, creating relevant syntheses that will have implications on both macro-, and micro level. While the communication axis creates 'tipping-points' as means to change the societal narrative, the conflict axis tells us about the increased need for sociological analyses and discussions, in respect of reversing the circle of doxa and habitus towards elasticity rather than plasticity.

The Actantial Model also depicts the complexity and multidimensionality incorporated within the empirical body. In the case of *Yellowstone*, what initially seemed to be 'only' a Hollywood good ol' Western show, suddenly became something else (cf. Martel, 2010). Here lies the power of sociologically analysing mainstream fiction –showing both positive implications for new understanding, as well as identifying tensions *within* the artistic expressions (although this actual paper do not specifically focus on tensions, leaving that for future studies).

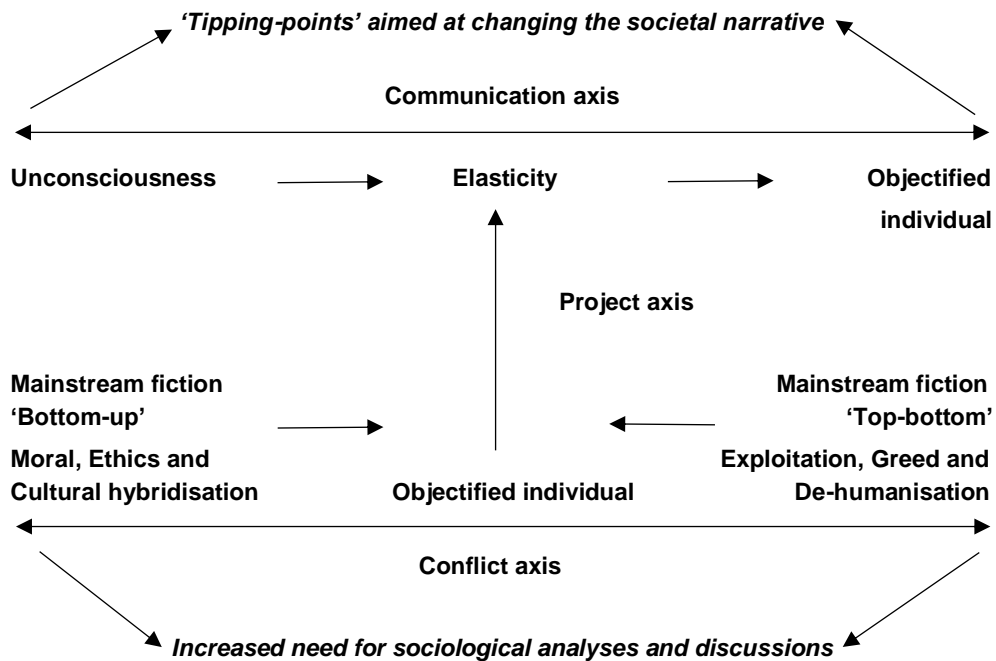


Figure 18 Actantial Model with syntheses. (My model).

The idea of focusing on positive syntheses is a deliberate strategy of this actual paper to act like a *flâneur*, taking ‘advantage’ of the creativity among the empirical body (Benjamin, 2002; 2007). As such, I can take the shape of *both* audience and *auteur* ‘walking’ the streets while conversing with the constantly changing crowd (Junyk, 2021; McCarthy, 2019). Being this multidimensional *flâneur*, I ‘walk’ the streets of my empirical body looking for ways to **create reversibility from plastic to elastic** – while advocating the merits of contemporary cultural production, distribution and consumption.

Essential in the syntheses above (fig.18) is their ability to create **agency** – which is a fundamental cornerstone for societal change. But here lies also the complexity: how do we know that the different outcomes are not created by an ideology agenda of false promises, *mauvais foi* or positive thinking (Deer, 2010, Marcuse, 2007)? The simple answer is we don’t, whereas the complex answer urges us to dig deeper into the different artistic expressions and intentions, while looking for elements that corresponds to the idea of enhancing elasticity, instead of plasticity. The equation does not *per se* result in the elastic good society 2.0 – it depends quite extensively on *what we add* to it, and how we define the idea of good society.

Another implication of the syntheses above (fig.18), depicts the necessity of distancing ourselves from an ontology based on division between arts (as in elitist ‘fine’ art versus art for the populace, aka mainstream fiction). If maintaining this ‘gap’, we simultaneously obstruct the creation of ‘tipping-points’ and societal change – which is why this paper advocate an alternative direction (fig.5), promoting art that is accessible for *everyone* (Pagello, 2010; Van Belle, 2019; do Nascimento, 2019). Today, cultural expressions are only a click away. What used to be cinematic memories (Van Belle, 2019) is today digital memories on the computer, mobile or any other device. Hence today we have unlimited access to creating necessary ‘tipping-points’, through a multitude of *assemblage points* constantly creating syntheses, progression and opportunities – of which this actual paper can be considered as *one* such *assemblage point*.

### 6.3 Methodological reflections

Although having worked with a quite dense empirical body, I claim to have maintained a methodological stringency, in respect of applying a modified

version of conversation and narrative. The high grade of subjectivity is also justified due to the nature of the topic, but also due to mainstream fiction being increasingly ubiquitous in our daily lives. The advantage with locating the paper within a **subjective sociology**, highly influenced by the Frankfurt School, is also to point at the necessity of incorporating new forms of empirical material, while working with new social processes, like realtime, interconnections and acceleration (Giddens, 2007). The main importance of such an approach lies in it being a counterpart to dangerous objectifying processes.

Furthermore, having an empirical body solely consisting of mainstream fiction makes it difficult to be nothing else *but* subjective, as there are as many interpretations as there are viewers, readers or listeners. But that is also one of the major contributions, to show that sociology is SO much more, in fact sociology is *everywhere* – especially in our society anno 2024. In our digital contemporary society, everything is accessible online. Indeed this implies risks of being manipulated, *but* we can also watch a music video on YouTube, or stream something on Netflix etc. and be encouraged to think in alternative ways. This ‘seed’ of *something else* might be the necessary ‘tipping-point’ for reversing the social narrative. The idea of promoting a subjective sociology is also in line with my focus on elasticity, creativity, aesthetics and ethics, however without losing the scientific relevance or reliability. But – being human is also to be subjective. Lest not forget that being critical *as well as* creative cannot be done without a certain amount of subjectivity, especially with the case of mainstream fiction. When dealing with material consisting of non-scientific matters like emotions, senses, visualisations, perceptions, flashes of meaning etc., we cannot approach it from a neutral position – as that would try and fit humanity into a box of objectivity. Which would eventually stand in opposition to my foundational intent. It is okey to be subjective. It is okey to be human.

## 6.4 Sociological contributions and aftermath

There are several elements that factors in the area of contributions, of which the main one is **how we can use mainstream fiction to reverse the doxic meaning of truth**. Doxa and habitus do not have a life of their own, *we* give them life, *we* give them meaning. As such, it is not written in stone that doxa



and habitus *per se* have negative implications for the individual, they just 'go with the societal flow' which sometimes mean manipulation and indoctrination with false truths. But – it can also be the other way round, which my empirical body implies. This is absolutely vital for, not just the sociology of culture, but to *all* of the sociological field. As researchers we study society, often from a critical point of view, increasingly involving popular culture as a potent actor in shape of empirical material. These new cultural resources (social media, streaming sites, YouTube etc.) not only hold great impact, but even more, transform our social experiences and cultural references – as shown in previous research.

Furthermore, in line with the idea of the audience preceding the *auteur* (Alsop, 2019; do Nascimento, 2019; Van Belle, 2019), neither of the material *tells* us what to do or how to act, rather it *pledges* us, appealing to our sleeping sense of primal conservatism in terms of a pristine sense of moral and ethics. This indicates an increased emphasis on having a 'bottom-up' intention within the *auteurs* (Van Belle, 2019). The value in, for example, portraying ideology as having a grammar and a colour is to show the complexity of societal critique – but also the simplicity of formulating such a critique through accessible mainstream fiction. To me, this is a direct response to the increased progression towards a multidimensional sociological analysis, based on popular culture and mainstream fiction. By embracing ideas of **reversibility**, **moral** and **ethics** as vital when discussing plasticity and elasticity, this paper contributes with, not another, but an important *alternative* discourse of how to approach the good society 2.0.

Another salient aspect is the power of **remembrance** to reclaim what has been lost on the way towards the contemporary society. Cinematic memory (Van Belle, 2019) and other sorts of memories becomes powerful tools for changing both the content of the doxa-habitus circularity, *and* the outcome of cultural production and consumption. It is all there, in our imagination! – we just have to 'remove' the fantasy bit and acknowledge stories to be just as real as the 'real' world in order to change and reverse the social narrative. The problem with this contemporary society though is that we have been far too accustomed to just consume, re-consume, obey and pledge allegiance to the Big Lie. But, as *Bilbo* shouts: "you can't give up now!?" (*The Desolation of Smaug*, Jackson, 2013) - or as *John Dutton* says: (Jackson, *The*

Battle of the Five Armies , 2014) “Just need a long ride to **remind** myself of what we’re fighting for” (*Yellowstone* SE2 E7, Sheridan, 2019). These lines show the simplicity *and strength* in mainstream fiction, indicating an extensive use of box-offices, iconic rock stars, successful TV-shows etc. to be part of a **new sociology**. As previous research show, together with the conclusions of this actual paper, we can use this new turn in sociology to illustrate both how FUBAR<sup>23</sup> we have become, living in a world that is very much *same shit different day*<sup>24</sup> and **all the possibilities we are provided with to create ‘tipping-points’ and changing this current FUBAR-state**. From that perspective, this actual paper has attempted to contribute with *yet another voice* in the direction towards good society 2.0.

## 6.5 Windows towards future studies

What this paper has done is to make way for a larger discussion about what exactly Good Society 2.0 means. How can we bring the syntheses of this actual paper beyond the frames of this particular study? That is one of the windows I have opened. How do we go on from here? To me, writing this paper has opened both windows, doors and roof tops, and right now I am, alike *Kayce*, standing on the edge of a cliff wondering which window I will open next. There is no doubt about the power in mainstream fiction, which is why we sociologists should extend even further the use of popular culture as empirical material. To be frank, how can we *not* use it? Today, anno 2024, I consider it even more important than ever to turn to music, to epic adventures, to a bit ‘good ol’ days’ romantic cowboy-and-western’, to find inspiration and hope. Humanity is currently dying, bit by bit – but humanity is also more **alive** than ever! There are a lot of social movements, rhizomatic movements, political movements, uprisings, revolutions etc. *One* way to jump on that train of coming alive is to increase the use of fiction, music, theatre, art, dance etc. in our research, embracing an increased interdisciplinary approach. Mainstream fiction is not just fairy tales, myths or poetic lyrics – it is also reflections of how the world was, is and *can be*. It is about responsibility...it takes two to tango, we can be helped to the cliffs,

<sup>23</sup> Fucked Beyond All Recognition, from the Steven Spielberg film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) [My annotation].

<sup>24</sup><sup>24</sup> *Dreamcatcher* (King, 2001:9)

staring down the unknown abyss<sup>25</sup>, but *we* need to make the decision. We are everything and nothing, we are *Sméagol* and *Gollum*, *we* are both the beginning and the end.

Another important window is to have a critical view on the empirical body to look for immanent tensions. Although this paper points out that all three 'bodies' implies the necessity of creating the good society 2.0, there are also tensions – both immanent ones between the 'bodies', between the 'bodies' and previous research *and* between the 'bodies' and myself. This calls for an extensive study with focus on the threefold relation between the empirical body, me as researcher and previous research. The findings of this actual paper could advantageously be involved in such a study, but with the necessary reflexive and critical view more enhanced. For example, the idea of ideology having a grammar has potential to be further explored by focusing on how David Bowie uses grammar to formulate critique, hope, dreams and progression. The same goes for ideology having a colour, as well as mainstream fiction functioning as **actant**. All these are ideas I consider to be interesting topics in the discourse of the good society 2.0.

Yet another aspect to be further explored is the tension between **plasticity** and **elasticity** – which this paper found to be lacking in previous research. To locate this tension in the context of popular culture in general and mainstream fiction in particular, will not only contribute to broaden sociological analyses, but also locate my specific research interest within the growing niche of using non-scientific resources like films, lyrics, TV-shows etc. as empirical material. Having such an intention will also provide opportunities for updating discussions of moral and ethics, from a sociological point of view.

Yet another future research topic is based on the idea that this paper is part of an essential **starting point for a new direction in sociology**, by position itself as the 'slash' between culture/culture sociology/**mainstream fiction**/society (Lindgren, 2014:27). This involves an increased 'bottom-up' perspective (Van Belle, 2019), but also an updated

<sup>25</sup> Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you" (*Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: Epigrams and Interludes*, Kaufmann, 2000:279).

methodology following the fast-accelerating tendencies, in respect of mass media, social media and cultural production, distribution, consumption and consequences. To allow the audience to precede the *auteur*, they need to be involved to an even greater extent by e.g., **create interaction through new techniques, research design** and **responsiveness** towards a constantly changing societal narrative. This evolution takes time to digest, placing this paper as *one* among other tentative attempts to represent a ‘new’ way of approaching sociology based on how we interact in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By inserting hyperlinks and iconography, the reader can instantly *be* and *incorporate* what the researcher tries to mediate – a practice that should be embraced to a greater extent than I currently perceive. Today we have a multidimensional ‘reading’ involving moving pictures, images, sound etc. as the ‘new normal’. This calls for a constant need of updating in how we methodologically conduct scientific research. From that point of view, this actual paper should be considered as one of all representations of a new, dynamic approach to popular culture as vehicle for societal change. Because of this dynamic character, we can also consider this new sociology as a brave approach, alike *Kayce* standing on the cliff (*Yellowstone*, SE4 E10, Sheridan, 2021), or David Bowie’s statement of being a vehicle but never really “sorted out what it was” (Leorne, 2015:120).

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**Sam:** It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo.  
The ones that really matters [...]  
That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo.  
And it’s worth fighting for.  
(*The Two Towers*, Jackson, 2002)



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# Appendix 1

## David Bowie catalogue:

David Bowie	1967
David Bowie (Space Oddity)	1969
The Man Who Sold The World	1970
Hunky Dory	1971
The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust	1972
Aladdin Sane	1973
Pin Ups	1973
Diamond Dogs	1974
Young Americans	1975
Station to Station	1976
Low	1977
Heroes	1977
Lodger	1979
Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)	1980
Let's Dance	1983
Tonight	1984
Never Let Me Down	1987
Black Tie White Noise	1993
The Buddha of Suburbia	1993
Outside	1995
Earthling	1997
Hours	1999
Heathen	2002
Reality	2003
The Next Day	2013
Blackstar	2016

## Soundtrack David Bowie

I'm Deranged (from "Lost Highway")	1997
I can't read (from "The Ice Storm")	1997

## The Lord of the Rings hexalogy:

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring	2001
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	2002
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	2003
The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey	2012
The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug	2013

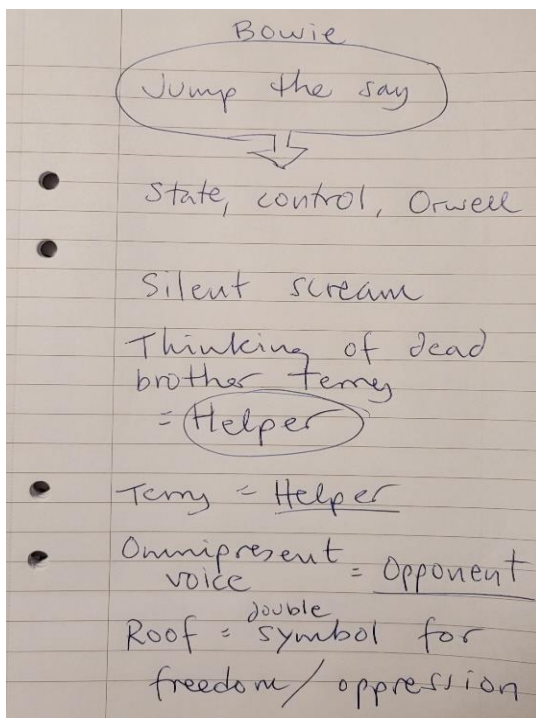
## Yellowstone:

Season 1-5	2018-2023
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## Appendix 2

Table 1 Scripts available online (as retrieved 2024-03-20).

<b>The Fellowship of The Ring</b>	<a href="http://www.fempiror.com/otherscripts/LordoftheRings1-FOTR.pdf">http://www.fempiror.com/otherscripts/LordoftheRings1-FOTR.pdf</a>
<b>The Two Towers</b>	<a href="http://www.fempiror.com/otherscripts/LordoftheRings2-TTT.pdf">http://www.fempiror.com/otherscripts/LordoftheRings2-TTT.pdf</a>
<b>The Return of the King</b>	<a href="https://www.scriptslug.com/script/the-lord-of-the-rings-the-return-of-the-king-2003">https://www.scriptslug.com/script/the-lord-of-the-rings-the-return-of-the-king-2003</a>
<b>An Unexpected Journey</b>	<a href="https://thescriptedit.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/the-hobbit-an-unexpected-journey-scripted-edit-ee1.pdf">https://thescriptedit.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/the-hobbit-an-unexpected-journey-scripted-edit-ee1.pdf</a>
<b>The Desolation of Smaug</b>	<a href="https://www.screenwritersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Hobbit-The-Desolation-of-Smaug-2013.pdf">https://www.screenwritersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Hobbit-The-Desolation-of-Smaug-2013.pdf</a>
<b>Yellowstone Season 1-4</b>	<a href="https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewforum.php?f=973">https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewforum.php?f=973</a>



Examples of jottings to music video Jump They Say (Bowie, 1993).

## **Publiceringsvillkor**

### **1. Mittuniversitetet är anslutet till DiVA (Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet).**

DiVA är ett digitalt repositorium för registrering och lagring av forskningspublikationer och självständiga arbeten, med möjlighet att göra handlingarna publika.

### **2. Genom att författarens verk laddas upp och publiceras i DiVA görs det tillgängligt för allmänheten.**

Uttrycket "tillgängligt för allmänheten" betyder att i princip alla och envar har möjlighet att ta del av verket. Forskarsamhället räknas i den meningen till "allmänheten". Författaren behåller sin upphovsrätt, och allmänhetens nyttjande av informationen i DiVA regleras av Upphovsrättslagen. (Se även Pkt 9)

### **3. Författaren svarar själv för att han/hon innehar erforderlig upphovsrätt för att publicera verket i DiVA.**

Eftersom författaren inte överläter någon del av upphovsrätten, står Lärosätet/DiVA utan ansvar för eventuella brott mot upphovsrättsliga regler avseende författarens verk. Lärosätet tillhandahåller enbart en plattform, vilket innebär att författaren är "den som publicerar" i DiVA.

### **4. Examinator ansvarar för att det examinerade verket i fulltext skickas till berörd fakultetshandläggare.**

Författaren ansvarar sedan själv för att verket har godkänts för publicering; avhandlingar, examensarbeten och liknande måste vara godkända för publicering innan de får läggas ut i DiVA. Fakultetshandläggare ansvarar för att ladda upp och publicera godkänd fulltext i DiVA.

### **5. Publiceringen i DiVA vilar på icke-kommersiella grunder.**

Lärosätet debiterar ej författaren några avgifter för publiceringen i DiVA. Författaren har inte rätt till ekonomisk ersättning från Lärosätet för publiceringen i DiVA. Lärosätet har inte rätt att ta ut avgifter för allmänhetens användning av författarens verk i DiVA.

**6. Lärosätet har rätt att ta bort författarens verk från DiVA om författaren bryter mot Publiceringsvillkoren.**

Enligt Lärosätets anvisningar för publicering i DiVA är författaren skyldig att ta del av och godkänna Publiceringsvillkoren. Detta bekräftas genom knapptryckning i DiVA:s registreringsmodul, vid uppladdning av fulltextfil.

**7. Den som lägger upp fulltext i DiVA svarar för att samtliga författare till verket informeras om och godkännt Publiceringsvillkoren.**

Denna punkt reglerar ansvarsförhållandena vid flerförfattarverk samt sådana fall där någon annan än författaren, på dennes uppdrag, lägger in verket i DiVA.

**8. Författaren har möjlighet att avstå från delar av sin förfoganderätt till verket.**

Genom att förse verket med särskild licens, till exempel av typen Creative Commons, kan författaren ge användarna rättighet att använda verket inom vidare ramar än vad som gäller enligt Upphovsrättslagen.

**9. Publiceringsvillkoren gäller i tillämpliga avseenden även om Lärosätet övergår till annan systemlösning än DiVA.**

Metadata och uppladdade filer överförs i sådana fall till det nya systemet.