



The Phantasmatic Dimension of Culture Wars: The Case of Social Conservatism

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Abstract

The article is devoted to identifying and describing the phantasmatic dimension of the culture wars, in particular the phantasmatic dimension of one side of this confrontation—social conservatism. The notion of “phantasm” is used on the basis of the Lacanian tradition of social and political theory. A phantasm is understood as stereotypical, repetitive images or visions that structure the position of “culture warriors” and are the foundation on which other levels (rational, legal, etc.) are superimposed. Conservative phantasms are actualized at the moment when society undergoes a process of radical transformation, which breaks the usual systems of differentiation; it is this process that triggers culture wars. Empirical material to illustrate these ideas is the case of Russian social conservatism.

Keywords: social conservatism; phantasm; Lacanian social theory; Russia; culture wars; traditional values

Culture wars are a ubiquitous phenomenon these days. What started as a “struggle to control the family, art, education, law, and politics in America”¹ has globalized.² Now it drags into its struggles over morality issues more and more actors—from different cultures, continents, and religions. One of the relevant newcomers in these wars is Russia, which clearly sided with the social conservative position. Russian activities and ambitions in the global culture wars have already attracted much attention.³ The current essay is an attempt to uncover one of the key dimensions of contemporary social conservatism (and culture wars in general)—the dimension that could be called phantasmatic.⁴ As I draw on this concept derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, I use data derived from the study of Russian social conservatism for an illustration of my point.

Social conservative actors are powerful players in the culture wars.⁵ The Russian participation in transnational moral conservative networks has been one of the most visible in recent decades.⁶ The study of social conservatism from the angle of political sociology, political science, international relations, and social movement studies has mostly privileged a perspective according to which conservative actors are driven by rational, institutional, or ideational goals. The case of Russia’s ascent in the transnational moral conservative universe, for example, was accompanied by a learning process from Western social conservatives both in terms of institutions and in terms of framing strategies of the conservative message, in particular a framing in terms of human rights.⁷ Social conservatism, in this perspective, is about ideas, institutions, and strategies.

What we learn from the case of Russian social conservatism, however, is that the intellectual saturation of the Russian conservative position with the discourse of the global culture wars is not purely instrumental, rational and strategic. There is

1 James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America’s Culture War* (New York and Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994); James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

2 Clifford Bob, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Christopher McCrudden, “Transnational Culture Wars,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 13 (April 2015): 434–462, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mov018.30.09.2022>.

3 For a comprehensive analysis of this process, see Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralistic International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

4 See Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), 45–54; Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), 145–152. A clarification here is necessary: the phantasmatic dimension that I describe is not exclusive to socially conservative positions. It can also be traced in the opposite direction—that of social liberalism. I discuss this briefly in the final section of the paper. In general, the phantasmatic dimension of social liberalism and its main phantasms is a topic that deserves separate investigation and discussion.

5 For the American part, see Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

6 See the materials of the [Postsecular Conflicts \(POSEC\) project](#), which researched and documented this phenomenon, in particular Kristina Stoeckl, “The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur,” *Religion, State & Society* 44, no. 2 (July 2016): 131–151, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2016.1194010>; Kristina Stoeckl and Ksenia Medvedeva, “Double Bind at the UN: Western Actors, Russia, and the Traditionalist Agenda,” *Global Constitutionalism* 7, no. 3 (November 2018): 383–421, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s2045381718000163>; Dmitry Uzlaner and Kristina Stoeckl, “The Legacy of Pitirim Sorokin in the Transnational Alliances of Moral Conservatives,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 18, no. 2 (Month 2017): 133–153, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795317740734>; Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds., *Postsecular Conflicts: Debating Tradition in Russia and the United States* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2020); Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralistic International*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv307fh49>.

7 For more on this, see Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralistic International*, 17–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv307fh49>. For similar developments in the US context, see Andrew R. Lewis, *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

also another aspect, pointing to a dimension “beyond rationality,”⁸ the, so to speak, “obscene” (I will explain below why I find this strong word appropriate) side of this phenomenon. In the Russian case this other side manifests itself in narratives with clear mythological overtones—about the traditional way of life and how it is threatened by enemies that must be fought. These are stories about the Golden Age of tradition, about the forces of evil that have fallen upon it, about courageous heroes and vicious villains, about the disastrous consequences of abandoning traditional values, leading literally to the end of the world.

The two dimensions of social conservatism—the rational-strategic and irrational-mythological—could be present in one and the same person. Over several years of fieldwork in the conservative milieu with numerous interviews, I typically encountered highly educated entrepreneurial subjects with excellent networking skills and knowledge of all the flaws and weaknesses of the contemporary international legal order, which allowed them to successfully defend their conservative point of view; on the other hand, these same persons, when prompted to place their activities in a more general context, would talk about Stalin as savior of Russia from destructive ideologies (for example, from feminism), about a neo-Marxist plot to destroy traditional values, about George Soros’ and Bill Gates’ mission to subvert morality, etc. What I encountered, in short, was a strange mixture of practical rationality and mythological thinking.

Research on social conservatism necessarily puts emphasis on the rational-instrumental side of the object of study, tracing networks, organizations, and concrete activities, but it is also necessary to keep in mind the second—“beyond rationality”—dimension of this conservatism: these theories, imbued with the pathos of a heroic struggle against powerful enemies.⁹ Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2022 and its justifications through the pathos of culture war and the mission to prevent gay-parades¹⁰—together with a lot of other ideological explanations—brought this second dimension to the foreground.¹¹ The use of such justifications for the war seriously questioned, first, the rational basis of social conservatism in Russia and, second, the existence of rational actors behind this social conservatism who are immune to its “dark” (or, as Freud would put it, “uncanny”) aspects but only use them for their purposes. By “dark” aspects I mean the pathos of an almost “cosmic war” against enemies who subvert morality for the sake of Antichrist or some other figure representing evil.

My main insight is that social conservatism certainly has a rational side, but at its core it is driven by something “beyond rationality” that we can call “phantasmatic.” This phantasmatic dimension must necessarily be kept in mind for a more comprehensive

8 It is not that easy to find a good term to define this dimension in terms of rationality. I call it “beyond rationality” in the sense of beyond our taken-for-granted understanding of rationality. At the same time this dimension seems to have its own rationality and its own logics that I call “mythological.”

9 See also Dmitry Uzlaner, “Perverse Conservatism: A Lacanian Interpretation of Russia’s Turn to Traditional Values,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 22, no. 2 (November 2017): 173–192, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-016-0036-6>; Dmitry Uzlaner, “The Logic of Scapegoating in Contemporary Russian Moral Conservatism,” in *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes and Perspectives*, ed. Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 103–127.

10 Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, “In his ‘Forgiveness Day’ sermon—a slightly more sophisticated ‘globohomo’ rant—Kirill lays out an authoritarian vision in which his version of God might dominate and rule the human race,” *Religion Dispatches* (March 7, 2022), <https://religiondispatches.org/in-his-forgiveness-day-sermon-a-slightly-more-sophisticated-globohomo-rant-kirill-lays-out-an-authoritarian-vision-in-which-his-version-of-god-might-dominate-and-rule-the-h/>.

11 Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, “Russia Believed the West Was Weak and Decadent. So It Invaded,” *Washington Post* (April 15, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/15/putin-patriarch-ukraine-culture-power-decline/>.

understanding both of the culture wars and of the parties involved in them. Before I turn to an argument for the phantasmatic dimension, I give an overview over the rational and instrumental interpretations of social conservatism.

Two Main Lines of Interpreting Social Conservatism

Most approaches to dealing with social conservatism—at least of the Russian variety—usually move in one of two directions.

The first direction is that of intellectual history and discourse analysis.¹² It presents the conservative narrative as a discursive construction. Here the researcher tries to dissect this construction into elements and trace the roots of these elements. The essence of this approach is to place social conservative ideas in the context of one (or more than one) intellectual tradition, for example, in the context of the history of Russian conservative thought or global conservative thought. This gives us an understanding of where these or other discursive elements in Russian social conservatism come from, for example, why “the West” appears as an enemy, why Russia claims to be the “Third Rome,” why Russian actors aspire to rule the “Russian world” denying the subjectivity of Ukraine, etc. My main problem with this approach is that it excessively intellectualizes social conservatism—it transfers it to the intellectual, rational plane, framing our understanding of it as primarily semantic construction, a work of reason and intellect, which could be influenced by logic (arguments, facts, objections, emphasis on its intrinsic contradictions, etc.). It overly rationalizes and intellectualizes something that, in my view, is deeply non-rational, non- and even anti- intellectual.

The second direction of analysis, perhaps the most widespread and mainstream, could be called “instrumental.”¹³ It presents social conservatism as a tool behind which there is a rational agent who tries to use this tool for one purpose or another: for example, as a way to unite the population around him, if we are talking about a political leader; as a way to accumulate resources, if we are talking about a norm entrepreneur; as a way to achieve fame and influence, if we are talking about an ambitious ideologist, etc. In other words, what looks like a puzzling phenomenon would be the product of the activities of calculating actors who need and use this irrationality to achieve a rational goal. The basic premise here, which seems false to me, is that there is a rational subject who is placed outside the ideological constructs—he or she uses these ideas, but remains invulnerable to their debilitating radiance. The problem with this approach is that it is essentially an attempt to explain a seemingly incomprehensible phenomenon through a conspiracy theory—something happens because there is a group of powerful actors behind it who use it as a tool to realize their insidious designs.

These two lines of analysis do not contradict each other. In reality they are usually combined. The standard assessment of social conservatism by those who do not share its ideas goes a bit like this: social conservative narratives are created by gifted ideologues from elements of traditional religion and past ideologies in order to realize their political and sometimes personal goals. An organic fusion of two approaches.

¹² Many examples of this can be found here: Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds., *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes and Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

¹³ See, for example, Elena Stepanova, “The Spiritual and Moral Foundation of Civilization in Every Nation for Thousands of Years: The Traditional Values Discourse in Russia,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16, no. 2–3 (August 2015): 119–136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2015.1068167>.

Both approaches are very useful, but are not enough and must be supplemented by a third line of thinking. What is needed is a view that, on the one hand, would take into account the phantasmatic aspect of these constructions; and that, on the other hand, would finally give up the illusion of the existence of rational-instrumental actors who would remain immune to the ideological environment they live in. This last point is a trap that many experts on Russia have fallen into: for years they have seen the most absurd ideas blossom in Russia, but have always reassured themselves that behind these ideas there are rational and pragmatic elites, who certainly think like we do and for this reason would never take these ideas seriously, but use them only for cynical political purposes. The war with Ukraine, I believe, will destroy this myth of the rational Russian actor. Actors are not *outside*, but *inside* ideological phantasmatic narratives—their practical rationality is determined by the system of coordinates structured by these narratives. There are clear signs that such rethinking is happening—for example, leading researcher on conspiracy theories in Russia recently acknowledged that the Russian regime does not exploit conspiracy theories (as he thought earlier),¹⁴ but is *driven* by them.¹⁵

Phantasm and the Phantasmatic Dimension of Social Conservatism

When I say “phantasm” and “phantasmatic dimension,” I, of course, refer to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically-oriented social and political theory, in particular, to the tradition associated with Jacques Lacan and those philosophers and sociologists who were influenced by his ideas.¹⁶ The key psychoanalytic intuition that allows us to expand our vision of social conservatism is the understanding of the individual as not only a rational and conscious being; rationality and consciousness are only parts, albeit key ones, of human nature. As Anthony Elliott put it, “one of Freud’s most substantial findings is that there are psychical phenomena that are not available to consciousness, but which nevertheless exert a determining influence on everyday life.”¹⁷ Human subjectivity includes a powerful multilayered dimension (what in psychoanalytic terminology is usually called the dynamic unconscious), which manifests itself in everything that people do—including their political and social imagination. Emotional, affective aspects are definitely part of this dimension, but the key concept for me in the context of the current discussion is that of “phantasm.” Phantasms can be personal, if we refer to the level of the individual subject, or political or ideological, if we refer to the level of above- or inter-

14 See Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).

15 Ilya Yablokov, “The Five Conspiracy Theories That Putin Has Weaponized,” *New York Times* (April 25, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/25/opinion/putin-russia-conspiracy-theories.html>; Ilya Yablokov, “Putin Believes in Conspiracy Theories,” *Holod* (August 1, 2022), <https://holod.media/en/2022/08/01/putin-conspiracy/>, 30.09.2022.

16 For the best introduction to this tradition, see Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999); Yannis Stavrakakis, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2020); Anthony Elliott, “Psychoanalytic Social Theory,” in *Routledge Handbook of Social and Cultural Theory*, ed. Anthony Elliott (London: Routledge, 2021).

17 Anthony Elliott, *Social Theory since Freud: Traversing Social Imaginaries* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 185.

subjectivity. Our thinking about social conservatism should be supplemented by the analysis of the always present phantasmatic dimension of this phenomenon.¹⁸

The concept of “phantasm” appeared as a result of the translation of Freud’s term *Fantasie* into French. The French word *fantaisie* was not considered appropriate by Freud’s translator—as it has a meaning of something light, childish, playful, while Freud meant much darker and grim aspects of human imagination: the fantasy of killing your father, etc. So the term “fantasme” was offered—and later used by Lacan—which at that time was a rare and unusual word in French language. Since then, this word became an absolutely common word.¹⁹ For this reason, I prefer the concept of “phantasm” to that of “fantasy” for similar reasons and also for the reasons of emphasizing that my line of thinking goes along the psychoanalytic lines and not just along common-sense ideas on how human fantasies and imagination function.

What is phantasm and what is its role in the maintaining of any social reality? Here I will briefly summarize the standard Lacanian position.²⁰ Let us start with the intuition of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the non-existence of society in the sense of “founding totality of its partial processes.”²¹ In order to decipher this idea, we have to start with a distinction between social reality “as it is” (what Lacan called the “real” register) and different symbolic representations of this reality (what Lacan called the “symbolic” register). These two registers never coincide. For example, we traditionally tend to differentiate humans along the lines of males and females—this is the symbolic register. But today more and more people tend to question this representation claiming that reality as it is (in its real register) is much more complicated. So, there is always a discrepancy between social reality as it is and our symbolic representations of it. These results in social symptoms, the breaches in the smooth fabric of social reality—the culture wars, actually, result from these breaches.

We never deal with social reality as it is (we do not have access to it); instead we deal with its symbolic representations. To a certain extent one can say that social reality is equal to these symbolic representations, at least we often take these representations for granted (not noticing that our representations are, using Lacanian concept, “not-all,” that there is something else, some unrepresented element behind them). So, this social reality (“the Big Other,” if we use Lacanian terminology) is a symbolic construction, we can even call it a fiction in the sense that it exists as long as there are

18 On the concept in clinical context, see Bruce Fink, “Fantasies and the Fundamental Fantasy: An Introduction,” in *Against Understanding, Volume 2: Cases and Commentary in a Lacanian Key*, ed. Bruce Fink (London: Routledge, 2014): 39–52. For the use of this concept in social and political theory, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997); Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, 145–152; Jason Glynos, “The Grip of Ideology: A Lacanian Approach to the Theory of Ideology,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 2 (August 2001): 191–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310120053858>; Jason Glynos, “Fantasy and Identity in Critical Political Theory,” *Filozofski vestnik* XXXII, no. 2 (September 2011): 65–88; Matthew Sharpe and Kirk Turner, “Fantasy,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis (London: Routledge, 2020): 187–198.

19 Guy Le Gaufey, “The Fight against Psychopathology: Why a Case Is Not Just a Case,” Conférence donnée à Londres le 12 février 2005 au CFAR (Darian Leader) (February 12, 2005), <https://legaufey.fr/122-the-fight-against-psychopathology-why-a-case-is-not-just-a-case-conference-donnee-a-londres-le-12-fevrier-2005-au-cfar-darian-leader-non-publie-2/>.

20 For more detail, see Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 45–54, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203006160>; see also Yannis Stavrakakis, “Enjoying the Nation: A Success Story?” in *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007): 189–210. For criticism of such interpretation of phantasmatic dimension, see Elliott, *Social Theory Since Freud*, 173, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203496060>, and other publications by the same author.

21 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 95.

people who believe in it.²² If they stop believing in it, it will dissolve and only some material artefacts will remain (buildings, papers, road signs, etc.). This symbolic construction is based on conventions that have no ultimate grounds (as Lacan wrote, “the Other has no Other”), for this reason this construction is unstable. We live in a structured world, so to say, where there are hierarchies, rules, norms, coordinates that we follow and that give us stability, but whose structure itself is lacking any ultimate foundations (it can be restructured—and history is a witness to these dislocations and transformations).

Another important aspect is that this social reality—in its symbolic register—brings together and unites absolutely different people with different, sometimes mutually exclusive interests; for this reason it inevitably contains contradictions, antagonisms which it cannot resolve and which constantly threaten to destabilize it, to plunge it into chaos. Social reality in its established symbolic manifestations is an attempt to domesticate this antagonistic aspect, to systematize it, to frame it in a structured entity.

Social reality, as I said, is an unstable construction, almost a fiction, a collective illusion, but it is a necessary illusion, an illusion that gives stability to our identity. Human beings, in the Lacanian perspective, also have the “real register” of internal chaos that we tend to structure through different imaginary and symbolic identifications that give us a sense of stability. But this stable identity is also an illusion—if social reality is unstable, then our identity, rooted in this social reality, is also unstable. Behind this fiction of social order always looms the threat of chaos, of disintegration, both social and individual, through the sweeping away of all hierarchies and differentiations, which, like a shield, protect us from the horror of havoc and endow us with an experience of stability and certainty.

The function of phantasm, in our case political or ideological phantasm, is to conceal the flaws in any social reality, to cover the seams through which the ever-present danger of destabilizing destruction shines, to explain away the symptoms that reveal the defects of any Big Other, of any social order. Through phantasm social reality appears to be integral, whole, devoid of defects—and phantasm also explains where all the defects come from and why.²³ As Glynos and Howarth put it, the role of fantasy is “to conceal or close off the radical contingency of social relations.”²⁴ One can enumerate the most widespread phantasms of this kind in the history of human sociality: the phantasm of the lost “Golden Age,” the phantasm of the lost territories whose return would restore the harmony, the phantasm of the scapegoats (that is, of enemies, traitors, witches, carriers of alien values and ideologies, etc.). The phantasm of the scapegoat seems to be the most disturbing—the traitors are the embodiment of social negativity, they symbolically represent all the seams, the flaws that exist in the social reality. Phantasms of social negativity also include dramaturgical scenarios for purification and expulsion of the social filth that would with certainty restore the lost harmony, etc.

Phantasms are necessary elements of any subjective or intersubjective structure; they perform a function without which the whole edifice could collapse. They are

²² One can refer here to the whole tradition of discussions concerning social ontology. See John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1997); John R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²³ The classical example of this kind of analysis was presented by Slavoj Žižek in his reflections on anti-Semitism and its role in the maintaining of the Nazis’ harmonious visions of the Third Reich. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

²⁴ Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, 147. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203934753>.

not rational constructions; they appear outside conscious and rational control of individual subjects. Individual subjects perceive them as something that seizes them, fascinates them, controls them, or drives them crazy. It is the background—the phantasmatic base—against which consciousness and rational activity takes place.

There is one more Lacanian teaching that is important in this context. These are not just dry discursive constructions—these phantasms are libidinally filled, energetically invested, they are permeated by what Lacan called *jouissance* (something that could be translated from French as excessive pleasure, excessive enjoyment). *Jouissance* permeates the visions of the “Golden Age,” the fantasies about expulsions of the social filth, the violent escapades against opponents, the celebration of one’s own way of life (however, always tainted by a feeling of “stolen *jouissance*”—we can no longer have as much fun as before, since part of our way of life, part of our enjoyment has been stolen from us).²⁵ Without this libidinal aspect, the culture wars would have been deprived of much of their militancy, they would have been reduced to the dull bickering of lawyers over this or that interpretation of this or that fundamental legal document.

Behind the phantasm of the harmonious social order and other phantasms connected to it lies another far more frightening phantasm: the phantasm of the disintegration of the social body—the psychotic fear of its destruction, annihilation, breaking apart into pieces. This phantasm goes together with an enormous amount of anxiety, a shield, a defense against which is the phantasm of social order, of wholeness and harmony. Utopian speculations about the always lost “Golden Age,” about the imminent regeneration of the social order as a result of the expulsion of all the scum are not rational constructs to which one clings for rational reasons, they are shields that separate the social subject from the anxiety, from the horror associated with the experience of its own disintegration, annihilation. In this sense, little wonder that conservative phantasms about the traditional way of life are almost always linked to phantasms about the world sinking into the abysses of sin and vice, about the coming Apocalypse and the triumph of the Antichrist,²⁶ about unforgivable pleasures (referring to Sodom and Gomorrah) entailing the picturesque God’s revenge,²⁷ and so on. The savoring of such images and scenarios is, as it seems, also strangely permeated with *jouissance* (that is, there is much pleasure in visualizing this Apocalypse).

What is peculiar about phantasms—the detail noticed by many psychoanalysts—is how stereotypical they are (Carl Jung called these stereotypical patterns “archetypes”). Relying on common sense one can think that phantasm as a product of human imagination is something very manifold and diverse. In reality these phantasms are usually reduced to a very limited number that are reproduced from one individual / collective subject to another. Our phantasmatic activity usually follows certain long-ago trodden paths—as if imagination is like a flow of water that goes along the well-known streambed, or a tram that is locked inside the rail route. The stereotypical character of the phantasms that we are dealing with could be easily deciphered from what was said above—each of them performs a particular function inside the machinery of establishment, maintenance, and re-establishment of social reality.

25 See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

26 See Revelation 12:17–13:18, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+12%3A17-13%3A18&version=NRSVUE>.

27 See Genesis 18:16–19:29, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+18%3A16-19%3A29&version=NRSVUE>.

In principle, any community produces such phantasms; one might even say that they are necessary for its existence. However, at moments of social dislocations, when holes, flaws in the social order risk finally exposing its fragility and conditional character, the significance of these phantasms increases. Cultural wars are the result of fundamental social shifts.²⁸ There is certain truth in Ronald Inglehart's claim that we are dealing with profound transformations that change the basis on which human civilization has hitherto been resting: the role of women changes as well as the general gender roles patterns, parent-child relationships are evolving, we are no longer sure what family is, our morality standards are moving, etc.²⁹

However, I am much closer to Peter Wagner's position, who is not talking about processes of millennial importance, but about the next stage of the crisis of the organized modernity (1960s in the West, 1990s in Russia [where everything happens with a 30-year delay]).³⁰ This crisis seems to be special, as it is connected to the revision of some root intimate conventions that have long remained inviolate. Any culture is a system of differentiations: good/bad, man/woman, up/down, friend/stranger, etc. At the moment when this system of differentiations begins to break down, to transform itself, it triggers certain processes—moral panics, phantasms of imminent chaos, etc.³¹ As if all psychotic fears of disintegration, annihilation immediately come to the surface. The shield against this disturbing experience is the phantasm of the social order as a harmonious whole, which must be regenerated through the expulsion of the embodied social negativity ("the scapegoat mechanism" so colorfully described by René Girard).³²

So, again, phantasms—be they phantasms of harmony, of purification, of disintegration and chaos—are not a rational position in some rational dispute, they are a by-product of a fundamental social mechanism. We are facing here objective processes that run beyond the rational or even conscious will of individual subjects, who may try to resist their power (and can sometimes even succeed in this struggle), but are usually their easy prey.

The Phantasms of Social Conservatism

If we need to reduce all previously discussed to a simple definition, then I would say that a phantasm is a recurrent almost stereotypical vision that constantly emerges in narratives. One may say that these narratives are structured around these visions, that these visions are like nodal points guiding the whole process of the work of human imagination. These visions are stereotypical insofar as they perform the same functions for different people and in different contexts. Now I will move on how these phantasms manifest themselves in the social conservative discourses. While the examples below all come from the Russian context, the structure of the argument remains the same also in other linguistic and cultural contexts. All of the phantasms listed here are interconnected—they support each other and very often go together.

²⁸ For the history of culture wars, see Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²⁹ Ronald F. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations Are Changing, and Reshaping the World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³⁰ Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline* (London: Routledge, 1994); Peter Wagner, *Modernity: Understanding the Present* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012).

³¹ One can draw some parallels here with Roger Griffin's reflections on "anomie" in the context of the rise of fascism. See Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991), and other works by the same author.

³² See René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

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The "Golden Age" Phantasm

This phantasm is structured around the vision of an idealized condition of society somewhere in the past—or, probably, in the future. The important thing is that this idealized state is fantasized as always already lost—or not yet achieved. In the case of social conservatism this is usually a phantasm about the past—some idealized period in history when people respected traditional values and led an unspoiled moral life. The function of this phantasm is to present a certain representation of social reality in which actors' identities are rooted as harmonious and peaceful and thereby cover existing antagonisms with a veil of bucolic pictures.

This example of a phantasm of the Golden Age, an age where traditional values were ubiquitous, was presented by one of Russian pro-family actors, who represented the type that I mentioned in the beginning: a combination of practical rationality and mythological ideas. While trying to define traditional values, he elaborated his idealized vision of the Russia in the past:

What was involved? First, religiosity. Well, that is, faith in God, a practical faith, very sincere. Not a formal faith, but an active faith. And the whole absolutely consciousness, the whole way of life, it was organized on Christian principles.

... Then, of course, there was respect for elders, unconditional authority of the elders, unconditional reverence. Monogamy. That is, monogamy. Only one husband, one wife. Nowadays one still uses such a formulation as mixed-gender marriage. That's true. Yes. But back then it wasn't, because marriage was always heterosexual by default.

... Chastity as a traditional value. That is virginity before marriage. Both for men and women. It was absolutely obligatory. It had, on the one hand, been encouraged. It was approved. On the other hand, there was a punishment for those who violate it.

... And also there has always been such a traditional value as fidelity in marriage. Marital fidelity. Then, in principle, the family way of life, that is, the prestige of family. Social status has always been increased only if a person got married. That is, if a person lived without marriage, he did not have the voice in the community.

... [T]hen the norm has always been not to allow divorce. That is, as a value, it was the lifelong-ness of marriage. That is, the marriage was made for life, and there was never any question of it being dissolved, unless there were very good reasons. Very good reasons. Yes. And finally, a very, very, very, very important value, I guess, which is also a traditional value. I call it childbearing. That is, love for children. Russian family always had many children. Always. It has never been about having an abortion or avoiding having children. Families who did not have children were always pitied. There was sympathy for them. It was seen as a deep [problem], kind of a disadvantage.

... And then there is also such a notion, such a value, as intergenerational family organization. People always lived not just as a separate nuclear family, husband and wife. But grandparents, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren. That is, there was such a chain of family. It was always extended. And they lived not so much in one house as in the whole yard. That is, the eldest son usually built a house on the same property. So, it was like a kind of clan always, like a big community. It was not just a family; it was several kinship families under one roof. And they all lived with one household, one soul, that is, one way of life. In principle, no one lived any other way.³³

This vision of a “one household, one soul, one way of life,” which brings to mind the famous description of *Gemeinschaft* by Ferdinand Tönnies, is probably the essence, the very core of this conservative phantasm. But this vision of a Golden Age of the traditional family is always perceived as something that has already been lost—and here the next phantasm comes into play: the one that could be called the phantasm of the “Lost Harmony,” of the “Theft of Enjoyment / jouissance.”

The Phantasm of the “Lost Harmony” and the “Theft of Enjoyment”

The widespread motif of the stolen enjoyment was described in Lacanian terms by Slavoj Žižek.³⁴ I use this concept to designate the core of the next phantasm, which structures the vision of the reasons why the Golden Age is lost. The structure of this phantasm is similar to that of many conspiracy theories, which I also consider to be deeply embedded in the phantasmatic dimension. This is the phantasm about how we lost the harmony. It was not just lost due to natural reasons; it was stolen by some evil actors—proponents of non-traditional values. The concrete names of these actors could be different—for example, liberals, secular humanists, transnational elites, servants of the Antichrist—but the structure of this phantasm remains the same.

I decided to call this phantasm the “Theft of Enjoyment,” and not just of the “Lost Harmony,” as I wanted to point to the fact that social conservatives (at least during the public events that I have visited) constantly show the way they enjoy their traditional way of life and at the same time constantly make complaints against their opponents—that they are stealing their children, their way of life (that is, stealing their enjoyment). That is why conservatives strongly support the idea of homeschooling as well as the idea of preventing the state from meddling in family affairs—“they” must be kept away from our enjoyment.³⁵

This is how this particular phantasm is often manifested in social conservatives’ discourse. Here I take an excerpt from an interview with a very influential priest of the Russian Orthodox Church, who for many years occupied important positions in the Church hierarchy. He explains where non-traditional values come from:

³³ Russian conservative actor, interview conducted in Russian in the context of the POSEC project, Moscow, translation by the author, February 12, 2018.

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

³⁵ On the homeschooling movement, see Julia Mourão Permoser and Kristina Stoeckl, “Reframing Human Rights: The Global Network of Moral Conservative Homeschooling Activists,” *Global Networks* 21, no. 4 (August 2021): 681–702, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12299>.

Non-traditional values are basically things that do not come from God, and not from eternal values, but from a social construct, a social project, from certain political, philosophical, managerial, economic and other players.

... Behind such values there is always some project, some proud and daring attempt to remake the world. I believe that the topic of changing sex is not that of a personal choice but that of a choice pressed through social processes; the topic of abandoning childbearing, of large and multi-generational families is not simply a value that is born among people, much less a value given by God. It is a project. It is a political project whose purpose is to limit the growth of the earth's population, and the erosion of homogeneous societies. These are all parts of the project. It is all a political project.

... It is a political project that is managed by one center. Part of the Western financial and political elites. And if we talk about the projects which are connected with the struggle with the population of the Earth—it is managed by certain forces since the period of Malthusianism, now these forces are more accurate than in the period of crude Malthusianism, but it is obvious that these are global processes, which are absolutely precisely managed by certain global forces. These are not spontaneous processes. This is a project that is imposed on people through propaganda, through laws, through politics, through economic mechanisms. Very much through culture and advertising even, right? This image of the lone wolf, which we see in advertising, is part of a project that aims to erode the family, to erode those ideas, those traditions that lead to the birth of many children.

All evil does not happen without the participation of evil forces, but I still think that the main actors here are people, people who are trying to become instead of God and be the architects of society and human nature so as to arrange it according to their own ideas, according to their own ideas, but also for their own economic and political interests.

... These are the global, first of all financial, and second political elites. That is, these are families like the Rockefellers and some of the political elites.³⁶

This particular manifestation of the phantasm is structured along the secular lines (though “evil forces” are mentioned), but it can also have a very vivid religious framing featuring Antichrist and its wicked servants. The phantasm of a loss at the hands of some malevolent actor leads to the next phantasm: that of scapegoat.

The Phantasm of the Scapegoat

This phantasm is most clearly articulated in the powerful almost mythopoetic images of the community which exorcises all the demons that prevent it from flourishing,

³⁶ Vsevolod Chaplin, interview conducted in Russian in the context of the POSEC project, Moscow, translation by the author, February 7, 2018.

from returning to the harmonious state. This is the phantasm of return to the lost paradise through the straight-out fight with the traitors, with the wicked enemies who stand in the way of this return.

This, for example, is how this phantasm manifests itself in the public speech of one of the activists of social conservatism, the head of the Russian NGO that specializes in the defense of traditional values. She finishes her debate with an opponent about perspectives on sexual education in Russia with a powerful vision, wherein she almost sets forth her dream, her vision of the desired future:

I love Russia. And everything is right here. All that is needed is that we simply sweep away all the garbage that was brought to us in the 1990s, we will chase away completely all this garbage with a pigpen broom, we will sweep away all this feminism, the child free movement, and then we will live happily. We will have a beautiful strong country, a traditional society, and we will live happily, not the happiness that you call happiness there, but really true human happiness. I believe in that.³⁷

These phantasmatic visions only intensified with the war in Ukraine and resulted in almost poetic images crafted by masters of this genre. Patriotic writer Aleksandr Prokhanov visualizes this phantasm in the following way:

Russia is a temple illuminated by the Fire of Grace. From the temple, frightened, blinded by the divine rays, merchants run away. Their trays are overturned. Their wicked billions are trampled. Terrified, their faces twisted in fear.

Flee from the Russian temple crowds of detractors, desecrators of shrines, that mocked the Russian altars, splashing mud on the faces of Russian saints.

At the hour of repose, a marvelous fresco opens on the wall of the Russian Easter Church. Plastered over by vile blasphemers, sealed with lime, and hung with rotten cloths, the fresco reveals a marvelous face—the miraculous image of Russia. The face is beautiful and formidable. It will comfort all who suffer and are burdened, whatever continent they are suffering on. It will inspire all warriors and noble men who trample the darkness.³⁸

In the Russian context this phantasm underpins an endless and self-repeating process of adopting one law after another aimed at limiting “non-traditionality” and punishing embodiments of it—so-called foreign agents.

The Phantasm of the Social Disintegration

The phantasm of social disintegration is, probably, the strangest one—it evidently stands out against the background of the usual conservative topics of morality, harmony, and order. In the beginning of my essay, I used the word “obscene” to describe the non-rational part of the phenomenon I am interested in. Probably, this

³⁷ “Za I protiv seks-prosveta / Zachem govorit’ s det’mi o sekse? / NENAVIZHU TEBYA?,” YouTube, October 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvpQHqsx3YQ>.

³⁸ Alexander Prokhanov, “Vo istinu,” *Zavtra* (April 25, 2022), <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/voistinu>.

word seemed rude, but exactly this phantasm is the reason for such a strong word when we describe the phantasmatic dimension of social conservatism.

This “obscene” part (which is also evident in the phantasm of scapegoating) is a definite sign that we are dealing with phantasmatic dimension in its clear form. As scholars writing on the phantasmatic dimension of politics put it: “empirical evidence indicating the presence of a fantasmatic object can often be identified by asking *whether or not it resists public official disclosure*.”³⁹ That is to say, the phantasmatic dimension always contains within itself something that is not easy to confess in public, something that is usually avoided—as being embarrassing or, as I put it above, obscene. The phantasm of social disintegration reveals the hidden anxiety-provoking dimension of conservatism, which is shielded by other phantasms mentioned and described above. The other phantasms are just a cover for this phantasmatic vision.

This phantasm manifests itself in Apocalyptic, obscene images and descriptions that try to symbolize the situation of disintegration, of chaos—that could result from the arrival of the non-traditional values. I will illustrate this phantasm with the help of a short novel, written by Aron Shemaier. Aron Shemaier is the pseudonym used by the Russian priest Vsevolod Chaplin, a key figure in Russian social conservative activism until his death in 2020. The novel is called *Masho and the Bears*.⁴⁰ Masho is a name that emphasizes the neutral gender of its bearer—neither female (the normal Russian female name is Masha), nor male.

This is a dystopian story about the world where all differentiations disappear: between males and females, between children and grown-ups, between human beings and animals, between human beings and technological devices, between moral and immoral, etc. The text is full of bizarre and perverse sexual details and descriptions, which reveal this priest as a man with a very rich imagination. I will give some quotes to illustrate what I am talking about.

Here is a public relations person describing his mission:

But there are values that we should never betray. One of them is taking care of the children, of their upbringing. That no one should ever dare to put gender stereotypes back into their hearts and souls. You know what I mean: the commercials of sex education programs. No matter how hard it is, they have to come out and they will come out! ... We have until the end of the year to make commercials for babies about the joys of interspecies contact, the benefits of masturbation, the transformation of a so-called boy into a so-called girl and vice versa. And clips accompanying the stimulation of erogenous zones in children under 5. And commercials for teenagers against asexuality. And clips against taboos. And clips about the newest gender—technophiles. We won't be ourselves; we'll lose our traditions if we don't make it all.

39 Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, 148, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203934753>: emphasis in the original.

40 Aron Shemaier, “Masho I Medvedi [Masho and bears],” *Religare.ru* (2014), http://www.religare.ru/2_104432.html.

Here is the story of a zoo in this dystopian world:

At first zoophiles took a fancy to the rarity object, but then someone ... decided that having sex with animals in cages was a symbol of unfreedom and residual discrimination. The zoophiles were kicked out. In their place came sadomasochists, for whom cages were just fine. But the lovers of extreme pleasures heavily abused chemicals, alcohol, fights, stabbings, and shootings ... 95 percent of the [population] tried to avoid the zoo and bypass it as far as possible.

This is how the protagonist describes his body shape:

“Yes, I have perfected my primitive nature. To the male sex organs, I added two specimens of female organs,” replied Masho.

These are just minor examples of a whole range of obscene visions. The world, which loses all differentiations, of course, could not exist and the short novel predictably ends with a nuclear explosion, when “a terrible blow swallowed up all living and non-living things.”⁴¹

One can argue that the author wrote the novel for purely didactical reasons to illustrate the excesses of the progressive agenda. However, the reader is left with the impression that the number of obscene details that are constantly repeated and almost savored is so big that a lot of jouissance is hidden behind these alleged didactic exercises. Besides, this kind of obscene musing is a widespread and almost constant feature of social conservative lamentations. One can find multiple other examples, illustrating the same points.

The phantasm of the disintegration of the social body is probably the most frightening and anxiety-provoking one—both on the individual and on the collective level. It represents the chaos that is always looming behind any order.

* * *

Phantasms are not natural entities that could easily be pointed at and enumerated. So, the four phantasms presented above could be regrouped in another way. What is clear is that these phantasms are interconnected: some of them could be present in the narrative of this or that actor, but others could be omitted (for example, one may talk about the “Golden Age” of traditional values but omit the part about enemies who are to blame for losing it). My guess is that the remaining parts are also somewhere near—they were not presented because the interview was too short or because the actor preferred to omit some elements of the story. These phantasms and their sequence have a very clear mythological structure that we can come across

⁴¹ Shemaier, “Masho.”

in many religions—the Paradise, the Fall, and the Regeneration through Purification (which saves humanity from Hell).⁴²

The Dimension of Reason vs. the Dimension of Phantasm

As it has already become clear, social conservatism has a rational side, but also the side that points beyond rationality—the dimension of phantasm that I have described above. These two dimensions—the rational and the phantasmatic—refer to different layers of human subjectivity. In this sense they can contradict or strengthen each other. When they contradict each other, this can lead to seemingly contradictory processes: on the conscious level, one can be consciously and rationally opposed to, for example, racism, but at the crucial moment—decisive elections—side with the phantasm of a harmonious community threatened by “migrant aliens” and vote correspondingly. One can on the conscious level consciously and rationally confess adherence to gender equality, but somewhere deep inside secretly entertain the visions of a highly hierarchical order with dominant men and subordinate women (or vice versa). When they strengthen each other, then what on the surface looks like a rational position edged with some facts and arguments could be just a cover for powerful phantasms driving this position and making it totally immune to any rational critique and refutations by means of facts and logical or legal argumentation.

Social conservatism can be interpreted and analyzed from the side of rational argumentation, but it also should be seen from the phantasmatic side, from the side of phantasmatic underpinnings that envelop rational argumentation and that drive a person’s engagement in the culture war logics not only in terms of arguments, but also deep-seated emotions. The phantasmatic aspect of social conservatism is libidinally filled and permeated with *jouissance*. Attention to the phantasmatic dimensions “provide[s] the means to understand why specific practices and regimes ‘grip’ subjects.”⁴³

Let me stress the key differences between these two dimensions. The dimension of reason is aimed—ideally—at *explanation*, it is aimed at convincing of something, of justifying a certain position. The dimension of phantasm is aimed at *protection*, it is a shield that guards the collective subject from anxiety, from frightening experiences of chaos and disintegration. Phantasms protect and restore the aura of stability of the social order—and one’s identity embedded in this order—that has been shaken by profound dislocations. The phantasmatic dimension is more powerful because the aim of anxiety-avoidance is more persuasive than logical constructions and factual persuasiveness.

The rational dimension focuses on logic and argumentation. The rational position is constructed as a logical transition from one proposition to another by means of facts, legal norms, common sense, etc. The phantasmatic dimension, on the other hand,

42 My reflections can lead to a conclusion that I am equating religion and the phantasmatic dimension of social conservatism that I am describing. But this is not the case. Although religion is an important aspect of socially conservative worldviews, it is only one aspect of what religion is—or, better put: one of the faces that religion can take in contemporary society. In this sense I follow René Girard’s contrast between religion of the “sacred” (relying on the archaic patterns of scapegoating, on the logics of violently defending of the sacred values of communities) and religion that overcomes these archaic patterns (relying on reconciliation, on identifying with victims, with a persecuted minority: that is, religion as a shield against scapegoating mechanisms). This second view of religion Girard saw in the gospels, in the story of Christ’s death and resurrection. See René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). On Girard’s ideas, see Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*, Studies in Violence, Mimesis & Culture (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013); Wolfgang Palaver, *Transforming the Sacred into Saintliness: Reflecting on Violence and Religion with René Girard*, Elements in Religion and Violence (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

43 Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, 145, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203934753>.

follows the *mythological* logic—it unfolds according to archetypal patterns, which often run counter to classical logic, known facts, common sense, etc.

To a certain extent one can say that in a moment of social crisis the phantasm plays the same role for the collective subject as what Lacan called “delusional metaphor” plays in the moment of disintegration of the individual subject’s structure—it fastens the disintegrating fabric of symbolic structure. In that moment the “delusional metaphor” is immune to any rational argumentation. Trying to change a position firmly embedded in phantasmatic dimension is a bit similar to trying to change the mind of a person in a state of delusion with rational arguments.

Final Reflections

The reflections above make my position clear enough: social conservatism is deeply embedded in ideological phantasms that appeal to the dimensions of subjectivity beyond a conscious and rational level. For this reason, it is impervious to rational arguments and even to any conscious motivations—it resonates with something deeper and more fundamental in human nature. Rational arguments can hardly affect social conservatism, because the rational dimension of this conservatism is only a superficial layer within the political phantasms of an impending chaos and the need to overcome this chaos through social rebirth/purification.

My article is called “The Phantasmatic Dimension of Culture Wars,” but I have been speaking only about social conservatism. This is for the simple reason that I have studied it. I should say that my firm belief is that the conservative position, despite certain progress in the direction of rationality, is deeply rooted in the phantasmatic dimension of human nature—this explains its resilience despite harsh criticism, logical and legal refutations, etc. The opposite side of the culture wars—social liberalism or progressivism—seems to be a much more rational position relying on facts, arguments, and common-sense reflections. This is its weakness, by the way, since the seemingly dried-up rational position is inferior to a position supported by a powerful phantasmatic dimension that engages deeper layers of human subjectivity and, in Lacanian terms, *jouissance*.

But this does not mean that social progressivism has no phantasmatic dimension. Some articulations of “identity liberalism” with “cancelling” and “safe space” practices display phantasmatic patterns of scapegoating and social order harmonization behind them—with a lot of *jouissance* invested in these activities. To put it simply, whether the phantasmatic dimension in social liberalism is weaker compared to social conservatism or of equal weight remains an open question.

Speaking of culture wars, it is impossible not to note that these are extremely dangerous forms of reaction to the kind of pluralism that our societies face today. What the Russian war makes clear is that these are not just *culture wars*, but *culture wars*, where the word “war” is no longer a metaphor, but a sound statement of fact. Overcoming culture wars, searching for alternative ways to react to antagonisms that produce them, is an urgent task for scholars, journalists, activists, etc. However, such overcoming is impossible without understanding the multidimensionality of this phenomenon, in particular, without understanding the powerful phantasmatic foundations in which rational arguments for this or that position are embedded. In this sense, for example, the strategy of so-called postsecular society,⁴⁴ the strategy of

44 Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x>.

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communication on a rational level is hardly able to work, since it appeals only to the rational side, leaving the phantasmatic basis out of sight. An adequate response to culture wars must involve not only a search for a kind of overlapping consensus in the sense of rational principles that everyone shares, but also overlapping phantasm, which can bring sides to a resonance on a much deeper level. Is this a real or a utopian perspective? I prefer to leave this as an open question.