



Representations of veridictory modalities and post-truth in the digital transition: discourse and corporeality in the Netflix show *Clickbait*

Représentations des modalités véridictoires et post-vérité dans la transition numérique : discours et corporéité dans l'émission Netflix *Clickbait*

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the representation of truth and falsity in the Netflix show *Clickbait* (2021), utilising its diegesis to review Greimas' (1983) Veridiction Contract and Keyes' (2004) text on Post-truth. A show presenting a commentary on the various challenges the digital substance poses to the construction and sanction of truth, the analysis of selected sequences facilitates the debate of two facets of truth-making in the digital transition: the manipulation of discursive substances—verbal language and iconic representation—and the emergence of a modality of truth anchored in the corporeality of subjects. The analysis approaches digital platforms and the intersubjective relations they enable and the extent to which different substances are capable of producing separate levels of reality. The examination of the crisis of truth emerging from the clash between “real life” and life post-digital transition permits the interrogation of mechanisms of sanction, which are replaced with an artificial enlargement of attention.

**Keywords:** Veridiction, Post-truth, Simulacrum, Contagion, Corporeal Experience

**Résumé :** L'article présente la question de la représentation de la vérité et fausseté dans la série télévisée *Clickbait* (2021) créée par Netflix, utilisant sa diégèse comme un objet d'analyse permettant la discussion de la théorie du contrat véridictoire de Greimas (1983) et le texte de Keyes (2004) traitant la Post-vérité. Dans *Clickbait*, il s'agit d'un commentaire social des plusieurs défis que la substance numérique présente à la formulation de la vérité : l'analyse des fragments de la série nous offrirait l'occasion de débattre deux faces du faire-vrai dans la transition numérique : la manipulation des substances discursives – la langue verbale et la représentation iconique – et l'émergence d'une modalité de vérité ancrée dans la corporéité des sujets. À travers les arguments autour de la possibilité d'une vérité au-delà de la construction binaire «.vrai et faux.» l'analyse approche les plateformes numériques et les relations inter-subjectives qu'elles permettent, interrogeant dans quelle mesure les substances différentes sont capables de produire des niveaux séparés de réalité. L'examen de la crise de vérité qui émerge du choc entre «.la vie réelle.» et la vie après la transition numérique permet l'interrogation des mécanismes de sanction, qui sont remplacés par une élargissement artificielle de l'attention.

**Mots clés :** véridiction, post-vérité, simulacre, contagion, expérience corporelle

*Clickbait* (2021) is an eight-episode series released on the streaming platform Netflix, narrating an intricate plot centred on a viral video, the reactions to it, and the multiplications of this filmic text. A simultaneous fictional representation and a social commentary on the effects of the ubiquitous presence of online platforms in our present society, the show manifests a complex, multilayered fictional text. Each of its episodes reveals part of the story, walking the viewer through the perspective of different characters—I will focus on the sections related to the Detective assigned to the case, the protagonist's alleged mistress, and the brother of one of the women implicated in the plot.

The most effective manner of describing the story is working backwards, following the order of events (rather than the order of episodes): a family man named Nick Brewer has his identity stolen by his colleague, Dawn Glead, a bored elderly woman who gained access to his personal data, phone, work computer, and in whom he confided about his marital issues. Dawn activates an old dating account of Nick's and impersonates him with one of his matches, but when that interaction fizzles out, she proceeds to create multiple accounts on match-making websites using Nick's photographs paired with false names, entering into multiple online relationships. The plot focuses narrowly on two of those relationships: a rapidly escalating romance with naïve Emma Beesley, who provides Dawn (using the false name Danny Walters) with the most satisfying interactions; and an equally intense exchange with Sarah Burton, an emotionally unstable young woman who ends up committing suicide after Dawn (using the false name Jeremy Wilkerson) calls off the romance.

The central event in the plot is the viral video presented in episode 1, part of the plan executed by Simon Burton, who seeks revenge for Sarah's death: to abduct Nick—the man he identified in the photographs with his sister—publicly shame him through a video in which he is presented as an abuser of women and a killer, to then execute him once the video reached 5 million views. However, when the video reaches the count, Simon realises the inconsistencies in the story justifying his revenge and that his main evidence, the photographs, were, in fact, photomontages. As a result, Simon allows Nick to escape with the promise that he will find the real culprit. Realising Dawn was the only person with access to his data and his stories, he proceeds to find and confront her, only to end up murdered by Dawn's husband, Ed.

Both at the level of fictional representation and in the relation established between the viewer and fictional narrator, the show is centred on critical questions emerging from the digital transition and its impact on “in real life” (IRL) reality: the ethics of online existence and its totalising vision, the negotiation of new modes of existence that occur entirely online or in the intersection of online presence and IRL, the matters of replicability and variability of the digital substance occurring in that space. One of the unifying questions embracing all those issues is the matters of truth and lie, which invoke theories about the representation of truth versus its perception (Cf. Greimas 1983; Keyes 2004), and philosophical debates around the matter of simulacra, simulation, and the emulation of truth and depth that emerge from our life in the image world (Cf. Baudrillard 1981; Browse 2017; Jameson 1991; McIntire 2018; Sontag 2002; Vermeulen 2015). As a fictional text, *Clickbait* merges several narrative styles, including elements of interactive fiction, the deconstruction of temporality, and the transformation of the viewer into an implicated subject who is not merely watching but participating, mirroring in fiction the interactive attributes we already experience in our existence within the digital substance. In such a narrative organisation, *Clickbait* promotes a split between the fictional space of the TV show and the

“real” viewer, the addressee; nonetheless, through engaging with the show, those split realities are re-merged, with the projection of the addressee (viewer) as one of the multiple enunciatees (the represented characters) in the diegesis: another facet of how the show represents dynamics that are familiar to those who habitually engage with online digital manifestations.

The questions raised in *Clickbait* invoke two seminal texts: Algirdas-Julien Greimas’ (1983) essay on the veridiction contract and Ralph Keyes’ (2004) somehow prescient work on Post-truth. An unintended parallel, both texts approach the matters of manipulation and construction of facts and the existence of contracts between subjects, which open up the possibility of “narrative truth” culminating in our present alternative relationship with truth. Equally, the themes they both approach are centred on the matter of truth as a social construct and the importance of cognitive subjects who assess whether effects of truth are achieved (or not). Similarly, the series addresses matters linked to how discursive substances—the verbal and the iconic—are perceived, exploring their potential for falsity that reference an array of semiotic and semiological theories about the stratagems of language (Cf. Barthes 1984; Brandt 1992), as well as Post-structuralist writings on the “murderous capacity” of images (Cf. Baudrillard 1981; Jameson 1991). Based almost entirely on the exchange of images and words, the digital substance shares the attributes of the iconic and verbal substances in their capacity to produce falsity, which becomes a given of the online mode of existence. That aspect of the digital transition, however, leads to a second argument pushed by *Clickbait*: the possibility of truth beyond images and words, emerging from the corporeality of sensitive bodies—an aspect I will analyse from Landowski’s (2004) writings on contagion and conductive bodies; and Fontanille’s (2004) schema describing the syntax of corporeal experience and the *lapsus*.

Beyond the analysis of a TV show, the multilayered complexity of this series permits a glimpse into a multitude of themes and their existence in the digital transition, such as the construction and manipulation of identities native to the digital substance and their reverberation in the material world and its “real” relationships. In this dynamics, the show explores the role of images in the construction of truth (both online and offline), denouncing the possibility of generating situations and existences that don’t match an IRL referent but constitute a new level of reality with its own rules—an aspect of the digital transition permeating multiple aspects of contemporary life today, reaching much beyond the matter of online “fake identities”.

### **1. Truth and lies: semiotics of discourses**

The unfolding of simultaneous narrative trajectories in *Clickbait* is centred around the matter of verbal discourse and image, questioning the potential for truth and falsity unfolding both in the represented “real” substance and in the digital substance. The core catalysts of the Brewer case emerge from the digital: the viral video in which the protagonist, appearing with a bruised, bloody face, holds the sign “I abuse women” in his own handwriting—which constantly leads the viewer between the polarised interpretations of either a *confession* or a *fabrication*—and records of online activities between digital profiles—text messages exchanged between users and photographic “evidence” showing the protagonist with the two women implicated in the plot. As the investigations around Nick’s disappearance and the subsequent finding of his body unfold, the intersubjective exchanges IRL between the police and the family, and the family and the media attempt to fill in the gaps of dissonance

between a man known to his wife and sister, the man as an online lover, and the man represented in a viral video, public opinion, and online interactions that are amplified, replicated, and rapidly disseminated in the online public arena.

While the representation of dynamics with legacy media and the police constructs a “base” veridictory contract through the discovery and dissemination of evidence, at the level of intersubjective interactions, a conflict emerges between an “innocent”, purely denotative language—a representation of concepts the enunciator wishes to communicate—versus language as a “pretext to multiple connotations”—a “lying language” (Greimas, 1983). This is represented, to an extent, through the show’s use of cut-ups that contrast lies being uttered—with verbal language—to the character’s memory, shown through moving images, which are not seen by the other characters, but used as a pretext to reveal fragments of “truth” to the outside viewer, at times confirming, at times refuting the processual veridictory contracts about the characters we are watching on screen, homologating moving images to *truth* and spoken words to *lie*. Such choices unite Roland Barthes’ (1984) and Per Aage Brandt’s (1992) understanding of connotative language as an *untruthful mechanism*: a perverted form emerging as a *cultural simulacrum* anchored in an *art of interpretation*, which Brandt defines as a form of “performative truth”. Such postulates align with the vision of discursive substances as producers of simulacra that are, by default, *distorted* and *incomplete*.

In *Clickbait*, the interplay between characters in both IRL situations and in their online existence represents such effects of truth-saying as *staged* intersubjective relations, revealing that both sides are aware that what is taking place is a social construction. While there is a prevalent discourse in which IRL is understood as “truer” than what takes place in online spaces, the fictional argument disseminated in *Clickbait* overcomes the standard veridictory contract, where the enunciator’s goal is to “make-believe-true” [*faire-croire-vrai*], resorting to another truth regime: the mode of “pretending” [*faire semblant*] proposed by Juan Alonso Aldama (2018), where the enunciator pretends to tell the truth, to believe to be telling the truth, and that the enunciatee believes it, while the enunciatee must also pretend to believe. A regime of pretending or making believe is one of the many discursive strategies deployed by addressers in the digital transition: although Alonso Aldama substantiates that the regime of pretending is a temporary contract that has limits and, like in a game, it must eventually come to an end, the show presents a social commentary on the artificial extension of this temporary contract as a mechanism to hold the attention of the multiple actors—in the narrative and the viewer. In the case of the viral video, as well as in the coverage of the case taking place chiefly through digital media, whether a contract of “truth” is sanctioned or not matters little: it is the sustaining of a perpetual state of *doubt*, maintaining subjects separated from the truth for as long as possible, that delivers the desired effect of *continued engagement*, which is the ultimate goal of manifestations born from and aimed at the digital substance.

When it comes to communications and mediated discourses, the indefinite extension of a pretending contract means that infinite *engagement* can be created, in a phenomenon that echoes the “infinite circularity” of digital existence identified by Eric Bertin and Jean-Maxence Granier (2019). In the mainstream debate of social media’s effects on society, such is presented as the emergence of an “attention economy”, to use the term coined by the economist Herbert Simon (1971): the treatment of human attention as a scarce commodity that becomes the ultimate goal for core areas of online business

such as content strategy, management, and production. The emergence of this phenomenon shifts the core of Greimas' *veridiction contract*: in his pre-digital transition socio-historical context, *truth* appeared as the commodity traded by discourses, while *adhesion* sanctioned the contract. Conversely, today, the goal shifted from *adhesion* to *attention*: while, for Greimas, the sanction of the veridictory contract means the acceptance of a constructed effect of truth (irrespective of whether the discourse contains "real truth" or not) in the realm of attention, the aim is to *postpone sanction*. Such a shift enacts an important transformation in the aspectuality of the veridictory contract: while the moment of sanction marks the disengagement of the enunciatee, thus carrying a terminative aspect, the absence of sanction—a sustained state of doubt—prolongs the engagement, conveying an almost indefinite durative aspect that forces the enunciatee's continued participation.

The show emphasises the representation of attention-sustaining mechanisms which tend towards *falsity* (not seeming, not being), representing widespread contemporary practices marking the assemblage of identities native to the digital substance through a bricolage of elements found online. Dawn's act of catfishing<sup>1</sup> utilises photographs of a good-looking man and his personal stories, resorting to photomontages to create situations and experiences that form the base of the false identity. As long as such practices respect the limits of *plausibility*, the encounter with an enunciatee who is available to firm a belief agreement—as is the case of Emma and Sarah: two subjects available to enter a virtual romance contract before experiencing an IRL encounter—falsity can become an attention-producing and -sustaining apparatus at both ends of the spectrum, destabilising the frameworks of how truth is constructed and sanctioned outside the digital realm.

At least two readings of this phenomenon are possible: on the one hand, the type of relationship permitted by the digital substance—where not all the senses are engaged in corporeal presence—the parameters utilised to sanction the veridiction contract must be somehow "relaxed", making mediated digital interactions the culmination of Greimas' theory, which comes full circle into Keyes' post-truth: when the facts don't match one's belief, or when the facts are not accessible, then truth is whatever one *believes it to be*. Furthermore, the concept of truth becomes almost quantifiable, permitting a fragmentation of the discourse in which there are "half-truths" or "part-truths" rather than a totalising, binary Truth.

However, the spectrum of what the standard theory categorises as falsity can also emerge as a separate level of truth: a simulation where anonymous relations negotiate the possibility of an *alternative* truth lived in the safe space of online, digitally mediated relations where, contradictorily, layers of falsity permit the sharing of a deeper truth. In that sense, rather than constituting a contrary binary of truth and lie, IRL and the digital world can be analysed as separate substances of expression equally capable of producing truth and lie but responding to different criteria of what these constitute in the first place. In the IRL substance, Truth is totalising and requires sanction: things either *are* or *aren't*; however, in the digital substance of online life, the truth shared and experienced is aimed at

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<sup>1</sup> The term *catfishing* refers to a malicious online activity in which fictional identities are created on social media using fake photographs or photographs of strangers found online to target a specific victim. *Catfishing* is used to impersonate celebrities and online personalities such as influencers for financial gain, but it is also used as a form of cyberbullying. In the case represented in *Clickbait*, *catfishing* is practised with the intent of "living a fantasy"—in that case, Dawn's character wanted to experience what it would be like to be a handsome man living fulfilling romantic connections.

attention, which can only be sustained if sanction is avoided. In such a reading of Poststructuralist inspiration, not only can we accept that discourses, both verbal and iconic, can create hyperrealities that surpass the experiences lived IRL: we equally grant digital virtual spaces the status of reality, constituting this space as a separate world with its own veridictory rules where what IRL categorises as falsity reverses into truths that are incompatible with IRL existence, and, thus, can only be fully lived through a digital transition. In *Clickbait* (and in the real world it represents), the conflict emerges from the desire to make those two levels of reality coincide: the pressure for transforming digital (simulated) relationships into “real” (physical) relationships, bringing in the ultimatum of sanction to contracts and roles that, inevitably, will end the contract of attention.

The reliance on iconic representations is one marker of truthfulness that is shared by both levels, although it could be argued that the simplification required in the translation of concepts into still images is as “deceitful” as the translation into verbal language, whether the enunciator intends the falsity or not. That touches upon a core issue of digital transitions—in the ordinary sense of the term, or the passage from analogue to digital—and the extent to which equivalences between representations in digital substances are emblematic and exhaustive of their material “referent”. This problem is emblematised by one image in particular—a photograph of Nick with his wife Sophie—which is explored in its potential for falsity, showcasing what Jean Baudrillard (1981) defined as images’ existence in their own service and their capacity for *generating a real*, rather than *representing the real*: in Fredric Jameson’s (1991: p18) words, “...the identical copy for which no original has ever existed”. Dawn selects this photograph to create digital photomontages that show Nick and Sarah and Nick and Emma together, replacing Sophie with the virtual lovers. While both women know the images are *false*—the situation captured in the image never occurred IRL but was created through digital manipulation—the fabricated couple photographs are cherished items that fulfil the same role the original image does to Sophie: evidence of (real) feelings that cannot be put into words. The falsity of the digitally manipulated images appears as a double edge: on the one hand, and contradictorily, a situation created through a photomontage—a digital evidence without a material referent—communicates the truth of the virtual relationship for the virtual lovers; however, the falsity of what is represented—the confirmation that the situation exists only as creation in the digital substance, and not as the register of an IRL encounter—is what communicates the truth of Nick’s innocence, destroying the certainty that led Simon to abduct and torture Nick.

As a critique of the passage from purely analogue lives to lives that share an existence across the material and digital substances, the core twist in *Clickbait* is the blurring of lines between material and digital lives, which occurs primarily through the acceptance of fabricated images *as* truth, pushing characters to tear the boundaries of the simulated relationships: a woman is led to suicide because of a digital breakup; her brother plans and executes an act of revenge against the *man in the image*; a third woman lies to the family, police, and media while a man’s real family puts their entire life into question because of and through experiences lived in images, denouncing the power of digital iconic representations to create realities, despite the direction pointed by the “real” facts. In the show—and in the reality that is the object of its commentary—subjects are aware of the artfulness of verbal language while being less suspicious of images, which carry a broader authority as *evidence*, leading to an inversion in the relation of resemblance remarked by Susan Sontag (2002): once, a good image was one

that resembled something real; today, a good reality is one that is more like images. Once images become not only *evidence* of reality but a *replacement* for it, then photographs can become a vehicle through which subjects are transposed *into reality*: a digital image created using image-editing software can enact a bestowing of a status of truth to what is represented—even in the absence of an IRL original.

Through its creative choices, *Clickbait* enables two complementary interpretations. On the one hand, it represents the *impossibility of truth* (at least at the level of discourses): aligned with Keyes' affective, fact-less dimension of post-truth, the characters lie so as to preserve a “deeper truth”, which, by the end of the plot, is somehow confirmed. In that sense, what Keyes defines as Post-truth could be reformulated as a *Post-adhesion* veridictory modality, in which the parameters of truth can no longer be placed into specific, objective contracts where the borders of immanence and manifestation are clearly gaugeable. In the impossibility of sanctioning truth, once both words and images can be indefinitely manipulated, edited, corrected, rephrased, there is only the “suspicious society”: when lies are all there is, attention is the only currency left to the enunciatee. Such leads to a second interpretation, in which *Clickbait* captures our collective disillusionment with discourse and the artificial enlargement of doubt that is exacerbated through our presence in the digital substance: in the web of omissions, half-lies, and blatant fabrications, the characters in the show appear in a narrative trajectory to break free from the digital world and its parallel reality, searching for a truth beyond representation.

## 2. The corporeality of truth

Throughout the episodes and the relationships established between the different characters, *Clickbait* articulates the crisis resulting from the saturation of digitally lived lives and the products of such interactions as a threat to the connections established in and dependent upon a “real world”. From that foundation, yet another modality of truth can be grasped from the show's diegesis: a truth that emerges from corporeal relations rather than from verbal and iconic substances, functioning as some kind of response to the erosion of veridictory contracts corrupted by the digital substance. In that sense, truth can pass from a matter of relations imprinted in uttered discourses to something that emerges from what Landowski (2004: p108) defined as “conductive bodies”. Such corporeal contagion of truth is more than the “gut feeling” associated with Keyes' post-truth as a “personal truth” independent from facts. The show constructs this form of intuition not as a rational attempt to deny the facts but as a *reaction* that is not mediated by strategies: an antidote to contractual instances of make believe [*faire croire*] or pretending [*faire semblant*], as something that can be conducted from one subject to the other through an *esthetic* body-to-body presence.

Landowski's understanding of a “contagious presence” presupposed the existence of “willing bodies” that are available to step out of the realm of manipulation and operation, returning to the insecurity of body-to-body relations and the impossibility of sanction characteristic of such situations. This “contagion of truth” is fully realised in the face-to-face interaction between Simon, simultaneous judge and executioner, and Nick, the perceived culprit of Sarah's death. In the algorithmic realm of the digital substance and the corporeal distance it simultaneously facilitates and requires, Simon was invested with a binary certainty of Nick's role in his sister's suicide, which led him to plan and enact his abduction, producing and releasing the video that starts the plot. However, in their bodily copresence, Nick is capable of making Simon *feel*, rather than *believe*, that he is acting over a false premise.

From his abduction to his escape, Nick undergoes a process of deconstruction of veridictory strategies, passing from attempts to *communicate truth*—through verbal language and logical arguments, which are associated with the veridiction contract and, consequently, with *lies* and *falsity*—to *embodying* truth. It is that presence that allows for all the evidence—the blatant, amateurish photomontage of Nick and Sarah—to be finally seen by Simon: in the partaken *esthesis* experience of copresence, Simon can conclude he abducted the wrong man. Rather than *adhesion* to a veridictory contract, that sequence communicates a value of *conversion*: the corporeal contagion of truth causes an abrupt transfer of belief that is not mediated but that simply “occurs” as a value that is passed from one body to the other. For Landowski, this passage from the regime of junction—where values (and contracts) are exchanged—to a logic of union requires the abolition of critical distance, which is followed by a suspension of interpretative and cognitive competences (Landowski, 2004): the form of truth we see occur cannot emerge from logic games of verbal language or the machinations that iconic structures permit or be sustained in the digital substance, where truth can constantly be edited, manipulated, and corrected. It is only in the suspension of those mechanisms, in non-mediated situations of mutual presence, that subjects can partake in this form of truth.

A second emblematic sensitive body in *Clickbait* is presented in Detective Amiri’s character, governed by a clash of modal and esthetic competences that translate into the experience of mixed, contrary emotions, which are homologated to the character’s existence in-between worlds: while Nick Brewer’s case is almost completely unfolded in the digital world, Amiri’s doing takes place in and affects the IRL substance. The irreconcilability of those two realms is represented in his corporeal experience and the contrary forces that seem to govern the Detective throughout the episodes.

In *Soma & Séma*, Fontanille (2004) presents a schema for the actant’s figure in which a distinction between *moi*—the referential “flesh”—and *soi*—the “body” in the process of becoming which split into a *soi-idem* and *soi-ipse* through which identity is formed—allowing for the actant to conciliate the tensions between instances of reference and positioning, the repetitions and similarities, and the incorporation of difference. From this foundation, Fontanille presents an analysis of the *lapsus*: the emergence of figures of discourse that are not planned or codified but an expression appearing in the place of something else, which he describes as the ephemeral victory of one form over another. This conflict between the fleshly “referent” and the self “in process” is developed in the Detective’s relation with his own corporeal truth: two sequences, in episodes 6 and 8, manifest a semiotic symmetry of Amiri facing suspects resisting arrest.

In the first sequence, where Simon is chased and resists arrest, putting Amiri in a situation where he might have to use his weapon, the Detective’s corporeality is destabilised by the possibility of shooting Simon. In what could be interpreted as a form of *lapsus*, in tears and a quavering voice, Amiri begs Simon to put his hands behind his head, expressing relief when he yields. Both corporeal reactions—the closeness to tears and the failing voice—emerge in contrariety with his role as a law enforcer, which permitted him to use his weapon, alongside the current “facts” pointing towards Simon’s motive as synonymous with guilt. As a law enforcer, Amiri is governed by a binary veridictory contract, in which Simon is guilty, and his arrest will close the case. However, despite the contractual facts, his fleshly “me” [*moi*] cannot accept Simon as Nick’s true killer. In episode 8, this sequence is repeated in reverse: Amiri faces Ed—Nick’s true killer—who also resists the arrest. In this sequence, however, there is no clash



between the narratives of the digital world and the material reality: although Dawn begs her husband to put his gun down, Amiri appears completely emptied of conflict or doubt, ready to shoot and kill Ed when he refuses to comply, bringing an end to *Clickbait*'s spectacle. While the first scene manifests conflict between the referential and the instance in becoming, with the victory of the bodily truth over the constructed truth of facts, the second sequence represents a clear alignment of both instances, resulting in a truth that *feels* truthful to the subject.

The representation of truth as a *felt*, corporeal phenomenon disseminates an argument for the split between the realm of discourses, which finds its culmination in the digital transition and the type of situations it enables when life partially or completely migrates to digitally mediated spaces and the contagious occurrence of truth that cannot be transposed to the digital substance, only surviving in this glimpse of shared copresence of bodies. However, this argument talks about the *transition*—the passing from IRL to virtual digital spaces and vice versa. Contradictorily, the show represents groups of relations that “belong” in the digital world because they are native to it: for relationships that are born from and remain in the digital substance, *esthetic* contact is represented as being possible even in mediated interactions.

This possibility of an authentic corporeal *esthesis* through digital relations represented in *Clickbait* bears the question of whether interactions occurring in the digital substance can be considered as “mediated” if the interactants *feel* like they are in the presence of one another. Besides the two romantic relationships between Dawn and Emma and Dawn and Sarah, which are at the plot's centre and presented to the viewer through the *real consequences* affecting both the digital and the IRL substance, one more sequence offers the possibility of digitally mediated body-to-body contagion: the multi-mediated conversation between Emma and Nick's son, Ethan. In an exchange occurring in a video call that is being filmed by his friend, Ethan tries to make Emma confess that she had never met Nick IRL. The mechanism to achieve the confession is yet another layer of mediation: playing the audio of a family video containing Nick's voice. When Emma is returned to her existence as part of the digital substance, other texts from the same realm can have a profound *esthetic* effect on her: *real Nick's* voice instigates a process of non-recognition that uncouples Nick Brewer, the man made of IRL substance, and Danny Walters, her lover made of digital substance. That insight is represented as a powerful emotional response in the Emma we see on Ethan's screen, which results in the confession that she hadn't met *Nick*. In that particular sequence, we see that the multiple *esthetic* charges being represented (the voice in the video, Ethan's emotions, Emma's emotions) don't need an IRL environment to be contagious. A prelude to an optimistic vision of the digital transition, the profound contact between Ethan and Emma pushes the argument for forms of *presence* not as a literal, physical requirement, becoming instead a *disposition* for sharing without mediation—even in a mediated environment.

### **Conclusion**

Beyond the matter of the attention economy and social media's harmful effects, emerging discussions in psychiatry and cognitive sciences focusing on how the type of attention we pay can alter the world (Cf. for example, McGilchrist 2019, 2021; Vervaeke, Mastropietro & Miscovic 2017) are gaining the mainstream. Within that scope, the semiotic study of attention not only as a commodity but as part of the veridictory modalities outlined in our theory becomes an urgent matter, particularly when it

comes to the mechanisms of representation utilised to postpone the sanction of effects of truth to privilege the suspended, durative state of engagement. The examination of such mechanisms utilised in *Clickbait* permitted a broader discussion of contemporary issues around the crisis of truth, its communication, our disenchantment with discursive truth, and the extent to which the digital transition acts as an amplifier of this crisis by demanding new modalities of intersubjective dynamics paired with new parameters of truth and falsity that are unique to the digital substance and the type of reality it can create and replicate. One of the key contributions of this analysis is the clarification of the mechanism of sustained engagement with the spectacle—particularly in traditional media—and its reliance on Post-truth as a tool for postponing the sanction of contracts: where there is sanction, there cannot be suspension.

Regarding its uses of verbal and iconic substances, *Clickbait* presents a subtle yet marked ideological position that reflects the binary existence emerging through the digital transition. Throughout its choices, its narrative communicates the murderous capacity of both images and verbal language, constructing a hierarchy that places the corporeal truth—the “gut feeling” Keyes would categorise as Post-truth—as the only mechanism through which a “truthful truth” can be experienced. As a social commentary on the present context of American culture half-transitioned to an existence in the digital substance, *Clickbait* argues for the importance of “resisting the facts” as a response that erodes the realm of manipulated, distorted facts that are *false by design*: in praise of “intuition”, the idea of “feeling in one’s body” is presented in the show as a response that cannot be *falsified*.

Finally, *Clickbait* poses the urgent question of whether simulated spaces are *real* or not by introducing instances in which corporeal contagion in the digital substance appears not only as possible but as an intense and transformative experience partaken by subjects. Without resorting to dystopian sci-fi themes—in *Black Mirror*’s fashion—the brutal spectacle of Nick Brewer’s *Ecce Homo* conducts the viewer through multi-layered intersubjective contacts and the possibility that, behind the mask of anonymity and falsity, an alternative level of truth can be found—even at the corporeal level.

Beyond the reductionist approach of Keyes (and his commentators), where the “post” in Post-truth is reduced to one set of mechanisms—the *uttered* truth, supported in the truthfulness or falsity of verbal discourses—the complexity permitted in the various semiotics utilised in this analysis show that, beyond the realm of discourse, “truth” can also be disseminated in situations and in corporeal experiences that occur beyond the limits of verbal and iconic representations. Such leads to the need for methods of research that extrapolate the reductionist analysis of isolated discourses and channels. The representation of Nick Brewer’s case in *Clickbait* is a paradigmatic case of the intertextual and intersubjective complexities that cannot be grasped in the analysis of fragments—even if they are generalisable to that particular phenomenon. While I presented the analysis of a fictional text, the study can shed light on the importance of the articulation of various texts and channels linked to a particular phenomenon, as well as the analysis of discourse and corporeal experience as two halves of the same set of phenomena. The application of a holistic approach in the Semiotics of Media and Communications is particularly urgent today, in which digital media plays the contradictory role of multiplying and amplifying the discourses of traditional media while exposing cracks and contradictions in the “official” narratives through fringe discourses, parodies, and gamification of intersubjective interactions.

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