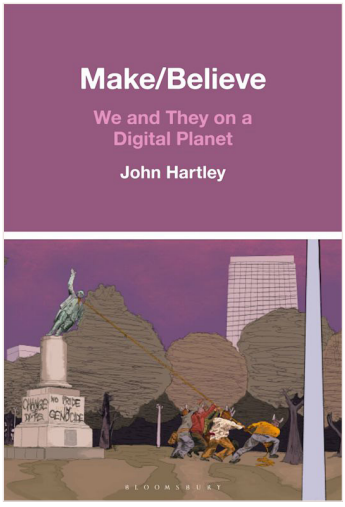
Doru POP

Make Cultural Studies Greta Again. Old and New in Cultural Science



Review of:

Make/Believe: We and They on a Digital Planet
John Hartley
Bloomsbury Academic, 2025
ISBN: 9798765128053

Abstract: Starting from John Hartley's book *Make/Believe: We and They on a Digital Planet* (2025), the paper discusses the transition from "cultural studies 1.0" towards a "culture 2.0" and the need to develop new methods and methodologies in cultural studies today, which can provide a framework for understanding the impact of "Web 2.0" technologies (blogs, podcasts, social media). These new forms of content production, which are generating shifts in social power structures, are articulations of "make believing", a fundamental mechanism in human culture.

Keywords: make-believe, cultural studies, zombie semiotic, digital semiosphere.

Doru POP
Babeș-Bolyai University
doru.pop@ubbcluj.ro

EKPHRASIS, 2/2025
AGE AND AGEING IN EUROPEAN AND WORLD CINEMA(S)
pp. 129–143

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.34.10
Published First Online: December 30, 2025

When cultural studies were established as a discipline during the 1960s, the approaches and methods used were among the "newest" additions in humanities. Six decades ago, cultural studies were the "youngest" among the academic sciences, many "newcomers", professors and researchers questioning the "old" traditions and approaches, such as literary criticism or art history, were arguing the need of adapting our tools to the provocations of transformed cultural practices. Some of these "new" forms of engaging culture were propelled by the British Marxists, described by Hartley (2021) as "cultural studies 1.0". Early cultural scientists either belonged to the "Birmingham School", where the interpretation of popular culture was introduced in academia, or were trained in this tradition, as is the case with Lawrence Grossberg (2010), who recounts his meeting with Stuart Hall and the other researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham as life-changing. They created, adopted and expanded new forms of "cultural analysis", pioneering "new ways" of approaching everyday cultural experiences. As Hartley and Potts (2014) explain, since cultural science no longer belonged to the "tradition" of art history and has abandoned the "cultural criticism" approaches, it had to develop its own methods.

While the early works of "cultural scientists 1.0", such as Raymond Williams (1945, 1961), were exercises in literary history or the history of the "idea of culture", books like *Culture and Society* (Chatto & Windus, 1958) or *The Long Revolution* (Chatto & Windus, 1961) indicated a new path towards a more detailed studying of cultural practices. With *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) these studies moved from the "traditional" cultural forms, represented by "traditional" print media, to examining various artifacts, such as advertising or police serials, and, more importantly, to other meaning-making practices. Cultural studies became a discipline designed to analysing and evaluating artifacts and practices previously ignored by researchers. John Hartley, together with John Fiske (1978), was at the forefront of this cultural and academic endeavour. Followed by many other relevant works, first published during the 1980s, with the first edition of *Key Concepts in Communication Studies* (1982), followed by a second edition in 1994, which added "Cultural Studies" as a topic, Hartley's books have become fundamental in many programs dedicated to media and communication research.

As cultural studies evolved, moving from a reversion of semiotics coupled with ideology studies, combining feminism and queer theory, postcolonial theories and various versions of poststructuralism, the "science of culture" evolved together with the social structures that gradually changed. The question of how these "old" approaches can survive and can take into account the digital transformations our world is facing is still heatedly debated. Can cultural science provide a scientific framework in the "planetary cultural processes" Hartley asks in his most recent work (*Make/Believe: We and They on a Digital Planet*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025)?

The Dawn of Digital Zombies and Cultural Science 2.0

Our semiospheres are once again shifting towards newer practices, just as television became the predominant technology during the 1950s, today the expansion of "Web 2.0" technologies, such as blogs, podcasts and other social networking software, generates forms of signification and content production which are different. Thus the need for a renewed approach, a type of "Cultural Science version 2.0" in Hartley's terms.

These massive social and cultural transformations are difficult to evaluate, however, as Williams explained in his study on television (21–25), we can follow the relationship between the development of new technologies, social institutions and culture formation; their interplay, which is generating changes in meanings and values, can be analysed through "cultural forms" (in the case of television these were debates, variety, sports, advertising, tv series, drama-documentary, pastimes, etc.). Hartley, Ibrus and Ojamaa (2021) previously argued that a *translational* model, following the Lotmanian tradition, would be best suited for the digital semiosphere, representing the base for a new cultural science (32–33), focusing on dialogic interactions, multiplicity and difference, allowing a meaningful and purposeful culture *for* the Anthropocene. With the global digital indicating behavioural changes, new methodological devices must be added to the "old" cultural science, which must be revised. When rethinking cultural studies we must follow a new methodology that can take into consideration the meaninglessness of practices in which consumers are devouring millions of hours of visual content that was previously derided by both "old" cultures (the bourgeois *and* the working class). Just as cultural studies research 1.0 was an instrument for cultural, intellectual and political emancipation for marginalized social groups (the poor, the exploited, the women and everyone else considered "different"), cultural science 2.0 must go beyond communication as generated by books, photographs, motion pictures, broadcasting and even beyond the new "electronic media".

As the "culture 2.0" is developing, with meaning makings linked to new "states of the mind", with new "ways of life", cultural studies can provide a necessary framework, focusing on finding "culture" where nobody else has looked before. As human animals are spending incredible amounts of time on social media, interacting with each other on Facebook or TikTok, consuming videos on platforms like YouTube or participating in various online video games, their practices are changing. The amount of visual information consumed on various devices, from smartphones to tablets, laptops or smart TVs has reached unimaginable levels, but not so different from the past. During the 1960s television reached a similar expansion with the Internet today (covering 87% of households in the US) and the number of hours spent in front of the "small screen" (about 6 hours daily by 1971) is comparable with the consumption of "smaller screens" today.

Just like the apparition of early newspapers, which allowed the transmission of ideologies, facilitating the birth of nationalism, or in a similar fashion with the development of motion

pictures and television, allowing the generation of new forms of political and personal life, this *digital semiosphere* has created specialised cultural forms, in turn producing practices that affected the power structures. As Grossberg (2010) explained, we must understand that cultural studies are *not* about "culture", nor about the "popular" versions of culture, or another form of media meaning-making technologies. While culture remains a crucial element of all research, studying "culture" we are not looking for another way of analysing or studying "newer texts"—an analysis of "selfie culture", or a criticism about the new realities of cultural practices like the influencers are producing. In fact, we must look at how they relate to the existing structures of power. Once again, as Williams (319) observed, "culture" must be understood as the product of the social power structures. As the "old" leisured classes were defending their cultural forms (novels, drama, opera, classical music) against the pressure of the "new" forces in society (advertising, movies, television), the "traditional" divide between "bourgeois culture" and the "working-class culture" has now been deeply altered by the apparition of new cultural powers. Discovering what makes the power structure of the digital semiosphere is another, more complex task.

A recent study published by the European Comission (EC Report 2025) indicates that the evolution in media consumption patterns is affecting all human interactions—as a teacher I have experienced firsthand the disruptive force induced by smartphones in classrooms, affecting participation in learning processes and changing the focusing during lectures and debates. While techno-optimists claim that these new devices have a positive effect on students, some data indicating a positive outcome of using smartphones, learning and understanding has been transformed. With more than 25% of university students sending text messages and checking their social media websites while trying to perform academic tasks, our co-existence in cultural environments is deeply affected. Since it is not my purpose here to discuss how social media usage is affecting academic performance, the argument is that we are witnessing a generational and technological mutation, as digital media consumption has reached an unprecedented scale, which is reshaping our existence and affects our meaning making abilities.

It would be very tempting to use the concept of ***digital cretins***, proposed by French cognitive neuroscientist Michel Desmurget (2019). Desmurget claims that the new *homo mediaticus*, umbilically connected to his screens, is becoming a "crétin digital", as the very essence of what it means to be a human is severely affected. From language abilities to concentration and memory skills, from IQ levels to emotions and empathy, from academic achievements to long term development, everything about us is affected. The "envideoed" humans are not only "mutilated", inducing a different condition (condition vidéo) than the natural condition of human beings (condition humaine). The argument, supported by medical research, is that we are confronted with a "video deficit", which impacts human brains, regardless of age. When excessively consuming video representations, either through

MOOCs, various audiovisual materials online or virtual experiences generated by screens, our minds are constantly degraded. Since the data is inconclusive, as we need long term observations in order to make statements about how digital practices are affecting our brains, functional neuroimaging research (fMRI, PET scanning) indicate that long time videogame usage and continued online presence are impacting the neural structure of human brains.

Instead I am using the notion of ***digital zombies***, proposed by authors (May 2021) who analyse videogames using zombies and other undead narratives. While these studies are focusing mostly on games such as Minecraft or DayZ who are thematically linked to zombies, in fact we can extract one fundamental systemic rule for all games, which is contrary to every real life existence and experience: the resurrection ability. In a videogame environment nobody ever dies, we simply press "restart" and we can have another go.

Zombie semiotics for digital zombies

As admitted, I have a subjective interest in understanding these issues, especially after reading the third chapter dedicated to ***zombie semiotics*** and the economics of the Apocalypse, which stimulated several self-reflexive moments, many further developed here. While Hartley, who is indebted to Iuri Lotman's notion of ***semiosphere***, later developed in the concept of "digital semiosphere" (Hartley et al. 2021), treats the concept of ***semiosphere*** (249) as a coherent model, my own take on zombie semiotics, as described in *The Age of Promiscuity* (2018) is based on another conceptualization. Returning to the classical definitions elaborated by Peirce (1998), describing signs as manifestations of absent qualities, we can define all signs as "zombie signs". The father of American "pragmaticisim", after patiently describing his triad and the three "kinds" or "classes" of signs, based on likenesses, indication and symbolisation (13), identifies as sign every "thing which serves to convey knowledge of some other thing". While most of the times the connection between the sign and the object it stands for remains "genuine", there are instances in which a representamen functions as a "degenerate index" (Pierce 171), mainly when its relationship with the object conveys no information. Zombie signs at this level are manifestations of what Peirce described as "pollyadic" relationships—the best example for such "degenerated" representamens are our own names, there is no connection between the combination of letters and sounds associated with our persons and the reality of our existence. Another important suggestion was McLuhan's explanation about the fact that "new" technologies are always "old", that there is never a "dead" medium. All media are zombies, as writing was a "new" technology resurrecting oral poetry and wisdom into philosophy, as television carried further the film art forms, and now the new digital environments, who seem visual and dynamic, are in fact which are based on "scripts", even if the algorithms are not explicitly available for the "normal" users.

Although my explanations were illustrated with cinematic examples, based on contemporary filmmaking practices which are populated by such visual and narrative "zombies" that are mindless multiplications of "undead" representations, other relevant examples can be provided. In the digital meme culture there are innumerable versions of "old" pictorial media who are actually "dead", like the "funny Mona Lisa", yet digital users are constantly "reviving" them for a new iconic consumption. Such dead representations are then distributed online, getting the much desired "likes" (many deserving in fact "yikes!"). Without insisting too much here on my understanding of the "zombie function" of culture, I must underline that a basic notion is that of "cultural chimeras". This semiotic process allowed our ancestors to build cultural representations by creating hybrids, creatures combining the traits of various animals - in the case of the "classical" chimera, it had the head of a lion, the horns of a goat, the tail of a bull, and the body of a bear. This ability has reached a level of utter "promiscuity" in contemporary cinema and visual culture, with strange mutations and combinations made possible. Unlike the "simple" chimeras, like the centaur, which combined the human body with that of a horse, or the mermaid, which provided a relatively stable unity of dichotomous elements, when operating with zombie representations in our "culture of the postreasonable", we are involved in what I called the "zombiefied system" of meaninglessness production (351). Some of these promiscuous monsters were already analysed in my book, yet they never cease to appear, as multibillion dollars productions today continue to generate such zombie representations, which can be explained only with the instruments of **zombie semiotics**.

Obviously, chimeras are not cinematic inventions, nor a byproduct of meme culture, they have always been a part of human imagination. Perhaps the best illustration for such an ancient "chimera-like" representation is the so-called "Sorcerer" or the "Shaman", created by humans on the walls of the Trois-Frères cave in France. Combining the characteristics of animals and humans into a single creature, possibly linked with supernatural existence, this image is profoundly "chimeric". Only when comparing them with contemporary chimeras, like the January 6 rioter called the "QAnon Shaman", we can observe how the devolution of cultural functions is relevant for the process of zombiefication, the combinatory power of signs is transformed into *chimerically childish* appearances. In fact, one of the undisclosed sources of inspiration for my 2018 book was Donald Trump. Any cultural analysis, like the one I developed during the first presidency of this American "orange king", needs to take into consideration the mechanisms of such ideological chimeras, how utterly absurd creatures are behaving like walking dead in contemporary societies. Albeit Trump is not the only cultural zombie, what better proof for zombieism and the undead walking among us, can we find than the eerie apparitions of Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk, two of the richest human beings in the history of our species who might as well be computer generated creatures.

As Hartley (64) notes properly, we are always surrounded by the undead, our urban existence is a constant proof for this living with the dead. However, not only the statues

of dead (white) men, who are looking at us from above, are impacting our societies, there is a "zombie dialectic" affecting our minds. Just as noted by Hartley (65), I am following a suggestion put forward by Marx in his memorable analysis published in the first issue of "Die Revolution", in 1852. "The Eighteenth Brumaire", which is an analysis of the coup orchestrated on November 9, 1799 (Brumaire, according the the Revolutionary calendar) by Napoleon's nephew, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who proclaimed himself "Emperor Napoleon III", is an amusingly tragical move, since there was no "Napoleon II" (L'Aiglon, the "little eagle", as the biological son of Napoleon I and Marie Louise was called, never ruled, except the 2 days in 1815 when he was coughing in bed in Vienna). Marx, after the memorable and often quoted remark, that everything in history comes first as tragedy, the second time as farce, the author of "Das Kapital" made a relevant observation, that history is the result of previously existing realities. Humans might appear to make their own history, yet all we can do is to revive "traditions" transmitted from the past, with "dead generations" devouring the "brains of the living" like nightmares. We are always conjurers of "the spirits of the past", while believing we are creators of "newness", we believe we are inventors of things that did not exist before, yet we are zombies of the past, who appear new on the scene of world history, only in disguise and with a borrowed language. As Luther was a parody of Saint Paul and the 1848 Revolution was a costume drama for the 1789 Revolution, in turn a costume drama disguised in the clothes of the Roman Empire, we are always putting on stage representations of dead. The consequence of this process, paraphrasing Marx once again, is that we are witnessing a "poverty of thinking". The new chimeras who allow our minds to have access to strange mutations, are taking us into a reverse transformation, we are becoming promiscuous monsters. As I pointed out in *The Age of Promiscuity*, several years before seeing the nonsensical "Shaman warrior", in our age of confabulatory mash-ups, allowing contradictory elements to accumulate into grotesque representations, nothing is out of the realm of possibility.

I don't want to induce the idea that only capitalism deals with zombieism, as Stalin recounts when describing "The Foundations of Leninism", he acknowledges that "comrade Ulianov" in fact "disinterred" some of the ideas developed by Marx and Engels, which have been "buried" 50 years after the death of their creators. When I appeal to Marxist ideas, I am also a "zombie ideologist". In a way we are all "Time/Believers", not "Make/Believers", since we constantly revive ideas from the past, dead people from Plato to Marx haunt our minds.

In a sense we are all *necromancers*, always searching for identity in myths and storytelling forms that inhabit our brains, turning us into cultural zombies. Dead ideas are operating like ideological zombies, devouring our brains and manifesting themselves as if they were present, when in fact they are nothing more than "degenerate" signs. Alexander "the Great", who was sleeping with the "Iliad" under his pillow, was just an Achilles zombie, just as the millions of tourists flocking to take pictures with Mona Lisa, are photo-zombies taking pleasure in

the presence of a dead woman who has been deceased for over half a millenium. This form of zombieism is at the foundation of homo sapiens cultural formations, we constantly live in the presence of the undead, deluding ourselves that Antiquity can be revisited in video games, or that we can ride dragons on the planet of Pandora.

It was Walter Benjamin (87) who noted how this profound transformation in the art of storytelling has reached its end, when the epics of truth have died out. This is not only a "symptom" of modern "decay", when narrative forms have died by moving away from human direct interaction. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) we are at a moment when the final absence of human storytellers is made possible. Today, several online companies are offering writing services provided by AI-driven software, and, as book writers no longer need to be humans, the readers can become the ultimate zombies.

Another important elements of zombieism is *zombie capitalism*, as Chris Harman (2009) describes it by taking a cue from the notes Marx made to "The Capital", observing that the capitalist order is based on "the rule of the object over the human, of dead labor over the living, of the product over the producer" , with commodities becoming "means of domination over the worker". In this sense, Harman is right to describe the 21st century capitalism as a "zombie system", which in turn affects the manifestations of *digital capitalism.* Hartley elaborates further on the issues of *zombie economics,* using John Quiggin (2010) who develops the same suggestion taken from Marx, that dead ideas still walk among us.

Unfortunately, I cannot agree with the optimistic view adopted by Quiggin (199), who uses the typical liberal explanation, that somehow "bad ideas", the ones that previously caused social and economic damages, various forms of crisis, can be killed "once and for all". Ancient "zombie ideas" are never killed "once and for all"—who knows which human being first came up with the idea that there is "another realm", populated by "Gods", or that "immortality" is attainable. Maybe it was the *homo fabulans* who painted the Trois-Frères representation. Today, after millennia of existence, some profoundly zombie notions, like the presupposition that our material bodies can be reanimated after death, together with the concept of a "Supreme Being", keep on eating our brains.

The problem is when that many "undead" inventions are eating the brains of our contemporaries. One relevant contemporary episode in the "cultural wars", which is illustrative for this zombie function of ideologies, of how apparently "innovative" ideas are carriers of the morbid past comes from the brain of neo-reactionary philosopher Nick Land (2012), one of the founders of the NRx movement. Critical of the Enlightenment project, Land embraced the old Spenglerian theory about "the decline of Western civilization". Like his forefathers, who were also opposing democracy and egalitarian politics, this neoreactionary ideologue claims that the "arc of history" is moving downwards, from the ancient Greek proto-democracy to the final "zombie apocalypse" today. In his "neocon" criticism of Enlightenment, Land uses the zombie metaphor and claims that democracy is a form of "convulsive feeding-frenzy"

which is leading humanity into barbarism or what he identifies as a "zombie apocalypse". With the "democratic virus" affecting society and blocking forward-thinking, the only way to avoid this zombiefied tomorrow is just the re-generation of an old "no-brainer", the instauration of "capitalist monarchies". The supposed "enlightened zombie-tolerance", which is sheltering a democratic "mega-parasite", creating zombie populations, must be destroyed. With human populations infected by a democratic "zombie virus", moving towards a "cannibalistic" social collapse, the only solution is the destruction of the "parasite", more precisely of all the mechanisms of solidarity and other "socio-political pathologies". The political regime "invented" by this philosopher and his speculations show the same irresistible attraction of zombie-ideas, the fascination of "degenerate" signs we thought were dead, like Fascism and Nazism, only to discover that they are thriving in the minds of our fellow human beings. Like in Tommy Wirkola's nazi-zombie films (*Dead Snow* 2009 and *Dead Snow 2: Red vs. Dead* 2014) the unimaginable comes back to life.

Greta vs. Donald or How to Make the World Greta Again

Hartley's *Make/Believe* takes an optimistic turn as the author puts his faith (his belief) in the fact that a "new" science of culture is made possible by the existence of a "new generation" of storytellers and content creators, who are able to "democratize" the world, and who can move in a different direction than the adversarial parochialism of yesterday. These are new "worldmakers", able to compete with the hierarchical and elitist structures that dominated culture and education for centuries, who can provide solutions for our endangered planet.

Using Greta Thunberg as a relevant manifestation of this new culture, Hartley is right to describe this young woman as a "messenger" of another transformation of our collective semiosphere (250). Greta Thunberg is clearly a positive mirror to everything Donald Trump represents. The elderly American president not only suggested that "climate change" was a "con job", but was also mockingly calling Greta a "very happy young girl", in fact referring to this remarkable young person as mentally unstable, even as a "crazy person". At age 15, this young Swedish woman was leading a new global environmentalist movement, mobilizing children to fight for climate consciousness. However, I must question the suggestion that "Greta" can become the answer to all our problems, when she becomes the driving force for a new "planetary sapience".

Properly acknowledging the growth in power of a new class, led by young girls, Hartley applies here another notion previously expounded, that of "deme". Unlike the political concept of "demos", a *deme* is represented by "groups of meaningfulness" (Hartley and Potts 2014), defined as "inter-knowing" groups, coagulated by language, codes and culture, who are able to create "mediated demes". The fact that a large part of the digital networks

is populated by young girls could be relevant, albeit it needs a caveat because this optimistic view about a new model of "non-adversarial storytelling", is not entirely applicable. Our digital world is not created by children, the real demic mutation happens deeper in the underbelly of digital capitalism.

An important contribution to this discussion is provided by Lawrence Grossberg (2005), in the in-depth analysis of the "pedaphobic rhetoric" used in the new "cultural wars", orchestrated by conservatives and reactionaries in American society. In more clear Marxist terms, a "class" is always defined by "class struggle", during the entire history of human societies we can follow the constant battles of one class against another. As stated in the chapter 1 of the "Communist Manifesto", the clear formula is that the classes composing a society are clashing - from slaves and their owners in Ancient Greece and Rome, to patricians and plebeians, nobles and serfs, capitalists and proletarians, class is the central historical mechanism.

In the chapter suggestively subtitled "Class theory for dummies", Hartley identifies as the driving force of this new class consciousness, the new "worldmakers" considered to be the future of cultural studies, young children and specially young girls, who are a significant component of social media users (50). Hartley (2021) already discussed these issues, his arguments being extremely convincing. With children becoming a new "leisure class" and with young girls increasingly gaining economic and social power, these "new classes" are colliding with the "old", producing changes that are clearly affecting social structures, economic relationships and, ultimately, our cultural life. As Hartley (54) noted, this fundamental transformation is expressed by a new class antagonism, with children and their "allies" now in the vanguard of political and ideological struggle, confronting the "old" reactionary classes. A difficult question here, honestly addressed by Hartley (259), who acknowledges his own bias as belonging to the WEIRD culture (White, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic), remains if an "old, anglophone and white male" (259) can make a compelling case for expanding the horizons of cultural studies. I would say "yes", but for this we need to move away from describing "girlhood" as a bio-political category.

We should not be using only Greta as representative for the planetary class of girls who are no longer "outside", instead moved at the epicenter of our culture. Two other relevant cultural phenomena can be taken into account in order to fully understand what is going on. The first are the "Swifties", who coagulate as a planetary fan base for Taylor Swift. The second is represented by South Korean K-Pop girl bands, an imaginary best illustrated by the 2025 animated musical movie *KPop Demon Hunters* (dir. Maggie Kang), where the fictional girl „demon hunters" are modeled after famous K-pop girl groups such as "Blackpink", "Itzy", or "2NE1". The undisputed fact is that the "Swifties" are now a political powerhouse. Taylor Swift has enormous followings across multiple social media, on platforms like Instagram there are hundreds of millions of fans (about 283 million), while on X (formerly known as

Twitter) she has over 93 million followers, with many more on Facebook and TikTok. As it became evident during the 2024 presidential campaign in the US, Taylor Swift used her "girl power" to induce political changes. Posting messages as a "Childless cat lady", an ironic reference to J. D. Vance's primitive attacks on Kamala Harris, or calling on her followers to get out and vote, make her antagonistic to all *post-fascists* in US politics.

Undoubtedly this represents a major cultural mutation, visible not only in Western societies, with children having more economical and political agency, as they are involved in online participation, social networking, with full access to mobile devices, making their presence important. However, nuancing the extremely suggestive notion of "deme", inspired by the name attributed to ancient Greeks in Attica (35) who were the builders of the Trojan Horse, we must ask if children and young girls have reached a level of conscience to be able to trick their adversaries. When the Helenes who invaded ancient Illion were incapable to destroy their adversaries by force, they were able to accomplish the same results by fiction, convincing them to destroy the walls that protected them for more than a decade with the help of a make-believe horse. Here, the notion of make/believe, which I will discuss in the final part, is extremely important, especially since Hartley's notion of "Make/Believe" is based on the mutation of this concept into its 2.0 dimension.

Who rules the world? The political economy of *childocracy*

Sadly, the world today is led by ***gerontocrats***, the most important politicians of our time on planet Earth are elderly men. Starting with Donald Trump (born in 1946), who is 79 years old, to the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin (born in 1952), who is now 73 years old, and the president of China, Xi Jinping (born in 1953) who is 72 years old, the destinies of humanity are in the hands of a few *andropaused* men, and not with a good ending. Of course, compared to Paul Biya, the president of Cameroon, who was re-elected in October 2025 at the venerable age of 93, these are "young" leaders. I am not suggesting the typically *fascist* solution, that youth will fix everything, Joe Biden proved that old is not also "bad". In fact, the absurd logic amusingly used during the 2020 campaign by Donald Trump himself, who was 77 at that time, by mocking Joe Biden who was only 4 years older for his "old age" feebleness and confusion. Trump is statistically the oldest person elected as the president of the United States (Biden was also elected at age of 78), not the youthful and orange tanned skinned god of promiscuity actually is.

Confronted with the reality that 1 in 3 world leaders today (34%) are in their 60s, with countries like Ghana or Namibia, where president Nana Akufo-Addo or Nangolo Mbumba are over 80 years old, falling at the other end of the median, the argument that we are living in a ***neontocracy*** (Lancy 2015) is highly problematic. From an anthropological perspective,

Lancy suggests that the Western world, meaning North America and most of the European countries, is now affected by the rights provided for children, who are running out of control. Clearly distinguished from ancient agrarian societies, which were functional *gerontocracies*, the WEIRD societies (White, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic), cultivating a "laissez faire" attitude in which children are over-evaluated, adults not only tolerating "ill-mannered" youths, but on overprotection of society, preoccupied only by the welfare of childred is lessening of the influence of culture over the new generations. By studying children in the evolution of human culture, Land identifies three different perspectives—children as "cherubs" (angelic, innocent, naturally good), as "changelings" (inconvenient and unwanted) and as "chattel" (utilitarian, commoditized, pragmatical and part of the property). Child-centered societies have moved from the social systems dominated by its oldest members (as ***gerontocracies***), with the unique feature of contemporary systems being their "neo-ontocracy" dimension, children are not only having an important social capital, they are also a domineering factor.

However, I must point out that there is a dialectical dynamic at play, with "childish" behaviours which were previously associated with *puerility* and *immaturity* are becoming not only a part of children's life, but also that of the "adults". I must return here to some of my previous observations put forward also in *The Age of Promiscuity*, and argue that contemporary culture is not simply over-cultivating kids, they are reversing adults to childhood. There are multiple explanations for the global *infantilization* process, one in which children are constantly "matured" and adults are "infantilized". A strange fact is that millions of males in the Western world are living today with their parents, in the U.S. about 1 in 3 adults aged 18 to 34 continue to live with their elderly parents, while in some Western countries the percentage is even higher (Spain 48%, Italy 50%, Greece 54%). In Italy, these men are called "Bamboccioni" (big babies), grown-ups (over 30 years old) living with their parents, often sleeping in their "childhood" rooms and beds. The funny story of the 75 years old Italian woman who asked the courts in 2023 to evict her 40 years old sons from her home, since they kept living there without contributing to any household costs, is relevant. Another strange phenomenon happens today in China, a consequence of the one-child policy. In a culture where privileged children are males, coupled with selective abortion techniques, there is an excedent of 35 million men clogging up the global manosphere.

Thus, I would suggest that the concept used by Lancy would be better defined as ***childocracy***, not as ***neocracy***, since a ***child-ocratic*** society is not based on a biological faction, but a new social class of "kidults". With millions of adults behaving like young children, consuming cultural objects previously created for children, and many more million of kids behaving like previous adults explains how we moved from a society in which childhood was "the most vile and abject state of human nature", as claimed by seventeenth-century French cleric Pierre de Bérulle (quoted by Colin Heywood in *A Cultural History of Childhood*

and Family in the Age of Empire), to the capitalist exploitation of children, with the misery and cruelty witnessed by Marx or Dickens, to the "privileged"childhood in contemporary Western countries.

I believe in Make/Believe!

John Hartley's *Making/Believe* is a real show of force/farce (pun intended!) in cultural studies today, by opening several stimulating questions, among them if "Making" and "Believing" represents humanity's last hope for a "collective agency at a planetary scale". The force/farce, metaphor illustrated by the author in the final chapter explaining his own "Barbenheimer manoeuvre", represents the most recent addition to an eternal problem, as "make believe" remains one the most powerful instruments that *homo sapiens* has invented. Stories, myths and fictions are driving our civilizations for millennia, as we have invented storytelling machines, from oral chants, to theatre and literacy, printing and journalism, novels and "bildungsromans", we invented photograph and motion pictures, television and other popular media, leading to our contemporary social media. Nevertheless, "make believe" is not only one of the most problematic notions created by the English language, it is also a complex notion in human thinking. Used as a verbal phrase, in the common form as "make believe", or as a compound word ("make-believe"), with several alternative forms, such as makebelieve or make-belief, the term provides a variety of meanings.

As explained by Kendall Walton's "Mimesis as Make-Believe" (1990), unfortunately not mentioned in this book, we associate "make believe" with all imaginative playing, especially those of young children, who are quick to transform a broomstick into a horse. This "old" theory about making and believing, used by ancient philosophers, poets, writers and painters and many other creators of "make-believe", can be supplanted with Hartley's notion of "make/believe", where digital culture and social media practices involving young humans to create a new planetary connectivity, we continue to "make" new worlds generating "beliefs".

"Make/believers" are not simply imaginative beings, able to pretense playing, the ability of *making* humans *believe* something to be real remains a central human quality. Returning to Plato, who was placed by Karl Popper among the enemies of open society, "make-believing" is a promiscuous notion, since it coalesces two major distinctions, the "techne" (making and/or producing) and "mythos" (inventing, fictionalizing). The famous and infamous Plato argument from "Politeía", where the Greek philosopher denounced the dangers of fiction, must not be devoided of irony of the ancient text. Plato wrote a book in which he described an "Ideal State" from which the entire "imitative tribe" (poets, writers, dramatists) are removed. Using the "three beds" hypothesis in order to argue against "make believers", Plato makes the case for mythmaking. The first "bed", he claims, exists naturally, presumably

made by God, another is the result of "making", the work of a craftsman, a specialist like the carpenter, and the third one, which is the result of invention, like that in the works of a painter, is an illusion. Here, the impeccable logic of Socrates was purposefully failing, since the "ideal bed", the one created by God, does not exist, there is no pure "Idea" of an object artificially created by humans. While asking for the removal of the "tragic poets" and the "painters", who are "thrice removed from the truth", as dangerous imitators who are distorting reality as deceivers of humanity, Plato himself is creating some of the greatest myths in the history of humanity, among them the relevant „Allegory of the Cave". Plato was a „maker of ideas", who peddled with the creation by "appearance", a great creator of *mythos*, as falsehoods who keep generating meanings. In evolutionary terms, we are simultaneously descendants of *homo faber*, the "maker tools" and of *homo fabulator*, the maker of stories, and this dynamic will continue as long as we will live in a world abundant with storytelling. Perhaps we are not only part of a planetary culture of the Present, we are in a continous temporal culture that never ended, with postindustrial societies linked with all the other eras of storytelling in a single Antropocene.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn. Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 83–109.

Desmurget, Michel. *La Fabrique du crétin digital : Les dangers des écrans pour nos enfants*. Editions du Seuil, 2019, English translation *Screen Damage: The Dangers of Digital Media for Children*. Polity, 2022.

European Commission. "Study on audiences, consumer behavior and preferences relating to the consumption of media content – Final report". Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/5502681

Grossberg, Lawrence. *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Grossberg, Lawrence. *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics, and America's Future*. Paradigm Publishers, 2005.

Hartley, John. *Make/Believe: We and They on a Digital Planet*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025.

Hartley, John. *How We Use Stories and Why That Matters: Cultural Science in Action.* Bloomsbury, 2021.

Hartley, John, Ibrus, Indrek and Ojamaa, Maarja. *On the Digital Semiosphere. Culture, Media and Science for the Anthropocene.* Bloomsbury Academic 2021.

Hartley, John and Potts, Jason. *Cultural Science: A Natural History of Stories, Demes, Knowledge and Innovation*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Harman, Chris. *Zombie Capitalism. Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx*. Bookmarks Publications, 2009.

Lancy, David F. *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Land, Nick. *The Dark Enlightenment*. 2012, https://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land.

May, Lawrence. *Digital Zombies, Undead Stories: Narrative Emergence and Videogames.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writing volume 2, 1893-1913*. Indiana University Press, 1998.

Pop, Doru. *The Age of Promiscuity: Narrative and Mythological Meme Mutations in Contemporary Cinema and Popular Culture*. Lexington Books, 2018.

Stalin, Joseph. "The Foundations of Leninism", in *Works*, volume 6, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953, pp. 71–196.

Quiggin, John. *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us*. Princeton University Press. 2010.

Walton, Kendall L. *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the foundations of the representational arts*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

Williams, Raymond. "Communications as cultural science", in *Journal of Communication*, 24:3, 1974. pp. 26–38. Fiske, John and Hartley, John. *Reading Television*. Methuen, 1978.