

# TRUTH AS A REFLECTION OF FICTION



## **How is life here?**

It's very comfortable, I live near work. My first night here, I went out to dinner to a nearby restaurant, and I had my first taste of Polish food, and I became a big fan of Poland. I love *pierogi*, *żurek*, and *bigos*, and the cabbage meals are a revelation. I like to go to Hala Mirowska and Hala Gwardii, to watch the people. Public spaces are beautiful, clean, and well-kept, and the people seem to have a sense of pride and ownership of the city. That's very inspiring. I know that there's a dark side of living here, there are expressions of nationalism. But this phenomenon is now evident everywhere in the world. Nevertheless, the city has a heart, and the people here have been very helpful and warm.

## **However, I must ask this, don't you have the impression that we're profoundly mistrustful and negative? How could this be explained with the help of critical theory, which you often use in your work?**

It's hard to answer that. I live here, but my status is that of a tourist, I don't speak the language. But when I got lost, even people who didn't speak a word of English tried to help me. My sense is that the mistrustful, dour attitude masks real warmth and enthusiasm. After all, you were raised on Chopin.

## **In what way is that important?**

I was trained as a musician, and I've been to many concerts in Poland. I've noticed especially that when people play Bach or Mozart, nothing special happens. All of a sudden, when Polish pianists play Chopin, they just blossom, as if they could express themselves in Chopin. I can see a sense of great pleasure and pride. That's made an enormous impression on me.



DR. NAOMI MANDEL

**D**r. Naomi Mandel from Israel, one of this year's fellows of the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies (PIASt), studies how culture informs technology and, vice-versa, how technology informs culture.

**Could you tell me something more about the project you're working on in Warsaw?**

Generally speaking, I'm working on images of the computer revolution. My thesis is that the people who programmed the devices that we use on a daily basis grew up watching certain movies and connecting to certain books, which influenced directly the technological work they did. I believe in the constant exchange between culture and technology – technology informs culture, and culture informs technology. Usually, when we see images of technology, we think that this is an image of the way things are, the way things will become. But we don't think of the way these images have been informed culturally. For example, I'm writing right now about the 1983 film *WarGames*. This is a very important film for people who grew up to be hackers, computer technologists, and coders. There is talk that it might have inspired the designers of our current computers. In order to understand that process, from inspiration to technological ideas, I'm looking back at the games that were played in the 1960s and 1970s, and how those games informed the devices of that era.

**Don't you find it hard to find sources here in Poland?**

Fortunately, a lot of information about the topic I study is on the Internet. For example, while here in Warsaw, I found on the Internet three early images of people playing one of the first interactive games called *Spacewar!*, which was developed in 1962. One is a photograph of the games' developers playing the game on an original computer, one of those that occupied half of a room. One was a drawing in a brochure put out by a company that made the computers. And one was the cover art for an article that took a conspiracy theory approach to the




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is a Professor at the University of Rhode Island. She also has an affiliation with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel. Her comprehensive education covers studies in English and American literature and piano pedagogy at the University of Tel Aviv as well as a doctorate in contemporary literature in light of critical theory from the University of California.

She has authored the books *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America and Disappear Here: Violence after Generation X*. In Poland, she is working on a project that involves looking at the images of digital culture (hacking, computer games, and so on) from the first computers used by individual users to Web 2.0, which dominated the culture of the early 2000s.

topic. I could see that if you took these three images together, you could understand the poster for the movie *WarGames* in 1983. This historical, cultural context shows the evolution of the relationship between games and the real world in which they were created and played.

**You're also interested in movies.**

Yes, I'm actually working not with games themselves, but with representations of games in movies and literature. There's a movie that has just been released, called *Ready Player One*, based on a book published in 2011. It takes place in a future in which everybody lives online. At some point, it turns out that this virtual world is in danger of being corporatized. The only way to save it is to play a game. In the book, the main hero, who must play the game, has a number of obstacles to overcome, tasks to perform. The first involves reciting a dialogue from the movie *WarGames*.

**Your research provides a basis for a historical bridge between the analogue world, in which you grew up, and the world that is now emerging.**

You've perfectly captured the goal of the project. We often say that the new world that is coming is a completely different one. But we'll be able to understand it better if we understand its roots. Another part of my research involves looking at images of not just games, but also hackers. We can refer to the Anonymous phenomenon. Many people said that it was like *Fight Club*. It is not without importance that both the author of the book, Chuck Palahniuk, and the director of the movie, David Fincher, are both quite tech-savvy. For example, Palahniuk registered his own website back in the days when doing so required more work than just a few clicks, and a lot of knowledge.

I managed to trace the evolution of a certain idea from *Fight Club*, through the culture of early hackers, all the way to Anonymous. Of course, Palahniuk is not much in control of how his text is adapted by online activists. But that does not matter, because they are not adapting his intentions, they are adapting his text.

**You study how technology reflects what is going on in culture.**

Yes, but that works both ways. Technology reflects culture, and then culture reflects technology. Both fields constantly influence each other.

**The relationship between technology and culture leads us to another subject related to your work. When I was reading about your research interests, I immediately thought of**

**Quentin Tarantino, whose films are filled with violence. When asked in an interview why there was so much aggression, he got really upset and tried to explain that his movies were fiction, artistic visions, and were not about him directly. In your opinion, what's the mechanism behind this? Does violence in films reflect existing problems in society, or is it more likely to provide inspiration for such problems?**

I think that's the same dialectic that I describe in the case of the cultural representation of technology in reality. Distinguishing between the two things and saying what is real and what is not real is not very useful. Developments in the media in the 1980s and the 1990s made it very easy for us to identify with movie heroes, and Tarantino comes directly out of that. Instead of saying that it's fiction, we should think what we mean when we say that. When we tell children to get away from the virtual reality and come back to the real world, we forget that that world is real, too. We need to change our definition of reality. It's not always people talking to each other in person, it can be also avatars online engaging with each other in a game. We need to expand our definition of reality to include the virtual world. Part of that realization in my previous book has led me to this project.

**Does this mean that we can say that you study the relationship between reality and the virtual world with the help of different categories?**

Yes, I previously looked at violence, and now I look at technology.

**When we listen to reports of shootings in the United States, we may get the impression that the country is becoming less and less of a safe place. I wonder what is happening in the sociocultural context, what leads people to such actions. Let's look at Norway, which is regarded as one of the world's best countries in terms of the quality of life. However, Norway in a sense allowed the madman Anders Breivik to become who he was. What lies at the root of this?**

The United States is unique in three ways, which can be seen as the root of the events you're talking about. One is that the Constitution allows everyone to buy guns, and it's easier to purchase a gun in the United States than it is to purchase a car. The other thing that's unique to the United States is the lack of universal access to mental healthcare. That's because it is extremely expensive and rarely covered by workplace insurance. Thirdly, there is the American attitude of "pulling yourself up from rags to riches by your own bootstraps." This encourages self-sufficiency, which makes people feel stupid when they ask for help.



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A scene from the 1983 movie WarGames.



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And there is one more thing, but I don't know how unique it is to the United States. Because the United States is such a huge, very diverse country, it is held together by ideas that are conveyed through movies and newspaper stories. These are cultural constructs, and school shootings are one of those cultural constructs. If you are an angry, lonely, and confused teenager, and there is no one you can ask for help, and you have an easy access to gun, the idea of a school shooting is not foreign to you. You don't have to invent it. It's already out there for you to access. That's a toxic mix. For the time being, it has proved impossible to limit this access to guns. The only place I can see room for improvement is in efforts to make healthcare more accessible.

I think that every informed person finds it hard to accept such alarming phenomena. Many extremists have risen to power all over the world. Something strange has happened.

#### **Is it possible to identify any common cultural roots for manifestations of extremism in various parts of the world?**

I've researched chiefly the manifestations of extremism present in fiction. Extreme fiction, a phenomenon from the 1990s, means literature that tries to break the borders between the virtual and the real. One example is Palahniuk. His readers took his idea of fight clubs into the real world. Together with one of my associates, we looked at many examples of fiction from all around the world, unfortunately with

the exception of Africa. We found extremisms that were a certain formal choice that couldn't be identified with a single political perspective, which is one of the characteristics of extreme fiction.

**Finally, could you tell me something more about how you define Generation X, another important concept in your work? When I read the description, I immediately thought that it was about my generation. It is characterized by the absence of a single idea around which it can unite. In Poland, our grandparents have their stories of World War II and our parents have their recollections from the times of communism, but we don't have our own story. Nevertheless, my generation does not fit into the timeframe of Generation X.**

The timeframe I defined, which means people born between 1960 and 1980, is very loose. Your description fits our definition. Generation X does not have a clear enemy, nor can it identify with a specific cause such as Marxism or feminism. The people who form that demographic witnessed the revolution from the analogue to the digital. It's a generation that was thoroughly informed by the media. That's the best argument in favor of the need to augment the notion of reality to include the digital experience, instead of opposing it.

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