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NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE BLIND ASSASSIN:* FICTION, HISTORY, AND POPULAR CULTURE[2]

Focusing on newspaper clippings as one of the layers of narration in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, this paper examines their roles and discusses their significance within the novel. Relying on the idea that *The Blind Assassin* is, to a large extent, a novel about how history is recorded, the paper provides a brief overview of the position of history in postmodernism, highlighting the challenges to the separation of the literary and the historical. This is followed by an examination of news as a genre in which the historical and the popular merge, simultaneously reflecting popular tastes and shaping everyday stories into what is to become history. This theoretical framework places the novel's newspaper clippings at the intersection of fiction, history and popular culture, and serves as a starting point for a discussion of their various facets. It is first analysed how the articles depict the society of the era and the roles characters occupy within it. Given that *The Blind Assassin*'s narratives frequently mirror each other, the paper then proceeds to examine how the main narrative is echoed in the clippings. Finally, treating the clippings as pseudo-historical documents, the analysis focuses on how they represent history, with the ultimate aim of revealing how Atwood makes use of both personal and public records to construct a paper-made past. It is eventually concluded that newspaper clippings serve as more than a mere mirror to the other narrative layers, as the features of news as a popular genre are present in the novel on the whole.

Keywords: The Blind Assassin, Margaret Atwood, news, history, popular culture

1. Introduction

Among the most striking aspects of Margaret Atwood's acclaimed novel *The Blind Assassin* are its multiple layers of narration, with various kinds of textual material cut up and arranged so as to resemble the structure of a collage. Narrative strands emerge as stories appear within stories, while narrators – and our assumptions about them – shift repeatedly, creating a medley of genres and voices.

The backbone of the novel is an autobiographical account by the octogenarian narrator Iris Chase Griffen, examining her own troubled marriage and her sister Laura's mysterious suicide. The memoir shifts between the present-tense, diary-like narrative, set in 1999 Canada, and the retelling of the tumultuous Chase family history, beginning

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with the late 19th century and encompassing such historical events as the two World Wars, Great Depression and rise of capitalism. Interwoven with this frame narrative is a novel-within-the-novel, purportedly written by Laura Chase. Published posthumously, the novel brings Laura literary fame; it tells the story of an unnamed woman of high social standing and her romance with a young fugitive. Yet another story is embedded in this novel – one told by the mysterious fugitive during the lovers' secret meetings. His tale, a Bolshevist allegory of Canadian society and the lovers' unfortunate circumstances, is a science-fiction narrative set in the fantastical city of Sakiel-Norn, featuring a sacrificed maiden rescued by a blind assassin. Interspersed within the chapters are various supposedly authentic newspaper articles, reporting both on the characters' lives and deaths and on the social and political occurrences that surround them.

Not only does *The Blind Assassin* feature complex patterns of narration, but it also openly and self-consciously examines the narrative process and its challenges. Contemplating the gap between truth and interpretation, the novel's narrator complains: "The only way you can write the truth is to assume what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself" (ATWOOD 2001: 345). As far as Iris herself is concerned, we can never be quite certain that she is free from the impulse to obscure and conceal the truth, precisely in order to provide excuses for her actions – *The Blind Assassin*, after all, is one of Atwood's "villainess novels" (COOKE 2004: 29). Like another storyteller of Atwood's, Grace Marks, Iris is a woman "with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold" (ATWOOD 1998: 1515). Repeatedly pointing out the relativity of her point of view, she "encourages the reader to ponder upon the fact that her version of events may not necessarily be the only possible version" (FELDMAN-KOLODZIEJUK 2014: 5).

With this in mind, we might turn to other narrative layers of the novel and look for an objective account beyond Iris's recollections. But as Robinson (2006) points out, the novel's final twist brings us to the realization that we have, in fact, been reading two separate autobiographies by Iris Chase, one written in the midst of her affair with Alex Thomas, and another written more than fifty years later – both likely to be tainted by unreliability that stems from Iris either being too emotionally involved in their subject or too temporally distant from it. And when the novel's multiple voices ultimately converge into one that belongs to Iris herself, albeit at different stages of her life, we are left with no outside sources that can corroborate or contradict her narratives – except, of course, the newspaper clippings. However, the articles' credibility is so consistently undermined throughout the novel – either through Atwood's parody of newspaper discourse and explicit portrayals of sycophantic reporters, or by the main narrative – that it is impossible to perceive any of them as potential arbiters of truth. Rather than serving as credible sources of information, they mirror Iris's unreliability and underscore the clash between private experience and official records. The issue these competing narratives bring to the foreground is that of remembering and recording the past. In fact, as Tolan (2007: 155) remarks, so prominent is this concern in *The Blind Assassin* that the novel could in fact be described as "a general inquiry into the way that history is remembered and recorded".

History is, without a doubt, one of the key recurring themes in Margaret Atwood's works. However paradoxical it may seem, the difficulties of historical interpre-

tation are a central concern even in her most famous "futuristic" novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*: "the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come." (ATWOOD 1986: 311) What is more, as Margaret Ann Doody (2000: 27) remarks, Atwood's stories and characters are often "steeped in the particularities of their era" – from popular customs and beliefs of the 19th century Canada as depicted in *Alias Grace*, to novels such as *Life Before Man*, in which each section is headed by a specific date, and *The Robber Bride*, covering the Vietnam War and chronicling the cultural changes of the 1980s. *The Blind Assassin*, where she illuminates the details of Canadian life from the late Victorian era throughout the 20th century, is no exception. Atwood is often able to paint the atmosphere and limitations of Iris's time and place with swift, powerful strokes – when Iris remarks that, at the unveiling of the war memorial in 1928, "even the Catholic priest was allowed to say a piece," she concisely sums up traditional Protestant attitudes and the power structure of Port Ticonderoga (DOODY 2000: 27). Yet the novel's engagement with the past is significantly deepened by the use of newspaper clippings, which highlight how the characters are embedded in a historical context and allow the author to represent the turmoil of the 1930s.

Bearing in mind the role newspaper clippings play in presenting the Canadian society and history of the era, one of the aims of this paper is to examine how they portray the prevalent ideologies and cultural values, as well as the roles the characters occupy within that society. However, acknowledging that the articles do not function as standalone social commentary, but as an integral part of the novel, the paper attempts to analyse how they fit into some of the novel's major themes, such as the opposition between the public and personal or the power to conceal, and aid the author in further exploring them. In the end, the paper will aim to address the novel's overarching issue – the gap between truth and narrative – and examine how the use of newspaper clippings as pseudo-historical documents plays into this idea.

Given Atwood's status as one of the great postmodern writers, it will first be explored how history and its recordings are understood and represented in postmodernism. After that, the paper will look into the nature of news. Finally, with this theoretical framework in place, various aspects of newspaper clippings in the novel will be analysed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. In search of histories: The postmodern pasts

"What does the past tell us? In and of itself, it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first, before it will say a word; and even so, listening means telling, and then re-telling," remarks Margaret Atwood (1998: 1515–1516) in her lecture on writing *Alias Grace*. Her statement emphasizes the impenetrability of the past and aligns with what has come to be regarded as a "basic tenet in contemporary theories about history and historiography, namely the inseparable conjunction of history and narrative" (BUCHINGER 2011: 73). This relates to the notion that, as Linda Hutcheon (1988: 16) put it, the only way to know the past is through its texts. Since any historical account is merely a reconstruction of disjointed fragments, the traditional claim of history to represent an objective truth has been increasingly questioned.

Hutcheon (1988: 6) suggests that the postmodernist era is marked by the "problematizing of history" rooted in a sense of disillusionment and incredulity towards what Lyotard termed "master narratives," grand narratives that silence individual voices excluded from their vision. As one such narrative, history in postmodernism is continually re-examined and rethought as a human construct. As historian Hayden White (1978: 121) points out, "the techniques or strategies [both historians and fiction writers] use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts". It is therefore "the very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art" (HUTCHEON 1988: 105). Hutcheon clarifies that both modes of writing are linguistic constructs that derive their force "more from verisimilitude than any objective truth," while also emphasizing their conventionalized narrative forms and intertextuality.

Highlighting its theoretical awareness of both history and fiction as human constructs, Hutcheon defines the genre of historiographic metafiction, which she describes as both intensely self-reflexive and parodic. Without pretending to mirror or reproduce reality, this type of postmodern novel presents fiction as "another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality," while at the same time foregrounding both the act of construction and the need for it (HUTCHEON 1988: 40). Although the genre examines history in an ironic and problematizing light, Hutcheon describes it as "resolutely and overtly historical" (1988: 129). Mirroring the contradictions that lie at the heart of postmodernism, historiographic metafiction must work within the conventions in order to subvert them – it is "a questioning that is totally dependent upon that which it interrogates" (HUTCHEON 1988: 42). It is therefore parody, defined as "repetition with critical distance," that Hutcheon perceives as central to postmodernism and deems a "privileged mode of postmodern self-reflexivity… which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it," both incorporating and challenging what it parodies (HUTCHEON 1988: 26, 35). What is both challenged and incorporated, used and subverted in historiographic metafiction are the discourses of a society, which it attempts to "milk for all they are worth" (HUTCHEON 1988: 133). Hutcheon notes that historiographic metafiction draws upon all sorts of discourses it can find operative in a society, from fairy tales to newspapers, often parodying popular and conventional forms. Its intertextuality therefore rests not only upon literary, but also upon popular and historical texts, either incorporated in their raw form or parodically inverted. Representing the past in such a way illustrates that what we know of it "derives from the discourses of that past" (HUTCHEON 1988: 136).

All these practices of postmodernism operate with a view to stressing the narrative nature of our knowledge of the truth and the past. They all point to the narrative as the core of the problematized relations between history and fiction. The process of narrativization has come to be regarded as essential for human comprehension, with the need to narrativize rooted in the urge to establish order and make sense out of the chaotic lived experience. Recognizing the human need to impose order and control, while at the same time emphasizing the futility of any such attempt against the chaos of life, postmodernism has rejected the totalizing narratives of history in favour of the pluralist notion of histories (VEVAINA 2006: 86). And with such grave challenges to the possibility of ever

telling the true story, the focus of fiction appears to have instead shifted towards questioning "whose truth gets told" (HUTCHEON 1988: 123).

2.2. News: Popular texts "struggling to write history"

It has been discussed how postmodernism and historiographic metafiction deal with representations of history and the blurring of lines between history and literature. In *The Blind Assassin*, perhaps the most prominent example of a union between the two can be found in the novel's newspaper articles, grounded both in history and in the fictional world its characters inhabit. News as a genre, however, stands at yet another intersection: it is in the news that the historical and popular overlap. Containing elements of both "history of today" and popular texts, news is a genre watched and read for both information and pleasure (FISKE 1989: 149).

As Fiske (1989: 149) points out, on the one hand, news appears to be "determined by the reality of events" and has a social responsibility in that it needs to disseminate knowledge. Building on Foucault's (FOUCAULT 1980) ideas, Fiske, however, denies a neutral, objective relationship of that knowledge to the real and instead underscores the link between knowledge and power. He emphasises that the power of knowledge is a discursive power entailing two dimensions: one is to shape reality into a discursive construct "whose arbitrariness and inadequacy are disguised as far as possible" (FISKE 1989: 150), while the other is to have the construct accepted as truth and circulated throughout society. News is therefore a genre strongly marked by its relationship to control and power and inextricably linked to history. Much like history, it attempts to control what Fiske refers to as "the unruliness of events" and structure them into a coherent, cause-and-effect relationship, producing a grand narrative out of apparent randomness. Drawing on Foucault's distinction between traditional history, which links events into a unified story, and genealogy, which emphasises their multiplicity and contradictions, Fiske (1989: 152) claims that news struggles "to write history and deny genealogy". It is, however, a struggle that can never be entirely won, since events resist its efforts to shape them into an unambiguous account. The discourse of news does not manage to altogether conceal the fact that the same events could be made to express something different if they were taken up by a different discourse; traces of these unrealized discursive alternatives therefore remain present in the text. "Within the news," Fiske (1989: 152) explains, "the contradictions and the discontinuities of events remain and finally resist its attempts to write a coherent history out of them."

This reluctant openness of news is what allows for the genre to be read as a type of popular texts, meeting the two criteria of popular taste – those of relevance and productivity (FISKE 1989: 185). The criterion of relevance refers to its connection to the everyday, which enables readers and viewers to make meanings that function in their everyday lives. Minimizing the gap between text and life, relevance is what makes news matter and what makes it talked about. But in order for news to be popular, the meanings it offers, however relevant, must be "made *out of* the news, not *by* the news". (FISKE 1989: 3) Placing news within the frame of media culture, Douglas Kellner (1995: 5–6) similarly argues that it is neither a mere weapon in the hands of dominant groups nor simply mindless entertainment. He lays emphasis on the need to study the creation and reception of media culture – and understand the forces and ideologies that shape it – in order

to better understand the nature, dynamics and everyday life of society.

This ties in with the fact that popular culture, as defined by Fiske, is made by the disempowered out of the resources provided by the very system that disempowers them. "The people's subordination," explains Fiske (1989: 4), "means that they cannot produce the resources of popular culture, but they do make their culture from those resources". In the same vein, rather than being only part of the dominant culture, news allows the subordinate groups to make their own meanings out of it. It therefore fits into the category of popular "producerly" texts, which Fiske defines by building on Barthes' opposition between readerly texts, requiring passive and disciplined readers willing to take in ready-made meanings, and writerly texts, which challenge their readers to participate in the construction of meaning. Producerly texts can be read in a traditional, "easy" way, without demanding any writerly activity, yet still possess the openness of writerly texts and gaps wide enough for entirely new texts to emerge from them (FISKE 2010: 83–84). It appears that the popularity of news stems from these qualities: offering its readers the productive pleasure of resistance, it allows them to create their own meanings and make their own sense (FISKE 1989: 3).

And not only does news contain the means with which to disagree with it, but its status of a discourse requires the reader to do just that. As Fiske (1989: 177) points out, the difference between fiction and news is only that of modality, which is why news' discursive strategies should be demystified, and its ideology of objectivity discredited, so that its texts can ultimately be treated with the same freedom as fictional ones. In *The Blind Assassin*, this line of thought seems to be taken up and taken quite literally, since its articles, although incorporating real historical events, indeed are fictional – and while we may know that their constructs are not to be accepted as truth, they do help to demonstrate how truths are constructed.

3. In the spotlight: *The Blind Assassin* told through newspaper clippings

The Blind Assassin's narrator, Iris Chase Griffen, is a writer both compelled to share her story and obsessively secretive; at one point she defines the spotlight as a form of humiliation (ATWOOD 2001: 299). Yet the novel repeatedly shows her family and their stories – from dinner parties to tragedies – as objects of media attention. Eighteen articles about the characters and socio-political circumstances surrounding them are inserted into her narrative with no commentary, as if without the author's knowledge (MULLAN 2003). Published by various local and national newspapers and magazines – some real, some invented – they introduce characters and provide information about their social status and relationships. From the outset, they draw attention to the gap between public and private truths, establishing narrative strands that are subsequently taken up by the main narrative, but presented in an entirely different light. They appear to both aid readers and mislead them, providing hints for linking or interpreting the main narratives, but at the same time encouraging expectations that remain unfulfilled or are eventually turned upside down (BUCHINGER 2011: 60).

Reporters and news are often referenced in Iris's narrative, but rarely in a positive context. Nevertheless, several characters remain unaware of urgent news for too long because they "never bother with the papers" (ATWOOD 2001: 376). Curiously enough, in one of the novel's early drafts Iris's life story was supposed to be revealed by two young

journalists (ATWOOD 2013). The message seems clear enough: there is something to be learned from reading newspapers, both for the characters and the readers. But apart from drawing the reader deeper into Atwood's maze of narrative layers, what is the significance of the clippings in the context of *The Blind* Assassin's stories? What do they reveal about the characters and the world they inhabit? How do they fit into the themes the novel explores? And why is precisely this genre chosen to represent the official history of the era? A closer look at the various roles of newspaper clippings in the novel might help to elucidate their significance.

3.1. A portrait of the society

The Blind Assassin is a novel in which all key characters die – and we learn of their deaths from newspaper obituaries. But the ways society records their passing differ greatly, and not only because some of these deaths are more scandalous than others. While Richard Griffen's fatal accident is something of a national tragedy, reported in *The Globe and Mail* and commented on by the Prime Minister, Iris's passing at the end of the novel is followed by nothing but an inconspicuous obituary written by a family friend and published in the local newspapers. It appears that both the lives and deaths of these characters must bear the mark of their social standing.

As Bemrose (in FELDMAN-KOLODZIEJUK 2014: 6) remarks, *The Blind Assassin* is a novel driven "at least in part by a desire to dissect social realities". Believing that "fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects" (BUCHINGER 2011: 75), Atwood weaves a social commentary on Canada into her story, examining its society "from its colonial heyday through fully-fledged industrialisation, labour unrest, and the battle of democratic and fascist ideologies—neatly aligned with an exposition of Canada's women in this same history" (DAVIES 2001: 1138). As Atwood intertwines her character's lives with true historical events, Iris's changing social status simultaneously allows her to explore various facets of society – from a small-town community to global politics. Much of the social commentary can be found in Iris's narrative, but what most effectively foregrounds the presence of the society in the novel are newspaper clippings, which go a long way in making the reader aware of the circumstances of the era. The way in which the media and its texts are employed in *The Blind Assassin* seems to confirm Kellner's thesis that they are instrumental in revealing the struggles, hopes and fears of a society.

As the status of the Chase family members changes, so does the type of newspapers publishing stories about them. It all starts with *The Port Ticonderoga Herald & Banner*, a provincial paper whose editor Elwood Murray is both a character in the novel and the author of some of its clippings. Murray's articles paint the picture of a small industrial town caught up in the Great Depression, trying to maintain its law-abiding spirit and stability – or, at least, the appearance of it – in the face of incoming turmoil. In his comically biased reports, Murray ingratiates himself with Norval Chase, Iris's father and the town's leading industrialist, by applauding his noble "public-spirited gestures" and presenting him as the town's safeguard against riots and Communist-inspired bloodshed. When riots eventually do break out, for Murray they are nothing but the work of outside agitators attempting to disturb their peaceful community.

While Murray's propensity to stretch the truth may be entertaining, its necessity is highlighted by the main narrative and the townspeople's attitudes towards reporters. First introduced after an incident – possibly political – in which he is knocked down into the river, Murray is clearly not well-liked in his community. As Reenie remarks, though he was seen as harmless in prosperous times, or even appreciated for writing down the right names for society events, people have become wary of anyone eavesdropping, and the reporter is too nosy for his own good. In difficult times, it seems, knowing too much might be dangerous both for Elwood and the town he writes for and about – and just as it often happens in the novel, both resort to wilful blindness.

The changes that the Chase family encounters as they become involved with the Griffens are yet again reflected in the kind of articles written about them: the characters now figure prominently in reports published by well-known papers such as *The Toronto Star* and *The Mail and Empire*, whose bias is now more subtle, hidden behind a polished, serious, matter-of-fact tone. Reports on local unrests are replaced by confrontations on a national and global scale, featuring such historical event as the March on Ottawa and the 1934 Communist rally.

Juxtaposed with such solemn matters, however, are flamboyant society columns, primarily concerned with gossip, club membership and minute descriptions of clothes and festivities. The glaring contrast in the tone and subject matter of the texts could be interpreted in terms of erasing the division between information and entertainment in news discourse (FISKE 1989: 185); nevertheless, in the context of the novel such discrepancies might also serve to shed light upon the society's attempt to hide its agitation behind a refined façade of glamour and optimism. At the same time, as Michael (in BUCHINGER 2011: 60) points out, just like the multiplicity of narratives in the novel forces us to re-examine each of them, this contrast "implicitly calls into question the objectivity and truth value of both kinds of stories."

Exaggerated optimism in the face of danger is further made visible – and further called into question – in reports on uprisings and events leading up to the war. Clippings discussing grim events often end on an incongruously positive note, confidently expecting the Depression to end and the country to be unaffected by the global turmoil. Richard Griffen is often the voice behind such assurances, with his 1938 speech predicting "seven fat years" and "golden vistas" stretching into the 1940s. Richard's speeches and his activism, as recorded by the press, not only highlight the emptiness of such unsubstantiated promises, but also aid the main narrative in painting an unequivocally dark portrait of his character. Both in the clippings and in the rest of the novel, Richard is a villain with virtually no redeeming qualities – he is authoritarian, ruthless, materialistic and a Nazi supporter. But more compelling than his one-dimensional personality is the papers' portrayal of Richard as a reputable figure, and the implicit indictment of the society which allowed such a man to rise to power, with the country's political elite applauding his corrupted values.

While Richard is the key character in political matters, Winifred, Iris and Laura mostly appear in society columns. This opposition between "hard" and "soft" news (BUCHINGER 2011: 60) therefore additionally highlights the gendered social spheres of the era. With the exception of deaths and accidents, women are never featured in any of

the "serious" papers; in fact, they only seem to be acknowledged by the press in relation to gossip, dresses and entertainment. As the *Mayfair* report on an event celebrating women in history illustrates, even when their achievements are recognized, it is only in terms of influencing "momentous world figures" of male leaders. Such women, of course, are not only to be found in distant history, but among the characters as well. Winifred, persistently working to advance the political career of her brother Richard, is praised by the society as its invaluable benefactress as she enjoys the glamorous life of a "noted socialite". Those who do not belong to such social circles, however, are never the subject of the articles – they have to contend themselves with reading them, just like Reenie who can only get the taste of such a privileged lifestyle by doggedly memorizing stories about the wealthy and powerful, portrayed as invariably "charming and picturesque" and inhabiting a world of pure elegance and class.

Interestingly enough, the only authentic document in the novel comes from a society magazine. It is the "genuine and gooey" (DOODY 2000: 27) account of the maiden voyage of the Queen Mary – and that it does not stand out from the clippings of Atwood's contriving is a testimony to the accuracy of her parody. What is also real, as Atwood confirms, is the fact that "the posh passengers made off with everything moveable as souvenirs" (ATWOOD 2013). Although this fact may be conveniently omitted from the newspapers' narrative, "what isn't there has a presence" (ATWOOD 2001: 484). There might be "no 'ancestral voices prophesying war'" (ATWOOD 2001: 332) in glossy magazines, but the very popularity of such exaggeratedly escapist entertainment implies that there is a reality to escape from. However boastful or optimistic the articles – both "soft" and "hard" – may be, the image of the society and its elite that the reader is left with is far less flattering than the one they aim to put forward. In keeping with Fiske's theories, *The Blind Assassin's* news is never free from the truths it wants to suppress – just like the society depicted in the novel and, ultimately, its characters.

3.2. Mirrored themes

The Blind Assassin is a novel in which narratives regularly mirror each other – perhaps most notably, stories of blind assassins and sacrificed maidens are found, albeit in different versions, in Iris's narrative, in the novel-within-the-novel, and in Alex's pulp fiction. Newspaper clippings similarly echo some of the novel's key themes, both in the topics they address and in the way they deal with them.

As it has been mentioned, various narrative layers explore the themes of blindness, concealment and deception. Richard's power to conceal the truth is among the propelling forces of the plot, and it is clearly demonstrated in the way he and his family are portrayed by the press. At the very beginning of the novel, the discrepancy between the narrative beginning and the *Toronto Star* article reporting on Laura's death indicates that some hidden powers have turned attention away from the truth and concocted a neat, scandal-free interpretation of the accident (MULLAN 2003). The way such controversial events in the Griffen family – from disappearances to suicides – are presented in the media bears witness to Richard's need to spin stories to protect his public persona. So does his care, referenced in the main narrative, not to antagonize reporters, those "vindictive little vermin" (ATWOOD 2001: 412). With Winifred's help, Richard uses his power and influence to make sure that some questions are never asked, and stories that could expose

the unsavoury side of his character never told. But such concealment is never complete, especially if we have in mind the idea that undisclosed truths remain present in news discourse. Opposed to the power to conceal is the power of the story that demands to be told – and the emergence of suppressed stories is another strand connecting *The Blind Assassin's* layers.

Another conspicuous reflection of the main narrative in the clippings stems from the connections between war and family relationships. As Nathalie Cooke (2004: 144) points out, many parallels can be drawn between reports on wars and uprisings and Iris and Richard's marriage. The connections go beyond the irony of Richard's disdain for Communists as "disruptive elements" and his hope that the country may "purge itself" of them if they leave for Spain, mirrored – unbeknownst to him – in the course of Iris's relationship with Alex. Cooke argues that the country's policy of non-intervention in global conflicts – as advocated by Richard in a speech aptly named "Minding Our Own Business" – reflects Iris's failure to act as her sister's guardian. Iris therefore serves as "accomplice to Richard's villainy" (COOKE 2004: 143) and is responsible for his wrongdoings, much in the same way as war allies must bear responsibility for choosing to look the other way. Furthermore, the *Globe and Mail* report in which Richard lauds the Munich Accord illustrates his support for ruthless authority reflected in his treatment of his own family, as well as his belief that prosperity end economic interests can negate suffering – both on a global scale and in his home (COOKE 2004: 144). War reports can therefore be read as an allegorical representation of the characters' relationships and yet another retelling of the primary narrative.

The previously mentioned article reporting on Laura's death draws attention to yet another central motif paralleled in the clippings. With the headline "Questions Raised in City Death," it might mislead the reader into thinking that what follows is an inquiry into the suspicious circumstances of Laura's accident. Nevertheless, these expectations are subverted when the questions raised turn out to be of an entirely different nature – they refer to the dangers of exposed streetcar tracks the "adequacy of safety precautions taken by the City" (ATWOOD 2001: 6). This demonstrates how problems of the local community are used as a red herring to distract from the actual mystery, with the personal tragedy presented as a mere pretext for discussing the local ratepayers and their concerns. Later on in the novel we can find articles in which Aimee's death leads to a discussion about the state of social services, and Laura's disappearance takes a back seat to troubles with faulty postal delivery. In these clippings – and throughout the novel – the personal is repeatedly overshadowed by the public and political. Community and group interests are given priority over private hopes and desires – perhaps most strikingly in Iris's decision to marry Richard in order to save her father's factory, or in their marriage subsequently becoming a show for the public, with the key aim of furthering his political career. When weaving these themes into the clippings, Atwood uses a deliberately comical lack of subtlety in the transitions to public matters and pokes fun at reporters' unconvincingly didactic tone. But her parody serves a very serious purpose – just like Iris's confession, it makes readers question accounts that disregard the complexity and individuality of actual people and their experiences in favour of grand public narratives.

3.3. Representing history

The discussion of public narratives and their relationship to the individual in *The Blind Assassin* inevitably leads to discussing history as one such grand narrative. As pseudo-documents of the era, newspaper clippings highlight how the novel's plot is grounded in a historical context, making the spirit of the era palpable and giving it a voice of its own – the only voice not coming from the network of *The Blind Assassin*'s main characters. It is, however, a voice that presents the official versions of socio-political events and the Chase family's personal history from an "outside, but not necessarily objective point of view" (STROLZ 2009: 291). Far from being an unbiased account contrasted with the narrator's unreliability, history in *The Blind Assassin* is not to be trusted; it is incorporated only to be challenged and written against.

> In one of her interviews, Atwood addresses the multiplicity of possible histories: "When I was young I believed that 'nonfiction' meant 'true.' But you read a history written in, say, 1920 and a history of the same events written in 1995 and they're very different. There may not be one Truth – there may be several truths – but saying that is not to say that reality doesn't exist" (in STROLZ 2009: 300).

In *The Blind Assassin*, news reports covering events such as political campaigns, civil conflict in Spain, or Canada's response to Hitler's rise, are called into question when other narrative layers introduce conflicting versions of the truth: they cast a different light on the same events, offer greater insight into the characters and motivations of those involved, and reveal personal stories behind public events. As influential figures in the social and political landscape of the era, in official records the Griffens are remembered as reputable and well-meaning benefactors; however, in Iris's memoirs they are revealed to be hypocritical, self-serving, and vicious. On the other hand, the supposedly violent and seditious Communist "thug" Alex Thomas, as he is portrayed by the news, becomes a romantic hero when seen through the eyes of the Chase sisters. In other words, supposedly non-fictional truths are juxtaposed with other types of narratives, from romances to pulp fiction, only for all of them to be revealed as subjective accounts that fail to capture the past in a fully accurate and impartial manner. As the articles bring the novel closer to historiography, they simultaneously expose history as storytelling.

Atwood's presentation of history through the conventions of news as a genre that is, according to Fiske, characterized by its openness and the resistance of its events to being shaped into a coherent narrative, allows her to use the pseudo-documents to hint at the truths buried underneath official records. Through her parody of newspapers' exaggerations and euphemisms, their uncritical support for the wealthy and influential, their evasion of relevant questions in favour of mundane concerns, Atwood effectively "speaks to a discourse from within it" and points to the arbitrariness and artificiality of the process by which "events" are turned into "facts" (HUTCHEON 1988: 122) and cemented into public knowledge. With their subjectivity and unreliability exposed, newspaper clippings as testaments of history are therefore both an embodiment of the history that Iris is attempting to rewrite and a subversion of it; they are the backdrop that is written against and they write against themselves.

Newspaper clippings in *The Blind Assassin* represent an official history which is,

much like its narrator, "an over-excited, lying old lady" – the comparison is invoked twice in the novel (HOWELLS 2005: 168) – but we cannot know the past except through such deceitful storytellers' texts. In a characteristically postmodern and paradoxical manner, *The Blind Assassin's* emphasis on the historical thus undermines and problematizes the notion of history, stressing its "constructedness" and bringing history and fiction closer together as similarly arbitrary, biased and unreliable ways of making sense of the past – a fitting manoeuvre for a novel that insists on the textuality of our knowledge of the past, while at the same time questioning the possibility of ever writing a truthful text. If all our history is paper-made, but "the only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read" (ATWOOD 2001: 345), then perhaps the past truly is "unknowable, at least by us" (ATWOOD 1998: 1515).

4. Conclusion

Returning to the definition of news as a genre divided between the "history of today" and popular culture, it appears that *The Blind Assassin* makes use of both sides of its discourse. It presents newspaper clippings as historical documents that infuse a sense of time and place into the text and create a space in history for its characters. Furthermore, it depicts their interactions with the society and portrays social realities that shape their lives, at the same time demonstrating how newspapers and magazines – and their popularity – can be both a reflection of a society and a mask it hides behind. Most importantly, these public narratives help to tell a personal story: if popular culture rests upon the notion of the oppressed creating their own meanings out of resources provided by their oppressors, the position of newspaper articles in Iris's story is a resounding example of news employed as popular texts. Within the context of the novel, the clippings are no longer just stories written by her oppressors. They are incorporated to demonstrate how the same events are made to mean different things, but also how traces of silenced voices remain in the discourse, and they are made to serve as a backdrop that allows those voices to be heard. They can therefore be read as official stories that subvert, rather than support, the official story; they are history that challenges and rewrites history.

This rewritten history, however, is not to be trusted either: there are silenced truths in all narratives, including Iris's – as is the case with many Atwood's novels, *The Blind Assassin*'s readers are ultimately left with the realization that, despite all the testimonies unfolding before their eyes, true events, unruly and undisciplined, still escape them. Discovering how the narratives mirror and contradict each other and looking for truth among other truths, readers are invited to piece the public and private narratives together, and in the process re-examine both how histories are constructed and whose stories are allowed to be told. It should therefore come as no surprise *The Blind Assassin* has been described as Atwood's "most writerly" work; it is the reader who is ultimately left in the role of its editor (STROLZ 2009: 288). And while readers may not be led to any reliable histories, what they are offered instead is the "popular pleasure" of disbelief and resistance to official narratives - their pleasure of making meaning. Given that this pleasure, according to Fiske, is an essential feature of news as popular texts, it appears that Atwood's echoes spread in both directions – newspapers clippings echo the other narrative layers, but reverberations of the clippings themselves, with their invitation to investigate and create one's own meanings, are also felt in the novel as a whole.

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NOVINSKI ISEČCI U ROMANU MARGARET ATVUD *SLEPI UBICA*: FIKCIJA, ISTORIJA I POPULARNA KULTURA

Rezime

Ovaj rad se bavi novinskim isečcima kao jednim od narativnih slojeva u delu *Slepi ubica* Margaret Etvud i ispituje njihove uloge i značaj koji imaju u okviru romana. Oslanjajući se na ideju da je *Slepi ubica* roman koji se u velikoj meri bavi problemom beleženja istorije, rad najpre pruža osvrt na mesto koje istorija zauzima u okviru postmodernizma, naglašavajući izazove na koje u postmodernizmu nailazimo pri pokušajima da se povuku jasne granice između istorije i književnosti. Potom se analiziraju vesti kao žanr koji spaja istoriju i popularnu kulturu, u isto vreme odražavajući ukus javnosti i oblikujući niti svakodnevice u ono što će postati istorija. Ovaj teorijski okvir smešta novinske isečke u romanu u tačku preseka književnosti, istorije i popularne kulture, te služi kao polazna tačka za raspravu o različitim aspektima ovih tekstova u romanu. Najpre se posmatra kako članci predstavljaju društvo vremena u kome se odvija roman, kao i uloge koje likovi zauzimaju u okviru tog društva. Imajući u vidu da narativni slojevi *Slepog ubice* često odražavaju jedni druge, nakon toga se ispituju odjeci glavnog narativa u novinskim člancima. Na kraju, posmatrajući isečke kao pseudoistorijske dokumente, rad analizira način na koji oni predstavljaju istoriju, sa konačnim ciljem da se rasvetli kako lična i javna svedočanstva u romanu funkcionišu kao tekstovi iz kojih je izgrađena prošlost. Konačno se u radu zaključuje da novinski tekstovi nisu samo još jedno ogledalo drugih narativnih slojeva, već da se i ključne odlike novinskih tekstova ogledaju u romanu kao celini.

Ključne reči: Slepi ubica, Margaret Etvud, novine, istorija, popularna kultura