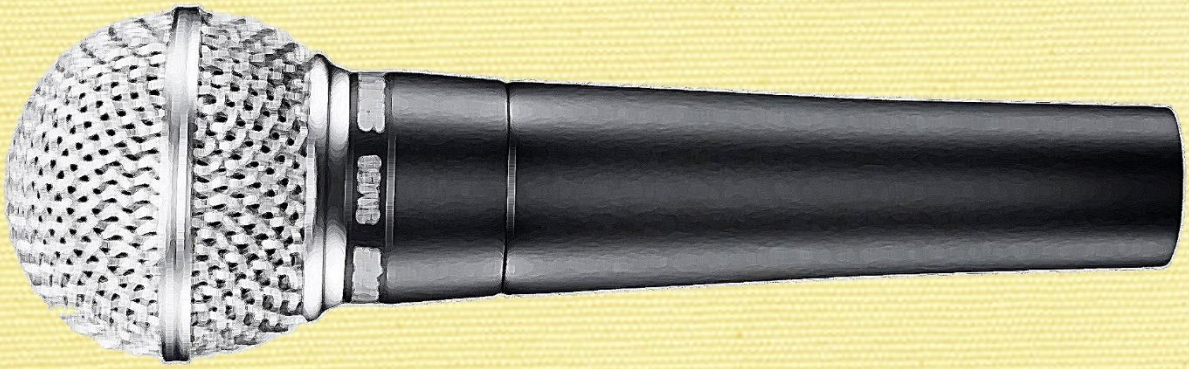

Ceci n'est pas un microphone

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Table of Contents

Editorial
Christine Caruana, Aaron Aquilina: *University of Malta, Lancaster University* 196

Introduction to Deadly Delusions #5
Barry Mauer: *University of Central Florida* 201

Deadly Delusions #5
Barry Mauer: *University of Central Florida* 217

Oral Rhetoric and Digital Media: The Twitter Campaign of the 2016 Presidential Election
Ben Mifsud Joslin: *University of Malta* 258

Towards an Agonistic Account of Democracy, Conflict, and Institutions
Usdin Martínez: *Northwestern University* 272

Thinking the Moment of the Originary: Memory and the Paradoxes of Re-turning
Subro Saha: *Utrecht University* 287

About Our Contributors 300

Editorial

Christine Caruana, Aaron Aquilina

antae, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Dec., 2018), 196-200

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Editorial

Christine Caruana, Aaron Aquilina

University of Malta, Lancaster University

"That's enough. That's enough. That's enough. Excuse me, that's enough."
——Donald Trump[1]

Following the midterm elections in the USA that took place in November this year, Donald Trump's unorthodox behaviour made the news again—this time, ironically, because he wanted the news to go away. Granted, he did not repeal the First Amendment. He did, however, insist that he would take no more questions from CNN's Jim Acosta after the latter questioned whether he thought that his rhetoric had 'demonised' migrants by referring to their arrival as an 'invasion'.[2]

The video evidence of the tussle that ensued between Acosta and the White House aide who attempted to remove the microphone from his hand has since been shared, scrutinised, doctored, and shared again on social media.[3] It has been held up as evidence by people across the political spectrum to demonstrate either how (a) the free press is being restricted and belittled by government, or (b) factions of the media with a malicious agenda keep overstepping the boundaries to make a good leader look bad… depending on who you speak to.

This infamous Acosta press conference contains many of the tropes that have become almost ubiquitous in the age of Trump and Brexit. In some ways, therefore, it functions as a text that is representative of its genre. All the stock characters are in the play: the government official and the journalists; the migrants too, but as with Duncan's murder in *Macbeth*, they "happen" off-stage. As the plot reaches its climax, the dogged persistence of the truth-seeking figure that is Acosta clashes against the might of the authoritarian behind the podium. The threat of violence—the invasion of personal space, the brief push on the opponent's arm—adds to the watchability of the event while increasing the atmosphere of tension. Even the fourth wall is broken in allusion to "views", as Trump scolds Acosta: 'Honestly, I think you should let me run the country. You can run CNN. And if you did it well, your ratings would be much better'.[4] And then, as the online outrage broke out in waves, the White House Press Secretary tweeted an edited video of the event in an attempt to add political spin: neatly, the favoured plot device that is "alternative facts" makes an appearance.[5]

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[1] TIME, 'President Trump Clashes With CNN's Jim Acosta, Other Journalists At Fiery Press Conference | TIME', *Youtube*,wallet (7 November, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmUAb4Ot_Iw>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].
[2] ibid.
[3] Drew Harwell, 'White House shares doctored video to support punishment of journalist Jim Acosta', *The Washington Post*, (8 November, 2018). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/11/08/white-house-shares-doctored-video-support-punishment-journalist-jim-acosta/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.355d6b6b62cf>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].
[4] TIME, 'President Trump Clashes With CNN's Jim Acosta'.
[5] A phrase first popularised by Trump's senior advisor in early 2017. See Marilyn Wedge, 'The Historical Origin of "Alternative Facts"', *Psychology Today*, (23 January, 2017).

As classic literary tradition maintains, however, it is the ending that truly shapes a work and gives it identity: the marriage at the end of a comedy, or the murder at the end of the tragedy. Therefore, while it is tempting to view the subsequent suspension of Jim Acosta's press pass by the White House as the act which seals the character of this particular genre, it is the undecidability of the present (in any era) which advises against this. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes writes that 'this was another of our fears: that life wouldn't be like Literature'; perhaps, however, this is our one big hope.[6] Inhabiting the present is about being mid-sentence, quite simply not knowing what will have been written—and there is power in acknowledging that risk.[7]

We might wish to hold on to the present's undecidability if we are to retain our autonomy, both as individuals and as members of a community. When, back in 2010, one Tunisian street vendor—Mohamed Bouazizi—set himself on fire in the village square, this act hit his country (and indeed the world) like a bolt out of the blue.[8] Prior to that event, the days under the oppressive regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali seemed permanent and unending; however, in hindsight, Bouazizi's act has been identified as the force that set off the Arab Spring. Of course, what came after the protests, the *coups d'états*, and the bloodshed—i.e., the current state of Arab countries in 2018—is a deeply unsatisfactory answer to the initial demand for justice posited by Bouazizi eight years ago. The ending, here too, is a further complication.

It is a small wonder, then, that establishment figures around the world appear increasingly keen to delay endings. By shutting down Acosta at the press conference (and literally "suspending" him soon after), Trump managed to shift the focus of the media conversation from the poor performance of the Republican Party in the midterms to commentary on this incident. As our cover image nod to René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* suggests, things are not always as innocent as they seem—perhaps even less than they were in Magritte's time. While Magritte's original painting prompted us to question the relationship between "the real" and the representations of "the real", now it is the real itself that is called into question. A microphone is never merely a technological tool but a symbol of control over public discourse—the power to wield and plan the agenda. Even the general rhetoric used by politicians may be viewed as a tactic of postponement: meaningless slogans like the oft-satirised 'Make America Great Again' (which won Trump the 2016 elections) is an example of this.[9] Across the pond, empty tautological phrases like 'Brexit means Brexit'[10] or the

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/suffer-the-children/201701/the-historical-origin-alternative-facts>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].

[6] Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2011), p. 16.

[7] It has been ruled that Acosta is to be given back his press pass. Does this mean that this was an isolated incident, one which has ended, and with which we should therefore no longer concern ourselves? Now past, what does this incident say about the undecidability of the present, or the ending *à-venir* in the *avenir*? See Ben Riley-Smith, 'Judge tells White House to give CNN's Jim Acosta his pass back', *The Telegraph*, (16 November 2018). <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/16/judge-tells-white-house-give-cnns-jim-acosta-pass-back/>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].

[8] Brian Whitaker, 'How a man setting fire to himself sparked an uprising in Tunisia', *The Guardian*, (28 December, 2010). <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/28/tunisia-ben-ali>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].

[9] Taylor Kate Brown, 'Why they love Trump: "He'll Make America great again"', *BBC*, (10 June, 2016). <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/election-us-2016-36495728/why-they-love-trump-he-ll-make-america-great-again>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].

[10] RT UK, '"Brexit means Brexit" – May', *Youtube*, (11 July, 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMek1okqphs>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].

perplexing pleas to the British public to 'believe in Brexit'[11] seek to discourage intellectual probing through circular logic. These are all different ways of saying, like Trump to Acosta: 'That's enough. That's enough. That's enough. Excuse me, that's enough'. This is how politicians buy time, and how the all-important ending—time and time again—gets delayed.

Barry Mauer (University of Central Florida) is one such thinker of endings both deferred and seemingly inevitable. His *Deadly Delusions* series, conceived in 2013 as a 'response to the increasingly extreme and dangerous right-wing propaganda' observed over the past few decades, reads the contemporary American political status in terms of its entanglement with mass media. In response to mass disinformation campaigns, the idea of irrationality, and the eliminationist abuse of power in denying one the microphone, Mauer's cut-up 'punk do-it-yourself aesthetic' represents the situation in a unique if troubling light. Issue #5 of the comic series ('Pictures in our Heads', published in this issue following an introductory contextualisation) ranges from the concepts of world-building, representationality and framing, to propaganda and meta-cognition, to neutrality, dismediation, and the figure of Trump. Mauer attempts to understand the right-wing worldview and its (re)production, 'sold to [right-wing individuals] every day on Fox News and Breitbart, portray[ing] the world as filled with evil liberals, perverted gay people, terrorist refugees, and subversive atheists: in other words, monsters to be killed'. In itself, this can be one potential act of resistance, a creative method that hinges not on escapism but on engagement.

Continuing in this vein of mass media and its use by, specifically, American politicians, Ben Mifsud Joslin's (University of Malta) article looks at the 2016 election campaign and its manifestations on Twitter. Analysing the rhetoric of Clinton's and Trump's online campaigns—and rhetoric, with its long history, is never as archaic as one might first assume—Mifsud Joslin spans the interesting leap between the oral tradition and its translation, or lack thereof, into the digital sphere. What does it mean to think of rhetoric in this way, as multimodal? What aspects of orality can or are retained when transposed into tweets of less than 140 characters? Despite the rhetorical novelties of Netspeak, GIFs, typos, the audio-visual, and Emphasis Through Capitalisation, Mifsud Joslin argues, it is only through the historical—initially Aristotelian—understanding of rhetoric that one may understand its contemporary affects and evolutions. There is 'undeniable continuity with classical conceptions of rhetoric' when looking at the candidates' Twitter campaigns, but it is through this 'new state of orality,' he writes, that there emerge 'new processes through which delivery becomes natural'.

Moving from the contemporary particularities with which Mauer and Mifsud Joslin are engaged and on to the more general, one reads Usdin Martínez (Northwestern University) propose an agonistic account of the notion of democracy that, despite its ubiquitous influence, remains today 'an empty, contested and re-appropriated signifier for both defenders and critics of contemporary society'. In the agonistic account, whereby conflict is situated not as an external threat to democracy but rather at its centre, Martínez works with various thinkers (Arendt, Lefort, Abensour, and Rancière among others) to rethink the place of conflict and the complex dynamics of institutional power. His essay, therefore, ranges from the tripartite relation between law, identity, and violence, to sociality and social ontologies, to the possibilities, and very notion, of political action—which is perhaps best understood as 'a

[11] The Telegraph, 'Theresa May: You can only deliver Brexit if you believe in Brexit', *Youtube*, (1 June, 2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeKmNBqeslA>. [Accessed 17 November 2018].

dynamic reconfiguration of the common world' and not 'as a struggle for power or domination'. From Martínez's wider perspective on liberalism, insurrection, resistance, institutionality, and action, one has at hand, then, not only a better understanding of the system in which most of us eat our daily bread, but also a heightened awareness of what it means to attempt to change this; after all, as he writes, 'the greatest danger for insurrection would be the fact that it actually institutes something'.

Seemingly unrelated, bringing up the rear in an issue on politics, media, language, and power, is an article by Subro Saha (Utrecht University) on memory and the (re-)thinking of the originary. It is different from the preceding essays in both tone and theme, seeing as how Saha primarily deals with the interrelations of time and memory as they emerge from the tensions and connections between Heidegger and Bergson's writings, ranging from interpretations of Aristotle's concepts on time to the dislocation and undecidability of thinking the "present" *in* the "present". It is quickly apparent why, however, Saha's contribution is a vital include in this issue. After all, when it comes to the power of wielding (what is on) the agenda—akin to the wielding of the microphone—this is very often equivalent to the power of shaping history, its narration, and its reception. In the theatrics of political sociality, it is often distraction and forgetfulness that are weaponised, and thus the question of how to think time in terms of time, and how to think memory at all, becomes crucial. After all, when conceiving alternates to dichotomies of right- and left-wing, or alternate societies, democracies, utopias and heterotopias, or alternate ways of holding up the microphone at the mouth of governmentality and institutional power, it is really an alternate *time* one thinks of. As Saha writes, '[a]ny attempt to re-think the concept of turning and memory thus calls for such continuous negotiation between the specificities that constitutes the thinking of originary and the generalities shaping the thinking of alterity'.

Is there in front of us, then, an alternate ending to be gleaned from our present political situation, where alterity is foreign but alternative facts are home? With what sense of an ending—going not only through Barnes but also, for instance, Frank Kermode[12]—is one left when reading of disinformation, censorship, rhetoric, conflict, and their memory?

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[12] Kermode speaks of our time as one in relation to a future, and of the narratorial fiction involved in that connection; the creation of a plot, and even, at least seemingly in these times, of losing the plot entirely. See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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