

**Straight talking honest politics: Rhetorical style and ethos  
in the mediated politics of metamodernity**

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## Contemporary Media Stylistics Chapter Submission

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Bionote	Sam Browse is a senior lecturer in English Language at Sheffield Hallam University. He is the author of <i>Cognitive Rhetoric: The Cognitive Poetics of Political Discourse</i> (2018, John Benjamins). His work explores the stylistics of political discourse and can be divided into two main areas of activity: analysing the discourse of post-truth and the language of the British left, and, more broadly, the development of audience or reader-centred approaches to political text and talk.
Chapter Title	Straight talking honest politics: rhetorical style and ethos in the mediated politics of metamodernity

### Abstract

The leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, is known for his ‘straight talking, honest politics’ (indeed, this was the slogan for his first leadership campaign). This chapter examines the rhetorical construction of authenticity in three videos taken from his official *YouTube* channel.

Some journalists (e.g. Toynbee, 2016) have suggested that the socialist politician’s leadership of the party is symptomatic of the new ‘post-truth’ politics, a political culture in which the rhetorical appeals from *ethos* and *pathos* trump those from *logos* (Browse, 2017: 168). Scholars have pointed to the effect of online media in accelerating this recalibration of what constitutes legitimate argument (Harsin, 2015). This chapter argues that while the term ‘post-truth’ does capture a shift in the kinds of legitimacy claims made by contemporary

politicians, it does not adequately explain their causes. Here, they are instead accounted for within the theoretical framework of ‘metamodernism’, which describes the renewed emphasis on “depth” and authenticity in the cultural and political sphere resulting from the economic, political and environmental crises of the 2000s (see van den Akker et al, 2017).

Using critical stylistics (Jeffries, 2010) in combination with Chatman’s (1990) notion of the ‘cinematic narrator’, the analyses investigate how the Labour leader and his party’s appeal to authenticity are styled in the videos. Three strategies are identified – Corbyn’s use of populist rhetoric, his allocentric curation of “ordinary” people’s experiences, and the curation of his *ethos* by others – and these are linked to the renewed sense of historicity, depth and affect that characterise metamodernity. The chapter therefore offers a critical stylistic reading of the socialist politician’s performance of authenticity which is situated with respect to the contemporary metamodern political and media context.

## **Straight talking honest politics: rhetorical style and *ethos* in the mediated politics of metamodernity**

### **1. Introduction**

In 2015, *The Guardian* journalist, John Harris, was standing outside a community centre in the English town of Luton interviewing a woman who had just attended a political rally. She said, ‘after hearing that tonight, he comes across so genuine and just real... I totally believed Jeremy Corbyn’ (Guardian, 2015). Following an unexpected defeat in the 2015 election, the British Labour Party found itself in the midst of selecting a new leader and Corbyn, the left-wing veteran and perennial backbencher, was the unlikely frontrunner. Not only did he go on to win the contest with 59.5% of the vote, but months later increased his overall majority to 62% following a second leadership challenge prompted by a rebellion of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

The sentiments expressed by the woman at the rally are shared not only by Corbyn’s political allies, but his opponents. When asked whether he thought electors would vote for the left-winger, Andy Burnham – a defeated rival for the leadership – said:

Well, we'll have to see won't we, but, you know, what they do want is politicians of conviction, people who say what they mean. They are sick to death of people coming on looking like they're reading off a script. Well, that's clearly not Jeremy Corbyn.

(BBC, 2015)

The politician's *ethos* is certainly a salient part of his appeal. Indeed, 'straight talking honest politics' was the slogan for his first leadership campaign. The focus on the man has led some to suggest that his supporters are more like fans (Allington, 2017), while more vitriolic commentators have bemoaned the contemporary Labour Party's 'cult of Corbyn' (Cohen, 2017). This depiction of the irrational Corbyn cultist is sometimes linked to the discourse of "post-truth" politics. For example, in an article for *The Guardian*, after enumerating all the ways in which she feels the new Labour leader is unelectable, Polly Toynbee describes her experiences of talking to Labour members at the party conference:

In one fraught conversation after another, I try all this on Corbyn believers but to no avail. No compromise, blocked ears, total denial of electoral facts, a *post-truth* conviction. You can hear this non-meeting of minds everywhere at this conference, a shutter of incomprehension dividing the two sides. "But we can convince them! People will listen!" They do think Corbyn will be the next prime minister, because conviction moves mountains. These are likable people, and I envy their certainty – the way you can envy the religious their delusions.

(Toynbee, 2016, my emphasis)

The first use of the term 'post-truth' is often traced back to Keyes' (2004) *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. The book argued that the value of truth in American society and culture is in decline. In a 2010 article for the environmental news and opinion website, *Grist*, David Roberts repurposed the concept, using it to describe 'a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)'. Since then, journalistic writing has proliferated on the issue (book-length recent examples include, Ball 2017; D'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017; and McIntyre, 2018). This has triggered further discussion of the term in a variety of different academic contexts including anthropology (Mair, 2017), communication (Hannan, 2018) and cultural studies (Harsin, 2015, 2018), philosophy (Tallis, 2016), cognitive psychology (Lewandowsky et al, 2017; Munoz, 2017),

politics (Fish, 2016) and stylistics (Browse, 2017). Journalistic and academic writing on the subject proceed from very similar premises. Both converge on two central claims relating respectively to the production and reception of political discourse.

The first is that the rhetorical practices of mainstream politicians have changed for the worse. Post-truth rhetoric represents the unwelcome triumph of appeals to *ethos* and *pathos* over *logos*; the archetypal post-truth politician is anti-establishment, plain-speaking, gutsy and authentic (Browse, 2017: 168). These rhetorical shifts are not only a matter of style, but of content. Sismondo (2017: 3) argues that according to ‘the rules of the game in democratic contexts, politicians generally only bend the truth’; now, though, we have entered an epoch in which public figures tell outright lies, make claims that cannot be verified, or promises that cannot feasibly be kept.

The second claim is that not only politicians, but their audiences, have come to value their emotions and sense of identity over rational debate and “facts”. This is often accompanied by arguments relating to the proliferation of “fake news”, the decline and erosion of trust in traditional media institutions, and the pernicious effects of social media (see especially Hannan, 2017, on the latter). One of the key causes of this shift is said to be the digitally mediated nature of contemporary political discourse (Harsin, 2006: 87; 2015). For instance, the distribution and circulation of fake news is aided by the ‘attention economy’ of the internet and the predictive analytics that produce social media content (Harsin, 2015: 330). These algorithmic processes create so-called “filter bubbles” – social-media echo-chambers in which users are provided with content based on what they have previously read or shared (Pariser, 2011). The result is to reinforce already held beliefs and opinions, entrench ideological divisions, and accelerate the circulation of fake news stories (although see Flaxman et al, 2016; Kelly Garrett, 2009; Prior, 2013). Lewandowsky et al (2017: 360) outline the social consequences of this dynamic, arguing that ‘we are now facing a situation in which a large share of the populace is living in an epistemic space that has abandoned conventional criteria of evidence, internal consistency, and fact-seeking’. Political realities are instead defined by the self-reinforcing circulation of content in social networks that are hermetically sealed from rival ideological perspectives. Thus, Toynbee describes ‘a shutter of incomprehension dividing the two sides’ and the ‘no compromise, blocked ears, total denial of electoral facts [and] post-truth conviction’ of Jeremy Corbyn supporters.

This chapter takes a critical stylistic perspective on political discourse (see Browse, 2018; Jeffries, 2010), the issues raised by the post-truth critique and what they mean for an analysis of Corbyn's rhetorical style. 'Critical' in this context means 'making visible the interconnectedness of things' (Fairclough, 1985: 747) – tracing the dialectical relationships between individual interactions, the institutions in which those interactions take place, and the overarching social formations in which those institutions are located (Fairclough, 1985: 747-748). Whilst an analysis of technological infrastructure is an important part of this, the trends in the production and reception of political discourse outlined above should not be divorced from their wider social, economic and political context. In this chapter, I describe this wider context through the lens of metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010, 2015; and van den Akker et al, 2017), situating the rhetorical performances of Corbyn, and the party that he leads, within this broader heuristic. In Section 2, following van den Akker et al (2017), I outline the key features of metamodernity. Section 3 describes the data used to exemplify the metamodern trends in Corbyn's rhetorical performances – three videos from his public *YouTube* channel – alongside the stylistic frameworks employed to operationalise this metamodern perspective in the analyses of the online broadcasts. Section 4 examines the way that the Labour leader uses a populist rhetorical style to perform authenticity in the videos, and Section 5 investigates how this left populism involves curating the apparently authentic experiences of British electors for his viewers in order to make tacit appeals to his *ethos*. The chapter concludes by discussing the relationship of these metamodern rhetorical strategies to the journalistic and academic discourse on 'post-truth'.

## **2. Metamodernity: The 'revenge' of history and return of depth and affect**

'Metamodernism' is a term primarily associated with cultural criticism (see, for example Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010, 2015; and van den Akker et al, 2017), although it has also been used in discussion of contemporary political rhetoric (see Browse, 2017).

Following Raymond Williams (1977), van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017) describe metamodernism as a 'structure of feeling' – a historically situated and socially shared affective state or "mood" that is manifest in the cultural production of the era. They suggest that 'historically, metamodernism is tied to a moment after postmodernism in the sense that it has developed from and displaces postmodernism as the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies' (van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017: 11). Using Frederic Jameson's (1991) tripartite conceptualisation of postmodernism as a 'cultural dominant', they describe

the metamodern structure of feeling along three axes – historicity, depth and affect – using these descriptors to contrast post- and metamodernity.

## 2.1 Historicity: the revenge of history

The first dimension of van den Akker et al's (2017) Jameson-inspired theorisation of metamodernity is historicity. After the defeat of communism, Francis Fukuyama (1989) famously proclaimed 'the end of history' – the idea that major questions about how to organise society had been settled with the triumph of capitalist liberal democracy. Politically, not only would the victory of the West have consequences for revolutionary Marxists, it would also result in a global reconfiguration of the centre-left in the form of 'Third Way' social democracy. The particular expression of this global movement in Britain – the context relevant to my analysis of Corbynite rhetoric – was Tony Blair's New Labour, which combined a liberal attitude to matters of race, gender and sexuality, an embrace of market reforms in the provision of public services, and an ever closer alignment of British foreign policy interests with the US State Department (the last of these culminating in Blair's strident support for the war in Iraq). Whilst the New Labour government delivered downward redistribution of wealth in the form of tax credits, in its essentials it continued the pro-market reforms of the previous Conservative governments (Blackburn, 2018). Indeed, on the occasion of Thatcher's death, Blair (2013) himself said 'I always thought my job was to build on some of the things she had done rather than reverse them'. Thus, 'the end of history' signified the hegemony of neoliberal ideology across the political spectrum. Gordon Brown, chancellor for the New Labour government, even claimed to have vanquished the rhythm of up- and downturns that are fundamental to the economic cycle, repeatedly proclaiming an end to "boom and bust". It was this sense of having reached a cultural, political and economic endpoint that marked the – hubristic – postmodern structure of feeling.

Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 12) argue that there has been a gradual transition from this perspective, starting in the late 90s at around the time of the Seattle demonstrations against globalisation, continuing through the 2000s, and finishing at the end of the decade. This new metamodern cultural *sens* 'reboots' the progress of history (van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017: 2). The 2007/8 economic crash, the relative decline of US-led imperialism, the rise of China predicated on an alternative social and economic model, and the impending global environmental crisis, all point to significant structural failures in Western-style capitalism. However, unlike the Cold War, which entailed an ideological

competition resulting in only one of two possible outcomes (the victory of East or West), what happens next is now very much up for debate. It is this which causes van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 2) to suggest that we face a “bend” in the road ahead beyond which we cannot see. Thus the new metamodern structure of feeling involves a felt sense of progress, but with no corresponding totalising ideological perspective through which it might be rationalised.

The rebooting of history is more evocatively described by Corbyn’s director of communications, Seumas Milne (2012), as its ‘revenge’. Although inequality widened, the protracted economic upturn of the 2000s did allow successive Labour governments to advance the living standards of the majority whilst – as one British politician put it – being ‘intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich’ (Mandelson, 1999). The global economic crash of 2007/8 brought the “long boom” of the previous decade to an abrupt and dramatic end. Under pressure to adopt a fiscally ‘responsible’ economic policy from the opposition Conservative Party, the Labour Party, now led by Gordon Brown, opted to pursue its own weaker version of austerity and duly lost the 2010 general election. Brown’s successor, Ed Miliband, continued in this vein, pledging not to exceed the overall Conservative Party spending envelope. While Miliband presided over a small reversal in Labour’s electoral fortunes, he also failed to secure a general election victory. It was in the aftermath of this defeat that Corbyn took the reins of the party. A long-time backbencher and lieutenant of the former leader of the Labour left, Tony Benn, he had resisted the Party’s embrace of Third Way politics since their inception. As chair of the Stop the War Coalition, he was one of the leaders of the British movement against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also led vocal opposition to the 2010-2015 Conservative-led coalition government’s austerity policies, speaking on numerous marches and demonstrations. His election to the leadership of the Labour Party therefore represented a decisive break with the political perspective which had dominated for the previous twenty years.

## 2.2. The Return of depth and affect

The ‘revenge’ or ‘return’ of history has had consequences for contemporary aesthetics. This has resulted in the closely entangled second and third lines of difference between post- and metamodernity. They relate to the status of affect in cultural production, and the linked notions of depth and surface. The modernist sense of historical progression brought with it a corresponding impetus for individual self-realisation and improvement. High modernism,



Jameson (1991: 12) suggests, thus involved the ‘desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling’. Artwork from this period invites us to look beyond the surface of the canvas to an expressive reality behind it. For instance, Van Gogh’s vivid depiction of peasant shoes is evocative of a lived experience beyond the picture with which we are invited to identify or empathise.

Conversely, Jameson (1991: 15) suggests that the dissolution of a centred, modernist self in the ‘organisational bureaucracy’ of late capitalism has engendered a depthless, self-referential quality in postmodern art. Whereas Van Gogh gestures towards something outside the picture frame, in Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, the assorted footwear is stripped from its real world context, rendered in block colours on a black canvas like a colour photocopy or, as Gibbons (2017: 83) suggests, a photographic negative. The image consequently ‘no longer speaks to us with the immediacy of Van Gogh’s footgear’ (Jameson, 1991: 8). Jameson (1991: 10) calls this rejection of any gesture towards an external emotional realm ‘the waning of affect’ in postmodern cultural production.

The new metamodern structure of feeling, on the other hand, heralds the return of affect and depth in culture. If the high-modernist project endeavoured to communicate an interior subjectivity and affectivity which postmodernism rejected, this return ‘should be understood as *a desperate but wishful attempt* to think, feel and perceive historically, spatially and corporeally’ (Vermeulen, 2017: 149, my emphasis). The contemporary orientation to affect and depth, then, is governed by two contradictory impulses: the (‘desperate but wishful’) gesture towards an emotional reality beyond a surface, and ambivalence about whether such a deeper reality exists. This oscillation is captured in Vermeulen’s (2015, 2017) concept of ‘depthiness’:

Depthiness... is the establishment of depth not as a shared epistemological reality but as one among many personally performed (im)possibilities – which is, to be sure, not to say they cannot be shared, but rather that they are by no means necessarily shared.

(Vermeulen, 2017: 149)

The emphasis, here, is not on the reality beyond the surface performance, but on the performance itself; that is, what matters is that depth is affected, even if the emotional reality being gestured towards is illusory.

This depthiness arguably finds expression in contemporary patterns of consumption. Postmodernist art had celebrated Baudrillard's (1983) 'procession of simulacra' – the mass production of commodities which were all copies of copies, having no original (Warhol's paintings of Campbell's soup tins are the more famous examples). In contrast, metamodernity has brought with it an 'artisanal turn' (van Tuinen, 2017) in which the history of the commodity – the craftwork that has gone into making it – runs at a premium. This is particularly pronounced in the food industry, as witnessed in the booming sales of craft beers, for example (so, according to the Brewer's Association [2017], last year in the US sales grew by 5% - more than any other type of beer). Even the fast-food colossus, McDonalds, is running adverts explaining the origins of the beef used in their burgers (they are '100% British and Irish Beef', [McDonalds, 2016]). This artisan culture of consumption has perhaps given rise to the contemporary social stereotype of "the hipster" – a person whose purchasing patterns are such that they always own the most authentic products bought from the most skilled producers. As in postmodernism, identity is indexed through consumer choices, but the choices themselves are saturated with an artisan *ethos* which conveys upon the consumer a sense of depthiness. Thus, the hipster performs depth by curating a set of commodity-artefacts that are imbued with historicity and authenticity. In Section 5, I explore the relationship between curation and authenticity in greater depth insofar as it pertains to Corbyn's rhetorical style.

### **3. Analysing metamodern style in videos from Jeremy Corbyn's *YouTube* Channel**

The metamodern conceptual framework outlined above provides a theoretical prism through which to view the political and economic context of Corbynite political discourse (Milne's [2012] 'revenge of history'), and the rhetorical emphasis on the Labour leader's *ethos* highlighted in the introduction of this chapter (the return of depth and affect in contemporary cultural production and new forms of curated authenticity this has engendered). The following sections apply these concepts to an analysis of three videos from the socialist politician's personal *YouTube* channel. The videos were chosen because they are some of the most viewed by visitors to the channel. It is therefore reasonable to expect that these play an important role in the construction of Corbyn's seemingly authentic persona.

The first analysis investigates the Labour leader's rhetorical construction of authenticity with respect to the renewed sense of historicity characterising the contemporary

metamodern *zeitgeist* (see Section 2.1, above). Part of the ‘revenge of history’ described by Milne (2012) is Corbyn’s insurgent left-wing anti-austerity politics – a politics which pits itself against the mainstream political perspective of the previous three decades. Corbynism can thus be seen as a form of left populism which involves the rhetorical construction of the people versus the elite (Schoor, 2017). Indeed, this rhetorical strategy is perhaps best exemplified in the Labour campaign slogan, ‘for the many, not the few’. The analysis of the first video outlines the stylistic means by which the socialist politician creates this rhetorical division and the tacit appeal to his *ethos* it involves. The approach taken is eclectic and holistic (Carter and Stockwell, 2008: 300, see also Jeffries, 2000) insofar as it examines how a number of different linguistic features are combined to create the populist style of the video. These include the Labour leader’s pronominal choices, his use of naming strategies (Jeffries, 2010), verbs with negative prosody, modality (Simpson, 1993), grammatical ambiguity, and impoliteness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1981). The second and third analyses examine the concept of ‘curated authenticity’ (see Section 2.2, above) in the party leader’s videos. To operationalise this concept, I focus on the visual and musical elements of the videos using Chatman’s (1990) notion of the cinematic narrator. To avoid lengthy exposition, here, I provide a more detailed exposition of Chatman’s (1990) approach in Section 5.1, below. The analyses, then, provide an account of both the linguistic, visual and auditory strategies used in the videos to construct Corbyn’s rhetorical appeal to authenticity.

#### **4. Corbyn, populism and the revenge of history**

A good example of the left populism characterising the revenge of history is a video broadcast from Corbyn’s *YouTube* channel called ‘Bankers like Morgan Stanley should not run our country’. The video, released on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2017, was issued in response to a press release by the banking giant named in its title. It has been viewed just under 32,000 times. The bank had suggested that a Corbyn-led government would be a worse threat to business than Britain leaving the EU. The video featured a head and shoulders shot of Corbyn standing in what appears to be his parliamentary office. This is the transcript of what he says:

Bankers like Morgan Stanley should not run our country but they think they do because the party they fund and protects their interests, the Conservative Party, is in Downing Street. That’s why they want to keep the Tories there, because their rigged economy and their tax cuts for the richest work for them. These are the same speculators and gamblers who crashed our economy in 2008 and then we had to bail

them out. Their greed plunged the world into crisis and we're still paying the price. Because the Tories used the aftermath of the financial crisis to push through unnecessary and deeply damaging austerity. That's meant a crisis in our public services, falling wages and the longest decline in living standards for over 60 years. Nurses, teachers, shop workers, builders, well, just about everyone is finding it hard to get by, while Morgan Stanley's CEO paid himself £21.5 million last year and UK banks paid out £15 billion in bonuses. Labour is a growing movement of well over half a million members and a government in waiting that will work for the many. So when they say we're a threat, they're right. We're a threat to a damaging and failed system that's rigged for the few.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the video is the penultimate line 'so when they say we're a threat, they're right'. To avoid a politically damaging row with a major bank, one might expect an attempt to placate Morgan Stanley and allay their fears. In their discussion of face threatening acts (FTAs), Brown and Levinson (1981: 61) suggest 'it is in general in every participant's best interest to maintain each other's face' because one FTA usually engenders another. This is an unusual pragmatic situation because mitigating Morgan Stanley's initial FTA would itself involve a follow-up FTA in which the Labour Party disagreed with the bankers' assessment. This could of course be diminished with a politeness strategy (for example, 'we understand Morgan Stanley's concerns, but rest assured the Labour Party is committed to creating a strong economy which is good for British business'). Instead, Corbyn unusually accepts the initial FTA, agreeing with the banking giant's assertion that Labour is a threat. The result is a bald, on-record FTA (Brown and Levinson, 1981: 69) which is amplified given the context – British politicians do not usually pick fights with major multinational investment banks. It is little wonder, then, that the Labour leader's retort was itself headline news.

The aggressive response to the bank's attack on Labour economic policy is legitimised with a populist rhetorical style (see Schoor, 2017) that pits 'the many' against an elite 'few'. Corbyn constructs an outgroup consisting of bankers and the Conservative Party, referring to this group with the third person plural pronoun 'they' throughout the short statement, alongside disparaging naming strategies ('speculators and gamblers') and possessive pronouns which all pre-modify noun phrases with negative prosody ('their interests', 'their rigged economy', 'their tax cuts for the richest', 'their greed'). The

government and bankers are even conflated with a grammatical ambiguity; ‘they want to keep the Tories there, because their rigged economy and their tax cuts for the richest work for them’. The possessive ‘their’ in ‘their rigged economy’ and ‘their tax cuts for the richest’ could be ambiguously attributed to either ‘the Tories’ or the bankers, cementing the rhetorically constructed relationship between the two. This outgroup is also the subject of several dramatic and physically aggressive verbs (‘plunged’, ‘crashed’, ‘pushed through’), which all further serve to negatively portray bankers and the Conservatives. In the case of ‘pushed through’, this evaluation is emphasised through negative premodification of what the government have supported, ‘*unnecessary* and *deeply damaging* austerity’.

The ‘they’ of the bankers and the Conservative Party is juxtaposed with a ‘we’ that includes people such as ‘Nurses, teachers, shop workers, builders’, ‘just about everyone’, ‘the many’ and, later in the video, the Labour Party itself. The construction of this group is achieved through the use of the first person plural pronoun, ‘we’ (‘we had to bail them out’, ‘we’re still paying the price’) and through possessive pronouns (‘our country’, ‘our economy’, ‘our public services’). The verbs associated with ‘we’ are both modally shaded (Simpson, 1993). ‘Had’ is a deontic modal verb and therefore signals obligation. Less straightforwardly, ‘paying the price’, echoes a register of moral accounting – it suggests that something should or should not have been done in the past and that someone is suffering the consequences of that action now, in the present. As such, it has a deontic modal quality. The effect of both verbs is to create a sense in which the positively evaluated ‘we’ is imposed upon by the negatively evaluated outgroup – that it has been forced or obliged to do something it otherwise would not have done. This counterpoising of the government and the bankers with the interests of ‘the many’ is further thrown into relief by the following: ‘Nurses, teachers, shop workers, builders, well, just about everyone is finding it hard to get by, while Morgan Stanley’s CEO paid himself £21.5 million last year and UK banks paid out £15 billion in bonuses’. Here, a number of “ordinary” groups of people are listed on the basis of their profession. Corbyn finishes this list with the discourse marker ‘well’ – an affected disfluency, given the pre-prepared nature of the speech – followed by the final item ‘just about everyone’. This achieves two things. First, the list contributes to the construction of a ‘we’ which includes everyone except bankers and the government. Second, the use of the discourse marker, alongside the imprecise qualifier ‘just about’ and the colloquial verb phrase ‘getting by’, creates an informal persona for the Labour leader. The listing, then, further constructs an in-group of ordinary people to whom Corbyn, with his casually styled speech,

belongs. This group is contrasted with the CEO of Morgan Stanley in what Jeffries (2010: 58) calls an ‘explicit opposition’, signalled by the subordinating conjunction ‘while’, thus further serving to emphasise the outgroup of elite bankers who profit while everyone else struggles.

Towards the end of the statement, the party leader introduces a new ‘we’, the referent of which is the Labour Party. Like the previous in-group, this new ‘we’ is also opposed to the ‘rigged’ system and is defined in opposition to the same ‘they’ – the Conservative Party and bankers – that feature throughout the speech. The interests of the Labour Party and ‘the many’ (for whom Labour are said to work) are consequently aligned. Far from being undesirable, then, Corbyn’s ‘threat’ to Morgan Stanley is repositioned as a positive feature of his political platform. In threatening the banks, he articulates – in populist fashion – the interests of the in-group of ordinary people which he has rhetorically constructed throughout the speech.

As was suggested in the introduction, part of Jeremy Corbyn’s appeal is said to be his authentic persona. Throughout the video, and as the stylistic analysis above has detailed, the Labour leader consistently positions himself as part of the in-group of ordinary people whose interests clash with those of the banking sector. However, authenticity in the video is not only performed through this rhetorical positioning. Corbyn’s acceptance that he is, in fact, a threat to the banks – his refusal to attempt to play down the FTA issued by Morgan Stanley – is perhaps the greatest index of the ‘straight-talking honest politics’ for which he is said to stand. Rather than take the face-saving line of least resistance by denying the bank’s assertions, he instead uses the criticism to sharpen the populist division between elites and ordinary people. That is, his intentionally face-threatening response to the banking multinational can itself be interpreted as an appeal to his authentic *ethos*.

Whilst the Labour leader’s riposte to Morgan Stanley is unusually forceful, he is not the only modern mainstream British politician to have relied upon populism. As Fairclough (2000: 115) argues, Tony Blair would often invoke ‘a mythical narrative... of how the leader at the moment of assuming leadership enters into a mystical communion with the people’ (Fairclough, 2000: 115). Stylistically, this would usually involve the former Prime Minister acting as the sensor and electors’ thoughts or feelings the phenomena in a mental process, for example ‘I *sense* that the British people demand...’, ‘I could *sense* confidence returning’, or ‘you *know* what I want’ (see Fairclough, 2000: 115). Notably, though, Blair’s populism was egocentric – he intuited the wishes of the struggling *demos* on the basis of his own political

and emotional intelligence. Conversely, rather than an ego who is attuned to the internal mental life of a third party, Corbyn's populism involves positioning himself with a particular constituency of electors (in the video discussed above, 'nurses, teachers, shop workers, builders'); he is part of the 'we' for whom he speaks. Stylistically, this means that unlike Blair he rarely uses the first person pronoun, and even actively avoids speaking about himself (see Browse, 2017, for further discussion). Although both Labour leaders use a populist rhetorical strategy, then, this is a key difference in how their populisms are styled. To examine it further, the next section explores the concept of curated authenticity and the way in which it might usefully describe the rhetorical appeal to Corbyn's *ethos*.

## 5. Curating the authentic in political discourse

Jeremy Corbyn is obviously *not* a hipster, but his own appeal to authenticity arguably works in a similar manner to these patterns of consumption outlined in Section 2.2. Rather than directly appeal to his own *ethos*, 'depthiness' (Vermeulen, 2015, 2017) is achieved through the mobilisation of other people's authentic experiences. A good example of this is his approach to Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), for which he will often use apparently crowd-sourced questions rather than those he has devised himself. The rhetorical effect of this is paradoxical. On the one hand, in the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate, it means that the rhetorical appeal from *ethos* is no longer his but the seemingly ordinary member of the public whose question he has selected (which has obvious practical advantages in a debate). On the other, the act of self-effacement – choosing to ask someone else's question rather than his own – is itself a tacit appeal to the populist integrity of the Labour politician (Browse, 2017: 180-181). Indeed, to return to the comparison with other Labour leaders, whereas Blair might emote or utilise aspects of his own personal biography to construct a sincere, genuine public persona (Fairclough, 2000; Pearce, 2013), Corbyn tends to actively avoid doing so (Browse, 2017: 178-9). I call the Labour leader's indirect appeal to *ethos* 'curated authenticity' because it derives from his expert ability to curate these experiences and efface his own. The word 'curate' is a better descriptor than, say, 'present' or 'represent', as it captures the way in which Corbyn not only relays the everyday struggles of electors, but situates them within a wider populist political narrative. For example, in the case of PMQs, the questions are integrated into a broader political attack on the Prime Minister which coheres with Labour Party policy. Just as the selection and curation of artisan commodities indexes "depthiness" in contemporary cultures of consumption, implicitly validating the

insight and expertise of the curator, so too does the selection and curation of questions in PMQs. Thus, the left-wing politician's rhetorical style not only reflects the 'revenge of history' in the populist division it makes between the people and elites, it also resonates with the metamodern performance of depth. The following analyses of two videos from Corbyn's *YouTube* channel demonstrate this approach to "doing" authenticity. The first analysis investigates how the experiences of others are curated in order to construct a rhetorical depthiness in Labour election campaigning, and the second the way in which Corbyn is the subject of curation by others.

### 5.1 Corbyn as the curator of the people's experiences

*YouTube* has a facility for 'pinning' videos to a profile. This means that they appear on the homepage of the *YouTube* user. The pinned video on Corbyn's profile is called 'For the many, not the few' and, at the time of writing, has been viewed just under 60,000 times. One of the most noteworthy features of the broadcast is that it includes no spoken language. Rather than its verbal elements, then, what makes it interesting from the perspective of examining how Corbyn and the Labour Party curate the experiences of other people is its use of cinematic narration (Chatman, 1990). Chatman (1990: 133-134) describes the cinematic narrator as follows: 'films, in my view, are always presented – mostly and often exclusively shown, but sometimes partially told – by a narrator or narrators. The overall agent that does the showing, I would call the cinematic narrator'. He outlines the semiotic means by which cinematic narrators 'show' the film in a diagram reproduced in Figure 1.

Starting at the bottom of the diagram, in the visual channel, the nature of the images the viewer sees varies throughout the 1 minute and 45 second video. Rather than telling an explicit narrative, the overall broadcast is more like a montage of images, the majority of which represent people and landscapes in both urban and countryside settings – from fields of wheat and rural villages, to seaside towns, inner-city London suburbs, and commercial venues, such as restaurants and garages. In terms of the props they use, their appearance and their performances, all the people in the video appear to be authentically going about their day-to-day lives. These 'actors', to use Chatman's (1990) term (although the apparent authenticity of the people in the film perhaps makes it problematic), all engage in "ordinary" activities – they are fisherman, postmen, a crossing-guard, dog-walkers, children on swings, a



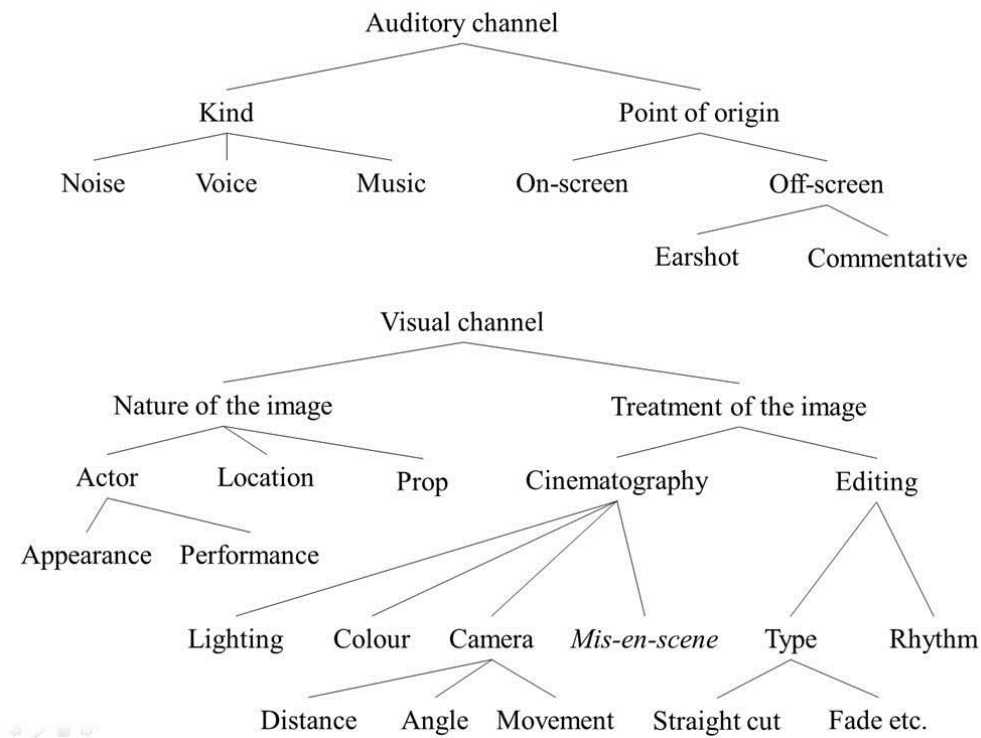


Figure 1. *Semiotic resources available to the cinematic narrator (from Chatman, 1990: 135)*

mechanic, a shop assistant, two skateboarders, gardeners, young people sitting in the park (judging by their laptops and open notebooks, they appear to be students), a father and son holding hands, nurses, a farmer, a busker, a chef, people in a retirement home, a child running down the street, two men in what appears to be a barbers, and a family at the dinner table. The montage begins by cycling through these vignettes of normal people going about their everyday activities and gradually intersperses these with images of Jeremy Corbyn. The first of these appears at 0:32 and is an image of the Labour leader talking to a crowd of people in a community hall. In the second, at 0:57, he appears to be joking and laughing with a team of nurses. In the third, at 1:01, he shakes hands with a woman on her doorstep. In the fourth, at 1:07, he is first pictured listening to someone off-camera, which then cuts to him embracing and shaking hands with the busker, and then to him talking to a woman on a public bus. The fifth, at 1:12, begins with Corbyn stepping off a campaign bus, waving amongst a crowd of people. It then changes to an image of him embracing a man with a child on the edge of a crowd of supporters, another cut to a very large crowd of Labour supporters, then another to him shaking hands with people on his way into a conference hall (presumably the venue for

the 2016 Labour Party conference). This switches to an image of party members at the conference breaking into applause, another image of the party leader shaking hands with those stood in line, followed by images of him talking to a large crowd of people outside and then inside a conference hall. The succession of conference and crowd images then shifts to Corbyn chatting to residents in a retirement home. At 1:26, the video returns to the montage of ordinary people, cutting back to him talking to a woman in a crowd at 1:33, and finishing with a shot of the Labour leader in profile staring into the middle distance. The video ends with a red screen with the Labour logo, followed by the campaign slogan ‘for the many, not the few’.

Before commenting in any great detail on the treatment of the images (thus far, I have only offered a description of the nature of the images and the editing), the auditory channel of the broadcast should be considered because the interrelation of image and sound is important for its populist message. The only sound is off-screen, commentative music – Lily Allen’s (2013) cover of the Keane song, ‘Somewhere Only We Know’ – which plays throughout. The instrumental arrangement of the song is mainly vocals, arpeggiated piano and strings, although there are additional percussion parts, including xylophone and cymbals. The lyrics and arrangement of the music act in tandem with aspects of the video. The music slows at 0:31 with the line ‘I’m getting tired and I need someone to rely on’, and pauses at 0:35. This is timed to coincide with the first cut to Corbyn and the pause occurs in a moment that the Labour leader appears to be delivering quite an impassioned point to his audience (it is a close head-shot in profile and he is gesturing emphatically with the back of his hand). Clearly, it is the veteran socialist that the viewer is to believe is ‘someone to rely on’ (interestingly, too, the persona in the song is ‘getting tired’ which echoes the way in which the in-group had been depicted as suffering at the expense of the banker out-group in the Morgan Stanley video analysed in the last section). At 1:11, the music then swells with cymbals and strings and Allen’s voice rises, which is the moment Corbyn steps off the campaign bus to greet a crowd of supporters. Finally, the musical crescendo relaxes at 1:33 with the line ‘somewhere only we know’. The lyric coincides with an image of the Labour leader and the woman talking together in a crowd (see Figure 2a) and is then repeated, this time only to piano, xylophone and high-pitched strings, over the image of him staring into the middle distance (see Figure 2b). The effect of this is to create an in-group sense of intimacy, reflected in the intensity of the discussion he appears to be having with the woman; he is holding both her shoulders and she is staring into his eyes as she talks to him. The repeated



Figure 2. *Image and music in 'For the many, not the few'*

lyric mimics this onscreen closeness. Similarly, the close head-shot of Corbyn in Figure 2b indexes an intimate relationship with the politician (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996); he is staring off-screen at 'somewhere only we know'.

The video, then, presents a series of quotidian images that represent life in the UK. These images are interspersed with those of the Labour leader joking, laughing and talking with ordinary people. The soundtrack works with this footage to promote an image of Corbyn as someone who can be relied upon and who shares an intimacy with both the people he meets onscreen and those watching the video. Perhaps what ties the vignettes of everyday life together with the footage of the politician most, however, is the cinematography, specifically the way the camera is angled throughout the short film. The images of "normal" people can be further divided into two kinds: more naturalistic medium and long shots that capture their day-to-day activities (a postman delivering mail, a couple walking their dog, gardeners landscaping a garden etc.); and medium or head-and-shoulder shots that depict those people facing the camera in portrait fashion, as if they were being interviewed. An exemplary selection of this latter viewing arrangement has been provided in Figures 3a-h. All these examples are what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) would call 'demand' images – they all involve the subject looking into the camera and establishing some relationship with the viewer on the basis of their gaze. With the exception of 3d, after the initial shot of Corbyn at 0:32 this gaze is accompanied with a smile or a laugh (as in 3e-h). Not only, then, does the video showcase the ordinary experiences of British electors, it also replicates the kinds of sympathetic relationships the Labour politician might share with them as he travels the country listening to their problems. The effect of the shot selection is thus to place us at

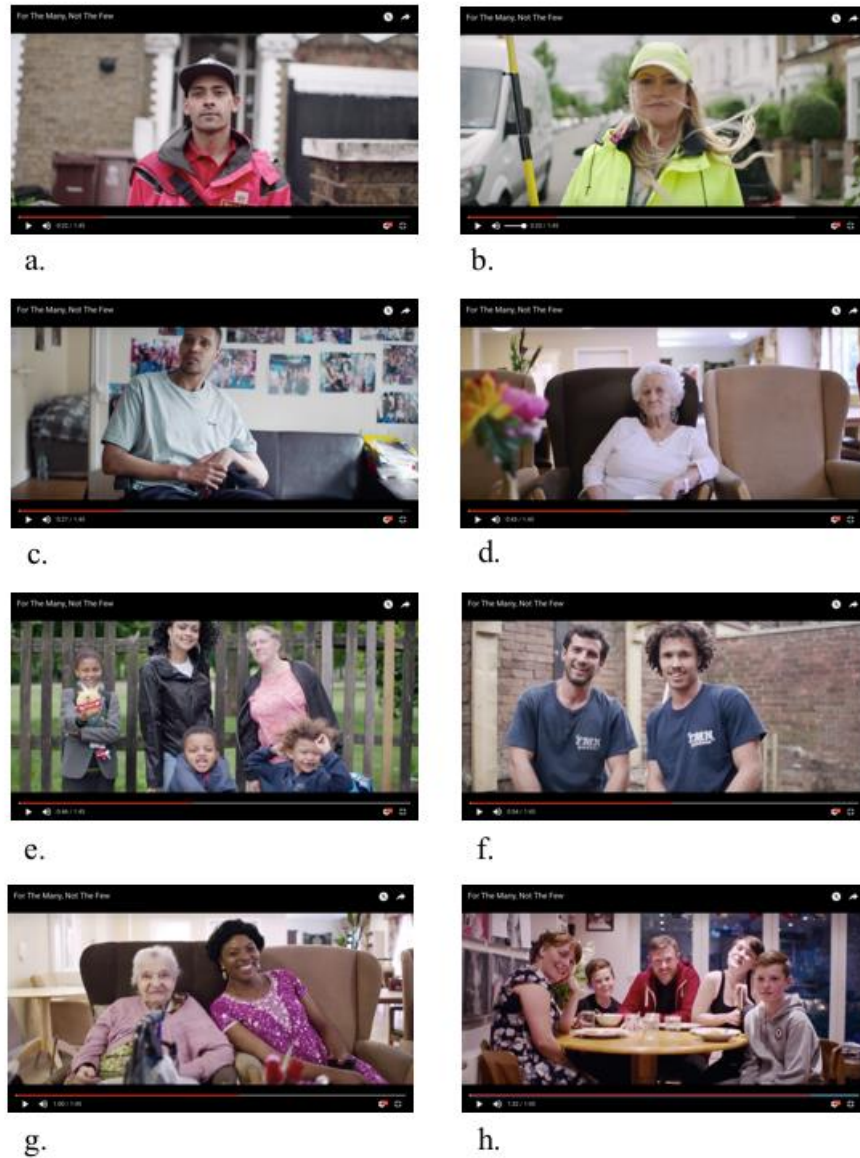


Figure 3. “Interview” shots in *For the many, not the few*

Corbyn’s arm as he listens to people’s everyday experiences. Importantly, this curation of electors’ quotidian lives affects the way we view the onscreen throngs of his supporters (the crowds, those he embraces and with whom he shakes hands); party members are not positioned as separate political fanatics (or ‘cultists’, to use Cohen’s [2017] term), but just another group of “ordinary” people who want to share their experiences with the Labour politician. If the Morgan Stanley video represented an aggressive left-wing populism, ‘For the many, not the few’ is its more positive counterpart; in their curation of apparently

authentic British experience, Labour Party communications strategists have created an inclusive in-group with which the audience is invited to identify. As in the discussion of PMQs, ‘curation’ is the most appropriate word, here, because the effect of this strategy is to position Corbyn and we – the audience of the film – as experts on the authentic lives of the struggling *demos*; their experiences are something ‘only we know’.

## 5.2 Corbyn as the object of curation

The short campaign film, ‘For the many, not the few’, works by positioning Corbyn and the Labour Party as the curators of British electors’ everyday lives. Their authenticity is produced by this allocentric gesture to the experiences of others, and their expert ability to select and profile those experiences. However, the politician’s ethos is not only the product of what he says about other people, but of what others say about him. Returning to Andy Burnham’s comments at the beginning of the chapter, the Labour leader is often framed as an authentic speaker by his political allies and opponents alike. Doubtless this is related not only to the strategy of curating the experiences of others and effacing his own, but also the political record outlined in Section 2; he has stood in opposition to the political consensus of the last three decades – a consensus which has suffered a ‘legitimacy crisis’ (see Habermas, 1976) since the 2007/8 crash. For these reasons, he is often introduced as a “man of principle” or “straight-talking” (as per his first leadership campaign) before he even speaks at public rallies or gives interviews to the press. He is thus *himself* the subject of curation by other people.

These ways of framing the discourse of the Labour leader negate the need for him to say explicitly that he is principled, or strongly committed to a set of political beliefs – other discourse participants do that rhetorical work for him. However, the projection of an *ethos* onto the Labour leader by those around him can sometimes take unusual and unexpected forms. Take, for example, the video entitled ‘Here We Come’. It has received just fewer than 6500 views. It was released on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2018 and is somewhat of a rallying cry to Labour activists for the coming year. Chatman’s (1990) model of cinematic narration can likewise be used to analyse this broadcast. The auditory channel is similar to ‘For the many, not the few’ – it has no onscreen spoken component and features only off-screen commentative music. The song selection, though, is very different. Instead of delicate piano and strings, the soundtrack is from the 2017 song ‘The Drum’ by the hip-hop duo, The Seige. It features a heavy percussion line consisting of a kick drum on the first and third beat of the bar and a clap on the second and fourth (later, the clap is joined by a snare drum). The rest of the

instrumentation comprises a heavily distorted bass riff played on a synthesiser, a series of different synthesiser parts which all fill in the mid-frequencies, a sample of a whooping noise and a vocal, which repeats the line ‘here we come’, sometimes with an accompanying grunt (‘uh’). In terms of the visual channel, like ‘For the many, not the few’ this broadcast is a video montage and the nature of the images are such that they include a variety of different locations. Similarly, the people in the footage all represent themselves, rather than actors playing roles. Whereas the previous film curated a series of vignettes from voters’ ordinary lives, the majority of this film consists of shots from the previous year’s campaigning – Corbyn shaking hands, consorting with activists, speaking to large crowds of people, doorstepping voters, talking to journalists, and visiting various public service providers (schools, hospitals and what appears to be a building site). Insofar as the treatment of the image is concerned, the footage is taken from the campaign trail so it is “realist” in its presentation – there are no filters or enhancements. The editing consists of a series of straight cuts, but these are timed to coincide with the music. The first 6 seconds of the video are edited in such a way that the first and third beat of the music (the kick drum) is accompanied by an image and the second and fourth (the clap) a screen blackout. Then for the next 11 seconds, the cuts are timed to the music. Throughout this time, there are no words, only music. At 0:17, the soundtrack pauses, at which point the footage on the screen is of the Labour leader playing football with a young boy. When Corbyn’s foot connects with the ball, the music resumes with an added vocal (‘uh, yeah, here we come’), more distorted synthesiser parts and the claps are joined by a snare drum.

In ‘For the many, not the few’, the lives of apparently ordinary voters were profiled and the use of camera angles – particularly the interview-style shots – made it seem as if the viewer was travelling the country with the Labour leader to hear people’s life stories. Conversely, in this video, the activities of the socialist politician and the crowds who come to see him are very much the central subject. The ‘we’ of ‘here we come’ is thus a more exclusive ‘we’ than that of the ‘somewhere only we know’, encapsulating only Corbyn, the crowds of Labour supporters and the cinematic narrator. Interestingly, despite this apparent unity, I would also argue that there is a clash between the *ethos* of the party leader and the agent narrating his activities. Whilst it was aggressive, his populist verbal performance in the Morgan Stanley video was also sombre and serious. The mood here, evoked by the brash and triumphant music and use of editing, is very different; it is energetic and youthful. The presentation of Corbyn’s campaigning activities is thus at some distance from how one might

expect the man himself to describe them. For some who are already hostile to the politician, this clash between their preconceptions and the proffered representation of the Labour leader might cause the video to fail rhetorically (see Browse, 2018) (notably, however, the main objection from his political opponents was that the video was threatening and bellicose). It is, though, perhaps more interesting to consider why this youthful and “cool” representation of a politician – who in the conventional sense of those terms is neither – might succeed (and clearly it did for some, at least according to most of the comments under the *YouTube* video).

The role of the curator is not only to present material but interpret it in some way. Similarly, the cinematic narrator not only curates a series of images of the campaigning Labour leader, but also projects onto him an *ethos* with the semiotic resources at their disposal – in this instance, primarily through the hip-hop soundtrack. The ‘we’ of the ‘here we come’ lyric is important because it paradoxically facilitates the differentiation of this narrator from the socialist politician; whilst signalling an in-group, it also suggests a plurality. Compare it to the hypothetical lyric, ‘here I come’, which, in the context of the video, would only map onto the party leader. That the ‘we’ who speaks in the song is not reducible to Corbyn but a plurality that includes him licenses the apparent dissonance between the narrator and the politician’s *ethos*. The clash is a productive one; the cinematic narrator, equipped with the knowledge of The Seige’s musical oeuvre and the cultural cache this engenders, proclaims themselves part of the Labour leader’s ‘we’ in-group and in doing so, transfers some of that cultural capital to Corbyn. The apparent conflict between the Labour leader and cinematic narrator’s *ethos* are integrated on the basis of the interests they share as supporters of Labour’s agenda ‘for the many, not the few’. The curation of the 69-year-old democratic socialist by the cinematic narrator of the video as cool and youthful therefore proceeds not as result of Corbyn’s personal qualities, but the political movement which he represents and with which the cinematic narrator identifies.

## **6. Conclusion: “post-truth” or metamodern rhetoric?**

The above analyses situate Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party’s rhetorical strategies for performing authenticity – the use of populist language and two forms of what I have called ‘curated authenticity’ – in the context of the metamodern ‘revenge of history’ (Milne, 2012), and the return of depth and affect in cultural production (van den Akker et al, 2017; Gibbons, 2017; Vermeulen 2015, 2017). Insofar as they link the linguistic and filmic semiotic resources used in the *YouTube* videos to broader social, political and cultural processes, they

have provided a critical stylistic perspective on these party political broadcasts. As I outlined in the introduction, metamodernism is not the only critical heuristic through which to understand the rhetorical style of the socialist politician; journalists have also viewed his persuasive appeal through the lens of “post-truth” (e.g. Toynbee, 2016). Assessing the analyses above against the two claims central to the discourse on post-truth is an important discussion given the relevance of post-truth to contemporary, popular journalistic debate on the state of political communication.

The first of these claims is that the rhetorical practices of some (post-truth) politicians have changed to emphasise appeals to *ethos* and *pathos* over more “logical” forms of argument, and that they tend to lie, mislead or dissimulate more. None of the videos discussed here feature any untruths. Indeed, this is arguably the weakest aspect of the first claim. Political discourse in the last century alone has featured antisemitism (Wodak, 1991; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001), racism (van Dijk, 1991, 1993a), anti-immigrant, refugee and asylum discourse (Philo et al, 2013), homophobia (Durham, 1991; Weeks, 1989), misogyny (Ross, 2006; Walsh, 1998) and McCarthyism. Rather than a peripheral feature of the political landscape, these discourses and discursive events have often been endorsed by powerful institutions and political actors. All have relied on the propagation of falsehood and rumour, usually at the expense of a minority group. However, as I have demonstrated above, the videos do place a premium on Corbyn’s *ethos*, either through the straight-talking populist style of ‘Bankers like Morgan Stanley should not run our country’, the more inclusive allocentric style of ‘For the many, not the few’, or the curation of Corbyn as youthful and cool in ‘Here we come’. Problematically, though, the post-truth discourse does not really explain *why* politicians like Corbyn might use these forms of rhetorical strategy, except to say that they resonate with some sections of a *demos* increasingly polarised by the technological processes outlined in the introduction. Certainly, ‘Here we come’ is oriented to such a narrow audience, but the curation of experience in ‘For the many, not the few’ represents a much more inclusive populism which is oriented to unifying a plurality of voters rather than any one “filter bubble” constituency (on ‘pluralist populism’, see Schoor, 2017). Moreover, whilst it is aggressively anti-banker, the rhetorical ‘we’ constructed in ‘Bankers like Morgan Stanley should not run our country’ is similarly pluralistic. To understand these strategies thus requires a more wide-ranging view of the political and social context in which these broadcasts are produced and received – a perspective better provided by the metamodern ‘revenge of history’ and return of depth and affect. Indeed, the aesthetics of ‘depthiness’



(Vermeulen, 2015, 2017) furnishes an explanation for the particular form of curated authenticity which is integral to Corbyn's populist style (note that the argument, here, is not that the veteran socialist uses this strategy because of his sensitivity to metamodern aesthetics, but that this particular way of speaking resonates with a constituency of voters as a result of the contemporary 'structure of feeling' [Williams, 1977]). The metamodern framework thus provides a more encompassing heuristic for understanding and interpreting the Labour leader's stylistic choices.

The second central claim of post-truth discourse is that political audiences have 'abandoned conventional criteria of evidence, internal consistency, and fact-seeking' (Lewandowsky et al, 2017: 360). The focus in this chapter has been on connecting Corbyn's rhetorical choices to the wider metamodern political and cultural context, rather than their reception by those watching the videos. Audience response studies of the politician's *YouTube* output would certainly be a productive area of future research (for similar audience-centred analysis of political discourse, see, Browse 2018, 2019, and Brunsdon and Morley, 1999). However, the framework used in this chapter does entail a different outlook for future work than that presupposed by the literature on post-truth. According to the former perspective, the 'revenge of history' has engendered a legitimisation crisis of political institutions (see Habermas, 1976); political audiences have turned away from the traditional arbiters of "truth" (journalists, politicians, experts etc.) because they have failed to accurately predict, explain or resolve economic crises, stagnation and the precipitous decline in living standards this has caused. It is not, then, that audiences have ceased to care about the truth, but that official truths have ceased to match lived realities. 'Post-truth' is thus a misnomer; it is the very inverse of the ideological dynamic suggested by a legitimisation crisis. The post-truth critique places the burden of blame on audiences and also politicians who have hitherto been on the margins of political life. From this perspective, post-truth politics is an extrinsic, alien feature of the political system – a distortion that can be attributed to demagogues from outside (Trump, Corbyn, etc.). Conversely, the argument advanced here is that changes in the production and reception of political discourse are system-internal – they are produced by legitimisation crises that are grounded in the social, economic and political processes characterising metamodernity. From a critical linguistic perspective, this argument is more satisfactory insofar as it situates discursive practices of production and reception in their proper social context. Moreover, rather than involving an implicit defence of powerful

institutions to define what counts as true, it rightly targets ‘the power elites that enact, sustain, legitimate, condone or ignore social inequality and injustice’ (van Dijk, 1993b: 252).

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