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“All Manners of Monsters”: Transparency and the Alt-Right in Hari Kunzru’s *Red Pill*

ABSTRACT

Red Pill (2020) is a novel by British writer Hari Kunzru. The novel explores two ongoing socio-political trends. First, it is concerned with the dominance of transparency in contemporary society, a situation which is presented as totalitarian. Then, *Red Pill* analyses the rise of the alt-right in Western countries. Kunzru also highlights the shortcomings of common center-left responses to modern-day far-right discourse. This article examines the novel from the point of view of Critical Transparency Studies, drawing on the work of, among other, Georg Simmel and Byung-Chul Han.

KEYWORDS

Hari Kunzru; critical transparency studies; contemporary politics; alt-right; Byung-Chul Han; Georg Simmel

1. Introduction

Red Pill is a novel published in 2020 by American-based, British writer Hari Kunzru. The novel explores two ongoing socio-political phenomena. First, it addresses the current dominance of a kind of social transparency which is presented as ideologically homogenising and oppressive. I will be approaching this issue from the point of view of critical transparency studies, an emerging field – named by Alloa and Thomä (2018) – concerned with the cultural and political dialectics between secrecy and transparency¹. To this end, I will be drawing upon the work of thinkers such as Byung-Chul Han (2024), Georg Simmel (1906) or Shoshana Zuboff (2019). Secondly, *Red Pill* explores the ideology and discursive strategies

¹ In her co-edited volume on secrecy in American fiction, Paula Martín-Salván (2024) further develops the concept: “The academic field of critical transparency studies integrates different notions of transparency, with an emphasis on the shift from the utopian desire for institutional transparency – which is still acknowledged as the main political meaning of the term – to the panoptical dystopia in which individual privacy would not exist (p. 8).”

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of the new reactionary right on the rise in Western democracies. The novel, which is told from the point of view of its narrator, a left-wing intellectual, keeps an ambiguous standpoint, as it acknowledges these issues as threats, but it also reveals the flaws and weaknesses of current center-left political stands². In this way the novel encourages readers to re-evaluate them and to revise their own positions. This article analyses how *Red Pill* deals with these two points of interest.

2. Left-wing anxieties and fear of "monsters": An allegorical novel

The novel's narrator and main character embodies the anxieties arisen within the contemporary political left as a consequence of the rise of the far right as well as the increasing enforcement of transparency on citizens. *Red Pill* is told in first-person speech by a progressive British writer of Asian origin based in Brooklyn, very much like Kunzru himself³. From the beginning of the novel, this unnamed narrator is beset with fears about the future, particularly regarding the rise of the far-right around the world, which he perceives as a path to barbarism. This writer is awarded a scholarship in Wannsee, Berlin, by the Deuter Center, a German cultural institution. However, on arrival the narrator is dismayed by the philosophy of the Center, which promotes an "open and transparent society" and, accordingly, offers an open-plan workplace where each resident's labor can be observed by the rest. Unable to get any work done and in a state of increasing anxiety, the protagonist spends hours on end scrolling away on the internet in his room and becomes obsessed by a grim, nihilistic police procedural called *Blue Lives*, which he binge-watches on his laptop. Gradually, the symbolic character of the narrator becomes apparent as we realize that his fears, his ineffectiveness, his defensive attitude and his eventual breakdown stand for those of the contemporary left. By remarkable coincidence, the narrator is taken to a fashionable jet-set party in Berlin where he meets Gary Bridgeway, the screenwriter of *Blue Lives* himself, who turns out to be a charismatic leader of the alt-right⁴. The far-fetched happenstance of the narrator's encounter with Bridgeway soon confirms the novel

² The amplitude of the center-left spectrum in the novel is delimited on the one hand by the narrator, who places himself clearly within the left, and by his wife, who collaborates with Hillary Clinton's campaign.

³ It should be noted that the narrator is a considerably stereotyped character: the familiar left-wing intellectual, with a political commitment that is mostly theoretical, in the midst of a midlife crisis. He is knowledgeable about critical theory but, as regards actual engagement, as he puts it, "[t]he only political slogan that had ever really moved me was *Ne travaillez jamais*" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 11). His wife says he uses cynicism "as an excuse to do nothing" (p. 274).

⁴ Following George Hawley (2017, p. 11), we may define the alt-right as a heterogeneous constellation of groups and individuals with right-wing sensibilities who reject mainstream conservatism and some of its traditional values. As Hawley argues, the main unifying point of the alt-right is white-nationalism. Hermansson et al. (2020) add as a common feature the belief that the rights of white males are being attacked by "liberal elites" who use "multiculturalism" and "political

allegoric character. By means of a small set of stereotyped characters, Kunzru presents his vision of an ineffective left on the defensive before the rise of a new, unabashed far right. Bridgeway, better known as Anton, rapidly becomes the narrator's ideological antagonist. Articulate, well-versed in the ideas of reactionary thinkers of the eighteenth century and derisive of the philosophical legacy of that era, Anton is clearly devised after the model of theorists such as Curtis Yarvin, or the accelerationist philosopher Nick Land, both founders of a movement called Dark Enlightenment, also known as Neo-reactionary movement, which now is usually seen as part of the alt-right. This trend, which promotes anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian ideas, is also characterized by a marked anti-humanism and an embrace of completely unrestrained capitalism⁵.

After this encounter, the narrator becomes fixated with Anton and starts tracing his online activity. In this way, the horrified writer comes to explore the alt-right blogosphere. Soon, his dread gradually turns into downright paranoia. In a state of severe distress, he follows a quite symbolic Middle East refugee and his little daughter to a refugee reception centre in Wannsee, where he tries in vain to help them. Eventually, the narrator is expelled from the Deuter Center. However, rather than flying back home, he follows Anton to a film festival in Paris, in a frenzied attempt to challenge his political activity. Obsessed with him, the narrator travels to a remote Scottish island where he believes Anton has a personal refuge, ready for a final confrontation with him. There, he is detained by the police in a state of schizophrenic delusion. He is subsequently admitted to a mental institution where he stays for some weeks. After his recovery, the narrator is received by his family in Brooklyn and has to go through the painful process of regaining their trust. The novel ends with the narrator and his wife on the 2016 election night, bracing for the triumph of Donald Trump, which he describes as "a portal through which all manners of monsters could step into our living room" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 274).

3. Transparency issues: An adversarial notion

During the first part of *Red Pill*, the oppressive character of imposed transparency appears as its main concern. Before we look into the novel's approach to this

correctness" for that (p. 2). In the novel, Anton and his white-nationalist followers express these beliefs unequivocally.

⁵ Nick Land was one of the founding figures of accelerationism in the late 1990s. This philosophical current defends unleashing the transformative potentialities of capitalism and technology to facilitate social change. Accelerationism soon divided into contradictory right and left-wing factions, with Land representing the former. American blogger Curtis Yarvin set the basis of the Neo-reactionary movement between 2007 and 2008, mostly under the Mencius Moldbug pseudonym. Prominent figures of the American right such as political strategist Steve Bannon, venture capitalist Peter Thiel or US Vice-president JD Vance have mentioned Yarvin as an influence. His ideas were further developed by Nick Land, who coined the term "Dark Enlightenment" in his essay of the same name published online in 2012 (printed in 2022).

concept, a succinct clarification is in order, since transparency is a highly multivalent and ambiguous notion. As Clare Birchall has put it, “[s]ecrecy and transparency are malleable, floating signifiers” (Birchall, 2021, p. 4). Simplifying matters for the sake of brevity, we may argue that, as Birchall has shown, the idea of transparency in politics and government activity has come to be seen as an absolute good in popular political discourse, especially within the left, as it is seen as indispensable to avoid corruption and promote good governance (Birchall, 2011, p. 1). However, a growing number of critics have come to see transparency in a negative way. Paula Martín-Salván (2024) has explained this position as an “adversarial” view of transparency:

They use transparency as an adversarial term for political contestation, identifying state surveillance and self-exposure as the twin evils embodying the totalizing tendencies of technopolitical transparency. They tend to draw on a Foucauldian theoretical framework identifying Modernity as the age of discipline and surveillance, and they implicitly endorse a liberal understanding of the public/private divide. (p. 11)

This is clearly the view adopted by the novel’s narrator. He finds his open-plan workstation intolerable, as it induces a crippling self-consciousness that precludes any creative work. When he complains to the Deuter Center’s management, he is told that the Center is intended to be an “experimental community” and was conceived “as a microcosm of the wider public sphere” (Kunzru, 2020, p. 23–24) by its founder, the late German industrialist, politician and philanthropist Herr Deuter. Soon afterwards, the narrator comes to suspect that the fellows of the Center are subject to video surveillance and he quotes Foucault to characterize the Deuter Center as a panopticon (p. 92). However, the narrator’s views resonate more clearly with the thought of the South Korean thinker Byung-Chul Han as expressed in *The Transparency Society* (2015) and other essays. Han is arguably the most influential of the contemporary thinkers characterized by the adversarial notion of transparency described by Martín-Salván (2024). Over a series of manifesto-like essays⁶, conflating different types of transparency in sweeping statements of high rhetorical impact, Han has argued that in contemporary neoliberal society transparency has been mystified and turned into a totalitarian ideology (Han, 2015, p. viii). For Han, contemporary culture is characterized by a kind of compulsory transparency that has a homogenizing effect, promoting thus conformity and de-politization. This oppressive character of transparency is particularly obvious when, as is usually the case, it is enforced on citizens while power, be it institutional or economic, remains itself opaque. In Han’s words, “[c]ompulsive transparency stabilizes the existing system most effectively. Transparency is inherently positive. It does not harbour negativity that might

⁶ See for example Han (2017) and Han (2024).

radically question the political-economic system as it stands. It is blind to what lies outside the system” (Han, 2015, p. 7).

In consonance with Han’s views, the novel reflects on how transparency may be invoked to actually bring about selective opacity in the socio-political field when it is demanded of citizens rather than power. This is exemplified by Herr Deuter, the founder of the institution, who evolved from a Wehrmacht officer into a Christian Democrat and a prominent businessman of post-war Germany, “one of the conjurers of the Wirtschaftswunder, the national economic miracle” (Kunzru, 2020, p. 22). Deuter’s efforts sought to leave the Nazi period behind by creating a brand-new public sphere. The novel suggests that Deuter’s push for transparency after the war served to reinforce conformity and de-politization in German society, as well as to obscure the Nazi past, in spite of his acknowledgement of the obligation of “confronting the darkness of the past” (p. 23). The novel mentions one of Deuter’s most successful products, a white colorant named Titanium Dioxide. Kunzru’s choice is significant as it symbolically suggests a widespread whitewashing of Germany’s past: “the ubiquitous white pigment that brought light into the darkness of Germany’s postwar domestic spaces ... prized for its optical brightness ... prized for its opacity” (p. 22).

4. Privacy and exposure: from the Stasi to Big Data

The first part of the novel also includes Monika’s narrative. This story within a story takes the novel’s depiction of totalitarian transparency to a new level of intensity. Monika, a cleaner working at the Deuter Center, accedes to telling the narrator her story as a young punk in East Germany during the 1980s. Her story shows the sheer nightmare of a true totalitarian panopticon state. Monika, like other disaffected youths, finds a spiritual refuge and a way out of a life of dismal boredom and conformity in the underground German punk rock scene. She becomes a member of an all-female punk rock band significantly called Transparent Women. However, she is soon targeted by the Stasi, who brutally coerces her into becoming an informer. One of the methods used by the Stasi to force Monika to cooperate is the use of shared secrets. The novel thus shows how a shared secret can be used to inflict an unwanted bond on someone and it may constitute a hostile form of encroachment on the self⁷. It also presents how a secret may also be used to separate people from their communities – the latin “secretus” means “to set apart”. Monika realizes it: “He’d made his abuse into a shared secret, a cozy secret that had alienated her from her friends, and she was disgusted with him and with herself for falling for it” (Kunzru, 2020, p. 132). Monika’s story shows how the complete obliteration of someone’s privacy amounts to the

⁷ As Dave Boothroyd (2011) has put it, being the recipient of a secret involves an encounter with “an absolute alterity which is ‘in me’ in the form of a secret” (p. 46).

hollowing out of a person's identity. When she falls completely under the power of the Stasi officers, Monika stops seeing herself as a full person (p. 139). As she says, "she felt she had no inside" (p. 141). Eventually, when her collaboration with the Stasi becomes known, she is forsaken by her friends and her life is virtually destroyed. She becomes the bearer of a stain that passes on to her life in the new unified Germany after the fall of the Wall.

Monika's narrative inevitably acts as a comment on the narrator's own story and his worries, although there is a certain degree of ambiguity as to its meaning. On the one hand, Monika's chapter seems to be a warning about the dangers of the totalitarian trends that the narrator sees in contemporary society with the rise of the far right. However, the narrator shows that he does not understand Monika's feelings, and the contrast between the horrors endured by Monika and his constant whining sheds a rather unfavorable light on him. Monika takes her leave with disparaging remarks: "She told me I was sentimental. I was trying to help you, she said. But you're soft and selfish" (p. 145). Here it is easy to feel an indictment of the ineffective progressive political position represented by the narrator⁸.

In any case, we may notice in the narrator a view of privacy and secrecy as essential foundations of the self and its creative capacities, and also as necessary conditions that are at the base of social relationships. This is a view that was spelt out by the German thinker George Simmel in a seminal essay published in 1906. There, Simmel argued that the self and society are founded upon secrecy, as secrets structure and shape social relations. What we know about other people is always based upon a much larger zone of their being and experience we do not know about. Consequently, social relations rest on mutual faith. As Simmel (1906, p. 445) argues, "life rests upon a thousand presuppositions [about the other] which the individual can never trace back to their origins, and verify; but which he must accept upon faith and belief". And he continues: "reciprocal knowledge, which is the positive condition of social relationships, is not the sole condition. On the contrary, such as those relationships are, they actually presuppose also a certain nescience, a ratio, that is immeasurably variable to be sure, of reciprocal concealment" (p. 448).

There is a distinct reminiscence of Simmel's views in the last part of the novel, as it examines the role of secrecy and privacy in the relationship between the

⁸ Monika's story serves as a reminder of the striking parallels between *Red Pill* and Jonathan Franzen's novel *Purity* (2015). Franzen's novel also shows a conception of secrecy and privacy as an essential foundation of identity as well as social relationships which is in consonance with Simmel's thought. Likewise, *Purity* contains an acerbic critique of the totalitarian culture of transparency brought about by digital media very much in line with Han's. Last but not least, *Purity* also includes a flashback chapter set in East Germany during the 1980s featuring the Stasi, illustrating the harmful effects of invading someone's privacy and the weaponization of secret sharing. For an analysis of *Purity* from the point of view of critical transparency studies see Blanco Hidalgo (2021).

narrator, in the process of recovery from his mental crisis, and his wife. As a result of his recent breakdown, the narrator's privacy arises misgivings in his wife. In absence of the mutual trust described by Simmel, privacy becomes suspicious, as the complete otherness of the people close to us becomes apparent. The narrator in turn feels "a vast gulf" between he and his wife: "Inside, Rei stretched away to infinity, a galaxy of unseen stars". The writer fears "that she was masking her true feelings, that while I'd been away she'd discovered some new part of herself about which I knew nothing" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 264). Yet, in spite of these pitfalls, the narrator still holds that privacy, threatened by contemporary culture, is indispensable for the self:

I believe everyone has a place, a mental laboratory where we experiment with thoughts that are too strange of fragile to expose. I believe that we need to preserve it, in order to feel human. It is shrinking, its scope reduced by technologies of prediction and control, by social media's sinister injunction to share. (p. 261)

Here we see how Kunzru's adversarial view of transparency points at the new society of control brought about by data collection technologies and social media, an environment that erodes the privacy that he, like Simmel, considers essential for human identity and social relationships. In this, Kunzru is in consonance again with Han, who sees the current dominance of social media as an inverted panopticon of sorts, far more efficient than the ones described by Bentham or Foucault, as it is voluntarily fed by its inhabitants, who think they are free:

The society of control achieves perfection when subjects bare themselves not through outer constraint but through self-generated need, that is, when the fear of having to abandon one's private and intimate sphere yields to the need to put oneself on display without shame. (Han, 2015, p. 46).

The narrator's praise of privacy contrasts with the scorn boasted by Edgar, one of the researchers at the Deuter Center. During dinner at the communal dining room, Edgar, an American neoliberal neuroscientist and a strict materialist, derides privacy as a regressive and antisocial concept, a Western liberal cultural construct. Likewise, he dismisses concerns about big data as mere superstition. Then Finlay, a black researcher, objects to the massive collection of citizens' data by governments and corporations from a subaltern minority point of view. For Finlay, this is potentially another instrument of oppression:

Any fool can see that biases are built into these systems, and unfettered information-gathering is going to be abused. ... It's obvious that you don't see the racial dimension to this. Black people been struggling for humanity over centuries now and one of the weapons you always use is to classify us, reduce us to statistics. (Kunzru, 2020, pp. 99–100)

Edgar, who ridicules black complaints about unfair treatment, is specially disparaging when arguing against humanist notions of the self. For him, "the self is just a folk notion" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 44). At the mention of the word "humanity", which sees as mere mysticism, he rants:

[H]uman? ... I thought all you people were post-structuralists or postmodernists or whatever it's called this week. You all hate the human! ... You ought to be pleased about it, but instead you're just whining. I wish you'd make up your minds. (pp. 100–101)

5. Discursive appropriations and progressive weakness

Edgar's mocking hits a nerve with the narrator, as the latter's view of the self is mostly based on post-structuralist and postmodern theory⁹. This kind of thought is considered anti-humanist in the sense that it set out to reveal the constructed or metaphysical nature of many concepts central to human beings – and often Enlightenment-derived – such as language, subjectivity or reason. Edgar, who is aware of the frequent association of continental philosophy and the left, is of course deliberately misrepresenting the anti-humanism of post-structuralist theory to sneer at his leftist fellow researchers. He conflates it with the kind of negation of human dignity inherent in some of the practices of what Shoshana Zuboff has named "surveillance capitalism", such as treating human beings as raw material for the extraction of data which are then monetized in the futures markets of behavioral modification (Zuboff, 2019, p. 14), a practice he obviously has no problem with.

Edgar's purposeful twisting of post-structuralist and postmodern thought points to another interest of the novel. Kunzru seeks to show that the alt-right has adopted discursive strategies from postmodern theory and uses them successfully to undermine progressive political positions. The title of the novel points at a paradigmatic example of such appropriation. The expression "taking the red pill" comes from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, openly based on Jean Baudrillard's views about our inability to reach reality or truth in a world made of simulacra¹⁰. In the film, the moment of taking the pill by the protagonist symbolically amounts to becoming aware of the reality that is usually masked by dominant ideology.

⁹ As an example, his research proposal for the scholarship is entitled "The lyric as a textual technology for the organization of affective experience and a container in which modern selfhood has come to be formulated" (Kunzru, 2020, p. 15).

¹⁰ It should be noted that in a 2003 interview for *Le Nouvel Observateur* Baudrillard criticized the Wachowski siblings, creators of the film, for having misrepresented his thought. The philosopher argued that the movie does present a real world which is different and apart from the digital simulation inhabited by the protagonists, a reality that can be accessed by them. Baudrillard dismissed this as a reformulation of classical Platonism (for an English translation of the interview by Gary Genosko and Adam Bryx see <https://jcgaal.medium.com/the-matrix-decoded-le-nouvel-observateur-interview-with-jean-baudrillard-cc8b293cd499>).

However, a gesture that was intended by the directors of the film as an emancipating move, has subsequently been appropriated by countless representatives of the alt-right and used to signify a liberation from an alleged ideological dictatorship of political correctness and “woke” ideas¹¹.

Last but not least, the novel points at a manifest weakness in both liberal and progressive positions which Anton deftly exploits to reduce the shocked narrator to silence. Anton eloquently portrays Enlightenment values of reason and progress professed by liberals and progressives as just a veneer:

You know this is bullshit, right? Reason, technocracy and a coat of white paint. ... Underneath, these enlightened liberals enjoy the same dark age shit as the people they condemn. All the obscene shit. They call it humanitarian intervention, but it's just a chance to play Abu Ghraib. (Kunzru, 2020, p. 185)

For him, liberals are just “better at hiding it” (p. 185). Indeed, it is hard to deny that American governments of any sign have deployed sites where human dignity is systematically destroyed, be it Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo or Gaza. More often than not, the defense of human rights is invoked to legitimize operations that seek to reinforce US hegemony. Meanwhile, the narrator, who considers himself a person of the left and acknowledges that Hillary Clinton is “just the mask that established power is wearing right now”, is compelled to vote for her because “[t]he status quo, bad as it is, looks better than the alternative” (p. 274). Thus, the narrator represents the hopelessly defensive position of much of the left nowadays, which, devoid of any initiative or transformative projection into the future, is periodically summoned to rally behind figures such as Emmanuel Macron or Joe Biden so as to prevent the triumphs of the likes of Marine Le Pen or Donald Trump – an effort which is clearly no longer working well.

6. Conclusion: dystopian visions and communitarian hopes

In the second part of the novel the rise of the alt-right replaces compulsory transparency as the novel’s main concern. However, Kunzru does not present them as completely unrelated phenomena. On the contrary, both are shown to involve a negation of human dignity. According to the novel, compulsory transparency, whether enforced by a panopticon state or by surveillance capitalism as defined by

¹¹ It is worth noting that this kind of appropriation of is far from new. As an example, we may look at the 2004 essay “Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?” by the French philosopher Bruno Latour. In that piece, written in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and its accompanying proliferation of conspiracy theories, Latour calls attention to the widespread use of critical tools usually associated to deconstruction, discourse analysis and, generally speaking, postmodern critique, by malevolent actors and extremists: “Isn’t this what criticism intended to say: that there is no sure ground anywhere? But what does it mean when this lack of sure ground is taken away from us by the worst possible fellows as an argument against the things we cherish?” (Latour, 2004, p. 231)

Zuboff, threatens the very foundations of the self. Similarly, the white nationalism of Anton and his followers offers the ground for the denial of human dignity to other social and ethnic groups. Furthermore, their ruthless worldview where “the essence of human relations is either subjection or domination” (Kunzru, 2020, p. 283), paves the way for the arrival of a dystopian, completely desacralized posthuman era of unrestrained capitalism that looks like the full realization of a right-wing accelerationist dream. Thus, near the end of the novel the narrator recounts his apocalyptic visions of the future: a system that dispenses with public politics altogether and “puts in its place the art of the deal: a black box, impossible to oversee, visible only to counterparties” (p. 226)¹². For the narrator, “something implacable is arriving from the future” (p. 228)¹³, bringing about a world with no “rights whatsoever, just the raw exercise of power” (p. 227); a world defined by “creeping loss of aura, the end of the illusion of [human] exceptionality”; a world run by AIs that subjugate human beings: “we will find that arrayed against us is an inexorable and inhuman power” (p. 227); a world where humanity has split between those “well-capitalized”, for whom genetic or technological enhancement is available, and those “to whom nothing is owned and can be used and discarded without compunction” (p. 228).

The novel is certainly not optimistic. However, its ending does leave a small space for hope. Still ailing from his breakdown and distraught by Trump’s victory, in his meditation the narrator verbalizes a communitarian plea: “I can say that the most precious part of me isn’t my individuality, my luxurious personhood, but the web of reciprocity in which I live my life” (p. 283). And he continues: “Alone, we are food for the wolves. That’s how they want us. Isolated. Prey. So we must find each other. We must remember that we do not exist alone” (p. 283). But the meaning of this statement is problematic, as it is left unclear whether the narrator is just thinking about his family or envisaging actual political organization. It is another example in the novel of an ambiguity that challenges the reader – especially the progressive reader – to rethink their professions. This ambiguity, which contrasts with the militant character of Kunzru’s previous novel *White Tears*, contributes considerably to *Red Pill*’s depth and resonance.

¹² This is of course a reference to Trump’s 1987 memoir – and motto – *The Art of the Deal*.

¹³ The image recalls Land’s often-quoted vision of capitalism as an artificial intelligence from the future that uses human beings for its own purposes: “what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy’s resources” (Land, 1993, p. 478).

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