Muriel Spark and the Art of Deception: Constructing Plausibility with the Methods of WWII Black Propaganda

ABSTRACT:

From May to October 1944, Muriel Spark was employed by the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), a secret service created by Britain during the Second World War with the mission of spreading propaganda to enemy and enemy-occupied countries. This was a formative experience which allowed her to develop an understanding of literal truth as elusive and historically contingent, even a constructed effect, as well as an interest in fictional fabrication and deception. Drawing on an account of the methods of WWII British black propaganda, Spark's biographical accounts, and heretofore untapped archival documents from the Political Warfare Executive Papers (National Archives), this essay analyses how Spark employs the fictional equivalent of the methods of WWII black propaganda in order to examine the creation of plausibility in her novels. It explores Spark's deployment of verifiable facts, evidence, precise information, appropriate tone, narrative coherence, targeting, covert motives, chronological disruption and repetition to construct the key elements of fiction in her novels. I argue that such fictional strategies provide a political and moral antidote to totalitarian thinking by presenting reality as necessarily contingent, and therefore, open to external contestation and democratic debate. Bringing together history, biography and literary criticism, this is the first systematic and archivally supported examination of how Spark's work for the PWE opens up a way of rethinking her fascination with the art of deception.

Introduction

In her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae*, Muriel Spark describes her role as 'Duty Secretary' in the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) – a secret service created by Britain during the

Second World War with the mission of spreading propaganda to enemy and enemy-occupied countries – which involved writing down intelligence provided by recently returned aircrews. She took 'the details of the bombing, the number of planes that had gone out and those (not always all) that had returned' and passed them on to black propaganda boss Sefton Delmer.[1] Propaganda is currently defined as '[i]nformation, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view', but Spark's intelligence gathering suggests that it is often loosely based on truth (or, as I will go on to argue, the appearance of truth). [2] The PWE was in charge of producing black propaganda, information of disputable credibility originating from an undisclosed or falsely credited authority.[3] PWE broadcasts to Nazi Germany, for example, used the voices of German POWs to disguise themselves as German even though they originated from Britain. Unlike the white propaganda created by the BBC European Services, which strived for accuracy and made no secret of its allegiance to Britain, black propaganda was unsanctioned by the state and often employed unsavoury methods to sabotage the enemy. [4] Delmer's team cunningly mixed real facts with believable lies to create plausible narratives capable of damaging the German morale; it disseminated 'disruptive and disturbing news among the Germans which will induce them to distrust their government and to disobey it'.[5] Spark's recruitment 'was probably the result of Delmer's expanding his staff in preparation for Operation Overlord.'[6] Lacking a university degree and knowledge of the German language, she was not tasked with writing propaganda, but 'as a fly in the wall [...] took in a whole world of method and intrigue in the dark field of Black Propaganda or Psychological Warfare, and the successful and purposeful deceit of the enemy.' (*CV* 147) The fact that Delmer tried out on Spark a fabricated story about the Allies hiring Italian interpreters to question their POWs signals her acquaintance with the art of crafting plausible news (*CV* 150). Indeed, Spark's PWE experience significantly influenced her understanding of literal truth as elusive and historically contingent, even a constructed

effect, particularly during wartime, and her writing often explores the complex threshold between truth and lies in different contexts.

In the 1960s, Derek Stanford, Spark's former friend and collaborator, was the first to suggest a connection between Spark's intelligence and literary work, noting that '[t]he hush-hush game played by her and her colleagues [in the PWE] might have come intact out of one of her own novels.'[7] However, early critics remained primarily interested in the ontological dimension of Spark's writing, often framed as Catholic satire, to the detriment of attention to its historical and political perspectives.[8] In the 1990s, Ian Rankin argued that Spark's intelligence job 'proved crucial to the writing career that followed' as her novels make use of 'forgeries and fakes' and portray their mythmakers as 'images of the novelist', but little attention was paid to the effects of such elements in her fiction.[9] Most recently, literary scholars such as Marina Mackay, Victoria Stewart and Adam Piette have provided more robust analyses of how Spark's involvement in black propaganda has influenced the representation of themes such as treason, secrecy and misinformation, respectively, in her novels. According to Mackay, 'Spark's interest in treason is intractably real-worldly and historical' – traceable to her PWE work – and her concern with 'the illicit acquisition and deployment of information' is a key theme in her early writing.[10] Placing Spark's work with POWs at the root of her scepticism toward unconditional national loyalties and analysing how such scepticism is deployed in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) in particular, Mackay persuasively contends that Spark's fiction-making resembles political betrayal insofar as they both resist 'consensual and monolithic understandings of what constitutes the real.'[11] Adding to Mackay's work, Stewart provides a more historically contextualised analysis of Spark's PWE work as 'an apprenticeship in authorship, in judging the balance between concealment and revelation.'[12] Through close reading of *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), Stewart highlights the role of linguistic ambivalence and contingent national

identities in the constitution of anxieties about secrecy, which often lingered well after the end of conflict. Adam Piette focuses instead on the proliferation of misinformation in *The Only Problem* (1984), taking Spark's contribution to the PWE's crafting of news for German consumption as a starting point. He argues that the media plays a key role in the portrayal of Harvey as a facilitator of terrorism, as well as in the illusory construction of his terrorist wife Effie as 'media goddess of fake news and psychological warfare'.[13] Stewart draws attention to the fact that PWE radio broadcasts 'had to be plausible and not out of kilter with the "white" broadcasts of the BBC' lest listeners would 'cross listen'; Piette identifies PWE news items as 'the most toxically powerful form of information' due to their perceived truthfulness.[14]

However, invaluable as they are, none of these commentators go on to discuss how plausibility is achieved or the impact it may have exerted on Spark's writing. Drawing on the PWE lectures, which were produced to instruct would-be propagandists on best practice, this article fills this gap by showing how Spark employs the fictional equivalent of the methods of WWII black propaganda in order to examine the creation of plausibility in her novels. It explores Spark's deployment of verifiable facts, evidence, precise information, appropriate tone, narrative coherence, targeting, covert motives, chronological disruption and repetition to construct the key elements of fiction in her novels. I argue that such fictional strategies provide a political and moral antidote to totalitarian thinking by presenting reality as necessarily contingent, and therefore, open to external contestation and democratic debate.

Verifiability and Use of Evidence

PWE agents were tasked with creating plausible narratives capable of engaging people's willingness to believe in order to damage German morale, so the incorporation and use of true facts which would stand verification was crucial to their propaganda work.[15] At the

beginning of the war, they often struggled to locate reliable and up-to-date intelligence, having to rely on the press and radio to craft their civilian-focused black propaganda.[16] But Delmer's intelligence collaboration with the Admiralty, his possession of a Hell-Schreiber receiving set which had carelessly been left behind by the DNB London correspondent, and the interrogation of prisoners of war significantly improved the flow and quality of information.[17] Propagandists were aware that, if they were to succeed at all, access to the German state of mind and the latest news items from Germany was a basic necessity. Delmer frequently drew attention to this need for accuracy: 'we must never lie by accident, or through slovenliness, only deliberately'.[18] His team studied German newspapers carefully to find the names and addresses of real people, building up a 'file of personalities' which would provide the 'characters' to populate its deceptive stories.[19]

Similarly, Muriel Spark related how she compiled a 'character list' describing her characters' features to help her build their personalities in her novels.[20] She also carried out meticulous research of the historical backgrounds to her novels, managing to evoke plausible plots and characters with a minimal amount of detail. Like a good propagandist, she assigned great importance to the authenticity of facts around which she could build a plausible story. In a 1987 interview with Sara Frankel, she recognised being 'very particular: you know, supposing I said the fifteenth of August, 1952, it was raining, well I do look it up to see if it was raining at that spot on that day. [That kind of detail is important] because it's authentic. And then within that realistic framework I can do what I like with the unreal.'[21] This idea is shared by film director Tom Richards in *Reality and Dreams* (1996), when discussing the casting of actors: '"Plausibility, my dear man," said Tom, "is what you aim for as a basis for a film. Achieve that basic something, and you can then do what you like. You can make the audience go along with you, anywhere, everywhere."'[22] This approach is most evident in Spark's 'historical novels'. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, for example, realistically evokes

the atmosphere of 1930s' Edinburgh as Spark would have known it, portraying Miss Brodie as one of the many spinsters whose sweethearts had died in the First World War and documenting the dangerous rise of fascism. *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) moves into the 1940s to paint a portrait of wartime London dominated by the Blitz and food rationing whilst conveying the jovial and fast-paced lives of the girls, who are just glad to live another day. Accurate detail, Spark suggests, is at the root of persuasion because it prompts recipients to take for granted the truthfulness of the overall message, thereby enabling the insinuation of alternative viewpoints in what appear to be tightly controlled authoritarian environments.

Kapka Kassabova's introduction to the Polygon edition of Spark's *Territorial Rights* (1979), however, highlights the implausibility of three facts in the novel, providing 'no explanation other than hurriedness for the dissonance of her Bulgarian references.'[23] Such implausible oversight resembles that of Delmer's forged Himmler postage stamps, which had presumably been ordered by Himmler ahead of his rise to power but prematurely issued by mistake. That such a blunder could have taken place within the flawless Nazi bureaucratic machine was highly unlikely and Delmer regretted inventing this story, which he admitted was 'utterly beyond the bounds of possibility' and 'entirely unconvincing', thus illustrating the dangers of fabricating implausible stories.[24]

True facts are however insufficient for a plausible narrative to appear credible unless it is supported by evidence. In the preface to *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark insists on her reliance on material and testimonial proof to corroborate her life story: 'I determined to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses; I have not relied on my memory alone, vivid though it is.' (*CV* 11) Likewise, her fictional characters are often preoccupied with proving the truth of their deceptive fictions. In her debut novel *The Comforters* (1957), once Laurence's grandmother, Louisa Jepp, confesses that she is indeed the leader of a diamond gang and we learn the gang's method of smuggling (dressing up as

pilgrims intending to visit religious shrines, hiding the diamonds in plaster figures and rosary beads so as to get through customs), she notes that she 'made Mervyn and Andrew visit the shrines properly, in case they were watched.'[25] In the case of *Robinson* (1958), the deceptive planting of evidence is explored through the contrived disappearance of Robinson, who carefully drops his blood-stained items along the path: 'at the head of the dip leading to the Furnace [lava pit], we saw more of Robinson's clothes, another jacket of his, dark tweed, his brown corduroy trousers, his underclothes.'[26] He attempts to make the plane crash survivors stranded on his island believe that he has been murdered, yet his implausible distribution of the clothing leads one of the survivors, January Marlow, to assume that they '"must have been planted by someone. […] They would not be scattered about in quite such an obvious manner if they had been dropped accidentally."' (*R* 102) These scenes from Spark's first two novels demonstrate that no story is ever indisputable, even if it appears to be backed up by proof, and therefore critical thinking must remain a moral obligation.

Delmer assigned great importance to the provision of evidence to support plausible narratives, a common procedure in black propaganda. In Delmer's words, 'Germans wanted to believe ill of their Nazi Party overseers and we gave them the "facts" with which to back up their suspicions.'[27] Such facts aimed to widen the gap between party officials and citizens, emphasising their unequal contribution to the war effort. But the PWE also encouraged leaflet writers to '[w]rite on a basis of truth, and do not merely state, but support by evidence, or what looks like evidence.'[28] Delmer put this theory into practice by sending food packages to the families of German POWs who had been portrayed as earning high salaries in the US and Canada in order to 'prove' their newly-acquired wealth: 'Enemy propaganda? Nonsense, look at the splendid parcel young Schöller had just sent his parents!'[29]

Amount and Tone of Information

Disseminating the right amount of information – not too little, not too much – was also crucial for psychological warfare since excessive knowledge could give away the deception. Black propagandists were encouraged to select only the key details which would make a narrative credible, and whenever possible, to '[d]eal with concrete illustration (in the sense of example) rather than with abstract argument.'[30] Intellectual appeals, which could be easily misunderstood or even identified as propaganda, were to be avoided in favour of concise and transparent information. In Spark's autobiographical novel *Loitering with Intent* (1981), novelist Fleur shows her artistic ability to plausibly transform lifeless data into a colourful narrative. When discussing her first novel, *Warrender Chase*, she claims that 'she managed to make [Warrender's war record in Burma] really credible even although [she] filled in the war bit with a few strokes, knowing in fact, so little about the war in Burma.'[31] In *The Comforters*, following Caroline Rose's accusation of the 'Typing Ghost', the disembodied being who seems capable of recording her every thought and movement, for 'not record[ing] any lively details about this hospital ward [because it] doesn't know how to describe a hospital ward', we receive a schematic yet plausible description of the main items we would expect to find in an orthopaedic ward, including 'plaster casts', 'the cages humping over the beds', 'the trolley at the window end' and 'a huge pair of plaster-cutting scissors like gardening shears' (*C* 172-3), not to mention the physiotherapists themselves. Spark's own economic writing style, not dissimilar from that of the writers who appear in her fiction, might well have been influenced by her PWE work in which clarity and brevity were key to success.

Unlike the BBC, which focused solely on news items, PWE broadcasts recognised the importance of a colourful story with a strong emotional component: 'We reported detailed and telling facts and took immense trouble to present our news wherever possible with the human and personal angles beloved of such popular newspapers as the *Daily Express*.'[32]

PWE propagandists also appealed to German nationalism, both to disguise their British origin and to gain the trust of the German population. In fact, Delmer followed Hitler's advice that propaganda 'must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect.'[33] And so does Sister Alexandra, one of Spark's foremost myth-makers, in *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974). Sister Alexandra, who strives to persuade the nuns to elect her as Abbess by appealing to their higher instincts, is instead advised by missionary Sister Gertrude to '"[a]ppeal to their lower instincts […] within the walls of the convent. It's only when exhorting the strangers outside that one appeals to the higher.'[34] Despite pretending to appeal to the nuns' intellect, her emotional speech in fact addresses their snobbery, which is satirised through their dehumanising covert meals: 'Anxious to be ladies, even the sewing nuns keep their embarrassed eyes fixed on the ground as they tread forward to their supper of rice and meatballs, these being made up out of a tinned food for dogs…' (*AC* 60-1). In addition to their sentimental approach, PWE broadcasts also featured exciting dance music which entertained and distracted the Germans from the dreary wartime news bulletins whilst acting as a call sign for listeners to tune in.[35] Sister Alexandra similarly uses aesthetics for mass persuasion, for example when interrupting her speech 'to smile like an angel of some unearthly intelligent substance upon the community.' (*AC* 60) Sister Alexandra's intertextual use of poetry in her speech, which aims to position her as a charismatic leader, may be intended to evoke the 'aestheticization of politics' whose dangerous idealism has been implicated in the persuasive tactics involved in the rise of totalitarian movements.[36]

Narrative Coherence

Black radio stations required less narrative coherence among their stories than those featuring white propaganda because they pretended to be German and were not connected with each other; however, close collaboration was necessary to ensure they did not contradict

each other's stories or those of the BBC.[37] In fact, a 'two-way co-ordination' was sustained between black broadcasts and black publications, with the latter often acting as reinforcement to the former by reproducing its content.[38] As a result, black propaganda cultivated a degree of internal coherence which further increased its credibility. Fiction similarly requires internal coherence, which is usually achieved through causality, as well as adherence to genre conventions and character types. In *The Comforters*, Caroline Rose hears voices and the sound of a typewriter, which leads her to believe that she is a character in a novel. She regards the 'Typing Ghost' as the articulation of predetermination, and rebels against it in order to take control of the narrative: 'The narrative says we went by car; all right, we must go by train. […] It's a matter of asserting free will.' (*C* 101) In her refusal to be subjected to this 'phoney plot', Caroline ridicules the novel's bizarre mixture of literary genres – featuring elements of the supernatural and detective stories – and the failure of Laurence's grandmother, Louisa Jepp, and Mrs. Hogg to adhere to their character types, thereby questioning the plausibility of the narrative created by the disembodied author: "Your grandmother being a gangster, it's taking things too far. She's an implausible character, don't you see? […] So is Mrs Hogg. Is it likely that the pious old cow is a black-mailer?"' (*C* 108) Caroline's scepticism towards the narrative stems from the fact that 'the form of the work is so manifestly artificial that the illusion of reality cannot be sufficiently achieved.'[39] Her role of 'critic' constitutes a metafictional technique which further contributes to laying bare the precarious nature of the novel's fictional construction.

A plausible story, however, must go beyond stereotypes in order to be believed. As Taylor Stoehr has noted, 'the most plausible story need not seem very lifelike; that which is trivial or mundane will hardly be trusted as faithful to experience, for reality cannot be so drab as all that.'[40] This creative principle is fully embraced by Fleur in *Loitering with Intent* when describing the creation of a character:

…to make a character ring true it needs must be in some way contradictory, somewhere a paradox. […] where the self-portraits of Sir Quentin's ten testifiers were going all wrong, where they sounded stiff and false, occurred at points where they strained themselves into a constancy and steadiness that they evidently wished to possess but didn't. And I had thrown in my own bits of invented patchwork to cheer things up rather than make each character coherent in itself. (*LI* 27)

Fleur is an experimental writer who incorporates elements of the 1950s' French *noveau roman* into her work. For instance, she feels 'compelled to go on with [her] story without indicating what the reader should think', and 'wasn't writing poetry and prose so that the reader would think her a nice person' (*LI* 52, 58), views which render her evil in the eyes of unimaginative Dottie and Sir Quentin, who, unlike her, champion the benefits of complete frankness. But most importantly, her concept of plausibility aligns closely with that of the French writer and theorist Alain Robbe-Grillet, who claimed that '[t]he little detail which "makes you think it's true" is no longer of any interest to the novelist […] [t]he thing that strikes him […] is more likely, on the contrary, to be the little detail that strikes a *false* note.'[41] Delmer's interest in the *false* note is evident in his strategies for distorting information, which routinely involved the incorporation of 'real' Nazi news items received via a Hell-Schreiber teleprinter into his black broadcasts: 'Some items we used as cover to give ourselves authenticity as a German station purveying official news. To others we gave a subversive twist so that when listeners heard them on the German radio later, they quite unconsciously read our tendentious distortion as the truth 'hidden between the lines'.[42]

Targeting and Covert Motives

PWE propagandists were aware that nations cannot be homogenously addressed, so they carefully targeted their stories at the right publics. They believed that propaganda 'must have an individual or sectional appeal, since the audience consists of individuals and since it is only by sectional segregation – by aiming at the joints in the structure of the enemy – that the enemy can be broken up and disrupted.'[43] This is precisely the approach taken by the mysterious telephone caller in *Memento Mori* (1959), who exhorts the elderly to remember death. According to Bryan Cheyette, only those characters who are able to 'unify matter and spirit, or the natural and the supernatural' can understand the phone calls as a benign reminder of death instead of a threat.[44] This translates into the various voices adopted by the telephone caller, who perhaps as a result of the characters' confirmation bias, is perceived by novelist Charmian Colston as 'a very civil young man' and policeman Henry Mortimer as '[a] woman, gentle-spoken and respectful', whereas Dame Lettie, who endlessly amends her will and threatens her relatives with disinheritance, feels personally threatened by the 'sinister' voice.[45] In *The Abbess of Crewe*, Abbess Alexandra is similarly aware of the differing needs of her audience and wittily modifies her rhetoric to fit the circumstances. For example, she lectures the passive nuns on rules of behaviour and unintelligible electronic surveillance, uses the power of argument on the Vatican – a real menace to the convent – and deliberately confuses the predatory media with 'some sort of a garble' (*AC* 70). Understanding the fears and desires of others in order to anticipate their behaviour is foregrounded as an essential ability for propagandists and novelists alike. After all, propaganda – and, I would add, fiction – is suggestive insofar as it 'cannot create something out of nothing' and must instead 'build on a foundation already present in the individual.'[46]

The PWE aimed to influence the thinking of a receiver 'without his conscious collaboration' to achieve 'an ulterior motive' which had to remain shielded from its German audience.[47] Likewise, Spark's narrators, despite their keen eye for circumstantial detail, are

often reluctant to disclose character motivations. Following Robbe-Grillet in his rejection of omniscience, Spark tends to depict characters through their actions, avoiding explanation of how their past states of mind have led to their present predicaments. Her focus, therefore, is not on causes but on effects apprehended through perception. This disavowal of motive may be the result of her Catholic sense of mystery; the recognition that only God can know our thoughts and humans should simply come to terms with our ignorance. Yet her playful obscurity forces the reader to problem-solve – much like Germans would have done when hearing black propaganda – in order to piece together the meaning of the text. As ex-propagandist Elsa in *The Hothouse by the East River* notes in relation to her psychoanalyst, who is trying to understand her mental condition: '"He hasn't got his material yet. He's looking for a cause, and all I'm giving him are effects. It's lovely."'[48] Similarly, when discussing the protagonist of her novel *Warrender Chase* in *Loitering with Intent*, Fleur uses metafiction to expose the possibility of Warrender's cognition, mirroring the interest in covert motives she shares with her literary creator: 'All these years since, the critics have been asking whether Warrender was in love with his nephew. How do I know? Warrender Chase never existed, he is only some hundreds of words, some punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, marks on the page. […] I didn't go in for motives, I never have.' (*LI* 61)

In *The Driver's Seat* (1970), Lise engineers her own murder in order to become an absence. Despite carefully describing all her movements, the narrator is unable to access Lise's consciousness, prompting readers to follow clues in an attempt to understand her reasoning. In her hotel room, Lise is presented as a hesitant woman, who unfolds and folds her clothes as if 'contemplating an immediate departure from the hotel.'[49] Yet her mental state is perpetually censored, never revealed; in the narrator's words: 'Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?' (*DS* 39) In fact, not even other characters do, as Lise compulsively lies to those she encounters, depicting herself as someone who is 'not looking to pick up

strangers', 'a tourist, a teacher from Iowa, New Jersey' or 'a widow […] and intellectual' (*DS* 27, 62, 63). Spark's use of covert motives helps to maintain secrecy and intrigue in her novels, but also prompts readers to critically assess her texts in order to construct meaning from the characters' actions, often with little or no authorial guidance.

Chronological Disruption: Prolepsis and Analepsis

In addition to covert motives, Spark's disruption of normal chronology by flashbacks and flash-forwards contributes to the disorienting nature of her writing. Mirroring black propaganda storytelling, which looks into the future – the (hopeful) movement of the enemy to act against its interests – and from there to the past – the assessment of intelligence on the effectiveness of propaganda campaigns (also known as 'comebacks') – in order to establish the success of a campaign, Spark's novels often plunge us back and forth for satirical or allegorical effect while focusing on what Frank Kermode has named 'the middest' of the narrative. In *The Sense of an Ending*, he argues that fictions, with their beginnings and ends, help us to make sense of our *in media res* lives. Analysing apocalyptic narratives in particular, he explains that throughout history, they have always been subject to a disconfirmation transforming the end from imminent to immanent and thus allowing flexibility for the narrative to plausibly reach its end: 'Men in the middest make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle. That is why the image of the end can never be *permanently* falsified.'[50] In view of this, Spark's tendency to disclose endings imposes a necessity while allowing room for *peripateia* – 'disconfirmation followed by a consonance' – which eventually meets the foretold end.[51] At the beginning everything is possible, at the middest certain actions are plausible and, at the end, everything becomes necessary. Spark

frequently uses narratological prolepsis, which entails a teleological retrospect allowing the future event to be given a significance it does not possess at the time of its occurrence.[52]

This is the case at the beginning of Chapter 3 of *The Driver's Seat*, which travels from the present into the future to foretell Lise's murder before returning to her present journey: 'She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14.' (*DS* 18) But the opening sequence of the book, in which Lise fiercely refuses to purchase a non-staining dress, has already provided a powerful proleptic hint, which only becomes significant in the context of her murderer's conviction. A predetermined ending thus alters our understanding of the present, which must consist of a series of plausible events leading to the already-anticipated conclusion. Knowing her end but not its details, Lise suffers from the anxiety of non-conformity; she 'fears that her life will not comply with the story, that she will make mistakes; she does not fear or question the violent death toward which the story goes.'[53] Indeed, Lise's restless search for her man – ultimately murderer rather than boyfriend – is both carefully premeditated and spontaneous, evidencing her ultimate lack of control over the narrative. She confides to Mrs Fiedke that she 'keep[s] making mistakes [and] starts to cry, very slightly sniffing, weeping…' (*DS* 58) Her death, accompanied by her undesired rape, further questions to what extent Lise is in the driver's seat after all.

In contrast, the butler Lister in *Not to Disturb* (1971) is exceedingly confident not only of the end of the tale – the murder of the aristocratic Klopstocks and their secretary – but also of the *necessity* of every action leading to this conclusion. From the very beginning, he states that '[the servants] are not discussing possibilities [but] facts.'[54] The aristocratic Klopstocks and their secretary, who are 'not to be disturbed', are expected to die during the night and their servants, in anticipation of the tragedy, have prepared to lucratively sell the

story to the media, with the serialization contract already in hand and a film script written. When their seemingly smooth plan is disrupted by the knowledge that the madman in the attic is the Baron's brother – instead of the Baroness' brother – and that he happens to be second in line, Lister rewrites the plot to accommodate this disconfirmation, which 'was quite unforeseen, but one foresees the unforeseen.' (*ND* 62) Unlike Lise, Lister leaves no room for the anxiety of non-conformity and confidently prophesises that his masters 'have placed themselves, unfortunately, within the realm of predestination.' (*ND* 33) By staging and recording the marriage of the pregnant servant Eleanor with the Baron's brother, the servants ensure they remain in control of their masters' inheritance. In fact, Lister's hints about his masters' deaths is realised as the past through the use of recording technology, which 'installs in the present an anticipated future from which the present will be re-experienced as representation of the past, or an infinitive sequence of future presents from which the moment can be recollected.[55] While expecting the arrival of the cameramen, the servants have already started to collect their memories of an event which has not yet happened. Lister's use of performative prolepsis, which 'produces the future in the act of envisaging it, so that the possible transforms itself into the actual' mirrors the future-oriented practices of PWE agents.[56]

Soldatensender Calais – a successful 'grey' military radio station which mixed 'absolutely unexceptionable information' with 'a number of isolated, more or less tendentious items' – was the medium for one of such practices, framed within Delmer's 'softening up' of the Germans as part of Operation Overlord.[57] It consisted of exploiting the feelings of those German officers' corps leaders who were becoming disenchanted with Hitler's thirst for war and longed for the establishment of peace with the West: 'we had been seeking to suggest to them that all they had to do was to overthrow Hitler for us to be ready to start peace negotiations'.[58] In doing so, *Soldatensender Calais* inspired them to believe in the possibility

of both casting aside the Führer and achieving peace with the West, even though PWE propagandists were aware that the latter was unthinkable. To Delmer's surprise, this offer was taken up by the officers in what became known as the 'Peace Putsch', an unsuccessful revolt against Hitler which cost them their lives. Otto John – the only survivor – later joined Delmer's team as a POW and reported 'that [its] broadcasts had indeed been heard by the conspirators, and interpreted in precisely the sense [Delmer] had hoped.'[59]

The PWE demanded unconditional secrecy and members of staff were often unaware of the work carried out by their colleagues. At her interview, Spark was asked by Delmer whether she had returned from Africa in a convoy and she replied that she did not know; this was 'an elementary test: we had all been warned "not to know" about the movements of ships and troops, past and present. Great signs were plastered over the walls of public buildings: "Careless Talk Costs Lives".' (*CV* 147) This domestic campaign, in fact, is unique in its adherence to PWE objectives rather than those of the 'People's War'. As Jo Fox has pointed out, it encouraged a culture 'of distrust, suspicion, and fear, where such aspects of "ordinary" life as conversational gossip were presented as dangerous.'[60]

The Hothouse by the East River is the novel which most closely and literally depicts Spark's work for the PWE. Its central character Elsa, like Spark, works for the organisation, writing down military intelligence and taking prisoners of war for walks in her free time. Unlike *The Driver's Seat* and *Not to Disturb,* Spark here uses frequent analepsis – the insertion of past-oriented narratives into the present – in order to explore the illusory nature of memory and the self-deceit of those who attempt to impose misremembered events as realities. For Elsa's husband Paul, also a propagandist during the war, life in 1944 England 'was more vivid than it is now. Everything was more distinct. The hours of the day lasted longer. One lived excitedly and dangerously.' (*H* 25) In contrast, their post-war existence in New York appears neurotic, grotesque and even hallucinatory rather than substantially real.

For instance, Elsa is followed by an uncanny shadow which falls in the wrong direction and acts as an 'externalization' of her repressed past. As a propagandist for the PWE, Elsa was not only expected to keep her work secret, but also 'deprived of any insights into its doing' (*H* 49). This professional secrecy feeds into her personal life with her reluctance to reveal to Paul whether she ever slept with Kiel – a presumably dead German POW who has mysteriously appeared in New York. Furthermore, her seeming inability to distinguish fiction from reality after her secret work has ended calls into question her mental sanity: 'She tells him everything that comes into her head at this hour of the evening and it is for him to discover whether what she says is true or whether she has imagined it. But has she decided on this course, or can't she help it? How false, how true?' (*H* 3) The performance of *Peter Pan* by an elderly cast becomes a symbol of Paul and Elsa's refusal to face the reality of their past death and the fictional nature of their current predicament. Paul's inability to cope with his jealousy has brought Elsa back to life as 'a development of an idea [which] took a life of her own. She's grotesque. When she died she was a sweet English girl…' (*H* 104). It is only when confronting the fact that they never survived the war – instead dying in a bombed train – that Paul and Elsa are able to abandon their self-deceptive existences and come to terms with reality: 'They stand outside their apartment block, looking at the scaffolding. […] A demolition truck waits for the new day's shift to begin. […] [The billboard] announces the new block of apartments to be built on the site of the old.' (*H* 136)

Both prolepsis and analepsis can be translated into psychological states of mind known as anticipation-neurosis and memory-neurosis, respectively, both of which are enacted in the present. A PWE lecture on anticipation-neurosis defines this phenomenon as 'a disturbance of the mental and emotional equilibrium of a person owing to fear of unpleasant events to come', in contrast to memory-neurosis which results from 'the impact of certain negative reminiscences which are either conscious or operate in a repressed manner…'[61]

Anticipation-neurosis was considered to be the result of German domestic propaganda banking on fear of British dominance of Germany and the guilt (and fear of revenge) resulting from the crimes committed in Eastern Europe.[62] Lest an intensification of anticipation-neurosis would prolong warfare, PWE propagandists advocated for 'a mixture of tact and firmness' when dealing with this issue, which afflicted Germans in particular due to their 'living more in the future and for the future than in and for the present.'[63] The PWE's preoccupation with anticipation-neurosis and memory-neurosis originated from a desire to manipulate the present perceptions of future and past events in order to use them as weapons of persuasion. Spark is aware of how such methods may be exploited to concoct plausible realities and her fiction often explores their troubling effects on characters. In *Memento Mori*, the materialistic elderly who are unable to come to terms with the supernatural phone calls live in a permanent state of anticipation-neurosis while awaiting their foretold end. In particular, Dame Lettie is convinced that the caller 'must be someone who is in [her] Will' (*MM* 99) and incessantly wonders who this threatening enemy may be. Her restlessness contrasts with the peaceful response of Henry Mortimer, who escapes anticipation-neurosis by recognising death as a necessity which must be incorporated into life: 'Death, when it approaches, ought not to take one by surprise. It should be part of the full expectancy of life. Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid.' (*MM* 148)

While *Memento Mori* looks into the future, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988) is haunted by wartime traumas. Polish refugee and dressmaker Wanda Podolak, 'whose capacity for suffering verged on rapacity', unwittingly brings her wartime unhappiness into her London existence.[64] On hearing 'a long, loud high-pitched cry which diminished into a sustained, distant and still audible ululation', her landlady Milly and fellow tenant Mrs. Hawkins discover that Wanda has received a threatening message: 'We, the Organisers, have our eyes on you.' (*FC* 22-3) This is just the beginning of Wanda's recurrent intimidation

aided by anonymous letters and fake press cuttings, which brings about her physical and mental deterioration culminating in her suicide. As Mrs. Hawkins had prophesized, 'her brave future was gone forever.' (*FC* 25) Cathy, a bookkeeper who works alongside Mrs. Hawkins at Ullswater and York publishers, similarly carries the scars of wartime trauma. She 'had been in a German concentration camp in the thirties' and her voice has been reduced to 'a crackle of broken English.' (*FC* 10) Despite being in full employment and leading a seemingly tranquil life, her traumatic past is enacted in the shape of suicidal thoughts: '"I should put my head in the gas oven."' (*FC* 59) Both Wanda and Cathy are subject to memory-neurosis in their incapacity to move beyond their painful pasts, with their disturbing voices reflecting 'that mode of absence from oneself that is the condition of the survivor, the savagely traumatised, and abjected.'[65]

Repetition

In his 1925 autobiography *Mein Kampf*, Hitler had already highlighted the benefits of repetition for successful mass persuasion:

[Propaganda] must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over. […] [T]he masses are slow-moving, and they always require a certain time before they are ready even to notice a thing, and only after the simplest ideas are repeated thousands of times will the masses finally remember them. When there is a change, it must not alter the content of what the propaganda is driving at, but in the end must always say the same thing.[66]

Repetition was closely observed by the PWE, whose lectures instructed would-be propagandists to 'play countless variations on the main theme. This repetition, if obvious carries with it the danger that his public may be bored, and lose interest in his arguments –

But if he persists and secures a sufficient number of new "slants" to his appeal, he is bound to impress some sections of the public.'[67] Delmer adopted this technique from his early radio station *Herr Gustav Siegfried* ('Der Chef'), which purported to broadcast the views of a Prussian general – 'loyal and devoted to the Führer, but scathingly contemptuous of the "rabble" that had seized control of the Fatherland in the Führer's name' – in order to create division between the Army and the Nazi Party.[68] 'Der Chef' would 'invent a good story and continue to repeat it, although with variations until yet another and another and another replaced it' in order to encourage a correlation between repetition and truthfulness.[69] This practice, which remains central to both consumer advertisement and political propaganda, was first theorised in psychological terms by Lynn Hasher et al. in 1977 as the illusory truth effect. Through an experiment in which forty college students were asked to rate the validity of sixty plausible statements – twenty of which were repeated – on a seven-point scale, they demonstrated that 'the repetition of a plausible statement increases a person's belief in the referential validity or truth of that statement.'[70] Although the illusory truth effect has two main constraints (source recollection and pre-experimental knowledge), the reliability of a source of information is not always retrievable, especially if there is a wide time span between the learning event and the moment of retrieval, and pre-experimental knowledge has been shown not to prevent the illusory truth effect. In fact, two related experiments by Lisa K. Fazio et al. have demonstrated that 'repetition increased perceived truthfulness, even for contradictions of well-known facts'.[71] In contrast to the knowledge-conditional model, which assumes that participants only rely on fluency when knowledge is not successfully retrieved, these experiments suggest that a fluency-conditional model, which shows that participants only access knowledge when fluency is absent or unreliable, may be more accurate.[72] The reason is that repetition increases the processing fluency of a statement, which can lead people to neglect their knowledge in favour of cognitive ease. In fact, people show a

tendency to believe in the truth of a statement because disbelief would entail additional time and energy.[73] Through the use of repetition, the PWE aimed to produce the illusory truth effect in the minds of Germans so that they would believe its frequently reproduced misinformation.

Spark's fiction similarly uses the illusory truth effect to show how characters deceive themselves and each other by surrendering their own knowledge and refusing to critically examine the fabricated stories imposed upon them. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Miss Brodie endlessly proclaims to her girls that her 'prime has truly begun', yet she provides no evidence to support this claim.[74] By the time the girls arrive in her class, Miss Brodie is a spinster in her forties, one in the 'legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties […] who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion.' (*PMJB* 39) Despite her charismatic personality, she remains an isolated teacher who 'never discussed her affairs with the other members of the staff' (*PMJB* 5), instead sharing her personal life with her pupils – the crème de la crème – who she invites for supper or takes to the ballet. Therefore, her self-inflicted prime, which 'extended […] still in the making when the girls were well on in their teens' (*PMJB* 41) is not historically-rooted but mythical. Through repetition, Miss Brodie comes to believe that she is in her prime and inflicts this delusion on her girls, who fail to question the validity of this knowledge. While this example of deception may seem relatively innocent, Miss Brodie's attempts to fictionalise reality are not always so. In fact, her student Sandy Stranger soon realises that Miss Brodie's embrace of fascism and vicarious existence through her girls 'was not all theory [...] in the way that so much of life was unreal talk and game-planning' and that 'Miss Brodie meant it.' (*PMJB* 119-20) Through the critical figure of Sandy, Spark exposes Miss Brodie's adoption of the illusory truth effect as a strategy which allows her to model the world according to her dangerous imagination.

If *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* succeeds in creating Miss Brodie's 'prime' as a fraudulent characterization detail, *The Public Image* (1968) goes even further in its representation of a character whose own sense of selfhood relies on the illusory truth effect. Shallow actress Annabel Christopher is turned into a movie star as a result of her consistent playing of the Lady-Tiger role: 'she was a tiger woman at heart and in "the secret part of their lives". This tiger was portrayed only by her eyes; it was an essential of the public image that the tiger quality was always restrained in public.'[75] Her public performance of the Lady-Tiger ends up leaking into her private life to the extent that her image becomes her very essence. Annabel is therefore constructed as a Pygmalion-like figure, who in the hands of film director Luigi Leopardi and his publicity assistant, has been reduced to her deceptive physical appearance: 'Before I made you the Tiger-Lady, you didn't even look like a lady in public, never mind a tiger in private. It's what I began to make of you that you've partly become.' (*PI* 29) Through her performative enactment of the Lady-Tiger role, and most importantly, through its media dissemination, Annabel has been replaced by her own image. She has become, in Jean Baudrillard's term, a simulacrum, a model of 'a real without origin or reality.'[76] However, her baby constitutes the last remain of her personal life – irreconcilable with the Lady-Tiger image – which anchors her to reality: 'She felt a curious fear of display where the baby was concerned, as if this deep and complete satisfaction might be disfigured or melted away by some public image.' (*PI* 30) On fleeing from the spotlights, Annabel transforms from object of spectacle to critical agent, thus becoming able to create a new life for herself and her baby. Through her satirical look at the film business, Spark employs the illusory truth effect to provide a critique of consistent imagery as substitute for reality.

If *The Public Image* allows a narrow escape from artefactual reality, this is not the case in *The Takeover* (1976), where protagonist Hubert Mallindaine asserts in postmodern fashion that '[a]ppearances *are* reality.'[77] He lives in a house on the banks of Lake Nemi,

owned by American millionaire Maggie Radcliffe, who has grown tired of him to the point of cutting off his allowance and trying to evict him. To make ends meet, Hubert decides to sell Maggie's Louis XIV chairs and her famous paintings, replacing them with fakes, yet he is careful to maintain the house in disrepair to demonstrate his slender means. The success of his persistent inauthenticity in the face of facts – his assistant Pauline's discovery of evidence disproving his descent from the Goddess Diana – he ascribes to his 'self-confidence':

The expert self-faker usually succeeds by means of a manifest self-confidence which is itself by no means a faked confidence. On the contrary, it is one of the few authentic elements in a character which is successfully fraudulent. To such an extent is this confidence exercised that it frequently over-rides with an orgulous scorn any small blatant contradictory facts which might lead a simple mind to feel a reasonable perplexity and a sharp mind to feel definite suspicion. (*T* 131-2)

Consistent fakery thus creates the illusory truth effect which leads people to disregard fact in favour of fiction. Yet the spell goes beyond deceiving others, and compulsive liars often remain in danger of believing their own lies. Hubert, in fact, had 'so ardently […] been preaching the efficacy of prayer that he now, without thinking, silently invoked the name of Diana for every desire that passed through his head, wildly believing that her will not only existed but would certainly come to pass.' (*T* 182-3)

Self deception was also common in black propaganda. As Delmer remarks, 'comebacks' often illustrate 'the danger of misleading your own side'; for example, a report from the American Services Attachés claimed that the Army, alienated from the Nazi Party, had set up a radio station called 'Der Chef', when in reality, such radio station was run by the PWE.[78] In her autobiography, Spark also recalls reading 'with great enjoyment in the British

newspaper [...] a straight news item [that she] had seen and heard [...] invented by Sefton Delmer...' (*CV* 150). In *The Takeover,* Spark illustrates this danger by presenting Hubert's self-deception as an unavoidable risk when reality is persistently being replaced by carefully crafted plausible narratives.

Conclusion

Drawing on her PWE experience, Spark constructs plausibility with the methods of WWII black propaganda in order to test the boundaries between reality and fiction. Her application of these methods to fictional practice exposes the manifold ways in which writers and characters manipulate their worlds with a view to deceive themselves, as well as others. In doing so, Spark highlights the dangers of moral absolutism and personal delusion, which have the potential of subjecting individuals to social and political exploitation. In her essay 'The Desegregation of Art' (1971), Spark advocated 'the arts of satire and of ridicule' as 'the only honourable weapon we have left' in the battle against oppression.[79] This essay has suggested that her use of PWE strategies contributes to laying bare the fabricated nature of fiction, and can therefore be framed as part of a rhetorical mode which challenges absurd realities by mocking them. Such rhetorical mode, Ali Smith claims, makes Spark's fiction particularly timely today because she 'hands us the key to the demystification of [an age] in which living means having powerful fictions nationally, internationally and politically foisted upon us.'[80]

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[3] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5th edn (London, 2012), 18.

[4] Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 17.

[5] Sefton Delmer, *Black Boomerang: An Autobiography: Volume Two* (London, 1962), 108.

[6] Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London, 2009), 62-3.

[7] Derek Stanford, *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Fontwell, 1963), 43.

[8] See Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London, 1974), Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (New York, 1982) and Malcolm Bradbury, 'Muriel Spark's Fingernails', in Joseph Hynes (ed.) *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (Oxford, 1992).

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[10] Marina Mackay, 'Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 54 (2008), 505-22, 507.

[11] Mackay, 'Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason', 520.

[12] Victoria Stewart, *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction: Secret Histories* (Edinburgh, 2011), 22.

[13] Adam Piette, 'Muriel Spark and Fake News', *Textual Practice*, 32 (2018), 1577-91, 1587.

[14] Stewart, *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction*, 40; Piette, 'Muriel Spark and Fake News', 1580.

[15] Charles Cruickshank, *The Fourth Arm: Psychological Warfare 1938-1945* (Oxford, 1981), 60.

[16] Cruickshank, *The Fourth Arm*, 61.

[17] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 73-90.

[18] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 92.

[19] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 67.

[20] James Brooker & Margarita Saá, 'Interview with Dame Muriel Spark', *Women's Studies*, 33 (2004), 1035-46, 1042.

[21] Sara Frankel, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark', *Partisan Review*, 54 (1987), 443-57, 451.

[22] Muriel Spark, *Reality and Dreams* (Edinburgh, 2018), 39.

[23] Kapka Kassabova, 'Introduction', in Muriel Spark, *Territorial Rights* (Edinburgh, 2018), xiv-xv. The implausible facts are Lina Pancev's student exchange in Paris (unlikely because of the Iron Curtain), her accommodated life in Communist Bulgaria (given that her family supported the royalty) and her intense anti-Semitism (Bulgarian society was not anti-Semite and in fact helped to save Jews from deportation).

[24] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 186.

[25] Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (Edinburgh, 2018), 101. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *C*.

[26] Muriel Spark, *Robinson* (Edinburgh, 2018), 101. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *R*.

[27] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 92.

[28] The National Archives (TNA), Allied Propaganda in World War II: The Complete Record of the Political Warfare Executive (FO 898), FO 898/99, Lectures. 1943. Accessed via *Archives Unbound* (Gale). <www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/archives-unbound>.

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[30] FO 898/99, Lectures. 1943. *Archives Unbound.*

[31] Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent* (Edinburgh, 2018), 60. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *LI*.

[32] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 160.

[33] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston, 1943), 180.

[34] Muriel Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe* (Edinburgh, 2018), 55. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *AC*.

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[36] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), 217-51.

[37] Cruikshank, *The Fourth Arm*, 71.

[38] Ellic Howe, *The Black Game: British Subversive Operations against the Germans during the Second World War* (London, 1988), 206.

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[45] Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori* (Edinburgh, 2018), 145-51. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *MM*.

[46] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (London, 1973), 36.

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[49] Spark, *The Driver's Seat* (Edinburgh, 2018), 37. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *DS*.

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[51] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 18.

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[54] Muriel Spark, *Not to Disturb* (Edinburgh, 2018), 1. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *ND*.

[55] Currie, *About Time*, 41.

[56] Currie, *About Time*, 44.

[57] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 113.

[58] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 120.

[59] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 121.

[60] Jo Fox, 'Careless Talk: Tensions within British Domestic Propaganda during the Second World War', *The Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012), 936-66, 937.

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[62] FO 898/99, Lectures. 1943. *Archives Unbound*.

[63] FO 898/99, Lectures. 1943. *Archives Unbound*.

[64] Muriel Spark, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (Edinburgh, 2018), 3. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *FC*.

[65] Patricia Waugh, 'Muriel Spark's "Informed Air": The Auditory Imagination and the Voices of Fiction', *Textual Practice*, 32 (2018), 1633-58, 1640.

[66] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 184-5.

[67] FO 898/99, Lectures. 1943. *Archives Unbound*.

[68] Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 42.

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[75] Muriel Spark, *The Public Image* (Edinburgh, 2018), 22. Further references are in the text abbreviated as *PI*.

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