

Digital Fiction Meets Critical Theory: A Gramscian Analysis Of Socio-Political And Economic Exploitation In A Place Called Ormalcy

Christy Isaac¹, Dr. P. Rathna²

¹Research Scholar, Department Of English, BSA Crescent Institute of Science And Technology
chris.isaac07@gmail.com

²Professor And Head, Department Of English, BSA Crescent Institute Of Science And Technology
rathnaperiasamy@gmail.com

Abstract

Rising authoritarianism, isolation and dehumanization are some of the issues that are on the rise across global societies, raising urgent concerns. Erosion of individual freedom and privacy in an increasingly surveilled world has become a dangerous threat. A Place Called Ormalcy (2018) is a digital 3D/VR fiction by Mez Breeze that serves as a cautionary tale about the potential consequences of unbridled power and the suppression of freedom that resonates with the current predicament of our modernized society. The cartoonish environment and the playful language underplay the dystopian world of subjugation in the beginning, but the narrative soon unfolds the fascist principles that dominate Ormalcy. This paper examines Mez's work through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which posits that dominant classes secure consent from subordinate groups by normalizing oppressive ideologies as common sense through institutions like education, media, and law. Rather than relying solely on coercion, authoritarian systems maintain control by manufacturing consent, leading to internalized compliance. A Gramscian reading of Ormalcy reveals how these dynamics are embedded in the life of the protagonist, Mr. Ormal, who begins as a contented citizen but becomes a dehumanized enforcer of the very regime that oppressed him. The study seeks to promote ways to develop a counter-hegemonic culture in order to create a more humane, and resilient society, where the well-being of individuals and communities is prioritized alongside progress of the nation.

Keywords: Digital Fiction; Socio-political issues; Authoritarianism; Hegemony; Mez Breeze

INTRODUCTION

Mez Breeze's digital fiction *A Place Called Ormalcy* (2018) presents a complex, layered exploration of authoritarianism, making it an ideal subject for a Gramscian analysis of socio-political dynamics. The revolutionary Marxist philosopher and politician, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) through his powerful writing explicates how the ruling class secures dominance not merely through coercive force, but by implanting their values through cultural institutions and social norms. The study examines Mez's portrayal of Ormalcy, a dystopian society that is built on forced conformity and the suppression of individuality, through the lens of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. It analyzes Mez's fictional world of Ormalcy to provide insights on how hegemonic and authoritarian forces are combined to normalize restrictive ideologies that impact the lives of ordinary people.

By engaging with Mez's work through a Gramscian framework, the study intends to explore the various socio-political issues that are prevalent in our society as a result of cultural hegemony. It aims to highlight the enduring relevance of Gramsci's ideas in understanding the complexities of modern power dynamics in today's globalized world.

Throughout this paper, the term socio-political is used broadly to include not only social and political systems but also the economic structures that sustain and reinforce them. This integrated approach aligns with a Gramscian perspective, where economic control is seen as inseparable from cultural and political dominance. The analysis uncovers that the fiction does more than critique authoritarianism; it demonstrates the dangers of ideological conformity that can lead to stabilizing of hegemonic structures which impede dissent and intellectual autonomy.

A Place Called Ormalcy utilizes interactivity to engage readers, breaking away from traditional, linear storytelling, to enable reader's choices and navigation to shape their narrative experience. The use of multimedia and the incorporation of 3D elements enhances storytelling and creates a hybrid space

between art, literature and technology. Mez points out that the digital fiction uses a combination of WebVR, 3D, VR, text and audio assets in ways that mirror a slow dystopian creep. Each chapter becomes progressively visually cloistered, with dark fog and grainy distortions increasing to finally create a type of gun-barrelled claustrophobic effect (Breeze, 2018). In his review of the work, Groth explains:

Each chapter is presented in its own VR environment, and the technology adds to the unsettling nature of the piece. These three-dimensional spaces, suspended in a void and frozen in time, enable the reader to zoom, rotate, and deconstruct. Told in a storybook style over seven short chapters, *A Place Called Ormalcy* is a clever allegory using a child-like sensibility to evoke a chilling tale of authoritarianism and conformity (Groth, 2019).

Mez Breeze, usually referred to as “Mez”, is a prominent figure in digital literature, who has been creating an eclectic array of digital fiction, books, VR and AI experiences, games, and experimental storytelling since the mid-1990s. Best known for developing the code poetry language Mezangelle, Mez's genre-defying work often dodges neat categorization, continually challenging traditional aspects of gaming/literature/arts and spatial computing industries. (MezBreezeDesign, 2019). The digital artist/writer reveals how she has been influenced by George's Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* that contains “more than a healthy dose of skepticism towards all things authoritarian and anything fascist-leaning”. Mez remarks, “I've been fascinated with [and in equal parts terrified of] dystopic-laced fiction ever since encountering George Orwell's book “1984””. *A Place Called Ormalcy* is powerful condemnation of the escalating tide of authoritarianism and global fascism where “where citizens become corruption fodder for all-powerful corporations, out of control systems of governmental control and corresponding institutions that squash any notions of otherness and/or difference” (Breeze, 2019).

Gramsci's Theory of Cultural Hegemony

This study is based on the theory of cultural hegemony by the enormously influential Marxist theorist and Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci. As a social activist who was particularly concerned with the turbulent political situation in Italy, Gramsci's writings were aimed at bringing about a major revolution in a nation plagued by authoritarian dictatorship. During his imprisonment by the fascist authorities in Italy, he wrote his most well-known series of philosophically dense essays which was smuggled out of the prison in the 1930s and was first published in 1948 as *Prison Notebooks*, years after the author's death.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is one of his most significant contributions to political and social theory. He refers to hegemony as “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci, 1971, p.12). According to Martin (2023), “Gramsci employed the concept “hegemony” to describe a process of intellectual and moral leadership that embedded a ruling class across society. He rejected the economic determinism of classical Marxism in favor of a nuanced political analysis attuned to contingent variation in historical circumstance. Gramsci brought Marxism into dialogue with neo-idealist insights into practical subjectivity, and sketched a revolutionary strategy aimed at preparing a new collective identity”. Though hegemony originally referred to the domination among states in ancient Greece, Marxist analysis extended the concept to refer to the domination by a ruling class over a subordinate class, the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. It stems from Gramsci's equation of the State, where he asserted that “State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armor of coercion” (Gramsci, 1971, p.263). He believed that it was intended to ensure the maintenance of status quo through the normalization of domination and hierarchy. Urbinati observes:

The politics of hegemony was not a deductive inference from class theory, but the outcome of Gramsci's pitiless inspection of his own biography, beginning with his conflicting relation to his deformed body and to the stubborn deformities of the social niches within which he lived: initially, as an indigent and genial child in one of the hardest peripheries of Southern Europe, and then as an alien within his own country (and party), both as an immigrant in Turin and as a prisoner in fascist jails (Urbinati, 1998, p.1).

Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony emphasizes the intricate balance between consent and coercion in maintaining control within a society. Fontana cites Gramsci in saying that power is constituted by a combination of ‘force and consent, violence and persuasion’.

He also contends that coercion and consent require each other: ‘Without consent or persuasion it would

be impossible to wield effective force or violence – in the same way that force is necessary to guarantee or secure the use of persuasion’ (Fontana, 2008, cited in Konrad, 2012, p.3). In Gramscian view, hegemony is considered the highest synthesis of coercion and consent, that is “the working together of political society with civil society; of freedom with constraint; of superstructure with structure – always under a new moral and intellectual leadership” (Howson and Smith 2008, cited in Konrad, 2012, p.4).

Gramsci distinguishes between civil society, which encompasses institutions like the media, schools, and religious organizations, and political society, represented by the State and its coercive apparatus. The ruling class wields influence over civil society to disseminate its ideologies and win voluntary compliance from the masses. Simultaneously, it employs political society to enforce its values and suppress dissent through coercive means if necessary. This dual strategy allows the ruling class to perpetuate its dominance, as the cultural acceptance of its worldview in civil society complements the enforcement of its authority by political society. The integral state is “the dialectical synthesis of both political and civil society and represents hegemony as never simply the operations of political power” (Howson and Smith 2008, cited in Konrad, 2012, p.3).

Gramsci believed that the struggle of ideas must precede the struggle for power (Brons, 2018). He proposed a two-stage revolution which comprises the “War of Position” and the “War of Maneuver”. The “War of Position” is directed against civil society and aims to establish counter hegemony. On the other hand, the “War of Maneuver” follows the success of the “War of Position” and involves swift, direct action to capture the State. This phase is marked by sudden attacks and rapid change (Sharma, 2024, p. 32).

Socio-Political Exploitation in *A Place Called Ormalcy*

Breeze explores various socio-political and economic issues in this dystopian narrative. She illustrates how mindless conformity erodes individuality, portraying a society where individuality and personal freedom are systematically replaced by rigid obedience to authority. Mr. Ormal, the protagonist, initially embodies innocence and contentment in his routine life. He not only loves his work of making flops at the Tovine Phactory, but also enjoys singing, dancing and sitting in the park, watching the Slittertoads and Popawomps. He has the ability to look at mundane things with a creative mind and appreciate simple pleasures of life. However, the repeated and increasingly authoritarian encounters with the “Plodiceman” begin to strip him of his autonomy. The Policeman’s arbitrary rules and restrictions, such as banning Mr. Ormal from walking on the pathway and revoking his work permit, symbolize the oppressive control of the State. Mr. Ormal slowly begins to unquestioningly comply with the Policeman’s commands, reflecting the dangers of blind conformity where the individual surrenders their rights and critical thought in exchange for the illusion of order and safety.

Mr. Ormal’s dehumanization is starkly highlighted through the narrative, where he is finally transformed into “Plodiceman” Ormal, an enforcer of the very system that suppressed him. By succumbing to the pressures of conformity, Mr. Ormal loses his emotional depth and connection to the vibrant world he once cherished. His former pleasures, like the goozy sound of flops or the squishy faces of Popawomps are replaced by numbness, as evidenced by his indifference to the cries of his beloved creatures and the destruction of the park, towards the end of the narrative.

The gravity of the issues can be effectively analyzed through the lens of Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. It posits how the ruling class in a fascist society maintains its power and wealth through cultural institutions. Gramsci explains that the ruling class employs ideology to construct a worldview that distorts the reality of social, political, and economic conditions. The worldview portrays these conditions as natural and inevitable, rather than as artificial constructs designed to serve the interests of the privileged ruling class.

Abuse of Power through Coercion and Consent

Gramsci conceptualizes power as operating on two intertwined levels, coercive force and ideological consent, reflecting the dual nature of authority and hegemony that together sustain societal control (Thomas 2009, cited in Ekber Doğan, 2020). Williams observes that “the imbrication of coercion and consent we have established as being central to Gramsci’s account of hegemony does not place hegemony in opposition to coercion, but rather folds together coercive and consensual practices, together with an array of practices that fall somewhere in-between. Coercion is a part of hegemony” (2020, p.239).

Coercive or authoritarian governance, limits political pluralism, restricts civil liberties, suppresses dissent,

and prioritizes compliance over individual freedoms and democratic processes. Hegemonic control, on the other hand, operates more subtly through the dissemination of dominant ideologies that shape societal beliefs, norms, and values. “Hegemony is conceived, broadly speaking, as a result of the interplay of all the diverse forces in a social system, an equilibrium point existing between the different forces governing the relations between elements” (Williams, 2020, p.92). Gramsci asserts that hegemony functions not solely through overt repression but by achieving cultural and intellectual dominance, wherein the worldview of the ruling class is internalized by the masses as common sense.

The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise leadership before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to lead as well (Gramsci, 1971, cited in Zhang, 2024, p.2). Lewis, aligning with Gramsci’s perspective, elucidates how consent is “manufactured”. The process of hegemony generally involves the struggle to create consent for a system that favors certain dominant interests. Popular resistance to the pursuance of those interests can be overcome by creating an ideological climate in which it is possible, in Herman and Chomsky’s phrase, to manufacture consent (Lewis, 1999, cited in Turner, 2016, p.12). Thus, hegemonic control complements authoritarian rule by fostering a sense of legitimacy and inevitability to the existing power structures, reducing the need for forceful compliance and facilitating the perpetuation of inequality. These forces work together to create a self-reinforcing system in which both coercive power and ideological dominance ensure the stability and continuity of elitist tyranny.

In *A Place Called Ormalcy*, Mez creates a vivid allegory of authoritarianism and hegemonic control, where the State, characterized by the Policeman, exercises arbitrary power over the citizens of Ormalcy, who represent the subaltern group. Mr. Ormal, is initially depicted as a happy-go-lucky person who enjoys his life and work, until the stifling authoritarianism of the fascist State disrupts his world. In Ormalcy, the fascist forces represented by the Policeman, take complete control of public spaces by rerouting pathways and restricting access to parks blatantly, without any explanation. The illogical revoking of Mr. Ormal’s work permit illustrates their overarching control over work, labor and the economy of the State. These actions illustrate how authoritarian regimes impose restrictions without accountability, gradually tightening control over personal freedom.

According to Gramsci, hegemony is most stable when the ruling class can rely on consent of the working class. Consent is achieved by shaping the worldview of the ordinary man through instruments of civil society such as education, culture and religion. They are manipulated into believing the fabricated ideology of the bourgeoisie as natural and plain common sense. In the narrative, Mr. Ormal is conditioned to think that “Ormalcy Policemen are friendly and helpful,” probably by way of his culture or education. He has been ideologically programmed to believe that Policemen serve to protect people, regardless of their actions or behavior. In his first shocking encounter with the Policeman, he is utterly confused and raises feeble opposition initially; his naivety quickly gives in to the irrational demands of the Policeman and he complies with the new rules without much thought or resistance.

“Ormalcy Citizen 91101, you can’t go this way.” says the Policeman. “Really? That’s funny. I always go this way. Why not?” says Mr Ormal.

“This pathway isn’t open to plarkstitters anymore. Only plarkowners can use this pathway now.”

Mr Ormal scratches his head and says: “Oh, I see. I’ll cross the road then”. And so Mr Ormal does, crossing back over only when he can reach the Tovine Phactory doorschlep (Breeze, 2018).

His conditioning makes it easy for him to subscribe to the false assurance of safety and welfare offered by the Policeman while ordering Mr. Ormal not to use the pathway or conform to the other restrictions imposed on him. The Policeman can be seen as a representative of the group referred to by Gramsci as “traditional intellectuals”, “whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it” (1971, p.3).

Building on Gramsci’s ideas, Bodenheimer believes that they are “legitimized by the ruling class to spread their ideas with compelling authority...And it is the traditional intellectuals who are the soldiers and the picket captains of the ruling class in the battle of ideas” (Bodenheimer, 1976, pp.22-23). The Policeman here is aligned with the ruling class and is employed to justify the use of force and coercion, portraying

the actions of the State as necessary for the security and welfare of the State. He is a part of the political society where power is imposed coercively via laws, security forces, and military structures.

In Mr. Ormal's encounter with the Policeman at the park gate, the latter resorts to brute force by "holding his slobnailed-booted phoot against the geight". Gramsci explains how ruling classes may oscillate between consent and coercion depending on the strength of the counter-hegemonic forces. Bodenheimer observes that in Gramscian thought, "ideological subjugation is not the only mechanism for maintaining bourgeois rule, and it breaks down in periods of insurgency, requiring the application of violent force" (1976, p.23). The Policeman swiftly shifts between tapping into Mr. Ormal's ingrained belief system of unquestioningly complying with law and forcing submission through intimidation and bureaucratic authority. "In fascist states, violence is accepted—even celebrated—if it serves or advances the national community. For fascists, violence often has a redemptive or purifying quality" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). The strong conviction professed by the Policeman in serving the "Ormalcy way of life" helps to maintain the illusion of legitimacy of the State.

Mr. Ormal's shocking degradation into a brutal Policeman, illustrates how authoritarian systems not only control individuals but also manipulate them into becoming instruments of the very oppression they once experienced. By the time Mr. Ormal becomes "Plodiceman Ormal", he feels nothing, becomes completely detached from the cries of the Popawomps and Slittertoads, who are now confined and suffering. Breeze critiques the authoritarian regimes that dehumanize individuals on both sides of power, turning ordinary people into agents of control, reinforcing the cycle of oppression, and wiping out humaneness and empathy in the process. The gradual removal of rights of Ormalcy citizens, the transformation of Mr. Ormal into a brutal policeman, and the normalization of the State's irrational control over citizens depict the evils of authoritarianism in the fiction.

Deprivation of Rights and Personal Freedom

In Gramscian thought, understanding one's own rights is crucial to achieving social justice and freedom. He emphasizes that culture is not "encyclopedic knowledge". "It is organization, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's personality; it is the attainment of a higher consciousness by means of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and duties" (Gramsci, 1916 cited in Buttigieg, pp.68-69). He criticizes the ruling class for weakening the belief system of people by curbing their rights and freedoms. According to Gramsci, this has resulted in "morbid symptoms" that could refer to the fascism that broke out during the period of crisis when "the old is dying and the new cannot be born".

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant', exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. (Gramsci, 1930, cited in Achcar, 2022, pp. 379, 382).

In *A Place Called Ormalcy*, the increasing restrictions imposed on Mr. Ormal by the Policeman curbs him of his fundamental right to life and liberty. The story illustrates how seemingly harmless limitations, like being barred from using the usual pathway escalate into a broader loss of autonomy. Initially, Mr. Ormal's compliance with small restrictions, such as avoiding the pathway, reflects how citizens are conditioned to accept intrusions on their freedom. As these restrictions compound, the once-blossomy and joyous world of Ormalcy becomes a controlled, sterile environment, where individual choices are denied, and personal desires are quashed by the growing power of the State.

The degradation of Mr. Ormal from a content citizen, who finds joy in the simple pleasures of life like sitting in the park or making flops at the factory, to someone deprived of both his livelihood and his personal space demonstrates the cost of losing one's freedom. The Policeman's actions represent the intrusion of the ruling class into every aspect of life, from employment to leisure, stripping Mr. Ormal of his basic freedoms without any logical explanation. The interactions between Mr. Ormal and the Policeman reveal the dehumanizing

effects of unchecked authority, as the enforcement of arbitrary rules leaves Mr. Ormal utterly confused and powerless, unable to comprehend or resist the unjust treatment meted out to him. It also reflects how oppressive regimes systematically dismantle individual rights under the guise of protection and welfare. Mez's narrative reveals the psychological toll of a society where personal freedoms are plundered, and conformity is enforced without reason. Mr. Ormal's unquestioning compliance with the increasingly oppressive regulations demonstrates how cultural hegemony operates by making people internalize and consent to their own subjugation without realizing it. Mr. Ormal does not resist the curbing of his freedoms because he has been conditioned to believe that these limitations are natural and just, illustrating how hegemonic power maintains control not only through overt force, but also through the subtle manipulation of beliefs and behaviors that align with the interests of the ruling class.

The hegemonic control of the State has resulted in complete loss of individuality and the assimilation of Mr. Ormal into the very system that oppressed him. This chilling conclusion highlights the cyclical nature of authoritarianism, where citizens not only lose their rights but also become agents of the oppressive system, ensuring its perpetuation. It underlines the dangers of complacency in the face of authoritarian rule and the devastating consequences of sacrificing personal freedom for the illusion of safety and order.

Social Conformity and Loss of Individuality

In a hegemonic society, individuals become disillusioned by conforming to the social norms enforced by the ruling class. Gramsci strongly believed that the challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned (Gramsci, cited in Sommer, 2010, p.1). These norms define what acceptable behavior is, how individuals should think about themselves, and what goals they should strive for. He strongly believed that the ruling class controls intellectual production that includes ideas, education, and cultural practices. "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its dominance" (Marx & Engels, 1970, cited in Mayo, 1999). This intellectual control limits individuals' ability to develop independent, critical thinking. It can lead to homogenization of thought and behavior, where people become less likely to express individuality, creativity, or dissent because they are discouraged from questioning or challenging the dominant culture. By way of cultural passivity, people are compartmentalized into passive roles, as workers and consumers, rather than active participants in shaping their own destinies. Collective identity or herd mentality propagated by the ruling class leads to loss of individuality as people are forced to conform to consumer culture rather than develop unique, critical perspectives.

Mez's fiction critiques how systems of control not only enforce obedience but also erase individuality. Social conformity is imposed to eradicate to promote herd mentality and thwart critical thinking. Mr. Ormal, once full of simple joys, eventually becomes a mechanical subject of conformity, devoid of both intellect and emotions. His shocking transformation into a ruthless Policeman illustrates how individuals lose their sense of self when they blindly comply with societal norms. The narrative issues a strong caveat against the dangers of losing oneself to a system that values uniformity at the expense of individuality. It also depicts real-world concerns about how authorities often manipulate people to fit into predefined roles that strip them of their unique identity and autonomy.

The insidious mechanisms of social control in the narrative can be explored using Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. The dominant group, embodied by the Policemen, exercises cultural leadership to maintain power. He bans Mr. Ormal from using the pathway, revokes his work permit to work in the Tovine factory and prohibits him from entering his favorite park. Mr. Ormal who can be seen as a representation of the subaltern group, initially challenges the arbitrary regulations imposed upon him by the Policeman. However, he is soon manipulated into believing that the dominant ideology of the ruling class is right and probably even beneficial. His standard response of "Right" or "Oh. Right" to the Policeman's ruthless orders shows his loss of individuality and spineless state.

Gramsci condemns how in a fascist regime, intellectual authority, that is the capacity for independent thought is selectively assigned only to certain people. He writes "All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (Gramsci, 1971, cited in Bodenheimer, 1976, p.21). In the fiction, Mr. Ormal's unquestioning compliance indicates his surrender of critical thought and agency in the gradual process of change initiated and controlled by the ruling class. His final transformation into "Policeman Ormal" and his absolute indifference to the suffering of his

once-favorite Popawomps and Slittertoads, reflect his total adaptation into the dominant ideology and his complete surrender to hegemonic control. Stripped of his identity and thinking ability, he has allowed himself to be cloned into just another agent of the suppressive State. Gramsci believes that through cultural institutions the ideology of the ruling class becomes so dominant that individuals internalize them without realizing that they are constructed to serve specific class interests. This internalization leads to a loss of critical awareness, where people adopt the dominant values of the society as if they were their own, even when these values may go against their personal interests or the interests of their social class.

Alienation and Dehumanization

As an authoritarian political philosophy, fascism inherently opposes communism, socialism, pluralism, individual rights and equality, and democratic government (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). In fascist regimes, individuals often feel alienated due to the suppression of personal freedoms, rigid social control, and dismantling of independent thought. Consequently, they become highly mechanized and devoid of human emotions.

Adorno explains their mode of operation: "Since it would be impossible for fascism to win the masses through rational arguments, its propaganda must necessarily be deflected from discursive thinking; it must be oriented psychologically, and has to mobilize irrational, unconscious, regressive processes" (1951, p.134).

Breeze explicates the themes of alienation and dehumanization through the experiences of Mr. Ormal as he navigates an increasingly oppressive and authoritarian society. Mr. Ormal's gradual alienation begins with small, seemingly harmless restrictions, such as being told not to walk on the pathway or being denied access to the park. These restrictions, however, serve as mechanisms to isolate him from the familiar and joyful aspects of his life, creating a growing sense of disconnection. His routine pleasures, like making flops at the factory or sitting in the park watching the Slittertoads and Popawomps, are slowly taken away, pushing him further into isolation. This alienation is not only physical, as Mr. Ormal is barred from spaces he once loved, but also emotional, as he becomes increasingly detached from his own feelings and from the world around him. His mindless compliance reflects the alienating power of authoritarian control, which distances individuals from their sense of agency and the joys that once defined their identity.

As the story progresses, Mr. Ormal's alienation worsens, culminating in his dehumanized transformation into "Policeman Ormal". Mr. Ormal eventually loses his emotional connection to the things that once brought him happiness. The creatures he once enjoyed watching, now trapped and caged, evoke no response from him. His tragic shift from a joyful, creative individual to a detached, emotionless enforcer of State control replicates how authoritarian systems dehumanize both the oppressed and the oppressors. By stripping individuals of their freedom and emotional responses, these systems turn people into mere instruments of control, devoid of personal identity or empathy. By the end of the narrative, Mr. Ormal has fully internalized the values of the hegemonic order, becoming a functionary of the very system that oppressed him, illustrating the ultimate outcome of hegemonic control that is total alienation from one's community and complicity in the oppression of weaker classes. The once vibrant Mr. Ormal, now a mechanical figure in his "slaughtery shirp and daggerfull pants", becomes a cautionary symbol of how authoritarianism not only alienates but ultimately dehumanizes individuals, obliterating their emotional and ethical principles in service of the State.

This reflects Gramsci's idea of "false consciousness" (Turner, 2016), where individuals in a hegemonic society internalize the dominant ideology of the ruling class and fail to recognize their own oppression. They are reduced to instruments of the ruling class, valued only for their compliance and utility in maintaining the status quo. Mr. Ormal fails to see that the system has dehumanized him; instead, he continues to operate within the constraints of the hegemonic order, unable to grasp the extent to which his freedom and agency have been eroded. This unquestioning acceptance of his diminished state illustrates how the ruling class's ideology blinds individuals to their exploitation and alienation, keeping them subservient to the system.

Excessive Surveillance and Policing

Gramsci believed that the cultural and ideological framework in a fascist society is fabricated to legitimate unwarranted control and compromises on civil liberties. Excessive surveillance and constant policing are considered necessary to maintain security and order, with individuals internalizing these narratives as

natural and universal. Their consent to constant monitoring ensures that the ruling class maintains its dominance without overtly relying on force, as people come to accept and even support systems that curtail their own freedoms.

Jamie observes that Foucault, who resonates Gramscian thought, uses the term “governmentality” to refer to the mechanisms for controlling the populace and its movements through what he terms “panopticism,” or “permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible” while ensuring the power behind and mechanisms of this surveillance remain invisible or obscured. (Foucault, 1995, cited in Jamie, 2023, p.26)

The pervasiveness of surveillance in Ormalcy is illustrated by the Policeman’s constant presence and his audacity to dictate where Mr. Ormal can and cannot go. The Policeman enforces the rules and restrictions without providing any justifications, merely stating, “Because you have been told by me that you have to”. This embodies the coercive aspect of Gramsci’s theory, where the State and its institutions use force to maintain control when ideological consent does not suffice. Mr. Ormal’s compliance with these orders, without questioning their validity, demonstrates how the ruling class has successfully instilled “false consciousness”, a state where individuals internalize the dominant ideology and see the restrictions imposed on them as natural or even beneficial. Hegemonic control operates by subtly normalizing surveillance and policing as necessary for the common good, even though these practices strip individuals of their autonomy and freedom. They exploit the deeply cultivated trust of the ordinary people on the ability of the State to ensure the safety and welfare of its people. The Policeman’s control over public spaces, like the park, further emphasizes how surveillance restricts personal freedom and isolates individuals, making them passive participants in a tightly controlled society.

Gramsci’s theory also applies to the way policing transforms individuals into enforcers of hegemonic order. Mr. Ormal is fully dehumanized, having transitioned from a compliant citizen into an oppressive Policeman himself. This shocking transformation underscores how policing in a hegemony society, not only controls people but also converts people into clones who uphold the very system that robbed them of their freedom and rights. As Policeman Ormal, he “pheels nothing” and becomes a detached enforcer of the oppressive order, indifferent to the suffering of the Popawomps and Slittertoads. This mirrors Gramsci’s idea that the ruling class maintains power by shaping both the cultural and political structures of society, ensuring that individuals internalize the dominant ideology and reproduce it, even at the cost of their own humanity. The cycle of surveillance and policing in Ormalcy ensures that the status quo remains unchallenged, solidifying the hegemonic system.

Economic Control and Exploitation

Gramsci emphasized that hegemony is far from being an exclusively ideological phenomenon. According to him there can be no hegemony without the decisive nucleus of the economy” (Hall, 2017). Fascist regimes not only exert rigid control over social and political life but also enforce a centralized grip on the economy, where individual economic freedoms are heavily subordinated to the goals of the State. The State directs economic activities to serve its ideological and nationalistic agendas, often prioritizing military expansion, infrastructure projects, and the dominance of select industries. This entrenches inequality, concentrating wealth and power among the ruling class while perpetuating worker dependence and class divisions.

Mr. Ormal’s employment at the Tovine Phactory, where he makes flops, is a symbol of his subordination to the dominant economic system. In Gramsci’s terms, the ruling class maintains control over the working class not just through direct economic coercion, but by establishing a cultural framework in which the existing system of production and labor appears natural and necessary. Mr. Ormal finds pleasure in the mundane aspects of his work, like the sound and smell of the flops, which reflects how hegemonic forces shape workers’ identities and values, causing them to accept their exploitation as part of a normal, even enjoyable, way of life. This internalization of the ruling class’s ideology prevents Mr. Ormal from recognizing the exploitative nature of his labor, effectively masking the deeper structures of economic control.

The revocation of Mr. Ormal’s work permit by the Policeman highlights the hegemonic control over labor, where economic participation is based on compliance with the rules established by the ruling class. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony explains that workers are not only exploited in terms of their labor but are also made to feel dependent on the system for their livelihoods. When Mr. Ormal’s work permit is

revoked without explanation, it shows how easily the system can strip away a worker's means of survival, reflecting the precarious position of labor under fascism. Despite this, Mr. Ormal does not resist or question the authority that has deprived him of his job, demonstrating how the ruling class's ideology shapes individuals to accept their economic subordination without protest. The withdrawal of his right to work serves as a punitive measure that keeps individuals in line with the hegemonic system, ensuring that they do not challenge the structures of exploitation.

The transformation of Mr. Ormal into Policeman Ormal illustrates how economic exploitation is tied to broader mechanisms of social control. The Policemen, who enforce the rules of Ormalcy, are the agents of both cultural and economic hegemony, ensuring that workers like Mr. Ormal remain compliant with the system. The transition from worker to Policeman reflects Gramsci's idea that individuals can become enforcers of the very system that exploits them. By transforming into a Policeman, Mr. Ormal shifts from being an economically exploited worker to an agent of economic and ideological control, helping maintain the exploitative structures of labor in Ormalcy. In this way, the story shows how economic exploitation is not only sustained through direct coercion but also through cultural indoctrination and the creation of a workforce that polices itself, ensuring the continuation of the hegemonic order.

Unchecked Urbanization and Environmental Control

In Ormalcy, public spaces like parks are tightly controlled by the ruling authority who restrict access and enforce rules to maintain order and establish their dominance. Mr. Ormal's beloved park, a space of natural beauty and personal joy, is progressively walled off and destroyed, reflecting how the ruling class dictates the use and control of natural spaces. This restriction of access aligns with Gramsci's belief that the ruling class maintains hegemony by controlling not just ideas and social norms, but also the environment itself. The fact that Mr. Ormal is denied access to the park, a place that brings him happiness, represents the way hegemonic powers reshape the environment to serve their own interests, removing spaces of freedom and expression for the ordinary people.

The urbanization of Ormalcy, symbolized by the development of factories and the destruction of the park, further reflects the role of hegemony in dictating how the environment is used and transformed. Urbanization and industrialization are not neutral processes, but rather are driven by the interests of the ruling class, who seek to maximize economic production while controlling the population. In the story, Mr. Ormal works at the Tovine Phactory, a symbol of industrial labor, while the natural environment is systematically degraded, as shown by the "blangery machine" that rips through his favorite park bench. This reflects how authoritarianism often prioritizes economic growth at the expense of environmental preservation, with working-class individuals like Mr. Ormal are forced to accept the destruction of their environment without protest. The narrative reflects Gramsci's concept of consent under hegemony, where individuals accept the urbanization of their world as a natural, inevitable process, even when it diminishes their quality of life.

The environmental degradation in Ormalcy is a tool of dehumanization and control, consistent with Gramsci's idea that the ruling class uses both ideological and material means to maintain its dominance. The confinement of creatures like the Popawomps and Slittertoads into crates and cages symbolizes the way that both nature and people are controlled and commodified under the hegemonic system. The destruction of natural spaces and the conversion of land into industrial zones serve to alienate people from the natural world, limiting their experiences to those dictated by the ruling powers. Mr. Ormal's eventual transformation into Policeman Ormal, a figure who enforces environmental and social restrictions, highlights Gramsci's concept of how individuals can become agents of their own subjugation, enforcing the very rules that diminish their environment and their humanity.

CONCLUSION

The Gramscian analysis of Mez Breeze's *A Place Called Ormalcy* has elucidated how authoritarian regimes achieve hegemonic control by embedding restrictive ideologies within both cultural and political structures, by shaping societal norms that ultimately function to inhibit individual autonomy and collective dissent. The study has examined various socio-political issues that result from cultural

hegemony, through Mez's portrayal of a dystopian environment demonstrating Gramsci's view that cultural hegemony operates not solely through coercion, but also through consent that is subtly elicited by normalizing oppressive ideologies. Drawing on Gramsci's notion of war of position, the study has emphasized the criticality of micro-resistance as a counter-hegemonic strategy, which could have averted Mr. Ormal's downfall and his eventual deterioration into a ruthless Policeman. Breeze asserts that although *A Place Called Ormalcy* may seemingly convey a message of hopelessness or helplessness, the ending does contain clues that all is not lost in this particular dystopian scenario – the final soundtrack offers hope, with protestors chanting and proclaiming resistance as key (Breeze, 2018). The study not only situates Mez's fiction as a critical interrogation of authoritarianism, but also reaffirms the contemporary applicability of Gramscian theory in digital fiction by decoding the complex interplay between power, ideology, and resistance in socio-political contexts.

REFERENCES

- Achcar, G. (2022). Morbid Symptoms: What Did Gramsci Really Mean? *Notebooks: The Journal for Studies on Power*, 1(2), 379, 382. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26667185-201020010>
- Adorno, T. (1951). *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda* (p. 134). <https://cominsitu.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/theodor-wadorno-freudian-theory-and-the-pattern-of-fascist-propaganda-5.pdf>
- Bodenheimer, T. (1976). The Role of Intellectuals in Class Struggle. *Synthesis*, 1(1), 22–23. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/43783312>
- Breeze, M. (2018a). *A Place Called Ormalcy*. Mezbreezedesign.com. <https://www.mezbreezedesign.com/vr-literature/a-place-called-ormalcy/>
- Breeze, M. (2018b, July 20). *Virtual Reality Literature: Examples and Potentials*. The Writing Platform. <https://thewritingplatform.com/2018/07/virtual-reality-literature-examples-potentials/>
- Breeze, M. (2019, November 15). *A Place Called Ormalcy and the NMWP*. New Media Writing Prize. <https://newmediawritingprize.co.uk/a-place-called-ormalcy-and-the-nmwp/>
- Brons, L. (2018). The Hegemony of Psychopathy. *Punctum Books*. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.66794>
- Buttigieg, J. A. (2002). On Gramsci. *Daedalus*, 131(3), 68–69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027789>
- Ekber Doğan, A. (2020). The construction of Erdogan autocracy: balancing hegemonic crisis with promises of accumulation regime. *Critique*, 48(1), 95–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2019.1706787>
- Gramsci, A. (1978). Selections from the prison notebooks (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Eds. & Trans.; pp. 3, 9, 12, 57–58, 263). ElecBook.
- Groth, S. (2019, August 9). Screenshots: A Place Called Ormalcy. *Thewritingplatform.com*. <https://thewritingplatform.com/2019/08/screenshots-a-place-called-ormalcy/>
- Hall, S. (2017, February 10). *Stuart Hall: Gramsci and Us*. Verso. <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/2448-stuart-hall-gramsci-and-us?srsltid=AfmBOooSCBOIF1vdaV782OriFYGHY7a2tUxxJDkE4G3aeV-lyIE-G314>
- Konrad, A. (2012, September 2). *Theorizing Realist and Gramscian Hegemony*. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/02/theorizing-realist-and-gramscian-hegemony/>
- Martin, J. (2023, January 13). *Antonio Gramsci* (E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman, Eds.). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gramsci/>
- Mayo, P. (2008). Antonio Gramsci and his Relevance for the Education of Adults. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40: 418-435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00357.x>
- MezBreezeDesign. (2019). *About*. Mezbreezedesign.com. <https://www.mezbreezedesign.com>
- Sharma, S. (2024). Antonio Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony: A Critical Analysis. *IEHE the Quest*, 3(1), 32. https://www.iehe.ac.in/PDF/The_QUEST/Volume_2.2/Paper-5.pdf
- Sommer, M., Freise, M., & Wilde, G. (2010). *Alternative Perspectives on the Democratic Deficit of the European Union* (p. 1). https://essay.utwente.nl/62846/1/BA_Moritz_Sommer_-_Gramsci_in_Brussels.pdf
- Turner, A. (2016). *Hegemony of the Fourth and Fifth Estates: Exploration of Ideology Hegemony of the Fourth and Fifth Estates: Exploration of Ideology and False Consciousness in the Media and False Consciousness in the Media* (p. 12). <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6126&context=etd>
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (2019, May 28). *Fascism*. Ushmm.org; Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/fascism-1>
- Urbinati, N. (1998). From the Periphery of Modernity: Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Subordination and Hegemony. *Political Theory*, 26(3), 1. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/191840>

32. Zhang, X. (2024). Comment on “Critical study form the enlightenment thought to the cultural industry: from Adorno’s perspective.” *TransFormAção*, 47(4), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n4.e02400258>