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From Submission to Soumission: Populist Perspectives on Culture

Jansma, Judith

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From *Submission* to *Soumission*: Populist Perspectives on Culture

Judith Jansma

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 groningen

From *Submission* to *Soumission*: Populist Perspectives on Culture

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Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga
and in accordance with
the decision by the College of Deans.

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Thursday 9 December 2021 at 12.45 hours

by

Judith Femke Jansma

born on 30 July 1989
in Leeuwarden

Supervisors

Prof. P. Valdivia Martin
Prof. L.P. Rensmann

Co-supervisor

Dr. A. Godioli

Assessment Committee

Prof. J.W. Duyvendak
Prof. S.L. De Lange
Prof. M.J. Broersma

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Political parties cited in the dissertation

Acronym/ short name	Full name	Political orientation	Country
AFD	Alternative Für Deutschland	Populist Right	Germany
CDA	Christen Democratisch Appèl	Christian-democratic	Netherlands
CU	ChristenUnie	Christian-democratic	Netherlands
D66	Democraten '66	Social-liberal	Netherlands
DENK	DENK	Social-democratic/ Multiculturalist	Netherlands
DIE LINKE	Die Linke	Socialism/Populist Left	Germany
FN	Front National (1972-2018)	Populist Right	France
FrP	Fremkrittspartiet	Populist Right	Norway
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	Populist Right	Austria
FVD	Forum voor Democratie	Populist Right	Netherlands
Groep Wilders	Groep Wilders (2004-2006)	Populist Right	Netherlands
JOVD	Jongerenorganisatie Vrijheid en Democratie	Liberal youth association	Netherlands
LFI	La France Insoumise	Socialism/Populist Left	France
LN	Lega Nord	Populist Right	Italy
LPF	Lijst Pim Fortuyn (2002-2008)	Populist Right	Netherlands
LR	Les Républicains (2015 – present)	Liberal-conservative	France
MoDem	Mouvement Démocrate	Social-liberal	France
PD	Partito Democratico	Social-democratic	Italy
PDL	Polo delle Libertà (1994-1995)	Liberal-conservative	Italy
PG	Parti de Gauche	Socialism	France
Podemos	Podemos	Populist Left	Spain
PS	Parti Socialiste	Social-democratic	France
PvdA	Partij voor de Arbeid	Social-democratic	Netherlands
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid	Populist Right	Netherlands
RN	Rassemblement National (2018 – present)	Populist Right	France
SYRIZA	Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás (Coalition of the Radical Left)	Populist Left	Greece
UDMF	Union Démocrate des Musulmans de France	Muslim party	France
UMP	Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (2002-2015)	Liberal-conservative	France
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie	Conservative-liberal	Netherlands

Introduction: why populism and culture?¹

During a parliamentary debate in December 2007, Dutch politician Geert Wilders, leader of the far-right Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), coined the term “linkse hobby’s”². These left-wing hobbies included for instance international development aid, public broadcasting companies, the EU, free integration courses for immigrants, and subsidies for arts and culture. According to Wilders, money spent on such activities would only benefit a small part of the population, elites rather than the hardworking common people. It is as a result of this kind of remarks that populism is often considered to have an antagonistic relationship with culture. On the other hand, culture’s hostility towards populism seems equally true. In this latter perspective, culture is presented as a way to better understand the patterns and dangers of populism, consider for example the success of Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* after the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States. It is thus widely assumed that the relation between populism and culture is simply one of mutual exclusion – populism dismisses culture as a waste of time and money, while culture perceives and represents populism as its disturbing Other. However, by affirming that populists simply oppose culture, populism’s own active use of culture tends to be underestimated.

To be clear on my use of the term populism, I refer to the definition proposed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017):

Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the ‘pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the ‘volonté générale’ of the people (p. 6)

Following this definition, populism has two main characteristics, namely a dichotomous view of society – divided between an imagined “us” and “them” – and the

¹ Some passages in this introduction have appeared earlier in Jansma (2018).

² Wilders further elaborated on his aversion to the so-called left-wing hobbies in a column published in 2009: “Kabinet, stop met al die linkse hobby’s”, originally published on stopdecrisis.nl on June 30th, 2009, an initiative of de Telegraaf. For the full text, see: <https://pvv.nl/index.php/component/content/article.html?id=3413:geert-wilders-kabinet-stop-met-al-die-linkse-hobbys> (accessed on 20-05-2021)

sovereignty of the people. In the remainder of this dissertation, I will further elaborate on, and critically engage with this conceptualization of populism. In doing so, I will argue that culture is part and parcel of populism. If we want to understand how populism works and how it can be so successful, it is therefore essential to study this cultural component. Three recent examples from France and the Netherlands will now illustrate the importance of culture in populist discourse.

In 2017, the year in which I started my PhD, presidential elections took place in France. These elections were different than usual, as both candidates in the second round were outsiders; newcomer Emmanuel Macron from the recently established political movement *En Marche* competed with Marine Le Pen from the far-right party *Front National* (FN)³. It was the second time in history that FN made it this far, after Le Pen's father and party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen lost in the second round of the 2002 presidential elections against Jacques Chirac (obtaining nearly 18 percent of the votes). The 2017 elections showed not only a break with the two mainstream parties – the socialist party and the liberal-conservative party – that had been alternating power ever since the foundation of the 5th Republic in 1958. What makes this case even more interesting, is the way in which Macron and Le Pen emblemized a deeply divided country. Macron, on the one hand, was the candidate of those favoring a progressive, cosmopolitan, pro-European France, while Le Pen represented a mostly nostalgic, nationalist and Eurosceptic part of the population. According to the results, two thirds of the electorate supported Macron's vision of France, and one third Le Pen's.

These opposing visions were well captured in both candidates' campaign videos. Macron's video⁴ symbolically opens with three different shots of a sunrise, to remind the electorate that a new day is about to get started. The video is full of moving images on various roads, of trains, boats, tractors, and of individuals that are walking through cities and workplaces. These frames re-appear as metaphors in Macron's ambition: "remettre la France sur le chemin du progrès et l'Europe sur ses rails" [to put France back on the road to progress and Europe back on track, lit. on its rails]⁵. At the end of the video, he restates his conviction that France can only move forward

³ The party changed its name to *Rassemblement National* (RN) in 2018 in an effort to rebrand the party and, as such, to appeal to a larger audience. In this dissertation, I will use the old name when referring to the period before 2018, and its present name when the period following 2018 is concerned.

⁴ "Emmanuel Macron – Clip de Campagne", April 18th, 2017: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psfbQL_LOGA (accessed on 20-05-2021)

⁵ Translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

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through progress, rather than decline, regression and conservatism, and has historically always done so. This idea is visually supported with images of modern technologies such as solar panels and VR glasses. In other words, Macron tries to construct a narrative that highlights France's historical role in technological and scientific advancement, claiming that it would be no more than natural to continue this tradition.

In her campaign video⁶, Marine Le Pen also adopts a historical perspective, to set out her passionate and visceral love for France and its history, which is strongly blended with her personal history. We see her glancing through an old family album, but there are also images of emblematic buildings and historical figures referring to France, such as Jeanne d'Arc, the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. Marine Le Pen identifies with France's past, as we see her riding a horse just after a shot of the famous Parisian statue of Jeanne d'Arc (on a horse). She embodies France by declaring that insults towards France are like personal insults to her, and that she feels the people's suffering as her own suffering. The viewer quickly comes to understand that the glorious image of France presented in the video is under threat, and that there is only one person who can restore order in France, or in her own words, "remettre la France en ordre". Marine Le Pen is vividly portrayed as a modern Marianne or Jeanne d'Arc.

The contrast between these two videos could almost not be sharper. The stories of both candidates have a historical background, but they are rooted in different versions of the past. Macron foregrounds a French tradition of technological progress and change which he wants to revive, emphasizing a futureproof France that is continually changing, evolving and improving. In contrast, Le Pen sketches an idealized historical situation in which current political and societal issues did not yet exist; a France that got lost and to which she wants to return. This rhetoric is not unique to France; it could be compared to the campaigns of former US presidents Barack Obama in 2008 ("Hope", "Change" and "Progress") as opposed to that of Donald Trump in 2016 ("Make America Great Again"). Just like Obama and Trump, the videos of Macron and Le Pen propose a certain narrative about the Self, defining, in this particular case, who the French are, where they want to go and who or what it is that stands in the way of that ambition. At the same time, Macron sets out his political

⁶ "Clip de campagne officiel| Marine 2017": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYWnuQc5mYA> (accessed on 20-05-2021)

agenda (“remettre le travail en marche”), by detailing the concrete steps he will be taking as a president. In Le Pen’s video, references to concrete policy are absent, as her message focuses on the notions of French identity and history, hence the centrality of cultural references. Le Pen identifies with France, embodies French identity, and through her personal engagement with its problems, she is a true authentic leader. Her message is clear: your problems will be solved if “we”, the people, stick to our French roots – as opposed to external “corrupting” forces that seek to destroy “our” nation and culture.

Culture thus seems to be a quintessential ingredient for the political narrative of Marine Le Pen, and, to a lesser extent, that of Emmanuel Macron. But which cultural images are precisely put forward to bring the message, and how is this image constructed? In which aspects do populist politicians promote a different cultural message than non-populist politicians? A good example that illustrates how populist worldviews can clash with those of other politicians, is the discussion on Dutch identity between Geert Wilders and Alexander Pechtold, the former leader of the progressive-liberal party D66. This discussion took place in the Dutch parliament in November 2017, when Pechtold interrupted Wilders’ intervention on “when the Netherlands was still the Netherlands”, in his words, “the most beautiful country in the world”⁷. Wilders had just sketched an idyllic image of a “strong, self-willed, proud” country, that once existed, but which has been bargained away by the political elites. According to his nostalgic conception, the Netherlands still had control over their own borders, they had their own unique culture, provided decent healthcare for the elderly, controlled their own budgets and the country was not yet affected by Islamic influence.

Following this rosy description, Pechtold, who has a degree in art history and archeology, intervenes and asks Wilders which period he is precisely referring to. At first, Wilders attempts to get away with a joke, stating that he means the time preceding Pechtold’s political career, but when Pechtold insists he specifies that he meant the period before 1850. Pechtold then debunks Wilders’ idealized picture, to the amusement of present ministers and parliamentarians. He questions the quality of healthcare for the elderly in 1850, disputes the sovereignty of the Netherlands in a politically turbulent period, and points at the fact that Indonesia, world’s largest Muslim country, was still part of the Dutch colonial empire. In response to these

⁷ “Pechtold geeft Wilders een lesje Geschiedenis” – NOS Politiek Tweede Kamer 2017, November 20th, 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Fsee4Nr4lQ> (accessed on 20-05-2021)

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insights, Wilders simply repeats his earlier statements, which leads Pechtold to conclude that this discussion reveals the importance of history education – a comment that is well received by the prime minister Mark Rutte (VVD), who studied history and still today teaches social sciences and Dutch one day per week in a high school.

This discussion between Wilders and Pechtold shows a strong analogy with the ideas promoted in the campaign videos of Le Pen and Macron. While both Macron and Pechtold refute the nostalgic image presented by their opponents, presenting an alternative message of progress and change, Le Pen and Wilders invoke a “pure” national identity that has been lost, and should be retrieved. Another point that they have in common is the relevance of culture in both their narratives, that serves to define those that can be part of the in-group and those who cannot. Le Pen’s embodiment of Frenchness makes it clear that in order to be French, one should look “Western” like her, other figurants in her video are also predominantly white. This idea is reinforced by the earlier mentioned references to “typical” French buildings, architecture and historical figures. In his speech, Wilders clearly designates Muslims as the out-group in his idealized historical depiction of the Netherlands, stating that one would not “stumble over head scarves or “Marokkaantjes” [lit. little Moroccans, pejorative] that are messing around and hissing”, a country without “fear of terrorist attacks and corrupt immigrants [lit. “allochtonen”] in the police force”. Unlike Le Pen, Wilders does not refer to concrete cultural products in this speech, but his aforementioned comment on left-wing hobbies hints at the existence of a “good” culture as opposed to the despised “left-wing culture”.

An example of a Dutch populist politician who actively uses culture could be Thierry Baudet, leader of the far-right party Forum voor Democratie (FVD). This is most clearly illustrated with what is commonly referred to as his “boreal speech”, proclaimed after the party’s historical success in the provincial elections of 2019⁸. Baudet depicts the elites (or in his words, the “cartel”), as culturally ignorant, suffering from oikophobia⁹, fear of the familiar. Policy makers, “people who have never read a book in their life”, are the reason why the country is in a “cultural and spiritual vacuum”, in this era of “cultural, economic and political capitulation”. Instead, Baudet

⁸ For the full text of the speech, see: “Spreektekst Thierry Baudet, verkiezingsavond 20 maart 2019”, in Trouw, March 21st, 2019: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/spreektekst-thierry-baudet-verkiezingsavond-20-maart-2019~be2a1539/> (accessed on 20-05-2021)

⁹ This is also the title of Baudet’s book: *Oikofobie. De angst voor het eigene*, which he published in 2013.

values Western architecture, classical music and painting, refers to Greek mythology and Hegelian philosophy (“Minerva’s owl spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk”) and cites Dutch poet Menno Wigman. He proposes a cultural renaissance, which, interestingly, is based on a rather classical or elitist conception of art and culture. This is especially remarkable as the majority of FVD voters have low or average education¹⁰, while elite culture typically addresses more highly educated citizens.

In other words, the previous examples reveal that these populist leaders – Le Pen, Wilders and Baudet – all actively engage with culture, and in some cases embrace so-called culture with a big C, despite their presumed aversion to (cultural) elites. In all three cases, however, these cultural references serve to set apart an authentic and glorious cultural community that should be defended at the expense of alien Others, whose culture is always inferior, and is seen as a threat to the country. Given the importance of culture in populist discourse, the aim of this dissertation is to map populist uses of culture. The next section will focus on the societal relevance of this topic, and argues that an analysis such as mine is crucial for understanding the success of populism. At the same time, I claim that the widespread success of populism promotes certain perspectives on (national) identity over others, thereby contributing to cultural change in our societies at large. This is why the third section of this introduction will further reflect on these different significations of culture, namely concrete cultural products and the broader, more abstract notion of culture. Finally, the last section will present the case studies that will be the core of my analysis.

Populism today

During the years of my PhD, starting in September 2017 and ending roughly four years later, populism has proven to be more than just a one-hit wonder. After the stormy year of 2016, that saw the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States, the so-called “patriotic spring” in 2017 did not fully come into blossom: Le Pen’s Front National and Wilders’ PVV both ended in second position in the respective presidential and legislative elections. A populist “autumn storm” reached Germany in September 2017, where Alternative Für Deutschland (AFD) was the first

¹⁰ Based on Ipsos polls for NOS, the Dutch Broadcast Foundation, after the provincial elections of 2019 and the general elections of 2021. See: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2277050-dit-is-de-forum-kiezer-en-zo-ziet-de-rest-van-de-stemmers-eruit> and <https://nos.nl/collectie/13860/artikel/2373083-verkiezingen-in-cijfers-hoge-opkomst-onder-jongeren-en-zorg-belangrijkste-thema> (accessed on 20-05-2021)

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nationalist far-right party to win seats in the Bundestag since World War II. Only one month later almost 26% of the Austrian electorate voted for the right-wing populist Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), which joined the coalition. Since then, several European countries experienced an upsurge of populist electoral success, most notably in Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. Outside of Europe, new populist leaders took office in Bolivia, Brazil and Sri Lanka, or were re-elected in India and Venezuela. Others, such as Trump, had to step down, but only after a turbulent period marked by accusations of election fraud, culminating in the historical storming of the Capitol. This illustrates that populism is still a dynamic political phenomenon in all corners of the world.

The global success of populism has generated attention both in- and outside the academic world. This is best illustrated with Figure 0.1, which is based on data obtained with Google Trends over the time period January 2004 until March 2021. The figure shows the relative frequency of the search query “populism” used in the Google search engine worldwide. Interestingly, the peak value (100) is reached in January 2017, which corresponds with the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States. However, the bigger picture indicates an increased interest since September 2016, and although there is a large decrease after January 2017, the numbers remain systematically higher than the years preceding Trump’s election. Given their specific relevance in my dissertation, I compared the global results to the cases of France and the Netherlands (using the search query “populisme”, limiting the results to the respective countries). These numbers, which can be found in appendices A and B, show similar tendencies, namely a strong increase starting in the autumn of 2016, followed by a decline. Especially in France, and less so in the Netherlands, populism remains a more popular search term than before 2016.

Figure 0.1. Relative frequency of the Google search query "populism" worldwide

Note: The figure contains data from the time period between January 2004 and March 2021. All values are calculated in comparison to the peak value (100). For example, in August 2016, the keyword “populism” was only 16% of the frequency reached in January 2017, in November 2016 this was 97%.

Figure 0.1 is indicative of the societal interest in the topic of populism, especially around important events such as the election and inauguration of Donald Trump, the Brexit referendum, the US midterm elections in November 2018, the French presidential elections in April-May 2017, and the Dutch legislative elections in March 2017 (for the latter two, see Appendices A and B). People, especially in the anglophone world, massively googled populism in order to find out more about the phenomenon, and continued to do so more frequently than in the years before 2017. The sharp decrease after March 2017 could simply show that in the months after the inauguration of Trump people lost interest in the topic, or that the query had become redundant due to the ample attention for populism in the media. However, it is clear that the numbers went back up soon after, and although they fluctuated, they remained consistently higher in the years after.

This increased interest on a societal level is mirrored by a growing number of academic publications featuring “populism” as one of the keywords. Using the online

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scientific database Scopus, I found a total of 2827 publications that responded to the keyword “populism”, a vast majority of which concerned journal articles (2423). As Figure 0.2 demonstrates, scholarly attention for the topic is strongly on the rise since 2016, with 135 scientific contributions, to 789 in the year 2020. Again, there seems to be a direct link with the Brexit vote and Trump’s election, that sparked a wider academic interest in the topic. Looking more specifically at the topic of my dissertation, Scopus located a total of 224 publications with both the keywords “populism” and “culture”, with a sharp increase starting in 2017 (25) up to 61 contributions in 2020. Figure 0.2 shows that both categories follow a highly similar development, although it should be pointed out that for the sake of readability two different scales have been used (0-1000 and 0-100). Publications on populism and culture thus remain a fraction of the total number of academic contributions on the topic of populism.

Figure 0.2. Development of academic publications on populism and culture

Note: The black line indicates the publications with the keyword “populism” on a scale from 0-1000, and the grey line those with the keywords “populism” and “culture”, on a scale from 0-100.

The Scopus data gives an impression of the popularity of certain keywords, and reveals that populism was a rather marginal object of study up to 2016, while research

on populism and culture still remains relatively rare. It is in this gap that the present dissertation is to be situated. The combined study of populism and culture allows to explore cultural factors that play a role in the success of populist parties. At the same time, an interdisciplinary focus can also explain how political phenomena such as populism shape the ways in which culture is valued in society. Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, my analysis will take into account broader societal patterns, such as the articulation of populist narratives in mainstream media, and provide a more in-depth perspective on populist engagement with cultural products. The next section will further engage with these two different levels on which populism and culture interact.

Culture and populism

As the examples of Le Pen, Wilders and Baudet above have illustrated, culture is a crucial part of populist discourse. While a more detailed theoretical reflection on the notion of culture will be presented in chapter 2 of this dissertation, this section will map the interplay between populism and culture. To be precise, I will distinguish between cultural products, as concrete manifestations of culture, and the larger, more abstract notion of culture, as a system of shared ideas, values and behaviors. As will become clear, populists engage with cultural products – novels, music, symbols – and integrate them in their rhetoric. At the same time, the success of populist rhetoric – having a strong cultural component – will have an impact on the broader culture. For instance, the populist emphasis on the people and its specific cultural definition may affect interpretations of what “the real French” or “the real German” should look like.

This reasoning thus understands culture to be a two-way street; not only an inventory of shared values and practices of a certain group of people, but also activating and orientating human behavior (cf. Appiah, 2018; Wekker, 2016). As such, culture is a quintessential factor for the construction and enactment of a narrative of community, defining who can and who can’t be part of the group, in other words, who is “us” and who is “them”. These groups are further shaped through what Stone (2012) defines as “stories of power” and “stories of change”, two narrative structures that define policy making. As she convincingly argues, political discourse clearly has literary characteristics, which is reflected in its narrative structure, but also its use of literary devices such as synecdoche, metaphor and ambiguity is essential. Politics, culture and literature are thus strongly intertwined.

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Considering culture as a manifestation of people's reactions to a crisis, Castells, Caraça, and Cardoso (2012) argue that the dominant culture of the post-2008 era is one of fear, overriding "alternative cultures of hope" (p.4). With crisis I mean "a moment of rupture and instability" (Valdivia, 2019, p. 287), leading not only to "turbulence and discontent", but also to "rethinking and innovation" of our social fabrics (ibid.). It is important to acknowledge that crises are usually multifaceted. In their analysis of the cultures of the financial crisis of 2008, Castells et al. (2012) specify that "a financial crisis triggered an industrial crisis that induced an employment crisis that led to a demand crisis that, by prompting massive government intervention to stop the free fall of the economy, ultimately led to a fiscal crisis." (p. 4). Eventually, this gave way to a culture of political parties blaming each other for the existing problems (a political crisis) and a culture of individual citizens or countries refusing to help others that were more seriously affected by these crises (a solidarity crisis).

The predominance of a culture of fear facilitates the creation and exploitation of rigid dichotomies of good versus bad and angst scenarios, a practice which Wodak (2015) has accurately labelled "the politics of fear". Focusing on right-wing populist parties, Wodak (2015) observes that this emphasis on feelings of fear and insecurity often leads to practices of scapegoating. Ethnic, religious or cultural minorities are held responsible for current crises, or are at least part of the problem, and thus pose a threat to the community. Simply put, issues generated by complex phenomena such as globalization are attributed to specific groups of individuals or institutions, providing easy solutions that will supposedly solve the problem. A good example of this logic is Trump's plan to ban drug trafficking and other criminal activities by building a wall on the Mexican border. Rather than attacking existing criminal structures within the United States, his plan mainly envisaged to prevent immigrants (framed as criminals and rapists) from entering the country. This clearly shows how the Other is stereotyped, blamed and eventually excluded, but structural issues with organized crime are left unaddressed.

The example also demonstrates that the culture of fear is often based on the enactment of strong sentiments, and that facts only play a subordinate role. This is especially relevant today, in an era qualified as post-truth and dominated by fake news and alternative facts that are widely shared on the internet (McIntyre, 2018; Nichols, 2017). Populist politics are often presented as an expression of common sense, as opposed to more nuanced expert views or politically correct technocratic solutions that

do not sufficiently address people's concerns (Moffitt, 2019). However, as we have seen, the flipside of these politics of fear is the outright exclusion of elites and Others. As such, responding to existing crises, the populist answer can give rise to the emergence of new crises of different kinds (e.g. the neglect of democratic virtues). As a consequence, it is necessary to examine these politics of fear and to think about reasonable alternatives. To repeat the words of Valdivia (2019), by looking for narratives of rethinking and innovation.

The complex interplay between populism and crisis suggests that populism does not have one clear cause and effect, but that it is rather rooted in and contributing to a larger culture of fear (Castells et al., 2012). Indeed, rather than considering populism as a linear process, this dissertation wants to build on the idea of populism having a more circular character, meaning that it is always latent in society and waiting for the right moment to trigger populist attitudes. Or as Hawkins (2010) accurately describes it: "There is a dormant Hugo Chávez or Sarah Palin inside all of us. The question is how does he or she get activated?". It should not come as a surprise by now that I propose to view these latent populist attitudes as largely culturally grounded.

With these considerations in mind, this dissertation wants to lay the foundations for a theory on the populist use of culture, taking into account both levels of culture discussed above; the appropriation of concrete examples of culture, as well as the integration thereof in broader interpretations of (national) culture. For this reason, the configuration and successful articulation of populist narratives will be a central part of the analysis. Following the work of Meretoja (2017), I understand narratives as "interpretative practices through which we make sense of our lives, and these meaning-making practices are ethically charged" (p. 3). In this sense, a narrative is considered a practice, a performative activity that "produces and shapes reality" (Meretoja, 2017, p. 13). This definition of narrative, and the implications of these performative qualities of the populist narrative, will be further discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

In short, the central argument in this dissertation is that to appreciate the prevailing success of populism worldwide, it is crucial to study the cultural component in populist narratives. Such an approach will shed light on the way in which populists themselves actively use cultural products as part of their political narratives. At the same time, it allows to reflect on the role of populist politicians in public debates on culture, more precisely how their particular take on (national) identity contributes to

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a culture of fear. To address both of these aspects, two overarching research questions will be central in this dissertation:

1. Which images, cultural institutions and products do populists identify with or promote, and how do they become an organic part of their narratives?
2. How did populist actors intervene in public debates on controversial cultural products?

To answer these overarching research questions, this dissertation is divided into two parts. The first one will take a theoretical perspective, defining populism and the populist narrative, as well as develop a novel methodological framework. The second part will put this methodological framework in practice, by analyzing two case studies, the short film *Submission* (2004) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh, and the novel *Soumission* (2015) by Michel Houellebecq¹¹. These two cases studies have been selected for two main reasons. First, they are two examples of cultural products that deal with the topic of Islam in a controversial manner, causing vivid societal debates. The link with Islam is emphasized by the title of both works, submission being one of the translations of the word Islam. More literally, the act of submission is prominent in the film – the submission of women to men – and the novel – the state’s submission to Islamic rule. Second, choosing these two case studies will allow me to analyze the political contexts of France and the Netherlands, two countries with notable far-right populist parties, who closely collaborate on a European level. I will further engage with the particularities of both case studies in the next and final section of this chapter.

From *Submission* to *Soumission*

The short film *Submission* (2004) and the novel *Soumission* (2015) caused sizable societal debates when they came out in the Netherlands and France respectively. In both cases, this had to do with the controversial topic of the cultural products as well as events of Islamist violence that followed or coincided with their publication. The film *Submission*, written and produced by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Dutch-Somalian member of parliament for the liberal VVD party, and the polemical film maker Theo van Gogh,

¹¹ To avoid confusion, I will refer to Houellebecq’s novel by its original French title. *Soumission* was translated in English as *Submission* by Lorin Stein and this translation came out in September 2015.

aims to expose the subordinate position of Muslim women. The film is controversial for displaying images that are shocking and outright offensive to Muslims. Several months after the film was broadcast on public television in August 2004, Van Gogh was killed in the streets of Amsterdam by the Islamist Mohammed Bouyeri.

In *Soumission*, the French author Michel Houellebecq describes a French society in the near future (2022) that is on the verge of Islamization. The novel came out on the same day as the terrorist attacks targeting the office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Although this coincidence was clearly not orchestrated by Houellebecq, some took it as a proof for the author's (supposedly) lucid analysis of Islam's potential danger to French society. An example of this is the journalist Sébastien Lapaque¹², who writes that "Michel Houellebecq est l'exemple le plus frappant d'un écrivain ayant trouvé son inspiration la plus authentique dans un événement qui allait lui succéder" [Michel Houellebecq is the most remarkable example of an author who found his most authentic inspiration in an event that was still bound to take place]. Others, on the other hand, pointed at the fragility of the situation and the detrimental effect of controversial texts such as *Soumission*. This position is illustrated by the statement of former prime minister Manuel Valls¹³, who claimed the following:

La France ça n'est pas Michel Houellebecq [...]. Ce qui s'est passé hier est abominable et nous devons en tirer évidemment toutes les conséquences. Mais c'est aussi peut-être pour nous, [...] c'est l'occasion de dire « non », nous refusons ces amalgames, cette intolérance, cette haine, ces discours qui traumatisent [...] aujourd'hui notre pays

[France is not Michel Houellebecq. What happened yesterday is appalling, and of course we have to take the consequences. But it is perhaps for us the occasion to say "no", we refuse these amalgams, this intolerance, this hate, these discourses that traumatize our country today].

¹² "Pourquoi les Français plébiscitent Michel Houellebecq", published on February 17th, 2016 in Le Figaro: lefigaro.fr/vox/culture/2016/02/17/31006-20160217ARTFIG00350-pourquoi-les-francais-plebiscitent-michel-houellebecq.php (accessed on 20-05-2021)

¹³ Manuel Valls: "Ces individus étaient suivis mais il n'y a pas de risque zéro" – RTL – RTL, January 8th, 2015. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgZ1_koC2UI (accessed on 20-05-2021)

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These responses epitomize the apparent differences of opinion concerning the novel and the possible intentions of the author, but also reveal the appearance of the novel *Soumission* in political and media discourse. As we will see in this dissertation, both controversial works sparked vivid societal and political debates in which the interpretation of *Submission* or *Soumission* was closely linked to the speaker's worldviews, in particular their attitudes towards Muslims.

My analysis will explore political responses to the film and the novel, with a special emphasis on populist politicians, cultivating a strong aversion towards unfamiliar (religious) Others. Taking a look at the broader societal context, I will also analyze the framing of both case studies in media debates. It seems evident that both instances of Islamist violence played an important role in the societal debates on these cultural products, but it is not precisely clear how this affected their success. On the one hand, works and authors that (critically) engage with Islam could gain more popularity as they become a symbolic act of resistance against Islamic violence. On the other hand, fear of further escalation could also favor a more cautious stance, and thus reject polemical works such as *Submission* and *Soumission*. In this regard, the notion of affect will be relevant for understanding how for instance fear and anger shaped public response to the two works.

As has become clear, the two case studies deal with the presence of Islam in Western Europe, a topic that fits in a broader European narrative of religious conflict (cf. Kaplan, 2007; Nelsen, Guth, Green, Jelen, & Rozell, 2015). In this light, religious differences have strongly defined European and national identities in the past, and continue to be a relevant factor in the present. Within this mindset, the stereotypical portrayal of the religious Other in literature and other forms of art is certainly not new, but rooted in historical narratives of religious struggle. In *Submission*, this dichotomy takes the shape of an Enlightened Judeo-Christian Self as opposed to a barbaric Islamic Other, whereas *Soumission* certainly plays with this opposition, but draws a more ambiguous and stylistically complex picture. I will further elaborate on the stylistic differences between both case studies in the final part of this chapter.

The analysis of the two case studies will take into account these different approaches to Islam, and explore how they influence the interpretation of controversial cultural works engaging with this topic. In this sense, French and Dutch debates on Islam illustrate what Tonkens and Duyvendak (2016) refer to as “the culturalization of citizenship”, a cultural understanding of citizenship that includes the adoption of

progressive secular norms and values. As such, a sharp polarization emerges between a Self that is considered modern, secular, emancipated and tolerant towards LGBT+ communities, as opposed to a backward and conservative Other, who, for that matter, cannot belong to the dominant culture. The two case studies may shed more light on how this process of societal polarization developed between 2004 and today, and focuses on the role of populism in particular within these cultural debates.

As stated above, one of the key objectives in this dissertation is to explore the different response to controversial cultural products in France and the Netherlands. The two countries have some important aspects in common; they are both founding members of the European Union, but rejected the European constitutional treaty via a popular referendum in 2005. The no-vote was mainly motivated by a perceived loss of national sovereignty, fear of unemployment, high membership fees, and the possible EU membership of Turkey (Marthaler, 2005; Nijeboer, 2005). Today, these Eurosceptic sentiments can be found most explicitly in the electoral programs of the far-right populist parties RN in France, and PVV and FVD in the Netherlands. Furthermore, on a European level, RN and PVV work together as part of the Identity and Democracy group.

On the other hand, there are substantial differences between the two countries in terms of their political and societal organization, especially in relation to the topic of religion. France strongly emphasizes the importance of a secular state, the so-called *laïcité* that was installed in 1905. While this was originally intended as an inclusive value, providing a neutral public sphere for all French citizens, today the debates on *laïcité* get a more exclusionary character as they focus on banning Islamic symbols such as headscarves in public schools (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015; Almeida, 2017; Balibar, 2014; Baubérot, 2015). The French secular state, or “la République indivisible”, is usually opposed to the much-feared notion of “islamo-gauchisme”, the alleged collaboration between left-wing elites and Islamist groups, and “communautarisme” the existence of various religious or regional communities that are seen to undermine the shared national identity. In fact, such a system in which different isolated communities co-exist was the reality in The Netherlands up to the 1960’s (cf. Mepschen, Duyvendak, & Tonkens, 2010; Van der Veer, 2006). This pillarized society was divided into four main groups (pillars), namely protestants, Roman Catholics, liberals, and socialists, upholding the “roof” of the Dutch nation-state. Besides being connected to a specific political party, each pillar organized their own news supply,

education, healthcare, leisure, and religious activities, which essentially created parallel societies where contact between different groups was rare. Although the decade-long pillarization has certainly left some traces in modern society, today the Netherlands is today among the most secular countries in the world (Mepschen et al., 2010).

To sum up, *Submission* (2004) and *Soumission* (2015) are controversial for their representations of Islam, which caused a societal commotion. Echoing the dynamics of societal polarization discussed above, the cultural products provoked strong emotional responses of shock, disgust or adoration, dividing the audience into those who love it and those who hate it. Their strong connection with politics made these cultural works politically relevant: the politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali wrote and co-produced the film *Submission*, and Houellebecq used real political figures as characters in his novel *Soumission*. As such, they are examples of what Ågerup (2019) labeled “discursive hybridity”, the “contemporary trend of blurring or renegotiating the boundaries between fiction and reality, and literary and political discourse” (p. 616). This discursive hybridity is also reflected in the societal debates on these cultural products, which engaged with both political as well as artistic aspects. I will further elaborate on the interplay between these literary and political discourses in chapters 5 and 6, borrowing the terminology of the “orders of worth” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). In this sense, the Inspired World foregrounds the artistic values of the work, while the Civic World considers the cultural product as engaging in a political or societal debate. Once more, this reveals the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to study the societal implications of controversial cultural works, in particular their use by populist and non-populist politicians.

However, in addition to emphasizing the similarities between the reception of *Submission* and *Soumission*, it is also important to consider their stylistic and narrative differences. More precisely, both works differ greatly in terms of their artistic use of ambiguity. This could simply be a consequence of the genre, as literary novels tend to leave more room for the reader’s imagination than the manifesto, but Houellebecq’s trademark use of literary style figures such as irony, ridicule and (dark) humor also plays a role. At the same time, public statements by the author on their intentions or political convictions provide clues to readers struggling to make sense of a literary text or film. In the case of Houellebecq, the reconstruction of the novel’s ultimate meaning is problematic due to the controversial plot of his books on the one

hand, and the author's cryptic statements in the media on the other hand, that might leave the audience even more confused than before (Baroni & Estier, 2016; Berg-Sørensen, 2017; Korthals Altes, 2014). Indeed, in an interview with *The Paris Review*¹⁴, Houellebecq defends his neutrality as a literary author:

But I am not an intellectual. I don't take sides, I defend no regime. I deny all responsibility, I claim utter irresponsibility—except when I discuss literature in my novels, then I am engaged as a literary critic. But essays are what change the world.

He further adds that *Soumission* was not intended as a provocation. The message in the film *Submission* is more clear-cut, the film's contents speak for themselves, and fit within earlier political statements on Islam made by Hirs Ali, the author of the script. The role of Van Gogh, on the other hand, is more equivocal, but the criticism of Islam voiced in the film is in line with his earlier insults towards Muslims, whom he used to address as "geitenneukers", goat fuckers. As a result of these differences, it is crucial to distinguish between authors who openly agree with and endorse the political message present in their work, and those who claim to be neutral, and thus remain rather vague about their personal intentions. The author's public attitudes towards populism in particular can provide clues for the interpretation of their work as supporting populist "us" vs. "them" logic, or perhaps as a critical position against this rhetoric. My analysis will distinguish between these different positions and explore their implications for the societal debates on *Submission* and *Soumission*, more precisely the integration of both cultural products in populist narratives.

Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is divided into two parts, of which the first will take a theoretical and methodological perspective to address research question 1, whereas the second part will focus on research question 2, studying the two case studies mentioned above. Again, the final objective of this thesis is to gain a more detailed understanding of the populist use of culture, using the short film *Submission* and the novel *Soumission* to

¹⁴ "Scare Tactics: Michel Houellebecq Defends His Controversial New Book", in *The Paris Review*, January 2nd, 2015: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/01/02/scare-tactics-michel-houellebecq-on-his-new-book/> (accessed on 20-05-2021)

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set the basis for a transferable model. Chapter 1 will first engage with the phenomenon of populism, by reflecting on the academic debate and by providing a tentative definition. The main focus of this chapter, however, will be to explore populist constructions of “us” versus “them”. In doing so, I will discuss political, socio-economic and cultural developments that lie behind the dichotomous worldviews articulated by populists, and that explain why populist narratives appeal to so many citizens. In chapter 2, I will argue that culture is an important factor of the populist success. Not only does culture allow to define who can belong to “the people” and who are its antagonists; we will also see that populists actively use culture – e.g. symbols, cultural heritage or literary works – as part of their political narrative. In developing a typology of populism and culture, I aim to gain insights in the type of cultural products populists identify with, why these products are particularly useful to them, and how they are eventually integrated in the populist narrative.

As mentioned above, the interplay between populism and culture takes place on different levels. Populists embrace certain cultural products that coincide with their definition of the true people, as opposed to corrupt elites and alien Others. At the same time, populist narratives orientate popular views on culture and (national) identity. In chapter 3, I will elaborate on the notion of populist narratives and their metaphorical and affective construction. More concretely, this chapter will take a look at the mobilization of certain affects that fuel emotional attachment to one group, and a strong repulsion of other groups, based on fear, for instance. The cultivation of such positive affects towards the Self, and a negative portrayal of the Other are central to understanding the widespread success of populist dichotomies. In addition to this, I will claim that conceptual metaphor is especially instrumental for framing cultural products within a broader narrative. Furthermore, the use of extreme metaphors such as war or disease scenarios creates a sense of animosity or danger, and leads to the activation of the affects of fear and anger. Finally, chapter 4 will conclude the first part of the dissertation by proposing a novel methodological framework that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods for analyzing the populist use of culture. This framework, based on Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is in line with the social-constructivist paradigm underlying the first three theoretical chapters, focusing on the construction and articulation of populist narratives.

The first four chapters provide the theoretical backgrounds and analytical tools that will allow me to study the short film *Submission* and the novel *Soumission* in chapters 5 and 6. More concretely, the typology of populism and culture will be used as a basis for a qualitative analysis that maps the degree to which politicians reject, identify with or appropriate the cultural products in question. Moreover, by focusing on the mobilization of affects in different political responses to *Submission* and *Soumission*, I aim to shed new light on the role of emotions and feelings in political narratives of belonging. Through a quali-quantitative approach, my analysis will look at broader societal narratives on both cultural works, more precisely the way in which they are framed in mainstream media. I will build on an innovative revisited model of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to reveal pervasive thought patterns that shape and orientate the way we perceive the world, and to reflect on alternative metaphors that can be used to imagine new realities. Finally, the key insight emerging from this dissertation will be that populist dichotomous worldviews are ubiquitous, widely supported, and not at all limited to isolated populist parties or politicians. While the issues and concerns raised by populists are often serious, and should be dealt with, their harsh exclusion of elites and non-alike Others shows the need to configure inclusive narratives. Rather than reinforcing polarizing rhetoric, it is crucial to create novel ways for building up all-encompassing narratives, worldviews and social fabrics. This dissertation aims to take a first step in that direction

PART I: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter 1 Revisiting populism¹

1.1 Introduction

The recent rise of populist parties and leaders has inspired a vast number of scholars, journalists, policy-makers, and artists among others. For this reason, it is hardly possible to give an extensive overview of the published works on the topic. Similarly, given this strong presence in academic, political and societal debates, many different interpretations of populism exist, and sometimes slightly contradict each other, as I will further show below. To give a recent example, some political commentators considered the coronavirus the beginning of a return to science and – consequently – the end of populism², while others, like the political scientist Cas Mudde³, were much more skeptical towards such claims. This reveals that some see populism as a temporary hype caused by a certain crisis or as a result of a particular *Zeitgeist*, which will disappear as soon as time will prove populist claims wrong. Most political scientists, however, concede that populism has become a much more structural part of the political system that should be taken seriously (cf. Akkerman, De Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Wodak, 2015).

In this first chapter, it is therefore of utmost importance to clearly define populism, and to be aware of different explanations for its prevailing success. Section 1.2 of this chapter will take as a point of departure the definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004), and discuss the main difficulties for the conceptualization of populism. However, the focus of this chapter is not the specific nature of populism – as ideology, logic or style – but rather its influence on society, specifically in shaping narratives around the notions of “the pure people”, “the evil elites” and “alien others”.

¹ Some parts of this chapter have appeared earlier in Jansma (2019).

² See for instance the article “Coronavirus could kill off populism” by Gideon Rachman in the Financial Times <https://www.ft.com/content/3bcf2b5e-e5f1-48e4-bb15-cd29615a9198> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

³ “Will the coronavirus ‘kill populism’? Don’t count on it”: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-populism-trump-politics-response> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

This is why section 1.3 of the chapter will take a closer look at populist dichotomies, how they are articulated, and why these dichotomies find resonance with large groups of voters. Here, my aim is precisely not to demonize populists as a dangerous Other, but to understand the societal issues that populism addresses, and that contribute to their success. Or in the words of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017): “Populism often asks the right questions, but provides the wrong answers” (p. 118). In adopting a critical perspective to (neoliberal) society, it is possible to tackle the real societal questions raised by populists, and to formulate alternative solutions to these problems.

While this approach is certainly not unique, this chapter will add to the existing literature by taking an interdisciplinary approach, considering populism as a broad societal phenomenon, and more specifically by taking into account the essential role played by culture. As will become clear, I understand culture to be an important marker of the populist interpretation of “the people”, defining for instance the “real French” or “real Dutch”. These popular ideas can materialize in new cultural narratives about “us” and “them”, which then build and support widely held worldviews concerning the Self and the Other.

1.2 What is populism?

Over the past few years, following populism’s growing relevance in the global political arena, academic interest on the topic has also increased (Akkerman et al., 2016; Finchelstein, 2017; Furedi, 2018; Judis, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rensmann, 2017; Rodrik, 2017; Wodak, 2015). Emanating from different disciplines – from history to political science to discourse studies – and different geographical areas, these contributions give us a glimpse of the broadness of the topic. Despite all possible definitions being tentative, I will use as a departing point for discussion the minimal definition of populism proposed by Mudde (2004), which takes into account the core concepts that all populisms have in common, while at the same time acknowledging the various shapes in which populism can appear. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as follows:

Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the ‘pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the ‘volonté générale’ of the people (p. 6)

This definition, or ideational approach, conceives populism as a “thin-centered” ideology, in contrast to a “full” ideology, meaning that it can be combined with other ideologies. If populism determines the presence of the three core concepts, the “host-ideologies” define the way in which they are interpreted. For example, if populism is merged with socialism, being part of the people or the elite is mostly a socio-economic question, as we see for example in countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia, or in Europe in left-wing populist parties like *Podemos* in Spain and *Syriza* in Greece. On the other hand, when populism is combined with nativism, the notion of the people is constituted on an ethnic base, for example the “real” French, Hungarians or Americans, excluding minorities such as Roma, indigenous peoples or (Muslim) immigrants. The populist worldview thus simplifies a complex reality, explaining the problems of an imagined homogeneous people by blaming the elite and by scapegoating the Other. This conflictive character of populism is one of its key aspects, and following Rensmann (2017), I will argue that this results in the construction of horizontal and vertical dichotomies, which will be further detailed in section 1.3 of this chapter.

Although populism is a regular topic of academic research, its conceptualization is still widely debated. While the definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) is frequently shared, other interpretations exist and do not necessarily exclude one another. This includes the conceptualization of populism as a discourse, a strategy, a logic or a political style (Moffitt, 2019). These various interpretations differ in the way they conceive of populism as articulating specific political convictions (ideology, discourse, logic) or as being merely performative (strategy, style). In other words, this entails the question as to whether every politician can potentially be a populist (to some extent), or whether this qualification is limited to a certain political spectrum.

Two factors that complicate the definition of populism are its lack of a strong ideological core, encompassing all forms of (left-wing and right-wing) populism, and the difficulty to measure the extent to which a certain politician or party is to be

considered populist (Moffitt, 2017). More concretely, a definition that is too broad would devalue the concept, being applicable to a whole series of political phenomena, while the different manifestations of populism – from Podemos in Spain to Trumpism in the United States – are hard to capture in a precise (ideological) description. This is also the criticism voiced by Piketty (2020) in his latest book *Capital and Ideology*, arguing that the term populism should be “strictly avoided”, because it “mixes everything up in one indigestible stew” (p. 962). Populism, he states, has become a way for the established parties to disqualify a political opponent, while at the same time it is embraced by some populist parties as a part of their identity. Essentially, this dynamic distracts attention from actual policy. Although I believe that it is up to the academic community to be critical towards what is framed as populist, and to any possible abuse of the term, I would propose that regardless of what populism *is* precisely, it might be more productive to focus on what populism *does*, and to explain its omnipresence in contemporary politics. For this, the ideational approach by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) proves to be especially helpful, as it provides a clear definition of populism, and defines its two main characteristics, namely the centrality of the people and its anti-elitist stance, resulting in a prevailing “us” vs. “them” dichotomy. In fact, precisely these two features stand out as a common denominator across different definitions of populism.

Analyzing these dichotomies is not only central for understanding how the populist narrative works, but, more importantly, it will also illuminate the main reasons why the populist narrative appeals to such large numbers of voters at this moment in time. As argued by Laclau (2005) in his influential *On Populist Reason*, populism emerges when there is a “multiplication of social demands” (p. 229). However, these social demands or “neglected concerns” (Judis, 2016) are slightly vague and are therefore often categorized along the lines of a social or a cultural cleavage in society (Kriesi et al., 2006; Rensmann, 2017; Rodrik, 2017). Therefore, the objective of the next section is to clarify these concerns, identifying the several concrete challenges the people are (allegedly) facing – and which populists aim to solve. I believe that this approach could bring different theories on populism together while at the same time it sheds new light on how different societal challenges interact and are used by populists in order to cast the pure and innocent people as victims and to put the blame on the corrupt elites.

Finally, the description of the people as pure and innocent is potentially problematic, as it impedes any critical reflection on the own behavior, and puts all the blame on the Other. In her impressive study on current manifestations of institutional racism in the Netherlands, titled *White Innocence*, Wekker (2016) argues that the cultivation of an innocent self-image gives way to the denial of racism (“it was only a joke”) and fosters ignorance about the dark chapters in history. She claims that the notion of innocence is strongly linked to the Christian worldview and the figure of Jesus as the “iconic innocent man” (p. 16). The appeal to innocence implies an identification with childlike and feminine features, picturing the Self as sincere, harmless and affectionate, and the Other as virile and aggressive. Thus, the appeal to innocence suggests an unequal fight, where the innocent Self needs to be protected against an evil Other. In fact, the self-image of being intentionally ignorant can also be found in the notion of “arrogance of ignorance”, proposed by Wodak (2015, p. 2), which she considers to be a key feature of right-wing populist parties. This illustrates the importance of understanding the configuration and dynamics of “us” vs. “them” dichotomies in society.

1.3 Populist dichotomies

An essential part of populism is the distinction between the people and the elite, although the definition of both concepts is highly problematic. To denote “the people”, Laclau (2005) framed it as an “empty signifier”, meaning that its interpretation is flexible, which makes it such an interesting concept for both left-wing and right-wing populists. Based on this idea, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) distinguish three common populist definitions of the people: the people as a sovereign, as the common people and as the nation (p. 9). The first definition considers the people as “the ultimate source of democratic power, but also as “the rulers”” (p. 10). The other two definitions constitute the people on the basis of socio-economic and sociocultural factors (the former) or in terms of civic/ethnic belonging (the latter). The notion of “elite”, on the other hand, receives much less academic interest. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) specify that the difference between the people and the elite is moral, as the latter is seen to be corrupt and defeating the people’s interests. Other criteria of being part of the elite are having political, economic and sociocultural power. These

are exactly the aspects that the people do not have (enough) and seek to obtain (cf. section 1.3.1). In the following, I will use the terminology of “people” and “elite” to refer to these simplified antagonistic entities, but with some critical distance.

Populists argue that the elite, which can be a political, economic, or cultural one, is alienated from the ordinary people and therefore does not represent the people anymore (Rooduijn, Van der Brug, & De Lange, 2016). This, according to the populist view, is the world upside down; the idea of popular sovereignty implies that the will of the people or *general will* should be decisive. In her 2017 campaign video, which was already discussed in the introduction, Marine Le Pen illustrates this antagonism by framing the choice that the French will be making for the elections as a crucial one, in her own words, “*un choix de civilisation*”. Either they continue “with those who lied, failed, betrayed, who misled the people and who lost France”, or they decide “to put France back in order”. The slogan of the campaign being “*Au nom du peuple*”, it does not require much imagination to find out who those liars and betrayers are, and why the French people need Marine Le Pen in order for France to be “independent, respected, prospering, proud, sustainable and just”.

Besides opposing the people to the elites, most populists tend to exclude an Other from being part of the people. This mechanism is referred to as the horizontal dichotomy (Rensmann, 2017) or exclusionism (Rooduijn, De Lange, & Van der Brug, 2014). While some scholars argue that this exclusion of a dangerous Other is purely a characteristic of right-wing populism (Judis, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013a; Rooduijn et al., 2014), Rensmann (2017) disagrees and states that this exclusionary discourse is also to be found with populist parties that are generally classified as left-wing. He points at the German *Die Linke* and *La France Insoumise* who – although being situated at the (extreme) left of the political spectrum – do defend an openly nationalist agenda. He adds that ultimately the left-right classification is an inadequate tool to qualify different types of populism, and suggests that we look at other aspects:

Despite their cross-national distinctions, however, all “right-wing” and most “left-wing” populist actors share key common ideological denominators shaped by authoritarianism, anti-liberal, anti-pluralistic vertical *and* horizontal dichotomies, which implicitly or explicitly endorse cultural exclusivity, identity and denigration of “others”. (p. 126)

In other words, and to look through the theoretical lenses provided by Mudde (2004), whether a populist party is left-wing or right-wing does not per se orientate their adoption or rejection of nativist ideas. In fact, the mere fact that populism aims at an imagined homogeneous people suggests that some sort of exclusion is inherent to the populist view, as such homogeneous peoples do not naturally exist and are thus created through the exclusion of members that look differently or behave differently. For this reason, the following section will not only focus on vertical dichotomies, but also explore horizontal dichotomies of “us vs. the others”.

1.3.1 Vertical dichotomy: perceiving a gap

The antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite is complex and I will therefore seek to analyze it from three different perspectives. This will hopefully provide the answer to our main question in this section: why, according to populism, do the people perceive a distance to the elite? I will argue that the reasons for this alleged gap can be of the political, socio-economic, or cultural sort. This corresponds to a large extent to the definitions of the people as a sovereign, as a common people and as a nation, and of the elite as those possessing political, economic and sociocultural power (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9). Whereas many scholars point at broad concepts such as neoliberalism and its consequences being the main source of the people’s discontent (cf. Finchelstein, 2017; Judis, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016), I will delve into specific issues, namely political representation, socio-economic opportunities and cultural representation.

Mudde (2016) describes populism as “an illiberal democratic response to decades of undemocratic liberal policies” (p. 30). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013b) further stress that populism is not anti-democratic, but anti-liberal democratic; populists do usually respect the democratic system, hold elections and tend to accept their results. Moreover, it is argued that in some cases populism constitutes a corrective for democracy (Laclau, 2005; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013b; Tormey, 2019), although others criticize it for challenging or threatening democratic principles (Alston, 2017; Müller, 2016; Rosanvallon, 2011). This explains the distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism advocated by Mudde

and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013a). Populism is not morally good or bad in its purest denominative appraisal, but it becomes problematic when it activates illiberal attitudes and practices being latent among citizens, as it appeals to their most primary affects: feelings of belonging, cultural partisanship and tribal attachments. Sooner or later, this can lead to the dehumanization of the Other and with that the neglect of (minority) rights and the democratic institutions that are there to protect them (cf. Alston, 2017). A good example of this are Trump's supporters chanting "lock her up" – referring to Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, and later other political opponents – at rallies during the presidential campaign. Belonging to the political elite, challenging Trump, and, in the case of Clinton, being implied in an FBI examination, are reasons for being sent to prison, which evidently is going against basic democratic principles (of having a fair process, for example).

The question that will be addressed below, is therefore to know what it is that provokes such strong reactions, in other words, what this "undemocratic liberalism" concretely means. This is why I will start by pointing out two recent trends in liberal politics which I argue contribute to liberalism's increasingly undemocratic character. The first tendency concerns the supply-side point of view (the politicians), whereas the second focuses on the demand-side perspective (the voters).

The idea of populism as a reaction to the shortcomings of (neoliberal) democracy is ubiquitous in Finchelstein (2017), who argues the following:

I propose viewing populism as the outcome of a modern historical process, in other words, as part of an ongoing history in which the limitations and intrinsic problems of formal democracy meet the interwar and post-war history of democracy being contested from within and without. (p.23)

As such, similar to fascism in the 1920's and 1930's, populism should be considered a response to the crisis of political representation that started in the Cold War era and became more serious with the emergence of neoliberalism, preferring the sovereignty of the market to the sovereignty of the people. Therefore, according to Finchelstein (2017), neoliberalism should also be seen as a threat to democracy, just like fascism and – to a great extent – populism. However, this historical analysis does not address the reasons behind the so-called crisis of political representation. Kriesi (2014) observes two tendencies in Western Europe that could actually explain why people feel

less represented by their politicians. In the first place, he argues that a politician has both a representative and an institutional function, but that the latter is often prevailing over the former. Kriesi (2014) suggests that this development, caused by the rising importance of supranational government structures and mediatization, leads to less direct contact between the people and the political parties. Populists tried to bridge this gap using digital media such as blogs (in the case of Beppe Grillo), vlogs (Matteo Salvini) and social media, notably Twitter (cf. van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). However, this online rapprochement is still problematic. Social media allow political leaders to connect to a target group, without the support of a party apparatus or the filter of the traditional media. As such, social networks are much more vertically structured than one might expect (Kriesi, 2014; Rensmann, 2017). The lack of restrictions – both in matters of time and content – leads to the spreading of misinformation, “since rumors can be quickly repeated and amplified if generated and shared by the most connected members” (Cardoso, Accornero, Lapa, & Azevedo, 2017, p. 382). If this content is offensive speech, it can be an accelerator of conflict, potentially turning involved actors – speaker, audience and target – into accelerants (or decelerants) (Scharffs, 2017). Although Scharffs does not elaborate on the differences between traditional media and social media, I would suspect that social media are especially good at activating affinity groups identifying with either the speaker or the target. In fact, what is precisely new about social media (or in Cardoso’s terms: networked communication) in relation to traditional media, is the autonomy of the individual to not only express disagreement but also to mobilize like-minded others in forming a powerful networked community:

If mass communication fostered the exercise of power through the integration of the individual in the existing institutions of society, networked communication, along with connective action, fosters the building of new institutional settings of power through the networking of individuals. (Cardoso et al., 2017, p. 381).

Being opposed to the establishment, and using conflict to divide, it is clear that populist parties and movements have greatly appreciated and exploited this new mechanism.

As a consequence of the mediatization of politics a dividing line between front-stage and back-stage politics appears, in which the former is “a largely symbolic contest between figureheads” and the latter a “technocratic exercise” (Kriesi, 2014, p. 366). In

other words, the political sphere is “depoliticized”, presented in digestible chunks so that ideological differences between established parties become more and more blurred (Kriesi, 2014; Kriesi et al., 2006). This alludes to the populist narrative of an elite lacking of transparency and being too occupied with their back-room politics and keeping the power within their own hands. At the same time, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) argue that political elites may have become more diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity, but that they no longer represent the working class and their specific political needs. Today, representatives are predominantly highly educated professionals with a white-collar background: “although legislatures have never been anything like socially representative, in the past left-wing parties in particular, like Labour in Britain or the communists in France or Italy, did have a far more working-class ‘face’” (p. 107-108). This development nourishes the idea of a political caste that has increasingly lost touch with the day-to-day reality of most of the population.

With their book *La Casta. Così i Politici Italiani sono Diventati Intoccabili* [The Caste, How Italian Politicians became Untouchable] (2007), Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella set the tone for what would later become the narrative of Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement. Playing on the similarity between the center-left Partito Democratico (PD) and the center-right Polo delle Libertà (PDL), Berlusconi’s former coalition, Grillo referred to the former as ‘PD meno L’. A similar trend can be observed in France where Marine Le Pen used to call the established parties the “UMPS” – a contraction of the two main parties UMP and PS, until UMP changed its name into *Les Républicains*. Besides the political metaphor of the caste, the economic metaphor of the cartel is used by Thierry Baudet (“partijkartel”), leader of the right-wing populist party Forum voor Democratie. It is not surprising that such a strong “us” vs. “them” narrative has an effect. Rooduijn, Van der Brug, De Lange, and Parleviet (2017) have found that exposure to populist messages leads to higher levels of political cynicism. Especially those who are already supporting populist parties turn out to be receptive to this “fueling discontent logic” (p.137). As a consequence, a vicious circle appears in which the political landscape becomes more and more polarized and people might feel increasingly less represented by their politicians.

An indicator of this (perceived) lack of representation could well be the people’s reluctance to vote at all, suggests Piketty (2018), who observes a “massive increase in abstention” (p.7) in the US, Great Britain and France between the 1950’s-1960’s and today. The French presidential elections of 2017 that were mentioned in the

introduction clearly illustrate this development, as the turnout rate for this kind of election was the lowest since 1969⁴. In the first round 22,2% abstained, this rose even further to a stunning 25,4% of the electorate in the second and decisive round. In concrete numbers, this means that about 12 million people, of which a majority of young or unemployed citizens, decided not to vote. In addition to this, there were approximately four million blank votes or null ballots, compared to two million in 2012. In total, these numbers show us that around a third of the French electorate refused to make a choice between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. Now, it is possible that the French elections of 2017 provide an unreliable example, because of the fact that none of the traditional parties made it to the second round. On the other hand, one could also argue that this mere fact is very telling already.

At the same time, it would be too quick a conclusion to state that these high abstention rates are solely caused by politicians and their political parties. According to Piketty (2018) politicians are simply unable – or unwilling – to democratically respond to changes in the electoral behavior. He argues that the days of a clear-cut class-based system, in which the rich vote for the Right and the poor for the Left, are numbered, mostly because of globalization and educational expansion. Today we are facing a so-called “multiple-elite” system, in which high income and high wealth are predictors for a right-wing vote; high education on the other hand is a predictor for a left-wing vote. Lower educated and lower income groups are consequently left behind and populist parties take advantage of this abandoned group. Piketty concludes that a “strong egalitarian internationalist platform” (p.62) is necessary in order to unite the lower educated and lower income voters and, subsequently, to reduce inequality. According to Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), on the other hand, this electoral change can be traced back to the 1970’s, when what they label “post-material topics” (e.g. freedom of speech, civil rights) became manifest, replacing the more traditional Left-Right debates on economic redistribution. This, they claim, has caused massive de-alignment with established political parties, or reluctance to vote at all, especially on the left. In order to turn the tide, Eatwell & Goodwin suggest that left-wing parties re-connect with their traditional blue-collar electorate by mitigating their standpoints on immigration and cultural values.

⁴ “IN NUMBERS: How the French voted (and how they didn't)”: <https://www.thelocal.fr/20170508/in-numbers-how-the-french-voted-and-how-they-didnt> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

This closely connects to the socio-economic debate, in which the key words are indeed inequality, globalization, and the welfare state (Judis, 2016; Müller, 2016; Piketty, 2018; Rodrik, 2017). I would nonetheless claim that the all-embracing concept that explains the socio-economic dichotomy between the people and the elite is the notion of unfairness. As Piketty (2014) very convincingly shows in his bestseller *Capital in the 21st century*, inequality is on the rise since the 1980's, and this development goes hand in hand with neoliberal politics. The idea of “a rising tide that lifts all boats” as advocated by John F. Kennedy and later by Ronald Reagan thus seems to be proven wrong, and neoliberal policies even led to the emergence of a so-called dual economy, in which the middle class has almost completely disappeared (Temin, 2015). This duality is commonly referred to in terms of winners and losers of globalization and international trade (Rodrik, 2017; Sandel, 2020). Globalization indeed plays a crucial role; not only it enables the richest to become richer through offshoring and outsourcing, but it also makes the poor more vulnerable to concurrence from abroad and thereby to the risk of losing their jobs. This leads to two cleavages, an economic and a cultural one (Rodrik, 2017). The former applies to a higher financial inequality between the rich and the poor, and thus a lower social mobility, the latter to the idea of “intruders” taking over “our” jobs. It is important to note that inequality is not problematic per se – people accept differences as long as social mobility is possible – but that there is an argument of “fair trade”:

It's one thing to lose your job to someone who competes under the same rules as you do. It's a different thing when you lose your job to someone who takes advantage of lax labor, environmental, tax or safety standards in other countries. (Rodrik, 2017, p. 15).

There are different ways of tackling this issue. A good example of the populist response is Trump's economic nationalism, in which paying your taxes in the US and hiring US workers to build your products was seen as a sign of loyalty towards the American People. Piketty (2014, 2020) on the other hand, pleads in favor of wealth redistribution in order to achieve social justice, including a 15% tax on capital and an 80% tax on high incomes.

Sometimes the socio-economic cleavage has a cultural side as well, and this leads to the third and last dimension of the vertical dichotomy: the search for inclusion

of lower socio-economic groups on the basis of a common (ethnic or religious) identity. I will illustrate this dimension with two examples. The first example concerns the concept of *Americanismo*, or the idea of “a common regional identity between the inhabitants of Latin America” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013a, p. 159). This identity is strongly anti-imperialist and strives for the inclusion of indigenous people, most notably in Ecuador and Venezuela. According to populists, there is a strong vertical dichotomy between the elite and the indigenous population, that is being discriminated against and whose voices are not being heard. However, this should not be confused with the horizontal dichotomy in right-wing populism in Western Europe, where the Other is excluded based on cultural differences.

The second example refers to what Piketty (2018) has called the “ethno-religious” cleavages. He observes that people with different ethno-religious backgrounds vote for different parties, i.e. the Afro-American and Latino population in the US who tend to vote more often for the Democratic Party, or the Muslim population in France who largely votes for the left, whereas the Catholics tend to vote more conservative right-wing parties. The Muslim population may not necessarily agree with left-wing progressive (family) values, but perceives the (far) right as a serious threat to their way of life. In the Netherlands, a new political party called DENK (Dutch for ‘think’ and Turkish for ‘equal’) was established in 2016 by two former members of the social democratic party, both of Turkish descent, and obtained several seats in the parliament following the elections of 2017 and 2020. The question whether DENK is a truly populist party still needs to be answered, and exceeds the scope of this chapter, but the least that can be said is that they use some instruments of the populist narrative: strong anti-establishment attitudes, harsh media critics and victim-playing are part and parcel of their political program⁵. What matters here is that they seek to defend a largely underrepresented and discriminated group of people, from different ethno-religious backgrounds, with the aim of realizing an “inclusive society”. The following quote, taken from a news message on their website, exemplifies this idea:

Jarenlang hebben de gevestigde politieke partijen in verkiezingstijd jouw stem en de stem van jouw familie gebruikt voor eigen gewin. Kandidaten met een

⁵ “Webpage Beweging Denk”: <https://www.bewegingdenk.nl/> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

migratieachtergrond konden nooit zichzelf zijn en moesten een deel van hun identiteit achter de voordeur laten.⁶

[For years, during election time the established parties have used your votes and the votes of your family for their own ends. Candidates with a migrant background could never be true to themselves and were forced to leave part of their identity behind their front doors.]

These consecutive yet semantically slightly unrelated sentences show two major problems with the notion of elite. Not only did they neglect the particular interests and issues of the people with a migrant background, but they also forced them to assimilate to the party machine were they ever part of a political party. This clearly demonstrates the problematic situation of some ethno-religious minorities who feel ignored by traditional political parties and do not take this for a fact any longer. This might lead to the emergence of new (populist) parties who combine an anti-establishment attitude with a strong cultural (minority) identity.

1.3.2 Horizontal dichotomy: perceiving Otherness

After having examined the vertical dichotomy between the people and the elite, it is now time to take a closer look at the horizontal dichotomy, drawing the line between the people and the Other. This section will be structured as above, looking at political, socio-economic and cultural reasons for this divide. The latter aspect is often seen as the main reason for perceiving the Other as a threat to the unity of the people, and populism is therefore often confused with xenophobia and anti-immigration discourse (cf. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). Although I do not deny that this is indeed a prominent part of many contemporary Western and Central European populisms, I propose to analyze and discuss the horizontal dichotomy in a broader scope, so that populism can be understood to its full extent.

According to populist ideas, the Other constitutes a serious threat to the imagined homogeneous people, implying that the people are morally good and the

⁶ “DENK en NIDA moeten fuseren”: <https://www.bewegingdenk.nl/nieuws/denk-en-nida-moeten-fuseren> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

Other inherently evil. It is important to note that also the Other is projected as a homogeneous entity, just like the people and the elite. Evidently, this homogenization of the Other is highly problematic, especially when talking about groups such as “immigrants” or “refugees”, which are obviously composed by people with various nationalities, religions, socio-economic backgrounds and education levels. By defining an out-group, a self-group is formed on the basis of a dichotomy: “they are lazy immigrants” versus “we are hard workers”. Excluding the Other thus helps to build an own (national) identity. Moreover, in order to emphasize their own unsullied conscience, and to create an almost mythical conception of the people, populists present their own version of history (cf. Wodak, 2015). As we have seen above, the notion of innocence is helpful in understanding why painful historical events such as a fascist past or collaboration with fascist regimes are euphemized or are even completely denied (Wekker, 2016). One can think of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen downplaying the role that the French government played in, for instance, the *Vel d’Hiv* drama, or Jörg Haider and more recently Matteo Salvini affirming that fascist dictatorships (Hitler and Mussolini in this case) also brought important improvements for the respective countries. At the same time, however, the Others are stigmatized as profiteers, thieves or criminals. Wodak (2015) points out that the *Bad Apple Frame* is recurrent in immigration discourse; this implies the idea of one bad apple that spoils the barrel: by letting these people enter a country, they will irreversibly harm its identity, norms and values (which are understood to be good). She also notes that:

Indeed, I suggest that this frame [the *Bad Apple Frame*] could be reconceptualized in body politics, for the *nation as body* metaphors, the metaphors of immigration perceived as contagious *disease/illness* and minorities (Jews or Roma) as *parasites* threatening the nation. (p. 60)

These mechanisms clearly show how the horizontal dichotomy is shaped along the lines of “good vs. bad” and how images and metaphors are used in populist discourse. In the following, I will take a look at different reasons for these Othering practices.

The political dimension of this antagonism implies the idea that politicians are favoring the Other over the people, by giving them free facilities such as temporary housing or language courses for immigrants. Undoubtedly, the underlying idea is that the money – brought up by the people through taxes – is invested in Others who clearly

do not need it or deserve it. A good illustration of this sentiment is the indignation that arose when it turned out that Syrian and Iraqi refugees possessed smartphones. Instead of helping out the people, who find themselves – as described above – often in underprivileged socio-economic conditions, the government chooses to give resources to the “outsiders”. This idea of the establishment intentionally neglecting the people in favor of an “out-group” can take a more extreme dimension of a conspiracy against the own (native) people. Several identitarian movements in France adhere to the idea of *Le Grand Remplacement*, posed by the French writer Renaud Camus in his homonymous book (2011). This theory suggests that the native population will be reverse-colonized by Muslim immigrants, thus “mutating” the given country and its culture. An important aspect of this theory is the complicity of the political establishment on both a national and a European level. With their generous immigration policies, driven by a supposed hate towards their native inhabitants, they would encourage people from Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa to move to Europe. Although this might sound as a rather marginal discourse – in fact, it was characterized as “*complotiste*” by Marine Le Pen – Camus certainly is a source of inspiration for some PVV politicians, whom he joined on a demonstration march in January 2018⁷.

In other words, one constitutive part of the divide between the people and the Other is the perception that the (political) elites are privileging the latter, whereas the people see themselves as the rightful citizens of the country, and thus as the ones that should receive a better treatment. The line with the next dimension is very thin, as it also concerns the societal status of the people that is seen to be threatened. However, the focus will shift from an alleged benefitting of the Others by the political establishment to a fear of the people losing their socio-economic status to an out-group. Gidron and Hall (2017) refer to this phenomenon as “status anxiety”.

In 1967, Lipset & Rokkan identified the four main cleavages of modern democracies, generated both by a National Revolution (state-making) and the Industrial Revolution: Church(es) vs. Government, Primary vs. Secondary Economy, Subject vs. Dominant Culture and Workers vs. Employers, Owners (Hooghe & Marks, 2017; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). The latter two cleavages seem pertinent for the analysis of the socio-economic dimension of the horizontal dichotomy and will be further

⁷ “Kasteelheer slaat alarm over cultuur van Europa”: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/01/22/kasteelheer-slaat-alarm-over-cultuur-van-europa-a1589332> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

discussed below. Multiple studies suggest that the white male working class, the so-called “angry white men” or “losers of globalization” are more likely to vote for populist parties (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Goodhart, 2017; Kriesi et al., 2006; Piketty, 2018; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017), while Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) point at the importance of education as a determinant factor. Gidron and Hall (2017) refer to recent examples, of which the Brexit referendum is the most striking: 64 percent of manual workers voted in favor of a Brexit, whereas for managers and professionals this was only 43 percent. Similar tendencies are found for the 2016 presidential elections in the US and the first round of the French presidential elections in 2017. Rensmann (2017), on the other hand, observes that both PVV and AFD are supported by “a broad spectrum of social strata” (p.126), although the latter party shows a slightly higher proportion of blue-collar workers among its voters. It seems thus that socio-economic class alone does not predict a vote for a populist party, therefore Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), Gidron and Hall (2017) and Rensmann (2017) suggest to take into account the changing cultural norms and values. In the case of Gidron and Hall (2017), who focus on right-wing populist parties, this is part of what they term the “subjective social status”, which is influenced by both material and cultural factors. In short, this subjective social status, or “relative deprivation” (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018), reflects the degree to which people feel respected and recognized by – and relative to – other members of society. This taps into the populist idea of “the people” being left behind by the elites. While the cultural factors will be tackled in the next section of this chapter, Gidron and Hall (2017) detect two socio-economic developments that affect the subjective social status: the disappearance of low-skilled decent jobs and the transfer of well-paid and well-reputed jobs to urban centers, creating a sharp contrast with the periphery. The latter corresponds with the cleavage between Subject and Dominant culture (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), or in other words, periphery versus center. Recent examples of this cleavage include the Brexit referendum and the French elections of 2017, in which a clear-cut divide can be identified between the urban centers of London

and Paris versus former industrial urban and rural areas^{8,9,10}. Furthermore, on a transnational level, the center/periphery cleavage could explain the populist's rejection of supra-national powers such as the European Union (Hooghe & Marks, 2017), as expressed in the Brexit referendum by a majority of voters.

Yet the idea of a certain group of people believing that their social status decreases because of socio-economic and cultural (cf. below) developments in society, leading to a horizontal antagonism with the Other is made explicit by Gidron and Hall (2017):

An extensive literature in psychology has established that threats to a person's social status evoke feelings of hostility to out-groups, especially if the latter can be associated with the status threat (Tajfel 1978; Riek, Mania and Gaertner 2006; Leach and Spears 2008; Küpper, Wolf and Zick 2010; Jonas et al. 2014). Thus, the anti-immigrant, racially-tinged and anti-Muslim appeals that are at the centre of most populist right platforms today are well-configured to speak directly to people who feel that their social status is threatened. (p. 62-63)

The perceived loss of social status explains both the people's aversion towards the elites, whose policies do not seem to improve the people's social status, but also towards the Other, who are seen to take over low-skilled jobs, or contribute to the negative image or emasculation of such jobs. However, one should not neglect the cultural factors that are at stake, as I previously pointed out. This cultural dimension of Otherness will be discussed below.

It is first of all important to clarify that this cultural dimension is not a synonym of cultural hostility towards migrants. Although it is indisputable that the horizontal dichotomy as such is based on nativist ideology, and is therefore opposed to immigration, the out-group concerns cultural Others in a much broader sense: minorities, (im)migrants, refugees, Muslims, Jews, indigenous peoples and "foreign

⁸ "EU referendum: The result in maps and charts": <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36616028> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

⁹ "Election présidentielle 2017 : résultats globaux du premier tour": <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-elections/Election-presidentielle-2017/Election-presidentielle-2017-resultats-globaux-du-premier-tour> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

¹⁰ "Election présidentielle 2017 : résultats globaux du second tour": <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-elections/Election-presidentielle-2017/Resultats-globaux-du-second-tour-de-l-election-du-President-de-la-Republique-2017> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

powers” (Rensmann, 2017). Piketty (2018) shows that immigration attitudes in France have changed over time, the proportion of those believing that there are too many immigrants in France having decreased from 70-75% in the 1980’s until the mid-1990’s, to 50-55% in the 2010’s. Several surveys in the UK report a similar decline¹¹. I would thus argue that the arrival of immigrants alone cannot explain the recent rise of the popularity of nativist populist parties, but that we should consider its implications: a diverse society, or a perceived new order of things. Gidron and Hall (2017) refer to this as “new cultural frameworks”, in which old social values and cultural beliefs are to be replaced by frameworks of multiculturalism and gender equality. This new hierarchy negatively affects the subjective social status of mostly lower-educated white men (cf. Banet-Weiser, 2018). Rensmann (2017) considers the recent upsurge of populism to be a “cultural counter revolution” against cultural changes brought about with migration. Societal discussions on topics related to a colonial past provide a good illustration of these ideas. In the Netherlands, there is a yearly – and increasingly violent – debate about Zwarte Piet¹², since a group of anti-racist activists openly questioned its racist nature in 2011 (cf. Hilhorst & Hermes, 2016; Wekker, 2016). This discussion challenges the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy, which does not seem compatible anymore with the populist idea of the good people versus the evil Other; now the people is considered racist! What is even more important, to my mind, is the mere idea that (minority) voices that were previously not heard are now becoming part of the mainstream discourse, thereby jeopardizing the traditional hierarchy of the native culture above minority cultures. This alludes to the notion of the “postcolonial melancholia syndrome” (Gilroy, 2005; Wekker, 2016), the “the guilt-ridden loathing and depression that have come to characterize Britain’s xenophobic responses to the strangers who have intruded upon it . . . recently” (Wekker, 2016, p. 150).

¹¹ “UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern”: <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

¹² In the Netherlands Saint Nicolas is a national festivity, celebrated every year in November-December, which can be compared to Santa Claus in the US. Zwarte Piet (lit. Black Pete) is a black-faced character, the helper of Saint-Nicolas. The looks of Zwarte Piet are not only overtly racist (according to a UN report published in 2013), but also appeal to the colonial past, as the characters have a stereotypical look with big red lips, and in the past golden earrings and even a fake Surinamese/Antillean accent or a simplified way of speaking. A fierce debate between those in favor of keeping the tradition and those willing to change it, is now a yearly tradition. Over the past few years, the Dutch tradition of the compromise has given rise to the appearance of new types of Zwarte Piet, for instance the Regenboogpiet (Rainbow Pete) and the Schoorsteenpiet (Chimney Pete).

As a response to this changing society, nativist populist parties, but also mainstream right-wing parties take a firm stand on these cultural questions. Strongly supporting the traditional looks of Zwarte Piet, the liberal VVD accused broadcasting company RTL of “assassinating” the national tradition of Saint Nicolas, after they had decided to eliminate the black-faced character from their shows¹³. PVV went even further by introducing a bill into parliament, establishing by law the looks of Zwarte Piet. The law was rejected by a vast majority of the parliament, including the VVD¹⁴. More recently, French president Emmanuel Macron expressed his distaste of critical race theory and intersectionality, a “wokeness” imported from the United States that he considers to be fostering identity politics¹⁵. Kriesi et al. (2006) suggest that this cultural dimension has become more and more salient in populist discourse: “As it turns out, parties of the populist right do not stand out for their economic profile. It is on cultural issues, where they support a demarcation strategy much more strongly than (untransformed) mainstream parties” (p.950).

North-Western Europe provides an excellent example of such cultural protectionism, in which the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy is essential. This dichotomy is based on the idea of “our” Western modernity, as opposed to “their” cultural backwardness (Brubaker, 2017), “they” being most often an Islamic culture. Islam is here presented as the “bad apple” that spoils the barrel, i.e. the modern Western civilization and its progressive values. Brubaker (2017) and Moffitt (2017) observe in several North-Western European countries a tendency to promote an “identitarian Christianity”, which is perceived as a culture, an answer to this alleged threat of Islam. Liberal progressive values such as gender equality, gay rights, secularism and freedom of speech are strongly defended and even celebrated as parts of “our” modernity. One can think of PVV leader Wilders being prosecuted for hate speech, flamboyant Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn (Lijst Pim Fortuyn) who was openly gay, the Mohammed cartoons in Denmark, or the fierce debate in France on *laïcité*, which culminated with the “burkini ban” in the summer of 2016. All these examples show how, according to

¹³ “VVD boos om schrappen Zwarte Piet: “RTL vermoordt sinterklaasfeest””: <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nederland/politiek/vvd-boos-om-schrappen-zwarte-piet-rtl-vermoordt-sinterklaasfeest> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

¹⁴ “Tweede Kamer haalt streep door Zwarte Piet-wet PVV”: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2158540-tweede-kamer-haalt-streep-door-zwarte-piet-wet-pvv.html> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

¹⁵ “Will American Ideas Tear France Apart? Some of Its Leaders Think So”. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/world/europe/france-threat-american-universities.html> (accessed on 22-03-2021)

populists, “our way of doing things” is influenced or even restricted by the presence of the Other. It is remarkable that while populists reject a backward Other, they themselves identify with conservative values as well. For instance, their idealization of the past as a time when the nation-state was still sovereign and the national identity intact, illustrates this ambiguous stance. This suggests that the populist self-image as defenders of progressive and secular values is mainly a way to antagonize Muslims as undemocratic Others.

The previous section presented a state of the art of the theory on populism, aiming to pinpoint the main reasons – political, socio-economic and cultural – for which the elite and the Others are antagonized. I have shown that on the one hand, the people feel a strong distance to the elites, because of political neglect or being excluded on a socio-economic or cultural basis. On the other hand, the Other is seen as a threat to the people’s way of life, contributing to a loss of political interest, socio-economic status and national identity. In other words, by defining their antagonists, the people put themselves in the center of attention: they should be considered the righteous people of the given country, and their wellbeing should be the first priority of the political elite. This construction of a homogeneous national people, an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2016) has a strong cultural component, not only because this is the foundation of their comradeship and their biggest common denominator, but even more so because culture is a powerful tool used by populist actors to mobilize the people. The concrete manifestations of populist engagement with culture, as well as theoretical reflections on the way in which populism and culture are connected, will therefore be the main object of study in the next chapter.

1.4 Conclusion

The main premise of this chapter was to delve into the phenomenon of populism, which, despite being a frequent object of study, still remains a contested topic. A theoretical state of the art on populism provided insights in populist dichotomies – a vertical and a horizontal one – and pointed out the main political, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of both oppositions. By framing the elite and the Other as the enemies, the self-defined people consider themselves as the righteous sovereign power, the “common people” belonging to the cultural majority. This latter aspect, the role of

culture, will be a main focus for the rest of the dissertation. Although populists seem often unenthusiastic towards culture “with a big C” that should not be given any public money, references to and appropriation of cultural products are clearly omnipresent in their discourse. Culture has the power to connect a people (an imagined community) on the basis of shared values and beliefs, but also to draw sharp lines between “us” and “them”. As such, a hegemony of cultures is constructed, which presupposes “our” culture to be better than “theirs”.

This chapter has led to three important insights regarding the study of populism. First, I claim that due to its complex and multifaceted nature, populism is best studied from an interdisciplinary perspective. Populism is often linked to specific political, economic, or societal crises, most notably the 2008 financial crisis or the 2015 refugee crisis. However, a logical consequence of this idea would be that populism automatically disappears as soon as the crisis is tackled, which does not seem to reflect the current political reality in which populist parties remain important players. Moreover, this chapter has identified several developments – political, socio-economic and cultural – that have played a key role in the continuous success of populist parties. As we have seen, such political, socio-economic and cultural processes usually feed into each other, creating broader societal narratives. As the following chapter will detail, I will argue that especially culture is central for understanding the potential that populism has in shaping and promoting certain narratives and worldviews.

Secondly, this conception of populism as a broader societal phenomenon that activates latent attitudes goes against the persistent idea that populism circulates only among a given part of the population (“angry white men” or otherwise irrational individuals), and that other parts of the population are immune to it. My second insight emanating from this chapter is that populist dichotomies are promoted through an appeal to basic affective responses to crisis and insecurity (i.e. fear, anger), and a reference to a particular narrative of cultural exceptionalism by alluding to the “real people”. By appealing to universal basic human affects, these cultural narratives have the potential to speak to large numbers of voters, especially those that feel neglected politically, socio-economically and/or culturally.

Finally, the third insight that will be central in this dissertation is the idea that populism is not strictly isolated in certain populist parties or leaders. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) use the notion of “national populism lite” to refer to mainstream parties or politicians belonging to the traditional political center that have successfully

incorporated anti-immigrant or anti-EU discourse (the Tories are an obvious example of this, just like the VVD's stance in the Zwarte Piet debate). The analysis of political and media discourse in part II of this dissertation will take a more detailed look at the widespread populist narratives in French and Dutch society.

In short, and to conclude, I argue that populism is a culturally grounded, organic phenomenon, articulating and activating latent attitudes already present in society. The next chapter will further conceptualize and clarify the link between populism and culture, leading to the creation of a typology of populism and culture that will be a helpful tool for the analysis of the case studies addressed in part II of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 Towards a typology of populism and culture¹

2.1 Introduction

With the arrival of populist parties to national and supra-national political institutions, the notion and alleged importance of the culturally-grounded national identity has made a strong come-back in today's political discourse, not only among the parties of the populist right, but on a much broader scale. Theresa May's famous statement that "citizens of the world are actually citizens of nowhere"², proclaimed right after the Brexit vote, well exemplifies this centrality of cultural identity in contemporary politics. Another example of this is Dutch Christian-democratic party CDA, who insisted in their electoral program in 2017 that children should learn the national hymn and its history at school. This compulsory measure made it to the final coalition agreement of which CDA was part. Hence, it can be said that adherence to a national identity is presented as a way to deal with complex societal challenges such as multiculturalism and globalization.

Similarly, culture is used as a means to convey a political standpoint. A good example is PVV leader Geert Wilders' attempt to set up a Muhammad cartoon competition in 2018, which was cancelled after ample protests in Muslim countries, most notably in Pakistan. It is clear that in this case the aim was not to celebrate culture as a creative process of artistic expression, but mostly as a strategic tool to create a commotion; depictions of Muhammad being considered an offense against the prophet. Wilders admitted that he had cancelled the competition in order to protect the citizens of the Netherlands, who might face aggression or worse, which provided the perfect illustration of what is – to his mind – the intolerant and violent character of Muslims.

¹ Some parts of this chapter have appeared earlier in Jansma (2018, 2019).

² "Theresa May's conference speech in full": <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

These two examples clearly illustrate the strong link between culture and populism. In order to study this question more in depth, two pertinent aspects will be central. Firstly, considering the critical stance that populist parties often adopt towards what they see as elite culture, I will examine what kind of cultural products populists do identify with, in other words, what they consider as their *Leitkultur*. The notion of *Leitkultur* refers to a “predominant or guiding culture” (Pautz, 2005, p. 40), a widely accepted conception of cultural norms and values which becomes the benchmark for the integration and assimilation of (non-Western) immigrants in Western countries (Pautz, 2005; Tibi, 2001). Secondly, while focusing on examples from France and the Netherlands, this chapter will analyze how populists concretely use and shape these cultural products, and how these become an integrated part of their political discourse.

My working definition of culture is “the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society, [and] the contradictory forms of “common sense” which have taken root and helped to shape popular life.” (Hall, 1986, p. 26). However, it should be emphasized that this is not a one-way street. Culture is not just a reflection of shared values and practices of a certain group of people, but it actually activates and orientates human practices. This presupposes that humans also act in the name of their culture, for instance when celebrating traditions. Wekker (2016) refers to this as “structured and structuring dispositions, that can be systematically observed in social practices” (p. 20). Culture is therefore a quintessential factor for the construction of a narrative of community within the geopolitically defined space (the nation). Following Anderson (2016), the nation should be considered “an imagined political community”, in which a group too large for all members to know each other still experiences a bond, a “horizontal comradeship” primarily based on a common culture.

As we have seen in the examples above, culture can be a set of common values and traditions that help define who “we” are, but it can also be used to provoke feelings of hostility towards the Other. This ties in very well with the Manichean character of populism, dividing the world into “the good people” (us) and “the evil” (them), and it is therefore assumed that these groups are largely built upon a cultural understanding of a common identity.

In the present chapter I propose to look at populism through a new lens, by zooming on the construction of the populist cultural narrative. What kind of cultural products are useful for populists, and why is this so? And how are these cultural

products then integrated in the narrative? The focus on narrative allows for the use of tools belonging traditionally to the disciplines of literary and cultural studies, such as narratology, metaphor theory and discourse analysis, thus enriching the methodology. Section 2.2 of this chapter will expand on this interdisciplinary method and the notions that will be key for the analysis. After that, sections 2.3 and 2.4 of this chapter will analyze how the populist cultural narrative works. To do so, I will first reflect on the kind of cultural products that are prioritized by populists, and I discuss various categorizations of culture that will allow to systemize the outcomes into a typology of populism and culture. The definition of populism presented in chapter 1 will be a guiding principle for the creation of this typology, that is based on the presence of both horizontal and vertical dichotomies. Finally, this typology will be applied in section 2.4 to analyze how populists engage with both material and immaterial manifestations of culture. To explore these differences, and to elucidate the construction of a populist cultural narrative as a process-in-the-making, I will focus on two cultural products in particular: the French concept of *laïcité* (secularism) and Michel Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* (2015).

2.2 Theoretical reflections on populism and culture

As shown in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, the number of academic publications that study populism in relation to culture (or vice versa) is increasing, although they remain a relatively small part of the total amount of publications on the topic of populism. This section will explore different perspectives on the interplay between populism and culture, before clarifying the theoretical direction that the present study will take. First of all, I will discuss two more conventional approaches, after which I will shift to a recent trend, that this dissertation aims to contribute to. All three approaches should be considered within the tradition of cultural sociology, which studies art and culture in a broader societal context, focusing on the social aspects of culture (cf. Hanquinet & Savage, 2016).

The first line of research engages with the cultural dimension of populist identity politics, arguing that rapidly changing cultural values can explain the success of populist narratives (cf. Brubaker, 2017; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Furedi, 2018; Goodhart, 2017; Kriesi et al., 2006; Moffitt, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Ostiguy,

2020; Rensmann, 2017). These different sets of cultural values (progressive vs. conservative) provoke cultural clashes; a “cultural backlash” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), “culture wars” (Furedi, 2018; Nagle, 2017) or in the words of Rensmann (2017), a “cultural counter-revolution”. As such, populism speaks to the people whose voices once belonged to the dominant cultural normative discourse, but which are now drowned out by those advocating progressive social values. These studies have been extremely instrumental in defining the theoretical framework of the present dissertation. On the other hand, they mostly engage with culture in general terms: much work still remains to be done with regard to the concrete processes through which populists exploit certain specific cultural products, in order to construct their narrative.

This, by contrast, is the case for the second axis of research on populism and culture, which precisely takes cultural products as a starting point for their analysis. Alluding to the populist opposition to elite culture, this includes the concepts of “cultural populism” (McGuigan, 1992), “le roman populiste” (Paveau, 1998) and the “literary populist” (Bax, 2016), all implying the desire of the author to identify with the common people and their way of life, which they perceive as more authentic. While using the term ‘populism’, it should be made clear that this interpretation of populism is not in line with the definition of populism proposed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) (cf. chapter 1), but that the accent is put on some of its key aspects. For instance, in the case of the “roman populiste” this is the emphasis on the people, borrowed from the Russian populist phenomenon of *narodniki* in the early 20th century. Bax (2016), on the other hand, focuses on the Dutch author Leon de Winter and his use of the populist rhetorical tools of simplification and polarization. This indicates the extent to which populism has become an ambiguous term, used across different disciplines, and reminds us that we should be aware of its diverse uses and understandings.

At the same time, there is scholarly interest in the study of cultural products that react to types of crises that are also addressed by populism. Examples include Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission*, which represents a “diagnosis of a current ideological crisis in European democratic culture” (Berg-Sørensen, 2017, p. 131), French author Edouard Louis who calls in his novels for a rethinking of class domination and homophobia in contemporary France (Foerster, 2016), and across the Canal the appearance of post-Brexit novels (BrexLit) (Eaglestone, 2018) as well as satirical cartoons “framing causes and consequences of Brexit” (Godioli & Pedrazzini, 2019, p.

1). However, being only indirectly linked to populism – through the cultural representation of the crises that populists also seek to respond to, or even to those that emerged from populism – these examples tend to overlook the political dimension. As a matter of fact, these studies treat populism as an object of representation, or as a term of comparison, whereas the role of populists as active (en)actors of cultural products is not taken into consideration.

The concrete use of cultural products by populists themselves, which then become powerful tools for their (identity) politics, is the main interest of a new axis of research (cf. García-Santamaría, 2020; Nærland, 2020; Özçetin, 2019; Szele, 2016; Ylä-Anttila, 2017). According to these authors, populists promote and identify with cultural products that express closeness to the people, particularly popular traditions or genres. For instance, Ylä-Anttila (2017) studies the populist appeal to familiarity, more specifically their appropriation of the traditional Finnish *Suvivirsi* songs. He argues that by alluding to familiar experiences shared by the Finnish people, populists present a nostalgic alternative to progressive narratives of other political parties, to “sing the song as it has always been sung” (p. 352). Focusing on more modern types of music, Szele (2016) analyzes the connection between nationalist Nemzeti Rock music and the populist Right, while Özçetin (2019) studies the framing of a Turkish TV series that echoes the rhetoric of Erdoğan’s AKP. Furthermore, the populist appeal to the everyday lifestyle of ordinary people is epitomized by the work of García-Santamaría (2020), who investigates the politicization of food in Instagram posts by the Italian Lega leader Matteo Salvini. Salvini’s preference for simple foods over haute cuisine is in line with a general prioritization of popular culture over elite culture, which reveals the former to be “a key symbolic condition for the formation of anti-elite identities” (Nærland, 2020, p. 305).

Yet, while García-Santamaría (2020) and Nærland (2020) emphasize the vertical dichotomy between the people and the elites, the position of the alien Other is not further detailed. The question is, therefore, how populists mobilize culture to antagonize and eventually exclude the Other. A telling example is the “couscous-gate” in France in 2017, when Florian Philippot, back then the vice-president of Front National, posted a photo of a dinner with other FN members in a North African restaurant in Strasbourg. The photo received strong criticism on social media, by FN followers judging that the choice of food was inappropriate or even unpatriotic: when in Strasbourg, one should eat *choucroute*. Although this is strictly speaking not a case

where populists actively use culture, it clearly shows the importance of culture as integral part of the horizontal dichotomy, as the choice of food was perceived as incompatible with the political ideas of Front National.

My approach wants to add to the existing literature by providing a broader scope, that takes into account the populist articulation of anti-elite sentiments as well as exclusionary rhetoric towards the Other. Indeed, my main objective is to develop a transferable model that maps the populist use of culture for the creation of both vertical and horizontal “us” vs. “them” dichotomies. Such a model is unique in the sense that it allows to compare between different political contexts, rather than focusing on one particular case. Moreover, it aims to include both material and immaterial cultural experiences, ranging from traditions and symbols to controversial novels and films. In doing so, my work has taken inspiration from the work of Hanquinet and Savage (2016), who argue in favor of a “relational and aesthetic sociology of art and culture” (p. 12). The relational aspect of my model lies in its emphasis on networks of interaction between cultural products and their authors (in the case of material culture), their framing in politics and media, and the feedback effect that may have. The enactivist approach, conceptualized by Caracciolo (2014), will be a helpful tool to map these connections and interactions between the world of the text – in its broadest sense – and the material world.

Focusing on literary texts, Caracciolo (2014) criticizes the more traditional computational view that considers reader’s engagement with narratives as a process of mental representation, based on imagination:

Stories, it is widely assumed, work by representing events, situations, characters, and mental processes: in Porter Abbott’s minimal definition, for example, narrative is “the representation of an event or a series of events” [...]. Yet the enactivists urge that experience is not a matter of representation, but rather an interaction with the world guided by the values that permeate the subject’s experiential background (p. 9).

Instead, he favors the notion of “experientiality” which takes into account the notion of the “story-driven experience”. More broadly speaking, the tension between the reader’s past experiences, their interaction with the text and its characters, may even “tap into – and have a feedback effect on – the background of *different* recipients.” (p.

50). This means that experientiality can lead to the enactment of ideas, values and even behavior. Transferring these ideas to the actual topic of the populist narrative, the enactivist approach leads to the insight that populists enact (cultural) narratives. This concretely means that populists shape narratives, based on experiences or emotions, which in turn activate populist attitudes. As such, the populist narrative is not a stable entity, but a process-in-the-making, a network of meaning-making constantly influenced by new realities and (en)actors.

Thus, following Caracciolo (2014), stories always come with an evaluation of reality:

stories allow us to make sense of the world not only because they create order [...] and organize experience [...], but also because they are evaluative – they bring in their wake and involve at several levels the values held by human cultures. (p. 54).

In this regard, it is essential to also reflect on the specific aesthetic qualities of cultural works, and how the artistic experience orientates emotional engagement. Besides this, Hanquinet and Savage (2016) specify that an aesthetic approach should also address “the ways in which our perceptions are influenced by values, images, codes and habits which can be traced back to the evolutions of the artistic and cultural fields” (p. 14). The concept of forms, proposed by Levine (2015), could be helpful in bridging the gap between art and culture on the one hand, and the political and societal context on the other. Defining forms as “all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (p. 3), Levine (2015) argues that forms are not necessarily just aesthetic, but on a societal level they define the world we live in. In fact, the very same tools and principles that are used for analyzing cultural works could shed light on matters of political organization: “politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping. And if the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form.” (p.3). In other words, in establishing a link between literature and politics, this theory can help us understand which social and aesthetic forms play a role in the populist framing of reality.

For instance, this is the case for the hierarchical forms of “us” and “them” in the populist reading of Houellebecq’s *Soumission*. Reversing traditional binary

hierarchies, in the novel the public sphere is ruled by male, religious members of a cultural minority, whereas the secular others belonging to the cultural majority are either forced to assimilate (a choice that is presented only to men), or relegated to the domestic private sphere. This leads to what Levine (2015) labels a “conflict of forms”. Instead of joining the thought experiment proposed by Houellebecq – a paradoxical sabotage of traditional binaries – the populist reading of the novel chooses to focus on the potential danger of “them” to the privileged status quo, thus enacting the hierarchy of the secular *“Français de souche”* over the religious Other. As such, this theoretical framework should give insights in ways in which literary forms and social patterns interact and create a dynamic system relating texts to the world outside the text. The typology that will be developed in the following sections should further clarify the particular ways in which populist politicians engage with cultural products in response to societal challenges, and how this affects their political narratives.

2.3 Towards a typology of populism and culture

To create a typology that includes different conceptions of culture, it is necessary to first reflect on ways in which culture can be categorized. This will give insights to the question of what images, cultural institutions and products populists identify with, and what strategies are used to do so. As the previous section has revealed, there are two important factors to consider: the apparent populist preference for popular culture (cf. Nærland, 2020; Ostiguy, 2020; Westheuser, 2020a), and their engagement with both material and immaterial culture (cf. García-Santamaría, 2020; Özçetin, 2019; Szele, 2016; Ylä-Anttila, 2017). For this reason, this section will first explore the opposition between high and low culture, before discussing the division of culture in terms of sociofacts, mentifacts and artefacts (Huxley, 1955). These categorizations will prove to be a useful orientation for the creation of a typology of populism and culture, which aims to study culture as a dynamic two-way process. As such, culture is utilized to identify with a certain social identity, which can then become a way of life, as “cultural objects become metaphors for social positions” (Westheuser, 2020a, p. 263). The final part of this section will reflect on how this metaphorical or symbolic use of culture precisely operates in populism, organizing and orientating ideas, worldviews and behavior.

The division between high and low culture is seen to originate in the capitalism of the 18th and 19th centuries, when access to the fine arts was considered a requisite for “Bildung”, human elevation, and independent reasoning (Hanquinet & Savage, 2016). Although this elitist view is widely contested today, divisions between highbrow culture and more ordinary artistic manifestations of everyday life (lowbrow) have remained persistent well into the 20th and 21st century (Barker, 2000; McGuigan, 1992; Nachbar & Lause, 1992). A third category, middlebrow, has been added as a response to the international bestseller culture starting during the interwar period. Aiming at the growing middle class, and constituting a middle ground between “culture” and “commerce” (Keltjens, 2017), the notion of middlebrow was initially disregarded as “inferior”, but since the 1990’s it is being taken a lot more seriously, mostly thanks to the leading scholarship of Rubin (1992) and Radway (1997).

According to Nachbar and Lause (1992), the difference between highbrow or elite culture and lowbrow or popular culture is not so much one of artistic quality or elevation, but is rather based on the differences in production scale: while the former envisages a limited exclusive audience, the latter aims to reach the biggest possible audience. Indeed, this view suggests that access to elite culture is not a matter of education or wealth, but rather one of personal motivation: ““Elite” is specialized and limited to those interested enough to learn the specific knowledge needed, but not merely the culture of the rich and intellectual” (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p. 16). However, the argument of difficulty seems quite simplistic compared to Bourdieu’s notion of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989; Hanquinet & Savage, 2016). In short, Bourdieu conceptualizes society as divided into different fields (e.g. economic, cultural), which are vertically structured through the distribution of capital, creating a dominant and a dominated class (Westheuser, 2020a). Both groups are characterized by different ways of speaking, eating, moving, behaving, etcetera, producing a hierarchy of what is considered high and low social behavior. For instance, consider the case of slang language being often seen as bad or vulgar language by those belonging to the dominant class. In analogy with economic capital, cultural capital is “a mode of currency which can be exchanged, reproduced and accumulated” (Hanquinet & Savage, 2016, p. 9). It is the entirety of socially accepted manners, knowledge and taste, a power structure that is generally perceived as natural, but which is in fact the result of existing dynamics of domination (Bourdieu, 1989; Hanquinet & Savage, 2016).

The notion of cultural capital sheds new light on the negotiation of power in contemporary politics, more particularly the populist use of culture. In emancipating the people, populists foreground not only their socio-economic precarity, but use culture as class demarcation, something Westheuser (2020a, 2020b) labels a “symbolic class struggle”. To Westheuser (2020a), populism is the “flaunting of the socio-cultural low” (p. 267), reacting against the dominant classes in both the economic and the cultural fields. In this light, it makes sense that income or wealth are not the defining factors for populist support or the lack thereof, but education – the accumulation of economic and cultural capital – seems to play a key role (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Westheuser, 2020a). Through the embracing of popular or everyday culture, populism identifies with the socio-cultural low, and, in doing so, their references to culture become political (García-Santamaría, 2020; Nærland, 2020). However, populism’s apparent preference for popular culture does not exclude their engagement with elite culture, as the case study on Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* will show. It is therefore important to reflect on what the cultural product represents to populists, and to consider its symbolical status rather than its mere artistic characteristics.

As the previous part has shown, the populist use of culture involves both “expressive popular culture” (Nærland, 2020), as well as immaterial expressions of culture, such as symbols, manners, tastes, social values and norms. These different materializations of culture could be categorized using the notions of artefacts, mentifacts and sociofacts (Huxley, 1955). Examples of artefacts include buildings, utensils, vehicles, anything that can be “classified according to the human needs and desires which they subserve – nourishment, health, shelter, clothing, enjoyment, adornment, communication, and so forth.” (Huxley, 1955, p. 17). The category of immaterial culture is divided into social and mental constructions, such as kinship or political and economic institutions (sociofacts), and symbols, rituals and beliefs (mentifacts). In other words, whereas mentifacts include the shared values and beliefs of a certain culture, sociofacts are about how these ideas are reflected in visible societal structures, and artefacts constitute the material productions of a given culture. Although this categorization of culture in terms of sociofacts, mentifacts and artefacts allows us to distinguish between symbols and traditions on the one hand, and the concrete cultural products on the other, the borders between categories are often fluid.

This complicates any prediction about whether populists favor artefacts, mentifacts or sociofacts, and how they might identify differently with each category.

The case of Jeanne d'Arc illustrates how an intangible cultural product can be referred to and appropriated in different ways. Considered to be one of France's major national heroes (cf. Schwartz, 2011), the history of the peasant girl chasing the English occupants out of France during the final stages of the Hundred Years War is today a symbol representing Frenchness. Today, her figure mostly inspires politicians at the right or far right of the political spectrum, such as former president Nicolas Sarkozy, and RN leader Marine Le Pen. In his visit to Jeanne d'Arc's natal town, Sarkozy described the heroine as "la France dans ce que la France a de plus singulier et de plus universel, car Jeanne est sans doute la Française la plus connue, la plus respectée, la plus aimée dans le monde entier"³ [Jeanne, it's France in all its uniqueness and universality, because Jeanne is without a doubt the most well-known, respected and beloved French woman in the entire world]. Sarkozy's statement reveals a conception of Jeanne d'Arc as a mentifact, incarnating Frenchness and uniting the French people. The RN goes a step further by organizing since the 1980's a yearly meeting to commemorate Jeanne d'Arc. This ceremony shows that the RN identifies with the heroic figure that gave France its independence back, and that this is institutionalized through societal structures, as a sociofact. At the same time, the figure of Jeanne d'Arc has been appropriated by others – authors (among others Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jules Michelet), painters, musicians and filmmakers – which has created the almost fictitious cult figure we know today. In other words, Jeanne d'Arc got her status through the myths and stories told about her, which means that the image of her we have today is a (re)construction, or put differently, an artefact.

As the example illustrates, the relevant point here is to what end the cultural product is used, and not whether it is an example of popular culture, elite culture, a sociofact, mentifact or an artefact. What we are interested in is not only the forms that make up the populist narrative, but also how these forms are associated to each other and, as a whole, are enacted within the populist narrative. Culture, in this sense, is not a stable entity explaining or describing a certain state of affairs, but a fluctuating system built up of connections between forms. The definition of the social by Latour

³ "Sarkozy célèbre Jeanne d'Arc, symbole de l'unité nationale" https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2012/article/2012/01/06/sarkozy-celebre-jeanne-d-arc-symbole-de-l-unite-nationale_1626744_1471069.html (accessed on 01-04-2021)

(2005) could therefore be helpful to perceive culture as “a movement of re-association and reassembling” (p. 7), or “a sociology of associations” (p. 9). This definition allows us to analyze the ways in which populists “re-associate” and “reassemble” their conception of culture, and to establish a direct link with the populist view of society as divided into “us” and “them”.

For this reason, I propose to set up the typology in the opposite direction: starting from populism and its dichotomies instead of culture, and modelling it according to its integration with culture. Following the philosophy of Bourdieu (1989), this enables me to focus on what is *perceived* as culture, instead of traditional typologies of what culture is or pretends to be. In sum, I propose to frame the populist use of culture as horizontal and vertical demarcation strategies, in line with the horizontal and vertical dichotomies analyzed in chapter 1. Vertically, they are dismissing cosmopolitan elite culture, or the socio-cultural high (Ostiguy, 2020; Westheuser, 2020a), seen to be selling out the national identity. The elite is thus demonized for not being able, or willing, to protect the country from losing its cultural identity. In addition to this, on the horizontal level populists are opposed to hybrid culture, which is seen to dilute the national culture. Other cultures, most notably non-European ones, are intrinsically backward, see the following quote by Geert Wilders during a Pegida meeting in Dresden, Germany⁴: “Unsere eigene Kultur ist die beste Kultur. Und Einwanderer müssen unsere Werte annehmen und nicht andersherum.” [Our own culture is the best culture. And immigrants should take over our values and not the other way around]. Interestingly, Wilders regards German and Dutch cultures as equally good, as they are both rooted in a so-called Judeo-Christian tradition. He opposes them to immigrant cultures, implicitly pointing at Islam, which represent a danger to the allegedly superior Western European culture.

While excluding both the vertical (too elitist) and horizontal (too international) dimension, populists do approve, as we have seen in both examples, a certain type of culture: their *Leitkultur*, the leading culture of a country, that newcomers would need to assimilate to (cf. Ossewaarde, 2014; Pautz, 2005; Tibi, 2001). I will divide this into two subcategories: cultural products that were imagined with the aim of supporting the populist discourse and those that were not. Based on the notion of “organic intellectual” (Gramsci, 1971), signifying the intellectual who identifies with (and speaks

⁴ “Tekst Pegida speech Geert Wilders, 13 april 2015”: <https://www.pvv.nl/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/8286-speech-gw-pegida-130415.html> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

in the name of) a given class, I will refer to this first category as “organic cultural products”. These works form a non-autonomous part of the populist narrative. Populists will strongly identify with these works, and integrate them as such in their narrative. The second category, which I will call “autonomous cultural products”, consists of independent, often ambiguous works that will be appropriated by populists. This appropriation is generally based on a specific framing of the work that endorses their political program. A crucial difference between the two categories is thus whether the populist interpretation as well as the integration of the cultural product in the populist narrative is actively supported by its creators. The case studies in chapters 5 and 6 represent both these categories, the short film *Submission* being considered an organic cultural product, and Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* an example of an autonomous work.

In short, this leads to the emergence of a novel model, which assumes that populists embrace a certain type of cultural products that echo their anti-elitist stance on the one hand, and promote the notion of a culturally homogeneous people on the other. These cultural products become embedded in the populist cultural narrative, either because they were imagined with the aim of supporting the populist cause (the organic cultural product), or through appropriation (the autonomous cultural product). In the following section, two examples will illustrate both processes of identification with and appropriation of a certain cultural product, taking into account intangible culture (*laïcité*) and tangible culture (Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission*).

2.4 The populist cultural narrative

As stated earlier, the populist narrative is a process-in-the-making, based on a constantly changing world and experiences. My assumption that this narrative is largely built up of cultural products, invites us to think about how these products ultimately find their way to the reader’s world. The before-mentioned enactivist approach, building on Paul Ricoeur’s theory on mimesis (Baker, 2017; Ricoeur, 1991), provides a framework for understanding our engagement with stories, taking into account the reader’s background and reactions to stories – experientiality – reinterpreting Ricoeur’s stages of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration:

In my conception of experientiality, these would correspond – respectively – to story recipients’ experiential background, the text (with the stylistic and narrative strategies adopted by the story producer), and the feedback effect of the text on the background itself. (Caracciolo, 2014, p. 48)

To translate this to my analysis of the populist use of culture, I would then claim that a similar three-phase process can be observed: 1) Prefiguration: forms and modes of thinking that precede the interaction with the cultural product, 2) Configuration: emplotting or framing the cultural product, and 3) Refiguration: the cultural product – be it organic or autonomous – becomes an integral part of the populist narrative. The result, a populist cultural narrative, enables populists to spread their ideologies, dismissing both the elite and the other, thus vindicating their status as true defenders of the people. Figure 2.1 resumes these three stages as a circular process, emphasizing its transformative character: as soon as a cultural product becomes an organic part of the populist narrative, this activates new forms of thinking related to other cultural products.

For instance, the nativist ideas present in Renaud Camus’ *Le grand remplacement* (2011), which was briefly mentioned in chapter 1, have oriented the reading and interpretation of Houellebecq’s *Soumission*. Houellebecq’s depiction of France being ruled by a Muslim president, fits in the frame of a reverse-colonization by Muslim immigrants signaled by Camus. Based on the previous (reading) experience with *Le grand remplacement*, *Soumission* can thus be read as a text that advocates Islamophobia and promotes far right ideology.

Figure 2.1. The making of the Populist Cultural Narrative

Let us now apply the model step by step to two autonomous cultural products, one intangible and one tangible, starting with the notion of *laïcité* or secularism in France. This example will show that the populist appropriation of *laïcité* features prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. More concretely, these different stages refer to an interpretation of *laïcité* following a dichotomous logic opposing the Self to the Other, its construction as an oppositional concept, and finally its integration in the populist French identity.

In the prefiguration phase, *laïcité* is thus linked to preexisting worldviews concerning the other. Originally an idea associated with the political left, responsible for the instauration of the well-known *Loi de Séparation des Eglises et de l'Etat* in 1905, since the 1990's the term is more and more claimed by the right or far right (cf. Almeida, 2017; Balibar, 2014; Ossewaarde, 2014). Their interpretation of the notion of *laïcité* has an exclusionary character, aimed at restricting the presence of religious (often Muslim) signs in public, and is even described as 'laïcité identitaire' (Almeida,

2017; Baubérot, 2015). In other words, the notion of *laïcité* provides the far right with the tools to wrap their Islamophobic or (prior) anti-Semitic message as one defending France's republican values: "the FN's conception of *laïcité* is coherently structured around the notion of an Islamic threat that recycles key leitmotifs formerly used in radical anticlerical discourse against the Catholic Church" (Almeida, 2017, p. 258). At the same time, as noted above, this interpretation of *laïcité* does not target the Christian religion, which is rather presented as something inherent to French culture, an "identitarian Christianity" (cf. Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt, 2017). The case of the traditional *crèches de Noël* (cribs) in public places and its (in)compatibility with the notions of *laïcité* is exemplary of this reasoning. Being considered an expression of French culture, the RN aims to protect the presence of these cribs in public buildings such as city halls, while these religious expressions obviously violate the main principle of *laïcité* that they defend so passionately.

The second phase of the populist use of culture seeks to configure the interpretation of the cultural product according to preexisting ideas defined above, opposing it to both the elite and the Other. In the case of *laïcité*, Almeida (2017) demonstrates how Marine Le Pen used these two different strategies during her 2012 campaign for the presidential elections:

In the presidential campaign speeches held in regional strongholds of *ouvriéro-lepénisme* [i.e. regions harshly affected by deindustrialization], references to *laïcité* were primarily intended to construct the image of Marine Le Pen as the last remaining leader in France defending authentic republican values. [...] In the 2012 campaign rallies in Toulouse, Marseille, Nice and Lyon [i.e. traditionally right-wing oriented regions] the defence of secularism appears primarily as a frame to legitimise a stigmatising and exclusionary discourse against Muslims. (p. 253)

Otherwise stated, *laïcité* is used here as a pretext to promote nationalist and racist ideas, a strategy widely known as *dédiabolisation* (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015), meaning a softening of the RN discourse since Marine Le Pen's leadership. In this case, Le Pen is blaming the elites for not defending the republican value deemed so important, symbolizing an overall market-driven sell-out of French industry, to the detriment of the people. She thus claims that a sovereign France where republican values are

respected by its politicians is the solution. Simultaneously, on the horizontal level, she victimizes the others stating that their lifestyle or religious clothing is not in line with the principles of *laïcité*. Simply put, she points at their disconnection with the French people and their unwillingness or incapacity to adapt to French standards.

The final stage of the construction of the populist cultural narrative consists of a refiguration of the cultural product in question. This product is fully integrated and directly associated with a populist party: a mode of becoming active and organized in the public sphere. In the case of *laïcité*, a topic abandoned by most other political parties, notably the left, Marine Le Pen is today considered, and considers herself to be the sole defender of French secularism (cf. Almeida, 2017; Nilsson, 2015). This appropriation of *laïcité*, as we have seen, constitutes “a new frame to legitimize old ideas” (Almeida, 2017, p. 250), and transforms the notion into a *laïcité version Marine Le Pen*: “La République laïque, idée consensuelle au-dessus de tout soupçon, devient un argument anti-immigration moralement acceptable” (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 97) [The secular Republic, a consensual idea exceeding all suspicion, becomes a morally acceptable argument against immigration]. This demonstrates how a populist party can appropriate a topic, basically “own” it, by giving it their ideological touch and bringing it to a new semantic field.

Following my typology, I consider *laïcité* as an example of an intangible autonomous cultural product, that is appropriated by the populist Right. To reflect on the process of appropriation of intangible culture, which seems less evident than the case of tangible culture, the notion of reframing is key. As we have seen with *laïcité*, an inclusionary left-wing value that turned into an exclusionary measure, reframing takes place through the emplotment of history (Anderson, 2016; Ricoeur, 1991). Ricoeur understands emplotment as “a synthesis of heterogeneous elements” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 21) which enables one to put events into an imaginative order, thus rendering the story comprehensible and credible. Sharing the view that humans tend to create stories (narratives) to count and deal with lived experience, Anderson (2016) chooses to focus on the idea of “forgotten experiences”, that fill the gaps in the narrative of person and nation and allow to answer questions of identity. This leads to the creation of a historical narrative emphasizing on an imagined fraternity, in which forgetting plays a crucial role:

English history textbooks offer the diverting spectacle of a great Founding Father whom every schoolchild is taught to call William the Conqueror. The same child is not informed that William spoke no English, indeed could not have done so, since the English language did not exist in his epoch; nor is he or she told ‘Conqueror of what?’. For the only intelligible modern answer would have to be ‘Conqueror of the English’, which would turn the old Norman predator into a more successful precursor of Napoléon or Hitler. (p.210)

The idea of forgetting is also present in the work of the influential 19th century thinker Ernest Renan, who in his famous essay “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation” (1882) defines the concept of the nation: “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (Renan, 2018, p. 251). This forgetting implies practical issues, like belonging to an ethnic group whose origins are necessarily blended through history, but also the neglect of historical events that one should not be proud of, such as colonial or religious wars. In fact, this could also relate to the notion of “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm, 2012), the construction of values and norms of behavior, which are repeated and appear to be continuous with the past. In other words, a certain tradition takes place regularly and exists presumably because things were done this way in the far away past. The problematic part is not the invented tradition itself, but the unshakeable belief in its (fake) authenticity, the disregard to alternative pasts, and the idea that only celebrating it in its “pure form” allows one to stay true to their culture. This, as we have seen for instance with the case of Zwarte Piet in the previous chapter, makes invented traditions the playground of populist parties, claiming that Others and the elite want to destroy it, and with that, implicitly, an important part of the national culture.

This reframing of substantial historical events, figures or symbols is not only constitutive for the idea of a common national history, but also serve as a precedent for current challenges, as we have seen with the case of *laïcité*. These challenges are linked to the presence of the alien Other, the horizontal dichotomy, and both RN and PVV insist on the potential threat that Islam is posing to French and Dutch (Judeo-Christian) values and beliefs. When looking at speeches of populist leaders, many parallels with historical events involving an “us” vs. “them” dichotomy can be drawn.

This includes Wilders' references to imperialism ("they" are "colonists"⁵, "sharia-infiltrates"⁶ aiming for the creation of a "Eurabia"⁷), or to Nazism (comparing the Quran to *Mein Kampf*,⁸), and Le Pen's comparison of the 2015 immigration crisis to the barbarian invasions of the 4th century⁹, leading to the fall of the Roman Empire. This shows how invasions from the past are used as metaphors for present challenges, allegedly aiming at the overthrow of our Western civilization. In sum, this demonstrates what mechanisms are used in order to frame intangible cultural products within a narrative of "us", the so-called horizontal fraternity, while at the same time it allows to position the Other in the opposite camp. This results in a dynamic structure of interconnected forms, which determine the (re)framing of a given cultural product through forgetting, inventing and emplotting, thus creating or reinforcing hierarchies of power (Levine, 2015).

In the case of tangible culture appropriation takes place in a more concrete way, as statements of the author can provide clues about their (political) intention. An example of an organic work that comes to mind is a short movie that was produced by Geert Wilders, *Fitna* (2008). The movie is intended as a criticism at Islam, showing fragments from the Quran next to footage of Islamic terrorism. Seeking to demonstrate the potential danger of Islam for – in this case – the Netherlands, the film is a continuation of Wilders' party program, which wants to ban out Islamic influence (cf. Maris, 2018; Van Noorloos, 2014; Vis, Van Zoonen, & Mihelj, 2011). Two examples of French organic authors include Éric Zemmour and Renaud Camus. The former argued in this essay *Le Suicide Français* (2014), that due to mass (Muslim) immigration France has lost and is still losing its cultural identity and authenticity, hence the idea of a French suicide. This very idea of cultural loss and even replacement is clearly

⁵ "Inbreng Wilders tijdens ABP": <https://www.pvv.nl/12-in-de-kamer/spreekteksten/1288-inbreng-wilders-tijdens-apb.html> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

⁶ "Wilders en De Graaf: Sharia verbieden is heel goed plan": <https://www.pvv.nl/83-fj-related/machiel-de-graaf/6811-wilders-en-de-graaf-sharia-verbieden-is-heel-goed-plan.html> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

⁷ "Het laatste woord van Geert Wilders bij het proces": <https://www.pvv.nl/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/3939-het-laatste-woord-van-geert-wilders-bij-het-proces-sp-1560346816.html> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

⁸ "Interview Geert Wilders in het AD": <https://www.pvv.nl/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/9336-interview-geert-wilders-in-het-ad.html> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

⁹ "Marine Le Pen compare la crise des migrants à la chute de l'empire romain": <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/citations/2015/09/15/25002-20150915ARTFIG00111-marine-le-pen-compare-la-crise-des-migrants-a-la-chute-de-l-empire-romain.php> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

advocated by Renaud Camus, author of *Le Grand Remplacement* (2011) whose work has been discussed earlier.

The case of the novel *Soumission* (2015) by the French author Michel Houellebecq provides more insights in the appropriation of autonomous tangible works by populists. *Soumission* depicts the Islamization of a near future France, and was used by populist actors and right-wing journalists to underline the cultural dangers we are facing. The prefiguration stage shows how the text was quickly linked to ongoing othering practices targeting the Muslim Other, following the ideas of Zemmour and Camus, which was probably also fueled by Houellebecq's own ambiguous statements in the media¹⁰. As a consequence, primary responses to *Soumission* interpreted the novel as hostile to Muslims, but a deeper analysis of the novel and the empirical author's intentions has demonstrated a different reading. In a previous paper, I consider the novel a rather critical reflection on rigid dichotomies as 'good versus bad' oppositions, part and parcel of populist narratives (Jansma, 2018). In other words, although the novel was not openly intended as right-wing populist propaganda – quite the opposite – it was appropriated as such by populists of the RN. This reveals how a novel can become a part of a political strategy, used to promote a worldview and the political agenda connected to it.

Looking at the reception and configuration of the novel *Soumission* by leading figures of RN, and its construction as an oppositional cultural product, allows us to draw a parallel between artistic and political forms (Levine, 2015). Indeed, the encompassing consensus among RN politicians seems to be that there is some sort of truth in *Soumission*, i.e. the idea of France suffering from an identity crisis that cannot be solved by its current political leaders, and that a different approach is thus necessary. Also, we can spot both a vertical and a horizontal dimension:

Ce qui est intéressant dans ce livre, qui est un livre fiction, mais qui est un livre d'une fiction qui pourrait un jour devenir, après tout, réalité, comme l'explique M. Houellebecq, c'est surtout la manière dont il décrit le comportement de l'UMP et du PS, qui est quand-même dans la droite ligne de ce qu'on constate

¹⁰ One example is the following statement: "Sì, penso di essere populista. Voglio che il popolo decida su tutti gli argomenti » [Yes, I think I am a populist. I want the people to decide upon all matters.] in Corriere della Sera: https://www.corriere.it/esteri/17_marzo_24/houellebecq-sono-populista-non-voglio-rappresentanti-0f93fbd4-100c-11e7-94ba-5a39820e37a4.shtml?refresh_ce-cp (accessed on 01-04-2021)

dans un grand nombre de municipalités et un certain nombre de départements, où, manifestement, le fondamentalisme islamiste avance avec l'accord et même la complicité de l'UMP et le PS¹¹.

[The interesting part in the book, which is a fictional book, but a sort of fiction that could one day, after all, become reality, as Mr. Houellebecq explains, is mostly the way in which he describes the behavior of the UMP and the PS, which is actually in line with what we observe in a big number of municipalities and a certain number of departments, where, evidently, Islamic fundamentalism advances with the agreement and even with the complicity of the UMP and the PS.]

Here, Marine Le Pen draws a parallel between the political reality and the novel, in which the two main parties PS and UMP choose to support the Muslim Brotherhood (instead of the Front National) in exchange for some important ministries; illustrative for the attitude of mainstream parties allegedly lacking of republican principles and only caring about their own careers.

Besides victimizing other political parties for not acting vigorously against this supposed wave of Islamization, caused by decennia of their own state-sponsored multiculturalism, the RN also addresses the role that the Others play. In an editorial on the RN website, Nicolas Bay, member of the European Parliament for the far-right coalition Europe of Nations and Freedom and former general-secretary of the RN, compares the emergence of the Union Démocrate des Musulmans de France (UDMF) directly to Houellebecq's *Soumission*:

Si nous sommes encore loin de la soumission du livre de Houellebecq, malgré des signaux préoccupants que l'on doit prendre au sérieux, nous voyons en revanche comment le multiculturalisme pourrait conduire peu à peu à l'éclatement de la Nation¹².

¹¹ Transcribed from : "Marine Le Pen sur Soumission : "C'est ce qu'il se passe dans certaines communes en France"", interview with Marine Le Pen on France TV Info : <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2e6qtr> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

¹² "Un parti communautariste musulman en lice pour les élections départementales 2015 : du multiculturalisme à l'éclatement de la Nation" : <https://www.rassemblementnational.fr/tribunes-libres/un-parti-communautariste-musulman-en-lice-pour-les-elections-departementales-2015-du-multiculturalisme-a-leclatement-de-la-nation/> (accessed on 01-04-2021)

[Although we are still far away from the submission described in Houellebecq's book, despite some worrisome signs that we should take seriously, this does tell us how the multiculturalism could lead little by little to the collapse of the Nation.]

The multicultural society is here presented as being incompatible with the French nation, just as we have seen in Houellebecq's novel, where a minority group takes the power, leading to a complete loss of French culture. This idea of an eventual take-over is also advocated by Gilbert Collard, a regional deputy of the RN and a leading figure of the far-right think-tank *Rassemblement Bleu Marine*. In an interview with I-Télé Collard points at "demographical reasons"¹³ for which he thinks the scenario of *Soumission* is plausible. This idea, borrowed from the above-mentioned writer Renaud Camus, wants us to believe that Muslims will soon outnumber "native" French citizens, given their higher birth rates compared to the French average. In sum, RN's parallel between *Soumission* and the current political situation aims not only at disqualifying political leaders making France's transformation possible, but at the same time denounces Muslim minorities for not devoting themselves to *la République indivisible*, as stated in the French Constitution.

Finally, the refiguration stage marks the organic integration of the novel *Soumission* in the narrative of RN, both through their own active appropriation, but also indirectly by left-wing politicians denouncing its allegedly Islamophobic character and referring to the novel as propaganda for Le Pen's party. For instance, Manuel Valls, French Prime Minister of the Socialist Party (PS) at the time, stated that "France is not Houellebecq. It is not intolerance, hate and fear". Left-wing magazine *Libération* accused Houellebecq of playing with the fear of Islam and thus creating a bigger audience for the Front National. These first reactions on *Soumission* summarize how the book was seen to be a gift for Marine Le Pen, both by the RN as well as by others. However, both these left-wing and (far)right-wing interpretations of the novel are ultimately misleading, as they follow the rigid rules of the good versus bad dichotomy: the left rejecting the racist Other, and the far right the alien Other (Jansma, 2018). At

¹³ "Houellebecq: plausible ou scandaleux? Les politiques prennent parti": https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/houellebecq-plausible-ou-scandaleux-les-politiques-prennent-parti-07-01-2015-1894638_20.phpn (accessed on 01-04-2021)

the same time, it does not come as a surprise that Houellebecq's message might as well be more ambiguous than that.

While the novel *Soumission* will be studied in detail in chapter 6 of this dissertation, this first observation suggests that the (populist) tools of simplification and polarization have robbed the novel of its artistic complexity by connecting it immediately to the ideology of RN. This highlights once again the importance of analytical tools from the fields of literary theory, narratology and cultural studies, to critically analyze the creation of divisive cultural narratives, as has been done in this chapter. It is clear now that culture plays an essential role in the articulation of the populist narrative, a process-in-the-making that follows the three phases of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. However, the creation of such narratives is only one part of the story; the next chapter will explore how these culturally articulated narratives work in practice, and delve into some of the reasons for their prevailing success in society.

2.5 Conclusion

The main goal of this chapter was to set the basis for the analysis of the concrete ways in which populists construct their narrative, and more particularly the role that culture plays in this process. Being more and more widespread, the populist narrative is problematic in the sense that it is inherently conflictive and that it excludes certain groups in a way that is not compatible with any basic democratic principles. As such, the people are constructed based on the notion of "ethnos" rather than "demos".

In order to acquire a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the populist narrative, I used notions from literary theory. Looking through an enactivist and new formalist lens allowed me to study the interaction between a text and the world outside the text, and to confirm that cultural and political forms are vitally interconnected. This also sheds light on the ways in which populists use cultural and social forms to construct and ultimately enact narratives, thereby perpetuating or creating new forms. Aiming to provide a typology of populism and culture, the following step was to analyze the use and appropriation of these cultural and social forms by populists. Looking at several ways to categorize culture, I have suggested a different approach taking into account the two dichotomies of populism. Dismissing

both elite culture and hybrid culture, populists do identify with certain cultural products. However, as we have seen with the two case studies – the notion of *laïcité* and Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* – this is only possible through a three-phase process involving prefiguration, configuration and refiguration of the cultural product.

It is important to recognize that these cultural products (*laïcité* and the novel *Soumission*) should not be seen as two separate cases; in fact, they are very much connected to each other. As such, it is impossible to fully grasp the RN's reading of *Soumission* without being familiar with their conception of *laïcité*. More than that, one could even state that the populist interpretation of *Soumission* supports and concretizes their vision of *laïcité*, while at the same time the novel emphasizes the need for a secular Republic, i.e. to ban out Islamic influence, presumably prone to destroy the Nation from the inside. More concretely, this means that the populist narrative is built on many different cultural products, from tangible to intangible ones, organic and autonomous, which are all interconnected and inform the populist agenda.

Now that we have a clearer picture of the populist narrative and its entanglement with culture, the next chapter of this dissertation will take a closer look at the next step, namely the adoption and diffusion of the populist narrative in society. In order to explain its prevailing success, I will argue that the populist narrative appeals to our most basic instincts and emotions – most notably fear and anger – through the use of conceptual metaphor. In short, populism addresses existential fears of an alien or corrupt Other and emphasizes strong affection for the own tribe. I will show in the following chapter that conceptual metaphor plays a major role in framing events in such a way that it reinforces popular cultural narratives about the Self and the Other. Furthermore, the typology established in this chapter will be instrumental in part II of this dissertation, to carry out a systematic investigation of actual discursive practices of cultural appropriation. Such an approach is necessary in order to understand how a variety of populist and non-populist actors engaged with culture, and more precisely, which linguistic patterns and rhetorical devices are used by populists when reframing, antagonizing and appropriating culture. Not only will this provide us with the tools to decode the populist interpretation of cultural products, but, in a broader sense, it will reveal the importance of culture for the populist agenda.

Chapter 3 Building narratives: The role of affect and conceptual metaphor in the populist narrative

3.1 Introduction

In the first two chapters we have seen that populism is on the rise, which is reflected in the persisting popularity of populist parties in both local and national politics, as well as the widespread adoption of populist tactics by established parties (cf. Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). More precisely, the previous chapter has revealed the importance of culture for the articulation of populist definitions of “us” and “them”, a practice that mainstream politicians also resort to from time to time, as has been illustrated. In this sense, the vertical dichotomy opposes a traditional, Judeo-Christian Self to a progressive globalist elite, whereas the horizontal dichotomy emphasizes an Enlightened Self vis-à-vis a group of culturally backward Others, who are seen to threaten the community’s unique character. The somewhat contradictory self-representation of the people as traditional as well as modern reveals the importance of both antagonists for the articulation of the people’s identity, which is typically defined by its apparent contrast with the elites and the Others. To put it differently, this supports the idea of the people as an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005).

The entanglement of populism with culture supports the idea of populism as an organic phenomenon, as described in chapter 1. As such, populism is considered to be deeply engrained in our cultural narratives, rather than a direct response to an economic or political crisis. This means that populism is not likely to disappear automatically after a crisis is resolved, and it explains to a great extent its electoral success. That is, the populist narrative is a process-in-the-making: populism engages with culture, and, in so doing, transforms commonly held assumptions about “us” and “them”. This process, in which prefiguration, configuration and refiguration play an essential role, has been made visible in the typology of populism and culture in chapter

2. In other words, the previous chapters have provided new insights to what populism is and how it works, focusing on its engagement with culture.

A question that has not yet been sufficiently explored, is how the populist narrative, once the cultural products have been integrated or appropriated, appeals to so many people in such different countries in this day and age. While I am aware that there are probably more possible answers to this question, I will argue that the success of the populist cultural narrative lies in its mobilization of powerful affects that activate positive feelings about the Self, and negative feelings about the Other. Cultural products thus play a key role in the construction and articulation of these narratives because they resonate with populist conceptions of “us” versus “them”, or are appropriated as such. For instance, the way in which Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* is framed by the Rassemblement National supports their view that France is silently being Islamized, and such a reading could invoke a strong emotional engagement with their electorate: fear of losing the country they grew up in, anger with the political establishment for letting that happen, and pride for parties like RN that (supposedly) stand up for the French people. Section 3.3 of this chapter will take a closer look at previous academic work on the topic of affective politics, and will reflect on current uses of the terms affect, emotion and feeling.

The direction that my approach will take is to examine the role of conceptual metaphor in reinforcing certain affects over other. With conceptual metaphor I refer to the process of “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Examples include framing Brexit as a family affair (a divorce), the arrival of refugees as a natural disaster (a tsunami) or a pandemic as a fight (beat the virus). As such, conceptual metaphors have the power to frame a situation and can therefore provide more insight in recurrent thinking patterns on societal issues (cf. Godioli & Pedrazzini, 2019; Musolff, 2016; Soriano Salinas, 2012; Stone, 2012; Thibodeau, Matlock, & Flusberg, 2019; Valdivia, 2019). Figure 3.1 schematically represents the interplay between the populist narrative, affect and conceptual metaphor as I conceptualize it. For the construction and enactment of the populist narrative, affect and conceptual metaphor are essential ingredients, as they shape and perpetuate the central dichotomies of the “good people” versus the “evil elites” and the “dangerous Others”. The content of the populist narrative conditions the choice of metaphor or the mobilization of a specific affect. In turn, the chosen metaphor or affect will shape the populist narrative. At the same time, the choice of

metaphor has repercussions for the activation of affects, and vice versa. For instance, following its negative stand towards the multicultural society, the populist narrative could choose to frame multiculturalism in terms of a lost battle or a civil war. This metaphorical framing activates specific mental images related to fighting, confrontation and violence, which may appeal to angry or desperate citizens. This use of powerful metaphorical images causing a strong affective response will then have a feedback effect on the populist narrative.

Studying conceptual metaphor could thus reveal recurrent dichotomous thinking patterns in societal narratives, but also shed light on the ways in which metaphors can orientate affective response to the populist cultural narrative. Section 3.4 of this chapter will discuss a theoretical model based on conceptual metaphor, metaphor scenarios, regimes of metaphor and cultural narrative. This will be a helpful tool for the study of the construction and articulation of such narratives. However, before delving into the notions of affect and conceptual metaphor and their role in the successful articulation of the populist narrative, the next section will first reflect on my use of the terms *narrative* and *discourse* in the remainder of this dissertation.

Figure 3.1. Interplay between the populist narrative, conceptual metaphor and affect

3.2 Narrative, ideology, discourse

In the previous chapters I have used the term narrative several times, denoting “[ethically charged] interpretative practices through which we make sense of our lives” (Meretoja, 2017, p. 3). Two aspects are worth noticing. First, humans are born storytellers, a talent that emerges from the strong tendency to create order to make sense of our lives and the world we live in (cf. Meretoja, 2017; Ricoeur, 1991). Second, even if these accounts are based on facts, they are necessarily subjective, due to innate biases and the specific structuring of the events by the narrator:

The meanings derived from the facts and ideas associated with the diverse objects and events included in our narratives are further illuminated by the structure and course of the narrative itself (...). We are incessant narrators of stories about almost everything in our life, mostly about important things but not only, and we happily color our narratives with all the biases of our past experiences and of our likes and dislikes (Damasio, 2018, p. 96).

As pointed out by Damasio (2018), there is a strong link between narrative and lived experience, in the sense that our narratives are shaped by our personal experiences. Yet Meretoja (2017) argues that the opposite is equally true: “cultural webs of narratives affect the way in which we experience things in the first place” (p. 9). According to Meretoja, our narratives are thus culturally mediated, and, logically, the notions of “living” and “telling” are inherently intertwined. To put it in her own words: “the stories we tell are never entirely our own” (p. 18). This idea of experientiality can also be found in the work of Ricoeur (1991), referring to “our power of applying to ourselves the plots that we have received from our culture and of trying on the different roles assumed by the favourite characters of the stories most dear to us” (p. 33).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, narratives can have a substantial effect on our daily lives through enaction (Caracciolo, 2014) or performativity (Meretoja, 2017). In both cases, the stories we hear, read or tell have a transformative effect on reality. Caracciolo (2014) writes that “readers bring to bear on the stories they read all their past experiences in a way that gives rise to new, “story-driven” experiences” (p. 46). As such, narratives, in the broadest sense of the term, can have a strong normative impact on the behavior of an individual or a group (cf. Asma & Gabriel, 2019). This

enactment of ideas, values and attitudes is present in the notion of cultural narrative, as defined by Valdivia (2019): “the moral and aesthetic coded symbolic matrix-in-the-making which orientates behaviour and signifies the imaginary relationship between an individual (and/or [virtual] community) and her (his/their) material conditions of existence in a given historical-spatial context” (p. 287). The notion of cultural narrative, and more precisely the way it is constructed, will be further analyzed in section 3.4.

The populist narrative, then, alludes to the presence of populist logic in a given narrative. As such, the narrative is shaped around the dichotomy of “us” vs. “them”, and emphasizes the concepts of “people”, “elite”, “Others” and “general will”, that have been described in chapter 1. In short, the populist narrative aims at connecting to and convincing possible voters, by presenting a story that centralizes an idealized people that is being neglected by the elites and whose continuity is threatened by the presence of a substantial group of religious and/or ethnic outsiders. It refers not to the particular policies that populist parties defend, or their concrete actions in the political arena, but rather the underlying message of their politics and public statements. In this sense, the difference with the notion of ideology is subtle. While ideology concerns the political, moral and ethical considerations that orientate policy-making, narrative foregrounds the process of emplotting a particular ideological message, providing a more (psycho)narratological perspective. In other words, rather than focusing on the question what the story *is*, this chapter will look at *how* it is told.

The notion of narrative is perhaps close to what Gee (2014), based on the influential work of Foucault (2002), labeled dominant or “big D” discourses, the “larger-scale meanings shown through language choices, patterns of behavior, meaning-making and social identities” (Johnson, 2014, p. 109). Following Foucault (2002), discourse is to be considered a set of practices that generate meaning, knowledge and truth. Presuming to be neutral or objective, their hierarchical organization is in fact a result of power, and they perpetuate power dynamics as discourses establish meaning. This Foucauldian interpretation of discourse is further defined by Lynch (2014):

[...] discourses are the complex networks of statements that make knowledge possible; that delimit what can be said, or understood, within a particular discourse; and that determine who can speak (or at least speak with authority

or be heard) within that discourse. They are, in this sense, a priori – they establish the conditions of existence for any given statement. But discourses are themselves transient, discontinuous, and situated within a history that makes their alteration and disappearance possible (p. 121-122).

A “small d” discourse, on the other hand, is considered ways of “talk, text, and media that express ways of knowing, experiencing, and valuing the world” (Mullet, 2018, p. 119). It is a large concept that can refer to everything from political speeches to children’s writing, and from newspaper articles to film scripts and social media content (cf. Mullet, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Simply put, discourse entails both a more general definition including the multiple uses of language, as well as a more precise one considering the construction and enactment of social identities through particular forms of language use (Foucault, 2002; Gee, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Lynch, 2014). In a way, the difference between “small d” and “big D” discourses resembles the distinction between narrative and cultural narrative, in the sense that in both cases the latter engages with the invisible structures that shape identities of social groups and reproduce power relations. To be consequent with my use of terminology, and given the focus of this dissertation on cultural phenomena and my emphasis on storytelling, I will adopt the notions of narrative and cultural narrative. When citing from other work, however, I will take over the terminology as used by the authors, without further engaging in potential terminological differences between discourse and narrative.

The following two sections will further explore the interplay between the populist narrative and the notions of affect and conceptual metaphor. In line with the definition presented above, a narrative operates both within the world of the text, as well as in the world outside the text, and both are strongly interconnected. Following this logic, affect and conceptual metaphor are artistic devices used by the author of a particular cultural product, but also orientate the response to a given cultural product within a broader cultural narrative, and vice versa. More concretely, a novel such as Houellebecq’s *Soumission* may elicit an emotional response – compassion with the protagonist, or perhaps jealousy or anger, that influences the interpretation of the novel. At the same time, this interpretation is rooted in broader affective patterns in the individual’s life or a society as a whole. The next section will focus on the latter dimension of affect, that is, its role in the mobilization of latent populist attitudes in society.

3.3 Affective politics

In mainstream media populism is often presented as an irrational form of politics, letting emotional impulses prevail over rational debate and appealing mostly to angry citizens (cf. Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019b; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Müller, 2016). In fact, such popular disqualifications of populist parties and their voters impede any serious interest in the basis of their widespread support, and give way to pejorative characterizations like Hillary Clinton's famous "basket of deplorables". On the other hand, populism's strong affective core is clearly revealed through its "charismatic leadership, [...] romantic folkish appeals, anti-elite stance and the like" (Demertzis, 2019, p. 32). This specific appeal to certain affects that seems to distinguish populist narratives from other political narratives is therefore a relevant topic for research that can broaden current knowledge of the use of affect in contemporary politics. This section will first engage with the different uses of the terms affect, emotions and feelings, and then explore the current state-of-the-art on the topic of affective politics, and populism in particular. Finally, I will further expand on the role affect will play in this dissertation, and how this relates to the notion of conceptual metaphor, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

The notions of affect, emotion and feeling are often used interchangeably, and it is therefore hard to encounter clear-cut definitions. Instead, Cossarini and Vallespín (2019a) observe that differences are often conceptualized according to their conscious or unconscious experience, their personal or impersonal nature, by referring to their duration or intensity, or whether they connect to individual or collective norms (p. 3). While not all scholars agree on each of those particular aspects, there is general consensus that affect is the nonsignifying, nonconscious and nonintentional counterpart of emotion and feeling (cf. Leys, 2011). In this sense, it is opposed to the "subjective, signifying, functional-meaning axis to which the more familiar categories of emotion belong" (Leys, 2011, p. 441). Affect is seen as a bodily process that precedes all forms of cognition, and can therefore not be expressed in language (cf. Arias Maldonado, 2019; Shouse, 2005). Shouse (2005) compares affect to an infant's innate impulses to the "continuous flow of sensations coursing through his or her body" (n.p.). Due to the infant's lack of cognitive capacities, these sensations cannot yet be put into language, nor connected to previous experiences, which is why a baby experiences affect rather than emotions or feelings.

More concrete examples of these nonconscious and impersonal sensations, as well as a detailed study of their interaction with higher-order cognitive operations can be found in the innovative book *The Emotional Mind*, by Asma and Gabriel (2019). The authors distinguish three layers of brain activity, ranging from instinctual drives to socially learned and conditioned emotions to the highest cognitive layer of ruminations and thoughts (p. 8). Rather than considering these layers as separate fields of study, the authors conceptualize these as a feedback loop characterized by bottom-up and top-down interactions. Within this framework, comprising both conscious and nonconscious brain operations, it is possible to examine how certain ideas and affects take shape and orientate different types of behavior. As such, a turn to affective neuroscience can help us understand processes of human “motivation, feeling, thought and behavior” (p. 42). An essential premise of their model is the identification of 7 foundational affective systems, based on previous work by Panksepp (2010). According to Asma and Gabriel (2019), these basic affective systems include lust, seeking, care, play, fear, rage and grief. While the positive affects lust, seeking, care and play lay the basis for (respectively) reproduction, learning, social bonding and empathy among others, the negative affects fear, rage and grief may ultimately lead to emotional or behavioral states such as anxiety, intimidation of others and sadness (cf. Panksepp, 2010). These foundational affective systems are therefore paramount to understanding the “perception, thinking, decision-making and social behavior” of the human species (p. 3).

Following Asma and Gabriel (2019) and Panksepp (2010), it is clear that emotions and feelings do not operate independently from affect, but that they are more crystallized manifestations of affect that operate on a higher cognitive level. Emotions and feelings are both considered conscious states, given that they can be expressed and processed through language (cf. Arias Maldonado, 2019; Shouse, 2005). The main difference between emotion and feeling concerns their appeal to either collective or individual norms. Emotions are social constructs, shaped by a given culture, which Shouse (2005) illustrates with a reference to a well-known experiment by the psychologist Paul Ekman. In this experiment, Ekman observed the emotional reaction of Japanese and American subjects to an unpleasant video and found that while individuals from both countries responded similarly when they watched alone, there were sharp differences between the Japanese and the Americans when they watched together with their compatriots. Feelings, on the other hand, are personal, tend to have

a longer duration, and are biographical, meaning that we make sense of what we feel based on our previous experiences (cf. Arias Maldonado, 2019; Shouse, 2005).

Since the early 2000's, research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences has embraced the notions of affect, emotions and feelings, which is frequently referred to as "the affective turn" (cf. Arias Maldonado, 2019; Leys, 2011). This is part of a broader tendency that seeks to mitigate the pre-eminence of reason over emotion, and instead promotes a new approach that values the complementarity of reason and emotion/affect. The groundbreaking book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Kahneman (2013) is an illustrative example of this trend. Other applications more closely related to the topic of this dissertation include the study of affect as cultural and societal practices (Ahmed, 2014), in political decision-making (Eberle, 2019), the politics of empathy (Bloom, 2016), or the populist engagement with certain affects (Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019a; Demertzis, 2019; Moffitt, 2019; Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017; Voelz & Freischläger, 2019; Wodak, 2015). As it turns out, affect can be a helpful tool to understand the success of populism:

The importance of affect rests upon the fact that in many cases the message consciously received may be of less import to the receiver of that message than his or her non-conscious affective resonance with the source of the message" (Shouse, 2005, n.p.).

In other words, affect invites to think outside of the dualism reason/emotion, and to study the populist narrative not exclusively as an appeal to ideology or emotion, but as a relational dynamic.

The affective study of populism typically centers on the affect of fear (cf. Wodak, 2015), i.e. the fear of losing one's job or the widespread fear of immigrants, but more recent work by Demertzis (2019) and Rico et al. (2017) suggests that "power emotions" such as anger and efficacy (the belief in one's own political influence) play a more important role:

Angry and efficacious individuals are likely to support mainstream political parties and appropriate established political styles of discourse (Magni 2017); the same holds true with hopeful and politically powerless subjects (Davou and Demertzis 2013) and with fearful individuals who are likely to opt for political

conservatism, since defending the status quo serves to reduce fear and uncertainty. In their analysis of current Spanish populism, Rico et al. (2017) found that it is anger rather than fear that is conducive to both right- and left-wing populist attitudes” (Demertzis, 2019, p. 40).

In other words, it seems that anger is an important affect to mobilize populist support, but only if the target group is deeply disillusioned with established politics, and feels that their voices are no longer being heard – two tendencies that I explored in chapter 1. On the other hand, Moffitt (2019) argues that feelings of familiarity and closeness play a crucial role in the populist leader’s identification with their electorate, for instance through their self-presentation as ordinary citizens, or a use of what he labels “bad manners”; which is defined as the use of inappropriate language and general political incorrectness. This reveals the importance of both negative and positive affects in the conceptualization of the evil Other as opposed to a good Self.

It is precisely this polarization which is the main interest of Voelz and Freischläger (2019), who consider populism as inherently polarizing. In line with my conceptualization of populism as an organic phenomenon, they claim that populism is “a logic that takes hold of society at large” (p.264). Not only does populism define itself against an evil Other, by doing so, it also sets itself apart from the rest of society: “Populism takes hold when the relational antagonism of the two halves becomes organized by both camps, so that each half recognizes the other as opponent or enemy, and, as a corollary, is reluctant to accord the other half legitimacy” (p. 264). In fact, they consider polarization not only a dynamic used by populist politicians, but a widely shared practice – on both sides of the political divide (cf. Moffitt, 2018; Nikisianis, Siomos, Stavrakakis, Dimitroulia, & Markou, 2019; Stavrakakis, 2018). Or in the words of Stavrakakis (2018), there is a “vicious circle of polarization” (p. 50) generated by both populist and anti-populist societal movements; the latter – usually established political parties, media outlets and scholars – demonizing the former as “abnormal” as opposed to their own alleged normality. The supposed danger of the abnormal populist Other, Nikisianis et al. (2019) argue, is metaphorically conceptualized as a mental or physical illness (e.g. parasite), a natural disaster (e.g. wave), or a mythological being (e.g. monster). While Stavrakakis (2018) and Nikisianis et al. (2019) both focus on the case of Greece, similar dynamics can be identified in France (Macron’s political movement *En Marche* explicitly targeting Le Pen’s *Front National* in the 2017

elections) and Italy (the protest movement “the Sardines” denouncing Salvini’s Lega in 2019-2020). In the case of the US, this polarizing logic translates, according to Voelz and Freischläger (2019), into liberals adopting the affect of indignation, mirroring the Right’s affect of resentment:

Staying true to our heuristic schema, the aesthetics of the affect of indignation ought to reflect and reconfirm a stance of superiority, whereas the aesthetics of the affect of envy/resentment is expected to reflect and reconfirm a demand for disruption that stands in the service of leveling the playing field. (p.276)

In this sense, the use of affect to denounce the Other as inferior creates a “negative partisanship” (p. 267), particularly visible in the US, where people make their electoral decisions based on their negative affective appraisal of the other party (Voelz & Freischläger, 2019). I will further elaborate on the affects of indignation and resentment in my discussion of the political response to Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* in chapter 6.

In both of my case studies (see chapters 5 and 6), the notion of affect will be helpful for understanding what happens once a cultural product – the short film *Submission* by Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh, or Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* – becomes part of the populist cultural narrative. More precisely, I will examine the political response to these cultural products, and take a closer look at their mobilization of both positive and negative affects. The previous chapter has already shown that cultural products can be productive for the confirmation, justification or rejection of populist worldviews. Additionally, I will show that these cultural products allow to convey or promote a certain affective response that reinforces an idealized image of the people, and inexorably excludes the elites and alien Others.

As stated above, I concede that conceptual metaphor also plays a role in the activation of populist attitudes. Here again, it is important to distinguish between two interconnected types of narrative. First, the use of metaphor in a specific cultural product (a novel or film), which may orientate the interpretation of the cultural product. Second, the broader societal narratives in which conceptual metaphor is used as a device to make sense of a particular cultural product. For instance, the framing of the novel *Soumission* as a bomb or a prophecy will inevitably influence an individual’s reading experience and interpretation of the novel. As a matter of fact, it could also be

said that a frequent metaphor is a cultural product in itself, as it taps into a pre-existing cultural repertoire, and reconfigures it. The next section will further explore the notion of conceptual metaphor and its link to broader societal narratives, as well as its potential to evoke certain mental images that can strengthen affective response.

3.4 The role of conceptual metaphor

So far, this chapter has mentioned several times that populism activates latent ideas, worldviews and affects, but it has not yet examined how exactly this process of activation takes place. I will argue in this last part that language, more particularly the use of conceptual metaphor in political speech and media reports on the cultural product in question, play an essential role in this process. Metaphor has many functions in our daily language; it allows speakers to express themselves creatively, but it is also an indispensable tool for understanding complex or abstract matters in familiar terms (e.g. the computer as a living body that can be attacked by a “bug” or a “virus”). The emphasis on metaphor thus follows the assumption that “metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 156).

More far-going implications of metaphor include the idea that the choice of metaphor mirrors underlying thought patterns, and that the repeated use of a particular metaphor can influence the way in which we perceive the world (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Thibodeau et al., 2019). Thibodeau et al. (2019) give the example of Trump’s use of metaphor in his famous slogan “drain the swamp”, and illustrate how this encouraged his followers to picture Washington DC as “a murky place with dangerous creatures” (p. 10). Furthermore, they suggest that this metaphor aroused a strong affective response:

Trump’s swamp metaphor may be especially effective because the thought of a hot and dangerous swamp that is a breeding ground for dangerous diseases can arouse feelings of anxiety and disgust, leading people to adopt Trump’s negative attitudes toward the political establishment (p.10-11).

In this sense, conceptual metaphor can effectively frame reality based on underlying convictions or political motivations. By using that metaphor, certain mental images, as well as an affective response are evoked, which may orientate ideas, worldviews and behavior. To repeat Lakoff and Johnson (1980), “a metaphor may thus be a guide for future action” (p. 156).

However, in order to analyze how concretely this process takes shape, the next section will conceptualize metaphor as part of a larger framework, which includes four interlinked levels of cognitive operation: conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), metaphor scenario (Musolff, 2016), regime of metaphor (Valdivia, 2019), and cultural narrative (Valdivia, 2019). This model makes it possible to take a closer look at societal narratives, by analyzing step by step how different layers of the model relate to each other, and how they become operational.

3.4.1 Four main cognitive operations of conceptual thinking

Conceptual metaphor refers to the process in which a concept in one semantic field, i.e. the source domain, is defined in terms of another, i.e. the target domain (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Musolff, 2016; Soriano Salinas, 2012; Thibodeau et al., 2019). The former is prototypical, usually based on daily life experience, whereas the latter is specific. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor NATION AS HOUSE in the sentence “Spain is our house!”, the country is compared to a not further specified archetypal house. Conceptual metaphor differs from linguistic metaphor in that it is an abstract cognitive operation, given that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). There is a certain universality to it, whereas linguistic metaphors may vary from one language to another (Soriano Salinas, 2012). Metaphor is thus deeply connected to our conceptual system, and allows us “to integrate the target topic into a set of familiar concepts and assumptions and structure it from a particular viewpoint” (Musolff, 2016, p. 11). In other words, metaphor is key to make sense of a complex reality, relating this to a more familiar experience:

¹ Santiago Abascal, leader of the Spanish right-wing populist party Vox, used this metaphor during the 2019 election campaign. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFuSTLaGHAA> (accessed on 18-02-2021)

Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientations, objects, etc.). This leads to metaphorical definition in our conceptual system. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 115)

Consequently, the study of metaphor is pertinent in two ways. First, the choice of metaphor can give insights in the speaker's deeper experiential, cultural and ideological motivations that are not always visible on the surface level. Second, for the recipient, a certain metaphor may activate conceptual frames and thus promote ways of thinking or feeling over others (cf. Turner, 2018).

Lakoff & Johnson referred to this effect as the metaphor becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy – priming certain ideas over others. Musolff problematizes this direct connection, arguing that another cognitive level must exist between the metaphor and our framing of reality; the metaphor scenario:

A scenario is a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about the prototypical elements of a concept, that is, participants, 'dramatic' story lines and default outcomes, as well as ethical evaluations of these elements, which are connected to the social attitudes and emotional stances that are prevalent in the respective discourse community. (Musolff, 2016, p. 30)

In other words, metaphor can frame reality, but only through and depending on the dominant metaphor scenario, or mini-narrative. As an example, Musolff cites LOVE/MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP, a scenario commonly used to refer to the relationship between Britain and the EU, comprising metaphors such as "a marriage of convenience" or "a divorce".

If metaphor scenarios process meaning, it is still not clear why some metaphors are more prominent than others. To explain this, Valdivia (2019) theorizes the hierarchical notion of regime of metaphor: "a key intermediate cognitive operation where metaphors are narratively enacted, made visible and experienced" (p.293). This is illustrated with examples of post-war regimes of metaphor on the European Union,

such as EUROPEAN UNION AS A BUILDING, or STATE MEMBERS AS FRIENDS, which are today being challenged by new rising regimes of anti-European metaphors like EUROPEAN UNION AS CORRUPTED BODY and STATE MEMBERS AS RIVALS.

As soon as a regime of metaphor gains momentum, it can enact the configuration of the fourth and last cognitive level: the cultural narrative, as defined in section 3.2. Simply put, cultural narratives are the fictions we believe ourselves to be, and in the name of which significant political and societal decisions are taken. Valdivia (2019) uses the example of Enlightenment Europe, promoting a strong belief in rationality and technological advancement, which largely defines and confirms our conceptualizations of the European Union as a vehicle for progress.

While Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT), was first introduced by Lakoff & Johnson in 1980, the other three layers of the model are more recent contributions. In the following section, I will argue that a model comprising conceptual metaphor, metaphor scenarios, regimes of metaphor, and the cultural narrative can provide a satisfactory answer to some of the major criticisms directed at CMT over the years. At the same time, this model allows to analyze the pervasiveness of certain metaphors or narratives over others in our societies, as well as suggest starting points for the configuration of alternative societal narratives.

3.4.2 A widely debated theory

In the roughly 40 years since the publication of *Metaphors we live by*, many scholars have both adopted and critically questioned its main arguments. In their afterword, added to the version published in 2003, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) reflect on the far-going implications of their work in fields as diverse as linguistics, literary studies and law, and to major developments that contribute to the study of conceptual metaphor at present, such as the development of computational models. However, they also provide a critical reading of their pioneering study, qualifying their categorization of structural, ontological and orientational metaphors as “artificial”, and acknowledging that they underestimated the notion of “primary metaphor” and the difference between metaphor and metonymy.

They were not the only ones to criticize (parts of) their work. In his article, Kövecses (2008) reviews the five most recurrent criticisms of CMT, namely its

methodology, the direction of analysis (bottom-up or top-down), the notions of schematicity and embodiment, and the relationship between metaphor and culture. In fact, the first two criticisms refer to the difference discussed above between linguistic and conceptual metaphors, and the different methodologies and approaches that are used. While the former is concerned with large datasets of metaphors used in daily language, the latter is interested in the underlying cognitive processes in a more intuitive way. In this sense, studies on linguistic metaphor work bottom-up, focusing on the semantic irregularities that may occur due to linguistic and/or cultural diversity. Conceptual metaphor, on the other hand, is top-down, starting from a universal regularity rooted in human cognition (e.g. *TIME IS MONEY*) that gives rise to different (linguistic) metaphors: spending time, investing time, wasting time. Such semantic irregularities – despite their conceptual link, spending time and investing time do not have the same meaning – are considered to be a result of different mappings of conceptual metaphor.

Kövecses holds that one methodology is not preferable over the other, rather, the two are complementary. In my analysis, which aims to analyze how populist narratives are constructed and enacted, I am interested in the latent ideas, attitudes and affects that populists seek to activate. I hold that these attitudes are linked to conceptual thinking, meaning that analyzing the populist narrative is not “just” a matter of studying words and sentences, but their underlying cognitive and emotionally embodied patterns. Similarly, I do not pretend that by simply changing certain linguistic metaphors social change can be achieved. Instead, we should realize that public discourse is a process-in-the-making, consisting of different layers, of which linguistic metaphor is the first, most superficial and concrete level, followed by conceptual metaphor, the metaphor scenario, the regime of metaphor and the cultural narrative. In order to change public discourse, all these stages should thus be continuously addressed.

The extension of CMT with other layers of cognitive operation could also help understand the issue of schematicity raised in Kövecses’ paper. In cognitive linguistics, the term schematicity is used to denote the complete overlap between different conceptual structures (Tuggy, 2010). In the case of conceptual metaphor, this refers to the question “which elements of the source domain are mapped onto the target, and which ones are not” (Kövecses, 2008, p. 175). Citing his example of the conceptual metaphor *THEORIES/ARGUMENTS AS BUILDINGS*, we can say that a theory has a solid

foundation, while we do usually not refer to theories as having “long corridors and high windows”. In other words, there is no full overlap between source and target domains (buildings and theories), but a speaker cherry-picks those parts of the source domain that allow to accentuate the elements relevant for the framing of the target domain. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) referred to this as partiality: “It is important to see that the metaphorical structuring involved here is partial, not total. If it were total, one concept would actually *be* the other, not merely understood in terms of the other” (p. 13). Evidently, the elements of the source domain which are used to define the target domain are not arbitrary, but serve a clear purpose: it primes some ideas over others. Here, the metaphor scenario, regime of metaphor and cultural narrative come into play, as they configure which metaphor is most appropriate within a given narrative, regime or scenario. More concretely, when using the conceptual metaphor THEORIES/ARGUMENTS ARE BUILDINGS, one metaphor scenario may be GOOD THEORIES ARE SOLID (a well-founded theory), and another GOOD THEORIES ARE ELEGANT (have beautiful wallpaper). Both scenarios would apply to different regimes of metaphor, which are then connected to specific cultural narratives. I argue that ultimately the narrative framing defines the choice for one metaphor or the other, and thus explains why some aspects of the source domain are used more frequently than others.

Another frequent critique is the question of whether conceptual metaphor is, as claimed by Lakoff & Johnson, a universal phenomenon. That is to say, while linguistic expressions may vary across languages, its underlying structures are grounded in basic characteristics of the human body and their perception of the world. For instance, the conceptual metaphor HAPPY IS UP finds its origin in bodily reactions to happiness: a smile, standing up, cheering, or jumping. This experiential basis of metaphors was labeled by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as “embodiment”. More broadly speaking, Asma and Gabriel (2019) define the notion of analogical cognition, the “[discovery of] similarities between behaviors, forms, sequences, and patterns generally” (p. 201). They state that through analogical thinking, humans are able to think conceptually, to create prototypical and class concepts, and, most importantly, to think metaphorically. Although this universal and cognitive approach to metaphor certainly explains some widespread metaphors, and the theory as such is quite convincing, it should also acknowledge the fact that humans are not only shaped by their biological features, but also by the cultures in which their lives take place. Kövecses (2008) therefore proposes to include the cultural aspect, as universal human emotions – anger, joy, shame – may

manifest themselves in different ways across cultures. In his definition of culture, Kövecses also includes local context, i.e. the setting and topic in which the metaphor appears, or the personal history of the speaker, for instance their profession or hobbies. Here, again, the notion of metaphor scenario can be useful, argues Musolff (2016):

Therefore, instead of clinging to the universalist ‘one domain-two models’ set-up, we can redefine the source aspect of the NATION AS FAMILY metaphor as a *discourse-based*, conceptual structure that incorporates evaluative bias elements, which make it useful for argumentative exploitation. This discourse-based, culturally and historically mediated version of a source domain is what has been referred to as a ‘metaphor scenario’. (p. 30)

In other words, if the conceptual metaphor is grounded in basic human experience, then the way in which it is narratively enacted depends on the culturally and historically discourse-based metaphor scenario, regime of metaphor and cultural narrative. At the same time, this being a circular process, a feedback loop is created in which new metaphorical concepts are shaped by the configuration of public discourse itself formed on the basis of conceptual metaphor, metaphor scenarios and regime of metaphor. Figure 3.2, borrowed from Valdivia (2019), concisely reflects this process, focusing on the case study of the White Paper on the Future of Europe and the use of the metaphor “the way forward”.

Figure 3.2. General scheme of the regime of metaphor theory

Note: This figure is borrowed from Valdivia (2019) and applies to the European White Paper on the Future of Europe and the metaphor use of “the way forward”.

To sum up, my point is that considering conceptual metaphor in a larger framework of cognitive operation can overcome the above-mentioned shortcomings of CMT. The inclusion of the additional layers of metaphor scenario, regime of metaphor and cultural narrative allow to study linguistic and conceptual metaphor as a process-in-the-making, using complementary bottom-up and top-down methods. Taking into consideration all levels of cognitive operation, and more precisely broader societal narratives, this conceptualization further clarifies the ubiquity of certain metaphors over others, and points out how scenarios, regimes and narratives condition the choice of source domains used to frame concepts. Finally, the different layers distinguish between more universal cognitive processes – conceptual metaphor – and the more culturally shaped phenomena of metaphor scenarios, regimes of metaphor and cultural narratives. I agree with Pinker (2007) that “thinking cannot trade in metaphors only”

and that instead, “a deeper stratum of thought” should be responsible for this (p. 249-250). Metaphors, he argues, are “an essential part of rhetoric, ordinary communication, and thought itself. But this doesn’t mean that people are enslaved by their metaphors or that the choice of metaphor is a matter of taste or indoctrination” (p. 261). As this section has shown, metaphor, or rivaling metaphor frames, is indeed not the final station of conceptual thinking, but they are in constant interaction with metaphor scenarios, regimes and cultural narratives, configuring and reconfiguring public discourse and thought.

These four cognitive operations will therefore structure the analysis of the media debate for both of the case studies in this dissertation. The objective of my approach is to dissect populist cultural narratives that are widespread in mainstream media, and to understand their configuration and preference for certain types of metaphor scenarios, in relation to the affects they mobilize. For instance, the conceptual metaphor NATION AS BODY – expressed in the linguistic metaphor “une France endormie” [a France that fell asleep] – can be captured in the metaphor scenario NATION IS A FATIGUED BODY. This metaphor scenario then activates the regime FRANCE IS VULNERABLE, ultimately leading to the configuration of the cultural narrative of Nationalism, which wants France to “wake up” and “fight for itself”. It is clear that the outcome of this narrative is highly confrontational, and that it alludes to basic affects such as “care” for one’s own community (an analogy with a parent that has to wake up their sleeping child) and “rage” against Others willing to destroy it. This process, and more particularly the intertwinement between conceptual metaphor and affect, will be further illustrated in chapters 5 and 6.

3.5 Conclusion

The previous chapter revealed that culture is an essential component of the populist narrative, and looked at ways in which cultural products have been used, and why particularly these products appeal to populists. These findings constituted the basis for the present chapter, which aimed at examining the next step: what happens once a cultural product becomes integrated in the populist narrative? More precisely, I looked at the reasons for the latter’s successful articulation in society, analyzing the importance of affect and conceptual metaphor. In short, I argued that populism is

particularly good at mobilizing affects, which support a negative depiction of the Other, while the Self is portrayed as inherently good and pure. In effect, I proposed that CMT plays a key role in activating these ideas, worldviews and affects, by framing a complex situation in familiar – and often highly simplified – terms, creating a powerful image that corresponds to a particular rhetoric. Trump’s swamp metaphor, which was cited above, is a clear example of this.

After having clarified some terminological questions, my aim was to investigate the role of these two pillars of the populist cultural narrative. I first explored the added value of the study of affect for understanding populism’s strong and prevailing electoral support. Previous studies by Rico et al. (2017) and Demertzis (2019) show how populism successfully appeals to angry citizens who have lost hope in mainstream politics, suggesting that this anger – directed towards corrupt and evil Others – is a strong political mobilizer. At the same time, Moffitt (2019) notes that positive emotions such as familiarity and closeness – linked to the care affect – are vital for the construction of the Self-group. In this sense, the cultural products used by populists embody the logic of the populist narrative, and the concrete and tangible story they tell contributes to the articulation of hostile feelings towards Others.

As I have further argued in this chapter, a concrete way to appeal to affect is the activation of meaningful mental images through the use of conceptual metaphor. As suggested by the earlier mentioned example of the swamp metaphor or the suicide metaphor in the title of Eric Zemmour’s *Le Suicide Français*, extreme images of disease, danger or death can arouse an extreme affective response, appealing to ultimate fears of “degeneration, decline and disintegration” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 78). In general, metaphor can both be an artistic or rhetorical device used within a given cultural product, as well as a tool to frame that cultural product within a given societal context. As I have made clear, both these levels are largely interconnected, as the world of the text permeates the real world and vice versa. In this sense, the study of metaphor can reveal insights in prevailing underlying ideas about the Self and the Other in cultural products and society at large.

Both affect and conceptual metaphor will be useful for the analysis of populist narratives on two particular cultural products – the short film *Submission* (2004) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh, and Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* (2015) – in chapters 5 and 6 respectively. Here too, I will map the multiple relations between the cultural products and their reception on the one hand, and the broader metaphorically

constructed cultural narratives on the other. While the cultural products are necessarily emerging from a given societal context, they also play a role in reconfiguring or perpetuating cultural narratives. In my analysis, I will focus on two different sets of societal response, namely political statements on the cultural products and media reviews. The political corpus will be analyzed using the typology of populism and culture, defining clusters of narratives on the cultural product, and exploring the different affects they seek to mobilize. The corpus of media articles will take a broader societal perspective, by analyzing different ways in which the cultural products are metaphorically framed by journalists or other societal actors. The aim of this analysis is to gain insights in the way cultural narratives, regimes of metaphor, metaphor scenarios and conceptual metaphors that reproduce the typically populist “us” vs. “them” dichotomies are widespread in society. Furthermore, I will take a closer look at the affects these metaphors appeal to, and in what sense they orientate ideas and attitudes. However, before delving into the case studies, one more essential step needs to be taken. The next chapter will reflect on the process of data collection, address some relevant methodological issues, and detail the methodologies that have been selected for the analysis of the two case studies.

Chapter 4 Mixing methods. Analyzing the populist cultural narrative using Constructivist Grounded Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this first part will reflect on the methods that will be used in part II of the dissertation. Its main premise will be to establish a connection between the theory discussed above, and the analytical work that will be the subject of the next two chapters. This will be done firstly by considering the implications of the theoretical focus for the methodology, most notably the topic of populist cultural narratives, the conception of this cultural narrative as a constructed entity, and the interdisciplinary approach. In so doing, it will become clear that the chosen methods are appropriate means to achieve the main objectives of this dissertation.

Section 4.2 will then take a closer look at these particular methods. In adopting a mixed-method approach, I will demonstrate how different tools can complement each other, and how possible constraints of each separate method can be overcome by combining them. The two methodologies that will be central in this chapter are Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). I will define the core characteristics of both approaches and refer to their use within the disciplines of the Social Sciences and the Humanities, before reflecting on their applicability for different parts of my own analysis.

Moreover, CGT and CDA being two examples of qualitative analysis, I will argue that a combination of the two methodologies provides further possibilities for extension to larger corpora, and adding quantitative elements. My own analysis will be an example of such a novel quali-quantitative approach, and will be briefly introduced in the final part of section 4.2. Furthermore, it is important that the notion of trustworthiness is taken into account. I will discuss how triangulation and intercoder agreement are essential tools for ensuring the rigor and reliability that goes with

quantitative analysis, while at the same time qualitative close reading techniques provide more depth to the analysis. In other words, this methodology chapter will lay out a quali-quantitative framework geared toward the theoretical basis set out in the previous chapters, considering the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

4.2 From theory to methodology

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the recent rise of populist parties has interested a vast number of academic scholars, operating in various fields. Due to the different shapes and different contexts in which it can appear, populism provides a real challenge to politicians, political scientists, and journalists who are all trying to make sense of the phenomenon. For instance, while the basic principles of populism are potentially beneficial to democracy according to some (cf. Laclau, 2005; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013a; Tormey, 2019), others completely refute this idea (cf. Müller, 2016; Rosanvallon, 2011). More specifically, Tormey (2019) advocates that a too negative depiction of populism as a threat to democracy impedes a critical look at democracy and political elites themselves: “The elephant in the room (the crisis of contemporary democracy) is left free to graze in the name of defending pluralism and democratic values” (p. 156). In other words, the topic of populism is still widely debated, not only in the academic world, but also within political parties, around talk show tables, and in the lives of ordinary citizens. At the same time, a focus on the notion of social inequality – whether experienced by majority or minority groups – seems to be a constant in theories about populism.

To say that populism is an undertheorized research topic would thus be inaccurate. On the other hand, a framework for the study of populism as an organic cultural phenomenon is still lacking. Such a framework should centralize the configuration of so-called populist cultural narratives in which popular conceptions of “us” and “them” are integrated. More precisely, the role of language as a vehicle for the diffusion of these narratives of dominance should be at the heart of the analysis, concretely the use of conceptual metaphor and the articulation of emotion. In this definition, language is never neutral; as a matter of fact it constructs “versions of the social world” (Burck, 2005, p. 248) and reproduces power dynamics (Mullet, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Discourse, understood as “the creative use of language as a

social practice” (Mullet, 2018, p. 119), is then a constitutive phenomenon, which – in the specific case of populism – can enable and justify “us” vs. “them” dichotomies. An analysis of both populist as well as broader societal discourses could thus reveal underlying patterns of thought and behavior, and implicit or hidden meanings, otherwise put “the assumed and the unspoken” (Johnson, 2014, p. 109).

This social-constructivist approach to the populist cultural narrative, focusing on linguistic forms and conceptual links, is ideally underpinned by a methodology that foregrounds the interpretative qualities of the researcher. Such research is considered a process-in-the-making, as opposed to a more linear hypothesis-testing enquiry in which data serves to support pre-defined ideas (cf. Burck, 2005; Johnson, 2014). In fact, the circular, iterative and inductive methodology I envisage generates new knowledge and insights in the process of analyzing the data. These outcomes then serve as a starting point for the next round of analysis, and, along the way, provide the researcher with different perspectives to establish new links, which then further shape the analysis and theory. Furthermore, this approach is especially useful for the creation of an innovative theoretical framework, most notably dealing with ongoing polemic political issues, where practices of power play a central role (cf. Burck, 2005; Johnson, 2014).

The consideration of the populist cultural narrative as a constitutive process, which is reflected in the choice of research methods, has two further implications. First, the chosen methodology is necessarily interdisciplinary. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, populism constitutes a response to present political, economic and cultural challenges, and has far-going political and societal implications. For this reason, my approach should integrate theoretical and methodological insights from various fields, as broad as cultural studies, political science, literary analysis, conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) and affect theory. An interdisciplinary mixed-method approach could make sense of the complex phenomenon of populism, focusing on its wide societal impact, the success of its narrative, and it could open possibilities for exploring more inclusive alternatives to populism.

The second implication is that following the methodological principles outlined above, the neutrality of the researcher and the objectivity of results are unattainable. This, I would argue, is not a sign of weakness, instead it provides an enormous potential for the critical consideration of power dynamics, a “contextualised meaning-making” (Johnson, 2014, p. 105), not only of the studied topic (subjectivity) but also

regarding the position of the researchers themselves (self-reflexivity). As Mullet (2018) shows, this is again in line with the basic principles of social-constructivism: “from the critical perspective, scientific neutrality places unequal power in the hands of the researcher and represents the failure to recognize that all knowledge is socially constructed and based on values” (p. 120). To put it differently, the researcher rejects the notion of universal truth, which would lead to oversimplification, yet at the same time they critically reflect on used theoretical principles, methods and their own convictions. For the sake of trustworthiness, Mullet (2018) argues that it is important that researchers are transparent about their critical stance and preference for a given approach.

So far, this section has led to two important insights that will define the adoption of two specific methodological tools in the next section of this dissertation, namely Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). While the former reflects the constructivist approach to the populist cultural narrative as an ongoing process, the latter allows for a focus on language as a power device, and provides tools for unravelling explicit and implicit forms of dominance through language. The next section will further define these two methodologies, and will explain how they complement each other in the specific case of my analysis. Finally, I will reflect on the notion of trustworthiness, particularly processes of triangulation and intercoder agreement, to guarantee the overall quality and rigor of the analysis.

4.3 A mixed-method approach

The previous section has illustrated the need for an interdisciplinary approach to grasp the complex challenges that populism poses to society. This section will further develop the quali-quantitative methodology that will be central in the second part of this dissertation. First, section 4.3.1 will provide a more general introduction in which I reflect on the implications of my research questions for the methodology, and the nature of my data. After that, parts 4.3.2 and 4.3.3 will present the selected research methods, CGT and CDA, and describe the added value of each methodology for my own analysis. Finally, section 4.3.4 will explore possibilities for further enhancing the transferability and reliability of my analysis, after which the process of data collection and coding will be briefly described in section 4.3.5.

4.3.1 Aligning research questions, methods and data

The proposed methodological tools, CGT and CDA, are particularly useful for qualitative analysis, as such research methodologies are “often open-ended and exploratory, aiming to generate hypotheses rather than to test them” (Burck, 2005, p. 238). Burck (2005) contrasts what she labels “hypothesis-generating” and “hypothesis-testing” research, two methods that are logically complementary, but she doesn’t further reflect on what a mix of both qualitative and quantitative research would look like. However, such a mixed-method research design, of which quali-quantitative analysis is an example, could be highly beneficial for my analysis. In fact, my analysis seeks to combine close reading techniques with the identification of more general patterns, and centers on two specific case studies which it wants to compare (cf. Bell, 2007; Moats & Borra, 2018). Quali-quantitative analysis complements the systematicity of quantitative research – most often through the adoption of digital tools for data gathering, analysis, or data visualization – with the interpretative focus of qualitative research. An additional advantage is that this qualitative interpretation of data can enrich the typical statistical analyses of quantitative research, in which data is usually homogenized, and critical details may be overlooked (Bell, 2007; Moats & Borra, 2018). To illustrate, Moats and Borra consider network analysis to be an ultimate example of quali-quantitative research, given the possibilities it provides for data visualization, the discovery of broader patterns, and the detailed exploration of connections between the data.

The second part of this dissertation will study the networked political, cultural and public debates on the short film *Submission* (2004) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh, and Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* (2015). More concretely, it will ask the question how these two controversial cultural products were framed both by politicians as well as in mainstream media, and what this reveals about underlying yet prevalent ideas, values and worldviews. A quali-quantitative approach would make it possible to work with a broad and diverse selection of political statements and media reviews, without losing the details and nuances – so important for the evaluation of complex cultural products – out of sight.

The media play a central role in my analysis. According to Vallespín and Bascuñán (2019), Western societies moved from being so-called party democracies to media democracies, and are now transforming into digital democracies. This is to say

that mass media and digital media are the arenas in which political battles are being fought: “(...) while decades ago political parties structured and *de facto* conditioned the functioning of the democratic system, the latter is now shaped by mass media communication” (Vallespín & Bascuñán, 2019, p. 164). The authors speak of a “symbiotic relationship” between politics and media; politics needs the media in order for democracy to flourish, and media needs politics to provide them with news to fill their newspapers and newscasts. An additional factor of this symbiosis which I assume is essential – although not explicitly cited – is commercial success; politicians have come to appreciate the added value of media exposure for improving their likeability and thus political success, but their presence in a TV show or newspaper interview also boosts TV ratings and sales, to the satisfaction of advertisers. Vallespín and Bascuñán (2019) argue that especially populist leaders have greatly profited from this development, linking the breakthrough of populism to the rise of private television channels as of the late 80’s and early 90’s: “Where the strength of quality press and deliberative public sphere is maintained, the impact of populist trends tends to be smaller; where they give way to the pressure of simplification and more frivolous staging, the contrary will occur” (p. 166). In other words, because of their political incorrectness and closer (performed) familiarity to the audience, attracting a large number of spectators, the populist leader is a welcome guest in TV studio’s. Inspired by this commercial success, (news) media will become eager to continue with this more sensationalist business model. At the same time, mainstream politicians – looking for media coverage – will be tempted to adapt to these new standards by letting their public appearance and style overshadow content and nuanced debate. This is in part how populist narratives become successful and prevalent.

Social media are certainly an important factor for explaining the populist upsurge, and have greatly influenced the form of current political debates. As has been briefly mentioned in chapter 1, social media allow politicians as well as other individuals to bypass mainstream media, and to connect to large groups of like-minded others. Furthermore, due to the lack of a traditional gatekeeping mechanism, an abundance of “fake news” is regularly published on social media, fostering further societal polarization (McIntyre, 2018; Nichols, 2017). As such, readers are able to cherry-pick the news stories that most appeal to them, not because they represent objective truth, but because they confirm previous ideas. This shows the importance of narrative framing in social media discourse, where the reader’s attention is caught by

conveying certain sentiments rather than dry facts. While I recognize that social media play an essential role in today's political debates, my analysis will focus on mainstream media only. This has a practical reason, namely the fact that at the time of *Submission* (2004), social media were still not widely used, but also the nature of social media posts is a limiting factor. Being mostly short comments, they have a different narrative structure, which requires the use of other analytical tools to reveal underlying patterns. The mobilization of populist attitudes through social media would however constitute a pertinent topic for a follow-up study.

The media are thus one of the places where populist attitudes are being made, reinforced and reproduced, which makes it an essential source of information for my analysis. In this regard, following Vallespín and Bascuñán (2019), the media are not simply supplying objective information, but they are in fact storytellers – crafting their stories by filtering and framing the news. The authors claim that metaphors, clichés and slogans are essential tools in the media to “influence the perception of consumers in order to impose the views they are interested in” (p. 164), an idea that we already discussed above in relation to conceptual metaphor (cf. Godioli & Pedrazzini, 2019; Musolff, 2016; Soriano Salinas, 2012; Stone, 2012; Thibodeau et al., 2019; Valdivia, 2019). For this reason, my analysis will not only take into account political statements on the case studies in question, but will extend its focus to media debates as well. More specifically, CGT and CDA will be used in order to unravel recurrent hegemonic patterns that are expressed both explicitly and implicitly. In the next section, I will describe these two methods more in detail, and I will explain their usefulness for my analysis.

4.3.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory understands research as a primarily inductive qualitative practice enabling the identification of ideas and theory in the data, which strongly contrasts with the hypothesis-testing approach that is common in quantitative research (Burck, 2005; Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sebastian, 2019). In other words, the theory is “grounded” in the data, rather than the other way around (Burck, 2005). This allows researchers to construct a theoretical framework based on the gathered data, starting from and shedding new light on complex societal questions (Burck, 2005;

Johnson, 2014; Sebastian, 2019). Since its first appearance in a now seminal work by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), the original theory has been subject to change, leading to the emergence of roughly three main avenues: classical Grounded Theory (GT), Interpretative Grounded Theory (IGT) and Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Sebastian, 2019). The latter two differ from GT in their denial of the researcher's neutrality, or rather of objective reality, favoring a more active role for the researcher and their background in the interpretation of data and, in the case of CGT, the construction of meaning (McAlinden, 2018; Sebastian, 2019). On the other hand, a clear difference between IGT and CGT can be found in the conceived relationship between theory and data. In GT and IGT, the theory is seen to emerge naturally from the data, while in CGT theory is constructed through the "active processes of interpretation and comparison" (Johnson, 2014, p. 105). Despite these differences, all forms of Grounded Theory have in common that they emphasize the importance of comparison, between codes and the raw data, but also between different codes and rounds of coding (Johnson, 2014; Sebastian, 2019).

As has been outlined above, it is precisely this subjectivity and the constructivist nature of the methodology that are of utmost importance, as they reflect the social-constructivist scope of this dissertation. By considering political and media discourse as playing a key role in the formation and affirmation of collective identities, the methodology should allow for the detection of general patterns, and should provide the tools for examining their layered constructions. For this reason, I believe CGT to be the best fit for my analysis.

The analysis takes place through several rounds of coding. As laid out by Sebastian (2019), the coding process of CGT is rather flexible, and contains two main phases, namely 1) coding all elements, and 2) focusing on the most prominent codes and restructuring the remaining data (p. 6). In her study of literacy tests, Johnson (2014) distinguishes four coding stages, an initial coding of all the raw data, followed by what she labels a focused coding (categories of codes), an axial coding (core themes) and a theoretical coding (discourse analysis). Her approach highlights the inductive and iterative nature of CGT, in which each coding stage provides the researcher with necessary information about the process and informs following stages. Moreover, Johnson (2014) concedes that "because of the constant comparison within these stages of coding [...] the constructed dominant discourses and the theory they represented were so grounded in the theory" (p. 109).

These four coding stages will greatly inspire my own analysis, but in order to accentuate the iterative character of the analysis, I propose to conceptualize the coding as a circular process, as Figure 4.1 shows.

Figure 4.1. The four stages of the CGT coding process, based on Johnson (2014)

The initial coding stage consist of a close reading of all the corpus texts, in this case media articles and political statements, with the aim to map different attitudes towards the cultural product in question. More concretely, I classify the texts according to their positive, negative or neutral assessment of the novel or the short film, and note the main motivation justifying this position. In the second phase, focused coding, this information is regrouped into several clusters of recurrent ideas about the cultural product and the artists. This phase identifies different ways in which the cultural product is framed, by categorizing different sets of pre-existing ideas influencing the appraisal and interpretation of the cultural product. These clusters of ideas are further condensed into thematic discourses during the axial coding stage. Johnson (2014) remarks that in this stage the focus shifts from categories to themes; the “central axes” that organize the earlier defined categories (p. 107). For instance, at this point one should no longer speak in terms of “those considering the artist as a victim”, but rather study the configuration of broader worldviews and cultural narratives connected to the way in which the artist is framed. If the axial coding is still concerned with worldviews

and narratives that are explicitly expressed in discourse, the final stage, theoretical coding, is looking for the subjacent conceptual links as part of these refigured cultural narratives. To be clear, I refer here to the use of conceptual metaphor and affect as ways to frame reality and to orientate behavior. Just like Johnson (2014), who relies on the tools of Discourse Analysis (DA) in this final coding stage, I will illustrate in the next section how Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be helpful for that part of my analysis.

In general, the process of different rounds of coding may provide insight in the configuration and layered construction of societal narratives. A concrete example that reflects this approach is the model based on conceptual metaphor, metaphor scenario's, regimes of metaphor, and cultural narratives described in the previous chapter. For instance, the initial round codes (linguistic) metaphors, which are then categorized into metaphor scenarios (focused coding). The following axial coding identifies in the news articles several regimes of metaphor corresponding to broader worldviews, and the theoretical coding explores the articulation of cultural narratives.

As becomes clear from this description of the coding process, based on the principles of CGT, the researcher is relatively autonomous in their interpretation of the coding process. It is up to the researcher to decide when to move from one stage to the next, whether or not to start a new cycle, to establish connections between different codes, and to choose which tools to use in the analysis. For this reason, it is essential that the researcher takes responsibility in providing insights in the choices being made and potential researcher effects that need to be considered (Burck, 2005). As such, the results of the analysis are verifiable and replicable, while at the same time the subjective qualities of the researcher are at the center of the research.

4.3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in the past often referred to as Critical Linguistics (Wodak, 2001), can be defined as “a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities” (Mullet, 2018, p. 116). Its main premise is to examine the relationship between language and power, which constitutes the crucial difference between CDA and ordinary Discourse Analysis (DA). At the same time, its

focus on “larger discursive units of text”, which considers language as “a social practice” and the socio-historical context as playing a key role, distinguishes CDA from more traditional forms of linguistics (Wodak, 2001, p. 2). Wodak adds that the use of the word “critical” refers to this inclusion of societal backgrounds – creating critical distance between the researcher and the data – and the notions of subjectivity and self-reflexivity, which are firmly rooted in the approach.

CDA is thus not limited to the study of texts as linguistic phenomena and sites of power struggle, but examines how a text is embedded in time and space. For instance, it takes into account the societal context that produced a given text, and explores how interaction with the text in society establishes new forms of meaning-making (ibid.). Or, in Wodak’s own words: “for CDA, language is not powerful on its own – it gains power by the use powerful people make of it” (ibid., p. 10). Since its development in the early 1990’s, the basic principles of CDA have taken the shape of a number of different approaches. Examples include Ruth Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), Norman Fairclough’s Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA) and Teun van Dijk’s Sociocognitive Approach (SCA) (Mullet, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

Similar to CGT, CDA thus provides no general guidelines for analysis, instead the researcher is flexible in choosing the methods deemed most appropriate. In attempting to streamline different approaches around a number of core principles of CDA, and to simplify its use for interested scholars, Mullet (2018) proposes a “General Analytical Framework for CDA” consisting of 7 stages. These different stages, of which the order is by no means fixed, range from 1) selecting the discourse; 2) locating and preparing the data sources; 3) exploring the background of each text; 4) coding texts and identifying overarching themes; 5) analyzing external relations in the text; 6) analyzing internal relations in the text; to, finally, 7) interpreting the data (ibid., p. 122).

Translating this to my own research, the first three stages coincide with the preparation of the corpora and the presentation of the central cultural product. More precisely, as already explained above, my corpora will consist of political statements and media reports on the film *Submission* or the book *Soumission*. As the following chapters will further detail, these texts have been acquired through the online search engine LexisNexis (media articles), as well as through a Google keyword search (political statements). A comprehensive overview of the academic state-of-the-art on the artists and their work is also part of the next chapters, providing the necessary

background information on the cultural products as well as their reception by the public.

The 4th and 5th stages of the CDA framework, as proposed by Mullet (2018), largely correspond with the coding process of CGT described above, more precisely the initial and focused coding (stage 4) and the axial coding (stage 5), which connects core themes to unravel dominant ideologies and discourses between the texts. The remaining theoretical coding, aiming to expose underlying ideas and worldviews, matches with stages 6 and 7, where linguistic devices within the texts are examined (stage 6) and interpreted in light of the previously defined context and topics (stage 7). As has become clear, my analysis is particularly interested in linguistic phenomena constructing dominant power hierarchies of “us” vs. “them”, especially looking at the ways both entities are framed, and why (populist) conceptions of the Self and the Other seem to take root more easily than others. Adopting the principles of CDA, I understand language to reflect and reproduce dynamics of power, which is why my analysis will map the appeal to emotion and the use of conceptual metaphor as central forces in the shaping and mobilization of certain thinking patterns.

To put it shortly, this framework of CDA complements and broadens the coding process based on CGT, most notably by emphasizing the role of language as a way to consolidate prevailing polarizing worldviews, often attributed to the populist Right. On the other hand, given that both CGT and CDA rely heavily on the researcher’s subjectivity and self-reflexivity, a potential shortcoming of the combination of these methods might be a lack of reliability. In order to overcome this issue, the next section of this chapter will discuss two possibilities for further improving the transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis.

4.3.4 Maintaining trustworthiness

It is important to consider the potential limitations of a methodology based on CGT and CDA, concretely the lack of the researcher’s neutrality and the absence of rigid methodological guidelines. This section will present two methods that are integrated in my own analysis, namely triangulation and intercoder agreement, which, I will argue, can be more than just checks and balances for safeguarding the trustworthiness

of the research. In fact, I will show that by combining methods and perspectives the overall quality of the analysis can be improved.

Triangulation denotes the combined use of different methodologies, analytical processes or data types for the study of one particular phenomenon – often related to social change – in order to mitigate the biases of qualitative research (cf. Denzin, 1978, 2012; Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018; Johnson, 2014). Generally, four types of triangulation can be distinguished: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012; Fusch et al., 2018). Simply put, these variants imply the use of a diversity of sources (based on different subjects, time frames, and geographical spaces), investigators, theories or methods. Methodological triangulation can both be within method (using different techniques to collect data – interviews, questionnaires, focus groups in a qualitative analysis) and between method (combining qualitative and quantitative approaches). According to Fusch et al. (2018) triangulation allows the researchers to study the data from different points of view, leading to higher degrees of reliability and transferability of the results, but above all to a deeper understanding of the object of study.

My own research incorporates two types of triangulation, namely data triangulation and methodological triangulation. The former refers to the comparative perspective provided by the two case studies, each focusing on a different debate around a controversial cultural product. The first debate centers on Van Gogh's and Hirsi Ali's short film *Submission*, released in 2004 in the Netherlands, and the second on Houellebecq's novel *Soumission*, published in 2015 in France. The latter, methodological triangulation, implies the adoption of a mixed-method approach described above, consisting of CGT and CDA. I firmly believe that the comparative focus and the use of a diverse methodological toolkit for the coding and analysis of my data enhances both the scope as well as the accuracy of my analysis.

A more specific form of investigator triangulation is the notion of intercoder reliability (ICR), which can be defined as “a numerical measure of the agreement between different coders regarding how the same data should be coded” (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020, p. 2). More precisely, ICR consists of the creation of an unambivalent coding frame, which is then applied to parts of the data by more than one coder, after which the coder's agreement is submitted to a number of statistical tests. Based on this score, the final coding frame is concretized and the remaining data will be coded (ibid.). O'Connor and Joffe (2020) concede that ICR improves both the external reception and

the internal quality of the research, which is considered more systematic, transparent, consistent and a proof of collaboration between different researchers.

While it would be too much to state that my analysis contains ICR, the coding process definitely is a collaborative effort. In their paper, O'Connor and Joffe (2020) cite different levels of intercoder agreement, of which ICR is the most rigorous and measurable example. A more informal practice, which closely resembles the coding process of my own research project, is the so-called intercoder consistency. Here, several coders analyze, compare and discuss the data, but the agreement is not expressed in numbers (*ibid.*). In my specific case, the research project is part of a PhD trajectory, meaning that my supervisors are closely involved with every step of the analysis, from the initial coding to the final conclusions, and that we regularly discuss and compare our interpretations of the data. While ICR requires training in statistics and available resources, intercoder consistency is often a more feasible alternative, and albeit less precise, it certainly contributes to the quality and rigor of the analysis.

Triangulation and intercoder agreement thus have considerable advantages both in terms of the external reception, most notably increasing trustworthiness and transferability, and the internal quality of the research, as it enhances dialogue between researchers and improves consistency (Denzin, 1978, 2012; Fusch et al., 2018; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). At the same time, there is also criticism. Some qualitative researchers argue that terms like reliability and validity do not square with the interpretative premises of qualitative research, and that such terminology alludes to (post)positivist beliefs that they do not support (Fusch et al., 2018; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Moreover, these critics claim that numbers and statistics risk to provide false precision, and cannot constitute a quality mark for the analysis (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020, p. 5). All in all, it is important to be aware of the fact that triangulation and intercoder agreement remain only tools contributing to the overall quality of the research, or as O'Connor and Joffe put it intelligently: "ICR is never an end in itself; it is merely a means to the ultimate goal of achieving an insightful and robust qualitative analysis" (p. 5).

In sum, the application of two types of triangulation and the used standards of intercoder consistency will have a positive effect on both the quality of my analysis, as well as its trustworthiness. By combining different methodological tools and a variety of data, it is possible to compare findings and consider them within a broader context, while the use of a clear coding frame created with the help of a second coder can

account for potential blind spots. As an additional advantage, the final product may appeal to a wider audience, especially disciplines where (traditional) qualitative research is not the norm.

4.3.5 Selecting and coding the data

The final section of this chapter will detail the used criteria for selecting the data, and the coding procedure for both case studies that will be discussed in the following two chapters. Generally speaking, these two processes reflect the first two steps in the CDA framework, namely 1) selecting the discourse, and 2) locating and preparing the data (cf. above). In my specific case, there are four main discourses to be distinguished, namely political statements on Van Gogh's and Hirsi Ali's film *Submission*, media reviews framing this film, as well as political statements and media reviews on Houellebecq's *Soumission*. The comparison between political and media debates will shed light on how political narratives orientate more widely shared thinking patterns in society and vice versa. Also, both case studies give insights in how these dynamics may have changed over time.

To locate these resources, I used the online database LexisNexis, which contains articles from more than 40.000 international, national and regional newspapers and magazines¹. On the basis of the acquired data, I was able to map the political debate on the cultural product in question, and through a Google keyword search I could find the original interviews, blogs or editorials. While political response on the short film *Submission* was mostly in written form – in news articles or interviews – this was quite different roughly 10 years later. Most of the political statements on Houellebecq's *Soumission* were made during live interviews on radio or TV, and can still be accessed on the website of the respective broadcaster or via YouTube. I transcribed the relevant parts of these interviews, so that they had a similar (written) format as the other data. For both of the case studies, the corpora of political statements include both populist and non-populist politicians, ranging from the (far) left to the (far) right. This will allow me to draw comparisons between different political orientations or even parties, and to explore the diffusion of what I label populist narratives in society.

¹ For more details, see: <https://www.lexisnexis.nl/>

In order to obtain an accurate corpus of media articles, the data had to be cleaned. I removed all double entries, and kept only the articles that were published in national press. The reasoning behind this focus on national press is twofold. First, national media outlets are historically characterized by a strong editorial line, while this is usually not the case for regional newspapers, which are most often catering to a geographical region instead of a specific political or religious orientation. Second, and more importantly, my analysis aims to take a national perspective to the debates on the film *Submission* and the book *Soumission*, and does therefore not seek to compare between regions. To ensure the usefulness of the data, I selected only the articles in which at least two different paragraphs discussed and framed the cultural product, and/or its authors. This resulted in a corpus of 73 media articles on the film *Submission*, and 36 articles on the book *Soumission*.

Due to their differences in size, the analysis of the political corpus of is qualitative, while the media corpus will be analyzed quantitatively. Concretely, this means that the political statements are studied using close reading techniques, and the media reviews will be processed using digital tools such as Atlas.ti and Excel. This will allow for more in depth comparisons and lead to the discovery of broader patterns and connections in the data. The analysis will also contain a number of graphs, figures and tables in order to visualize the trends discovered in the data. In addition to this, tools such as triangulation and intercoder agreement will seek to enhance trustworthiness, by incorporating and comparing two different case studies, qualitative and quantitative methods and by building on the perspectives of multiple coders. This will provide a detailed yet complete picture of the success of the populist cultural narrative, and will hopefully inspire new debates on how alternative narratives can be created.

4.4 Conclusion

The challenge in this chapter has been to bridge the gap between my theoretical framework and the analytical work in part II of this dissertation. As I have argued, this methodology should follow logically from the theoretical assumptions made in the first chapters, while at the same time it provides opportunities for the analysis of the populist cultural narrative. I have proposed to use a quali-quantitative framework based on CGT and CDA, combined with some degree of triangulation and intercoder agreement. As such, the analysis will seek to combine the rich and detailed

interpretation of qualitative research with the rigor and reliability of quantitative techniques.

CGT and CDA are both typical qualitative methodologies in the sense that they reject the idea of a neutral or objective depiction of reality, indeed, consider reality as being constructed. In CGT, theory is grounded in the data, meaning that it is constructed by the researcher, while CDA studies power dynamics that are constructed and expressed through language. Above, I described how both tools can be useful for the coding and interpretation of the data, as CGT provides guidelines for different coding stages, in which CDA can easily be integrated. At the same time, in CDA the socio-historical context is essential, which will be reflected in the following chapters with a section on the (academic) interpretation and reception of the cultural products in question.

The adoption of a methodology based on CGT and CDA is consistent with the social-constructivist paradigm that constitutes the basic principle of my theoretical framework. This framework revolves around the notions of a populist cultural narrative, identity, othering, inequality and power, which I consider to be constructed through forms (Levine, 2015). In other words, this involves the articulation and reproduction of “us” vs. “them” narratives which are a pervasive characteristic of populism, and, as will become clear in the following part, well beyond. Undoubtedly, populism is one of the major societal and political challenges of our time, a process that is still unfolding, and which many scholars are still trying to grasp. I hope to add to the existing scholarship a novel interdisciplinary, mixed research methods approach focusing on the role of culture, literature and language, both as tools for the construction of the populist cultural narrative, as well as forms for its propagation.

PART II: CASE STUDIES

Chapter 5 Divisive imagery: the reception and framing of the short film *Submission* (2004) in Dutch media and politics

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have pointed out that culture plays a central role in contemporary politics, by constructing narratives of community and division. While this is in fact a practice shared by most – if not all – political parties operating within the realm of the nation-state, the case of populism is especially appealing because of its emphasis on “the good people” and “the evil Other”. I argued that culture, and more specifically the use of cultural products, is instrumental for the definition of the Self and the Other, as the examples of *laïcité* and Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* have clearly illustrated in part I of this dissertation.

To study this process in depth, this chapter focuses on political and media debates on the short film *Submission*, produced in 2004 in the Netherlands by the liberal politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the film maker Theo van Gogh. The analysis considers the period from 2004 to 2014, and includes politicians and media outlets that represent several political ideologies. It will reveal that populist ideas and attitudes – framed around the notion of “us” vs. “them” – were manifest both in the film and in subsequent cultural debates. Following my argument that populism is an organic phenomenon, I will show that the film was framed following a populist logic, in which the Self identifies with the content of the film and connected progressive values (freedom of speech and gender equality) as opposed to a backward, conservative Other that needs to be excluded. Unravelling this interplay between a controversial cultural product (the short film *Submission*) and dominant cultural narratives can shed light on the configuration of populist and/or Islamophobic attitudes in society through the use of affect and conceptual metaphor.

The film *Submission* (2004) by Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh is a pertinent case study for two reasons. First, by problematizing the position of women in Muslim communities, the film fueled initial debates on multiculturalism, a topic being highly

controversial thus far, and still on the agenda today. By choosing the medium film rather than a parliamentary debate, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh sought a wide audience, in a society in which the new genre of multicultural film was still developing, for instance with *Shouf Shouf Habibi* (2004) and *Het Schnitzelparadijs* (2005). Given its overt negative message about Islam, *Submission* challenged what the makers framed as established cultural ideas, values and norms about the Self and the Other. As such, the opponent (i.e. the political elite) is presented as the establishment, and counterknowledge (i.e. the film *Submission*) is used to attack the establishment's alleged convictions (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). The rise of the Islam-critical politician Pim Fortuyn and his death in 2002, as well as the various terrorist attacks by Islamist fundamentalists across the West have certainly contributed to this climate of polarization.

Because of this clear populist stance in the debate on Islam, I consider *Submission* predominantly as an organic cultural product. As explained in chapter 2, the division between an organic and an autonomous author is found in the extent to which the author identifies with the (political) message enunciated in the cultural product. In this sense, Hirsi Ali strongly identifies with the contents of *Submission*, having based the film on her personal experiences with Islam and positioning herself as a victim and a convinced atheist (Hirsi Ali, 2006, 2007; Maris, 2018). These ideas are reflected in her political agenda, most notably her attempts to ban public funding of religious education, an incentive to close Islamic schools. Van Gogh, on the other hand, may be less driven by political convictions, as we will see below, but he certainly has a history of targeting Islam in his work. Section 5.2 of this chapter will further explore the motives of both Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh, and it will detail how the film embodied populist logic and prompted Islamophobic attitudes through the use of Orientalist stereotypes.

The second reason why the case study is pertinent, is that the debates around the film *Submission* provide new insights to the mainstreaming of exclusionary discourse. More concretely, this refers to the film's main message that the alleged unwillingness of (traditional) Muslims to embrace progressive values leads to their self-chosen exclusion of modern Dutch society. In *Submission*, the progressive civic values of gender equality and freedom of speech are central, and serve to depict the Other as anti-democratic and dangerous, an antagonist to the national community. This reveals a compelling analogy between the debate on *Submission* and populist

rhetoric. Analyzing the success of several Radical Right movements across Western Europe, Halikiopoulou, Mock, and Vasilopoulou (2013) observe that rather than an openly exclusionary discourse based on ethnic kinship, what characterizes successful Radical Right parties is their turn to civic values, or “symbolic resources of national identity” (p. 108). More precisely, this means a shift from an openly Islamophobic or racist discourse to one where the Other is excluded on the basis of their ideology, the so-called “civic Zeitgeist”. As such, banning Islam is not a violation of the freedom of religion, but instead it is framed as a service to Dutch society, which is freed from unstable, anti-democratic elements.

In this sense, the debates incited by the film *Submission* after its airing in 2004 are still relevant in today’s political and societal debates, where they are merely, though not exclusively, voiced by populist actors such as Wilders and Baudet. Yet it does not reveal how the underlying idea, namely that the Other is ultimately incompatible with the Self, evolved through different discursive fields and over time. In other words, the film *Submission* amplified a political topic so far only touched upon by eccentric politicians like Fortuyn, which opened a broader cultural dialogue on Dutch and European identity that would later become the playground of populist parties. In order to better appreciate how political and cultural debates became interconnected, the first part of the analysis will examine how politicians from different parties and orientations responded to the film and the makers. In so doing, I will focus on the way in which the film and the civic values prominently advocated in this film, namely freedom of speech and gender equality, became interwoven in political narratives. This analysis will make use of the typology of populism and culture, as discussed in chapter 2, and follows the steps of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration.

The second part of the analysis will go a step further and analyze the articulation of societal narratives on *Submission*. For this, I will use a corpus existing of newspaper articles on the film and its makers, which will shed light on the way mainstream media framed *Submission*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh, and how these ideas developed over a period of ten years (2004-2014). Furthermore, to understand how such popular narratives are constructed and can become widespread, a framework based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory will be used in this section to identify underlying pre-conscious patterns of thought. Finally, this data-based analysis will provide insights in the construction and configuration of exclusionary “us” vs. “them” dynamics and open up new vistas to more inclusive narratives.

5.2 Mapping the debate on *Submission*

Before exploring the reception of *Submission* both by politicians and in the mainstream media, this section will outline the societal and academic context of the film and the main figures who were involved in its production and the subsequent controversy. In doing so, the notion of the cultural clash will become relevant (Harkness, Magid, Roberts, & Richardson, 2007). Connecting the notion to the controversial Danish cartoons¹, Harkness et al. define one side of the clash as those defending the freedom of the artist, as opposed to those interpreting the cartoons as an insult. As this case illustrates, the former group, “Westerners”, criticizes the latter, “Muslims”², for their lack of tolerance, whereas Muslims perceive a severe disrespect for their religious culture. While it may be clear that both sides of the divide are much more heterogeneous than this, this section will show that *Submission* had a similar impact. The film displayed negative stereotypes about the Other, and promoted a positive image of the Self, employing a dichotomy constructed on the basis of an enlightened Self vs. a backward Other. This section will thus shed light on the position of the film *Submission* in the debate on multiculturalism in the Netherlands, first by discussing the film, then by identifying the protagonists in the societal debate, and finally by exploring the academic debate.

The film, fully entitled *Submission Part I*, was directed by Theo van Gogh and written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-Dutch member of parliament for the liberal VVD party. On August 29th 2004, *Submission* was broadcast on Dutch public TV, during an episode of *Zomergasten*, in which Hirsi Ali was invited³. Although Dutch Muslim

¹ The Danish cartoons case refers to the publication of 12 cartoons, featuring caricatural depictions of the Prophet Mohammed, in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005. As a result, Muslims all over the world protested against these cartoons, there were trade boycotts against Denmark, Danish embassies and consulates temporarily closed, diplomats and aid workers were evacuated, and Danish citizens were discouraged to travel to Muslim countries (Klausen, 2009). The protesters demanded an apology from the Danish government, yet Anders Fogh Rasmussen, prime minister at the time, insisted that he could and would not censor Danish free press (Harkness et al., 2007; Klausen, 2009). Because of the amount of controversy raised, the Danish cartoon crisis and the film *Submission* are generally bracketed together, and can be seen as a precursor of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks.

² Both “Muslims” and “Westerners” are obviously problematic notions, as they are reductionist and not mutually exclusive. However, as Klausen (2009) notes: “Alternative labels that do not seem overly generalizing are [...] hard to find” (p. 2). Keeping this in mind, I will continue to critically use these notions as I talk about the polarized debate, which will further demonstrate the limitations of such widely used false dichotomies.

³ The film can be accessed via YouTube, Vimeo and Dailymotion, see for instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rS8FJyX3gs>

organizations firmly denounced the film immediately after it was broadcasted, it was an enormous shock that Van Gogh was murdered two months later, on November 2nd, by the radical Islamist Mohammed Bouyeri. In a letter that was stabbed on Van Gogh's chest, it became clear that Bouyeri's actual target was Hirsi Ali, yet, being a member of parliament, she had received professional surveillance. After the murder, Hirsi Ali had to go into hiding, and only returned to parliament two months later.

Submission Part I deals with the oppression of Muslim women, and narrates four different (fictional) experiences of physical and sexual abuse by men: adultery and subsequent flogging, forced marriage, domestic violence, and rape by a family member. In all these cases the women are left on their own, as their families – mostly the men; fathers and husbands – fail to protect them against the violence. These personal stories, in which the subjects remain nevertheless anonymous, are said to represent major problems faced by Muslim women: “These women stand for hundreds of thousands of Muslim women around the world” (Hirsi Ali, 2007, p. xxi). The film's main message is that such misogynistic violence is inherent to Islam, an image that is reinforced by the appearance of Qur'an verses on the protagonist's naked upper body, visible through her translucent veil.

The film is set in a traditional oriental looking space, with typical oriental music in the background, a setting described by Hirsi Ali as “Islamistan, an imaginary country where the majority of the population is Muslim, and where the legal system is the Shari'a” (Hirsi Ali, 2006, p. 142). During the entire 11 minutes we see the protagonist as she is praying to Allah, recounting the experiences of abuse of the four women standing in the background. While doing so, she openly questions the “most high”, “most gracious” and “most merciful” Allah: “The verdict that has killed my faith in love is in your holy book. Faith in you, submission to you, feels like self-betrayal” (09:07-09:19). In other words, according to the film a Muslim woman is left with two options: either she submits to Allah and betrays herself, or she liberates herself from the yoke that Islam poses on her.

It is clear that the latter option reflects the choice made by Hirsi Ali herself, who converted to atheism in 2002, a couple of years after she had arrived to the Netherlands (Hirsi Ali, 2007). Born in Somalia to a traditional Muslim family of nomads, Hirsi Ali previously lived in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya before arriving in Europe in 1992. When she was five years old, her grandmother had Ayaan, her older brother and younger sister circumcised, against the will of their parents, who were absent at the

time of the event. In 1992, her parents arranged a marriage for her with a relative in Canada. On her way to Canada, via Germany, where she visited family, she decided to come to the Netherlands and to ask for political asylum. In order to receive refugee status, and few years later, to be naturalized, she lied about her name, date of birth and country of provenance (Kenya, where she was living before arriving to Europe, was a safe country at that time). These lies came out in 2006 and caused a public clash between Hirsi Ali and fellow VVD party member Rita Verdonk, the minister of Immigration Affairs. Verdonk attempted to withdraw Hirsi Ali's Dutch citizenship, which she considered to be issued on false grounds. Hirsi Ali had already given up her seat in parliament when, in June 2006, the government fell over this issue. Furthermore, as a result of Hirsi Ali's departure from parliament, the Dutch state would no longer pay for her surveillance. Both events would propel her immigration to the United States, where she still lives today.

At the time of *Submission*, Hirsi Ali could be considered an example of the "ideal immigrant"; eloquent, intelligent, and, above all, critical of Islam. The debate on multiculturalism in the Netherlands became more polarized, fueled by the much talked-about essay "The Multicultural Drama" by Paul Scheffer⁴ and the popularity of the politician Pim Fortuyn⁵, who openly criticized Islam. Outside the Netherlands, the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and the subsequent War on Terrorism played a crucial role. Hirsi Ali's ideas were welcomed as an original insider's perspective on a topic that was still – and would remain – sensitive. Maris (2018) notes that while Hirsi Ali "denounced Islam as a sexist and intolerant ideology", she did this "without playing

⁴ Paul Scheffer is a Dutch essayist and university professor. In his essay *The Multicultural Drama*, published in NRC Handelsblad in January 2000, he critically discusses the existence of an "ethnic subclass" marked by "unemployment, poverty, school dropout and criminality". He argues that the lack of clear immigration policies and political vision leads to further alienation between different ethnic groups: segregation, profound cultural differences, a lack of solidarity, and the role of Islam. In a follow-up, published in January 2020, he writes: "I wouldn't write such an essay today. Amidst all the oppositions I am looking for what binds people together: a shared future rather than a different past. But if I now picture the circumstances of 20 years ago, I would write with the same agitated tone". See: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2000/01/29/het-multiculturele-drama-a3987586>, and: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/01/24/migratie-is-maakbaar-a3988117> (accessed on 10-12-2020)

⁵ Pim Fortuyn was a Dutch politician, often called a right-wing populist, which was a label he would not identify with (Van der Veer, 2006). The populist label seems nonetheless accurate: "Fortuyn posed as the champion of the silent majority that had been silenced by the arrogant elite with its politically correct multiculturalism. [...] He intensified Islam bashing, dismissing it as a backward culture. The borders should be closed to Muslims, because their intent is to 'Islamize' the Netherlands" (Maris, 2018, p. 338). Fortuyn was assassinated in May 2002 by a radical left-wing environmental activist. In the subsequent national elections, held 9 days later, his party obtained roughly 17 percent of the votes, but due to internal frictions their success did not last long.

the nationalist card” (p. 338). Van der Veer (2006), on the other hand, is more critical about Hirsi Ali’s intentions:

Her emancipatory campaign was directed primarily toward gaining votes from the majority community rather than toward the transformation of the Muslim community. The subaltern can speak, but in order to be heard she has to express the feelings of the dominant community. (p. 121)

In any case, among the members of the majority community Hirsi Ali remained largely popular both nationally and internationally, as is proven by her appearance on the *Time* list of 100 most influential people in 2005, and her award for European of the Year (*Reader’s Digest* 2006).

According to Van der Veer (2006), the popularity of both Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali can be explained by their revolt against political correctness, which was rampant during the 1980’s and 1990’s. In fact, in 1990, Wim Kok, prime minister for the Labor party in those days, stated that the “Dutch welfare state was now complete”. This sentiment was clearly not shared by the entire Dutch population: “It at least shows that technocratic politics tends to ignore the emotional side of mass politics” (Van der Veer, 2006, pp. 115-116). Public figures as Van Gogh, and politicians such as Fortuyn, Hirsi Ali and later on Wilders and Baudet, were therefore praised by their followers for alluding to these widely shared emotions and for voicing popular concerns over the multicultural society.

Theo van Gogh can be described as a provocateur *pur sang* (cf. Van der Veer, 2006). While most of his cinematographic work remained rather marginal – his low-budget films rarely attracted more than 30.000 visitors – his columns and public appearances received ample attention. In these columns, he frequently referred to Muslims as “goat-fuckers”, but his criticism was certainly not limited to Muslims: he was taken to court several times for anti-Semitism and blasphemy against Christians. In this light, Van Gogh (born in 1957) can be considered a true incarnation of the post-1968 spirit, which in the Dutch context meant a rapid transition “from one of the most religious societies in the world to one of its most secular” (Mepschen et al., 2010, p. 966), a phenomenon commonly referred to as “de-pillarization⁶”. Any form of religious

⁶ Until the mid-1960’s, Dutch civil society was divided into four main “pillars” (zuilen) upon which the “roof” (i.e. the Dutch state) rested: protestant, Roman Catholic, liberal and socialist. Each pillar had its

fanaticism, but especially Islam, due to its visibility in the public sphere, reminds the Dutch of their own strict Calvinist past: “[they] feel that they have recently freed themselves from Christian conservatism only to be confronted again by Islamic injunction” (Van der Veer, 2006, p. 120). This reveals a strong stance of moral superiority of the modern, secular Dutch versus the traditional, religious Muslims, who have yet to liberate themselves. Furthermore, this frame explains why Van Gogh found it appropriate to make fun of religious communities and to trample on their feelings, as he said in an interview with *HP de Tijd* in 2003⁷: “Ik doe het om de mensheid te amuseren en te kwetsen, graag in die volgorde” [I aim to amuse and to hurt humanity, preferably in that order].

In a way, *Submission* can be seen as an atypical film in Van Gogh’s oeuvre. According to Van Gogh, the film was rather “boring”, “overly serious”, and lacked humor (Moors, 2005). His involvement in the film was mainly an act of kindness to Hirsi Ali, a politician he voted for and whom he admired as a friend. Although many interpreted the film as a work of art, Moors (2005) profoundly disagrees with this view: “The visual language of tortured female bodies and Quranic calligraphy, with a text that does not leave much to be imagined, turns the film into a pamphlet preaching to the converted” (p.8). In other words, it may well be that the overt political message in combination with the absence of ambiguity and satire – usually present in Van Gogh’s work – played an important role in its overall controversy. Although the film generated few reactions after it first aired in August 2004, this drastically changed with Van Gogh’s assassination, creating an international audience for the film and fueling the debate on freedom of speech (Jusová, 2008; Moors, 2005).

In this debate, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were strongly supported by prominent VVD members (such as the former vice-Prime Minister Gerrit Zalm), public figures that were critical of Islam (most notably Afshin Ellian and Ehsan Jami), and the editor-in-chief of the feminist weekly *Opzij*, Cisca Dresselhuys (Moors, 2005). The general tendency was that Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were praised for signaling the severe problems Muslim women are confronted with, and, thereby, fostered their

own (partisan) television and radio broadcasting companies, newspapers, political parties, schools, syndicates, (sports) associations and even hospitals, meaning people’s lives mostly took place within their own pillar, and social interferences – let alone marriages – between pillars were uncommon (cf. Mepschen et al., 2010; Van der Veer, 2006).

⁷ Theo van Gogh: ‘Wat is er mis met geitenneuker?’: <https://www.hpdetijd.nl/2009-10-28/theo-van-gogh-wat-is-er-mis-met-geitenneuker/> (accessed on 10-12-2020)

emancipation. Others, among which Dutch essayist Geert Mak and the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, insisted that the message was indeed noble, but criticized the form and approach of the film. Neshat's exposition *Women of Allah* features calligraphed hands and eyes, which had allegedly inspired Hirsi Ali, but she calls the use of Qur'an verses on naked bodies scandalous⁸. In addition to this, Mak draws a comparison between these calligraphed bodies and the use of Talmud verses next to rats in the Nazi propaganda film *Der Ewige Jude*, in his pamphlet *Gedoemd tot kwetsbaarheid* (2005). He further deplores how *Submission* radicalizes ideas about the Other, and how politicians misuse fears that spread after Van Gogh's death⁹. Such dynamics naturally contribute to the false dichotomy of "Westerners" vs. "Muslims", in which both sides see their views of the immoral Other confirmed in (the realization of) the film and the subsequent debate, and leaves no room for any possible deviation of what the "ideal Self", or "demonized Other" should look like.

This idea is recurrent in academic debates on the topic (cf. Butler, 2008; Gruber, 2020; Jusová, 2008; Mepschen et al., 2010; Moors, 2005; Van der Veer, 2006). *Submission*, according to these authors, reproduces stereotypical, orientalist imagery of a backward, traditional and conservative Other, which is portrayed as being incompatible with the open-minded, secular and progressive Self. In fact, the Other has only two options, either assimilation – following Hirsi Ali's footsteps – or exclusion. The latter is well exemplified in the numerous political debates on double nationality and denaturalization as an anti-terrorist measure, which took place throughout the 2000's and 2010's in various European countries (cf. Beauchamps, 2016; De Hart, 2005). In the following, I will focus on two central debates that construe the dichotomy of the Self versus the Other in the reception of *Submission*: freedom of speech vs. the right not to be offended, and progressive vs. traditional gender and sexual identities.

In the light of the first debate, *Submission* fits in a tradition of struggles over the margins of freedom of speech, more specifically the slippery slope between Islam criticism and Islamophobia (Maris, 2018). An important aspect of this debate is the question of agency. In his book, Maris discusses the film *Fitna*, made in 2008 by the

⁸ 'Ik ben geen ambassadeur van de Islam': <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/ik-ben-geen-ambassadeur-van-de-islam~bfd6e3f8/> (accessed on 10-12-2020)

⁹ Deze week: Geert Mak in De Groene Amsterdammer: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/deze-week-geert-mak-in-de-groene-amsterdammer> (accessed on 10-12-2020)

right-wing populist Geert Wilders, a white, male, secular perspective, and briefly compares this to *Submission*, whose script writer builds on “a personal experience with Islam” (p. 343). While Maris unfortunately does not offer a critical perspective to the question of representation, Jusová (2008) problematizes the fact that in the film the narrator speaks for the victims, and, analogically, questions Hirsi Ali’s own attitude towards Muslim women in real life:

The only way Hirsi Ali speaks of the narrator is as a figure lending her voice to the other women who seem incapable of speaking for themselves; never does the author acknowledge the tricky and potentially problematic nature of the act of speaking on somebody's behalf and the danger of appropriation inherent in such an act. The same lack of self-reflection seems to characterize Hirsi Ali's own career as a self-appointed spokesperson for Muslim women. (p. 153)

In other words, the debate on freedom of speech is not simply a matter of a clear set of laws, but comprises grey areas involving complex questions about who speaks, on whose behalf, and based on which legitimacy (Gruber, 2020; Spivak, 1988).

Another complicating factor is that freedom of speech is a cultural construct, meaning that perspectives on, for instance, the freedom of the artist, religious taboos and the ethics of humor may vary culturally. Harkness et al. (2007) identify the curious paradox between, on the one hand, the global diffusion of the Danish cartoons thanks to new media, and, on the other, the problematic reality that humor is often very culture-specific. Klausen (2009) adds that in this “transnational political theater” (p. 5) the interpretation of the cartoons followed the logic of the “clash of civilizations” thesis. This idea, developed by Samuel Huntington, holds that the main conflicts in the post-Cold War world are based on clashing cultural values, mostly between the liberal West and the Islamic world, and that peaceful coexistence is therefore an illusion (Klausen, 2009; Maris, 2018). This trope implies that conflict is unavoidable: for Muslims the Danish cartoons are a proof of Western immorality, and reveal the painful consequences of democratization. To Westerners, on the other hand, it confirms that Muslims are still far from embracing Western democratic standards, and that their cultural values are therefore ultimately incompatible with Western society (Klausen, 2009). As a matter of fact, the affective ground of this widespread opposition will be discussed in the next chapter, where I address the affects of indignation (Muslims) and

resentment (Westerners) that give shape to this apparent polarization. In this case, Muslims consider the negative portrayal of Islam blasphemy, evoking feelings of outrage and indignation towards a morally inferior Other, while Westerners display feelings of envy or resentment towards a supposedly dangerous and disruptive Other. A similar dynamic is at work in the polarized debate on *Submission* and the murder of Van Gogh, where, instead of a cultural dialogue, cultural misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge about the other actually drove the two groups further apart.

This divide further materialized through the debate on modern vs. traditional gender and sexual identities. According to Hirsi Ali, her film provides a positive, non-submissive image of Muslim women:

They pray, but instead of casting down their eyes, these women look up, at Allah, with the words of the Quran tattooed on their skin. They tell Him honestly that if submission to Him brings them to such misery, and He remains silent, they may stop submitting. (Hirsi Ali, 2007, p. xxi)

This idea is strongly contested by Jusová (2008) and Gruber (2020), who argue that *Submission* merely contributes to the activation of Orientalist stereotypes and fantasies about Muslim women through a male, Western gaze. Jusová (2008) refers to the clichéd scene, the naked bodies and translucent dress, which all allude to Orientalist erotic fantasies about sensual women, “veiled and in need of unveiling” (p.151). Van Gogh’s voyeuristic camera work further emphasizes this:

But again the actresses are stylized, and the scenes are filmed, in ways that foreground the sexual (partial nudity, quivering and perspiring flesh) and the exotic (Arabic calligraphy, exotic music, juxtaposition of brown flesh and a white ornamental bridal dress/white silky undergarment), and the final impression is sensational and pornographic. (p. 151)

Furthermore, the women are depicted as helpless victims, who stay in the background and remain silent; an image that is based on a dubious selection of Qur’an texts, allegedly justifying the violence. The entire film centers around what Jusová labels the “women vs. culture binary”, which holds that a woman’s emancipation is only possible through assimilation with Western standards. This binary is consistent with the

argument by Gruber (2020) that “orientalist imagination [...] constructs female bodies simultaneously as victims of brown male violence and receivers of white male salvation” (p. 58). It is clear that this strong stance of Western superiority does not leave Muslim women with much of a choice, in fact it polarizes the debate into Western emancipated women versus “backward” religious traditions, and discredits any possible middle way. Jusová (2008) adds that, by using this binary, the film inevitably promotes an Islamophobic interpretation of the events.

This “women vs. culture” binary fits within a larger tendency, described by Mepschen et al. (2010) as “a modernity vs. tradition paradigm” (p. 970). In their article, they examine the instrumentalization of sexual freedom, presented as a long-standing European value, as a marker of the tolerant Self, opposed to an intolerant Other. Referring specifically to Fortuyn and Van Gogh, Butler (2008) questions their motives, suggesting that their appeal to political, sexual and artistic freedoms is actually a means to exclude immigrant communities:

Of course, I am in favour of such freedoms, but it seems that I must also ask whether such freedoms for which I have struggled, and continue to struggle, are being instrumentalized to establish a specific cultural grounding, secular in a particular sense, that functions as a prerequisite for admission into the polity as an acceptable immigrant. (Butler, 2008, p. 4)

Indeed, Mepschen et al. (2010) concur that this culturalization of sexual freedom creates a situation in which those who defend LGBT+ rights are implicitly associated with Islamophobia, and those who fight Islamophobia are willfully turning a blind eye to homophobic attitudes allegedly present amongst Muslims. Needless to say, such dichotomies completely neglect the possibility that one can be in favor of sexual freedom or gender equity, while also rejecting Islamophobia. In doing so, the viewpoints of Muslim women and queers are effectively banned from the discussion, which becomes a white, male affair. For this reason, Mepschen et al. (2010) call for the promotion of sexual freedom “in an inviting, inclusive manner, without dismissing Muslims or Muslim cultures and in solidarity with those who struggle for justice and equality within these and other communities” (p. 972). This resonates well with the

notion of equaliberty¹⁰ coined by the French philosopher Balibar, a concept that will be discussed more in depth at the end of this chapter.

Furthermore, the modernity versus tradition paradigm is problematic, because while the Other's religious backwardness is openly criticized, it fails to critically assess the Self's supposed inclusivity towards women and queers. If *Submission* denounces misogynistic violence in Muslim communities, and encourages assimilation to Western culture as a solution, it overlooks the fact that Western civilization, too, is still vastly male-dominated, and therefore far from perfect. However, instead of looking for global solutions to a global problem, the film taps into an identitarian discourse aiming to unmask Islam as the evil Other, who can only be saved by the West (Gruber, 2020).

In sum, this discussion of the academic debate shows that there is a broad consensus that *Submission* reproduces the "clash of civilizations" logic to oppose a modern, secular West to a traditional, religious Islam. As has been argued, this is problematic for several reasons. Most importantly, such discourse promotes Islamophobic worldviews and leaves limited room for critical self-reflection. In fact, the idea of Western superiority is very much cultivated through the use of Orientalist imagery, using Hirsi Ali as a spokesperson, while these power dynamics fail to be openly questioned. This inhibits societal dialogue and leads to the further polarization of public life. However, the specific effects *Submission* had on the broader audience, and the degree to which it influenced public debates on multiculturalism in the following years have not been addressed in the academic debates. These questions will

¹⁰ Equaliberty denotes the preposition that equality and liberty are inherently entangled, and applies to the entities of both humankind and citizenship (Nosthoff, 2014). In short, with the notion of "equaliberty", Balibar emphasizes the intertwinement of both, stating that any form of equality presupposes some degree of freedom, and vice versa (Balibar, 2014; Nosthoff, 2014). Consequently, the elimination of either equality or liberty automatically excludes the existence of the other: "either by the history of capitalist exploitation, which by negating in practice the equality proclaimed in the labor contract ends up in the practical negation of freedom of speech and expression, or by the history of socialist regimes that, by suppressing public freedoms, end up constituting a society of privileges and reinforced inequalities" (Balibar, 2014, p. 49). The degree to which equality is to be free, or freedom equal, however, is the terrain of constant and complex struggle: "Equality needs to agree with liberty at some point in time (Balibar 2012: 94; 1994: 48) within a space of constant renegotiation between equal rights. The infinity of the inherent struggle marking this 'between' culminates in the impossibility for any practical institutionalisation to fully represent equaliberty" (Nosthoff, 2014, n.p.). Balibar adds that a truly democratic negotiation of what "freedom" means can only take place once social equality is achieved. In other words, as long as minorities are socially marginalized, any cultural definition of freedom proposed by the majority is bound to be unilateral. Referring back to the quote by Mepschen et al. (2010), the negotiation of sexual freedom should take into account a variety of perspectives, rather than promoting one (hegemonic) view over others. Following Balibar's line of thought, especially his chapter on the "headscarf affair" in France, sexual freedom cannot be totally free if it suppresses others, which is why it should be negotiated politically and become attainable for different groups in a more equal way.

be the main focus of the remaining parts of this chapter, in which a systematic analysis of political and media discourse will be presented.

5.3 Political responses to the film and protagonists

The previous section has demonstrated that the film *Submission* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh can be considered an early example of populist logic. More concretely, the film offers a dichotomous view of society, in which a modern and progressive Self is opposed to a traditional and conservative Other. Such conclusions do not find resonance with the political and media debates on the film, in which Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were most often presented as controversial yet courageous figures putting an important message on the political and societal agenda. If we want to better understand the reception of the film in Dutch society, and the way it orientated the debate on multiculturalism over the years, we need to look beyond the academic literature and focus on political and media discourse. The main question to be tackled in this analysis is the following: to what extent do debates on *Submission* engage with Islamophobic and/or populist attitudes? To answer this question, the analysis will be split into two parts, and will first focus on political responses to the film in 5.3, and then offer a detailed perspective on media coverage on the topic in 5.4.

The film *Submission* is a clear example of how political and cultural debates take the shape of what Ågerup (2019) calls a hybrid discourse. Written by Hirsi Ali, a member of parliament, who aimed to convey an overt political message, it also entered the realm of the arts thanks to the contribution of the well-known film maker Van Gogh and the presence of a fictitious script, actresses and its overall artistic set-up. This constitutes an important difference with the 2008 film *Fitna*, written and produced by Geert Wilders, which is a non-fictional compilation of violent acts by Islamic extremists, framed in such a way that it supports Wilders' standpoints on the role of Islam in the Netherlands. While the announcement of *Fitna* prompted Jan Peter Balkenende, Prime Minister at the time, to dissuade Wilders from pursuing his film project, *Submission* was met with much less political opposition. In fact, before releasing her film, Hirsi Ali showed it to a group of prominent figures of the VVD party; Frits Bolkestein, Neelie Kroes, vice-president and Finance minister Gerrit Zalm, minister of Internal Affairs Johan Remkes, and Defense minister Henk Kamp.

Although they all responded quite differently – some were concerned, others unaffected – no one tried to stop Hirsi Ali from bringing out the film, or thought it would be detrimental to the position of the Netherlands in international politics, diplomacy or commerce (Hirsi Ali, 2007).

In order to acquire a broader understanding of the political debate around *Submission* and its makers Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh, this section will analyze the rhetoric in a number of political statements pronounced in the years after the airing of *Submission*, the murder of Van Gogh, and Hirsi Ali's departure from politics. It aims to understand how politicians from various political parties made sense of the film following a populist logic, as will be illustrated with the typology of populism and culture. This typology distinguishes between the three phases of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration, as is illustrated in Figure 5.1. As a brief recall, this circular typology conceives the making of the populist cultural narrative as a three-step process, starting with the pre-narrative activation of forms and modes of thinking related to the cultural product, followed by its narrative emplotment and framing through discourse and affect, to the final stage of organic integration in the populist narrative. As we will see, the two notions discussed above – freedom of speech and the position of Muslim women – play a central role in the emplotment of the film within a broader political or cultural narrative.

5.3.1 Presentation of the corpus

For the analysis of political responses to *Submission* and its producers, a sample of political responses has been selected using the LexisNexis search engine and through a Google keyword search. This led to a corpus of 24 political statements, as shown in Table 5.1, expressed between 2004 and 2009, and collected from Dutch mainstream media sources. The vast majority of these statements (15) were made by politicians belonging to the coalition¹¹, which in 2004 consisted of the Christian Democratic CDA, the conservative-liberal VVD and the social-liberal D66. Furthermore, four statements

¹¹ As explained above, this coalition (Balkenende II) fell over Hirsi Ali's citizenship question in 2006. It was followed by a (temporary) minority government formed by CDA and VVD (Balkenende III), that lasted until the 2007 general elections. The subsequent government (Balkenende IV) included CDA, PvdA and ChristenUnie until it collapsed in 2010. Given that most of the political statements in the corpus took place between 2004 and 2006, I will only focus on the Balkenende II government.

were made by the leaders of the opposition parties PvdA (social-democrats), ChristenUnie (Christian Democrats), and Geert Wilders' one-man faction Groep Wilders, later named PVV. Another five political responses were collected from politicians outside the Dutch parliament: Klaas Jeroen Terwal from VVD's Youth Organization JOVD, Marco Borghezio from the far-Right Lega Nord (today Lega), Norwegian MP Christian Tybring-Gjedde from the far-Right Fremskrittspartiet and the French Secretary of State Rama Yade from the right-wing party UMP (today Les Républicains). Needless to say, an important detail is that Hirsi Ali, in her capacity of Member of Parliament, contributed to the political debates on *Submission* and the subsequent assassination of Van Gogh, which is why she is also listed in the corpus. Her role in the debate, however, was rather marginal due to the strict security measures she was subject to, and, consequently, her long (physical) absence from parliament. Appendix C details the statements used in this analysis.

While some of the political reactions are directly targeting *Submission* and the question whether or not the film was a legitimate critique of Islam, other statements allude to events related to this question, most notably the killing of Theo van Gogh, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's departure from Dutch politics. For this reason, the analysis of the political debate cannot simply be reduced to politicians either applauding or disapproving of the film. The following part will therefore consider the notion of value regimes or "orders of worth" (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Korthals Altes, 2014; Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011) to make sense of the politicians' encompassing belief systems that define their categorization of the film as a creative work of art or a political pamphlet, for instance. This will shed light on their pre-narrative ideas and attitudes relevant for the prefiguration phase, the first step of the typology of populism and culture.

Table 5.1. Composition of the corpus of political responses to *Submission*

Name of politician	Political party	Number of statements	Date	Source
Jan Peter Balkenende	CDA (Prime Minister 2002-2010)	1	2-11-2004	NRC Handelsblad
Piet Hein Donner	CDA (Minister of Justice 2002-2006)	1	2-11-2004	NRC Handelsblad
Johan Remkes	VVD (Minister of Internal Affairs 2002-2007)	1	2-11-2004	NRC Handelsblad
Maxime Verhagen	CDA (Leader and member of parliament 2002-2006)	1	2-11-2004	NRC Handelsblad
Wouter Bos	PvdA (Leader and member of parliament 2002-2010)	1	2-11-2004	NRC Handelsblad
Geert Wilders	Groep Wilders (2004-2006), PVV (2006-now), (Leader and member of parliament)	2	3-11-2004 29-10-2009	De Telegraaf Het Parool
Ayaan Hirsi Ali	VVD (Member of parliament 2002-2006)	2	4-11-2004 2-11-2005	NRC Handelsblad De Volkskrant
André Rouvoet	ChristenUnie (Leader and member of parliament 2002-2007)	1	20-11-2004	NRC Handelsblad
Gerrit Zalm	VVD (Minister of Finance, vice Prime Minister)	1	1-12-2004	Opzij
Henk Kamp	VVD (Minister of Defense)	1	1-12-2004	Opzij
Laurens Jan Brinkhorst	D66 (Minister of Economic Affairs)	1	14-12-2004	De Telegraaf
Rita Verdonk	VVD (Minister of Immigration and Integration, 2003-2006)	1	17-12-2004	NRC Handelsblad
Marco Borghezio	Lega Nord (European Parliamentary)	2	20-4-2005 21-4-2005	Amersfoortse Courant De Telegraaf
Christian Tybring-Gjedde	Fremskrittspartiet (Norwegian member of parliament)	1	18-1-2006	Trouw
Ben Bot	CDA (Minister of Foreign Affairs 2003-2007)	1	10-2-2006	Trouw
Jozias van Aartsen	VVD (Leader and member of parliament 2003-2006)	1	16-5-2006	Trouw

Hans Wiegel	VVD (party prominent)	1	16-5-2006	Trouw
Hans van Baalen	VVD (Member of parliament 2003-2009)	1	16-5-2006	De Volkskrant
Klaas Jeroen Terwal	JOVD (Youth Organization Freedom and Democracy, connected to VVD, leader)	1	16-5-2006	De Volkskrant
Frits Bolkestein	VVD (party prominent)	1	31-8-2006	De Volkskrant
Rama Yade	UMP (French Secretary of State for Internal Affairs and Human Rights, 2007-2009)	1	11-2-2008	Reformatorisch Dagblad
Total		24		

5.3.2 The making of political narratives on *Submission*

This section will take a detailed look at the three-stage process of the prefiguration, configuration and refiguration of cultural products as an integrated part of the political narrative, which is represented in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1. The making of the Populist Cultural Narrative applied to *Submission*

Starting with the cultural product *Submission*, the first step, prefiguration, activates the viewer's previous experiences and manages expectations, in line with the conception of stories being evaluative of reality (Caracciolo, 2014). Indeed, not only do stories, such as films or novels, affect the way we see the world, our living experience also colors our interpretation of these cultural objects in the first place. More concretely, this means that the political reactions to *Submission* are grounded in, and orient, a combination of artistic, political and personal experiences (e.g. are they familiar with Van Gogh's previous work? Are they primed to engage with the topic? Do they have personal connections with any Muslim community?). In order to identify political attitudes to the controversial film, and to learn how their particular viewpoints were justified, the notion of value regimes or "orders or worth" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) is relevant. These "higher order principles", or "rationalized myths" are the foundation of societal agreements and controversies, and so constitute a "political grammar", or a hierarchy of values that allows individuals to make sense of events based on legitimized justifications (Patriotta et al., 2011). There are seven such

domains, namely the Market World, the Industrial World, the Civic World, the Domestic World, the Inspired World, the World of Fame, and the later added Green World. In this sense, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh could be considered smart marketers looking for commercial success (Market), competent and hardworking craftsmen (Industrial), responsible citizens that engage in important political and societal debates (Civic), acting out of (parental) love (Domestic), as creative geniuses exercising their freedom of artistic expression (Inspired), celebrities mostly caring about publicity (Fame), or contributing to a sustainable world for future generations (Green).

Looking at the political responses in my corpus, they can generally be attributed to two different Worlds, namely the Civic World and the Inspired World. More precisely, by foregrounding the freedom of the artist, Balkenende, Donner, Verhagen, Bot (CDA), Remkes, Zalm, Kamp, Van Aartsen (VVD) and Bos (PvdA) recognize the artistic dimension of *Submission*, alluding to the Inspired World. For instance, in his response to the news of Van Gogh's killing, prime minister Balkenende stated that "The Netherlands is a country where people can express their opinion. We should make a firm stand for that right". Similarly, referring to *Submission*, vice prime minister Zalm told the feminist monthly *Opzij* the following:

I said to Ayaan that I found the combination of Qur'an texts and naked bodies not very fortunate. I also wondered whether it was the ideal way to reach out to Muslims. But Ayaan goes her own way. And I don't think *Submission* is crossing a line. It should be possible to make such a film in the Netherlands.

Both comments implicitly foreground the important notion of tolerance, which is a vital condition in order for freedom of speech to blossom. Even if Van Gogh or Hirsi Ali are controversial in the way they address societal topics, and their message is certainly not unanimously approved of, their voices should be tolerated in the public sphere. Tolerance is often considered to be a typically Dutch tradition (cf. Mepschen et al., 2010), and in this case it is clearly contrasted to an intolerant, fundamentalist (Muslim) Other. The reference to the Inspired World, seeing Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali as artists rather than political actors, could also explain the different reception of *Submission* and Wilders' film *Fitna*, which is more clearly the work of a politician, and thus interpreted as belonging to the Civic World (Maris, 2018; Van Noorloos, 2014; Vis et al., 2011).

In the light of the Civic debate, the remaining political statements consider the political dimension of the film, especially its take on the loaded topic of multiculturalism. A key characteristic of these statements is their emphasis on a supposed incompatibility between freedom of speech and Islam. While the Inspired framing highlights the notion of artistic freedom in a more abstract and generic way (i.e. regardless of the content of a given cultural product or its author), the Civic framing engages with the content of the film *Submission* more specifically. In the case of Rouvoet (CU), Brinkhorst (D66), Wiegel (VVD) and Terwal (JOVD), who are all representing the political center, this translates into a more nuanced approach to *Submission*. While these politicians agree most often with the core issue discussed in the film, they concur that the controversial method eventually increases polarization in Dutch society and leads to the alienation of the Muslim electorate with VVD. This is most colorfully illustrated by Brinkhorst, Minister of Economic Affairs at the time: “If I go to my neighbor’s house and I call her “stupid bitch” all day long, she will get mad. I should then not be surprised about that”. He adds that “I am opposed to unrestrainedly saying all kinds of things. If my freedom of speech means humiliating someone else, then my behavior is irresponsible”.

The second group of politicians operating in the Civic debate, namely Bolkestein, Hirsi Ali, Verdonk, Van Baalen (VVD), Wilders (PVV), Yade (UMP), Borghezio (LN) and Tybring-Gjedde (FrP), consider that *Submission* and its makers provide an essential and authentic perspective to the debate on multiculturalism, with which they identify wholeheartedly. These politicians, all members of (far) right-wing parties, present Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh as the heroes of free speech, who uncover the bankruptcy of the multicultural society and the presence of a dangerous Other. This is well exemplified by Hirsi Ali’s statement that Van Gogh “sensed the threat that Islam was posing” and that he “was proven right in the cruelest possible way”. In other words, there seem to be two clusters of responses within the Civic debate, of which the first (Rouvoet, Brinkhorst, Wiegel, Terwal) takes a critical stance, and the second (Bolkestein, Hirsi Ali, Verdonk, Van Baalen, Wilders, Yade, Borghezio and Tybring-Gjedde) agree with the political message of the film. In doing so, they draw parallels between the film and the Suffragettes movement (Verdonk, Bolkestein), and compare Hirsi Ali’s genius to Luther, Molière, Darwin and Voltaire (Bolkestein, Yade). These comparisons, however flattering, allude to the role of these historical figures and movements as critics to leading religious norms and values and their success in

providing a ground-breaking alternative. It is for this reason that these comments should still be regarded as part of the Civic realm, rather than the Inspired.

Thus, the difference between the Civic and the Inspired World can be quite subtle, as is also illustrated by the statements of Borghezio. While the notion of freedom of speech is strongly present in his statement, referring to the rejection of Borghezio's proposal to air *Submission* in the European Parliament, his criticism goes much further than that of Balkenende and the like, who invoke the artist's freedom. That is, Borghezio incarnates this freedom of expression, claiming the right – in his role of politician – to show the film in an official government institution. Borghezio's appropriation of the film is twofold. First, he strongly identifies with the content of *Submission*, especially the oppression of Muslim women. Second, he invokes the idea that Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali were “silenced” as a result of radical Islamist violence, and connects this to how his own attempt to air *Submission* was “silenced” by the politically correct European Parliament. In his words, this signifies “surrendering to the murderer of Van Gogh”, implying that he interprets *Submission* as a political statement that should be heard, an idea belonging to the Civic World.

The prefiguration phase thus leads to the identification of two main categories of political response, of which one foregrounds the artistic qualities of the film (Inspired World), and the other emphasizes its societal impact (Civic World). Within the latter category, however, two opposed attitudes towards the film and its makers can be found, based on preformed political ideas on the topic of multiculturalism and its consequences for Dutch national identity. The following stage of the model, configuration, which frames the film *Submission* and its producers Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh discursively, will further articulate these different perspectives.

In order to distinguish between different kinds of discourses, I will use as a starting point the division between a liberal discourse and a discourse of resistance, proposed by Ågerup (2019). Drawing a comparison between the reception of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* (2015), Ågerup (2019) observes “a conflict between aesthetic and moral/political reading modes” (p. 616), mirroring the division between the Inspired and Civic Worlds mentioned above. In effect, the confrontation in the trial of *Madame Bovary* in 1857, between those favoring aesthetic freedom of the artist and those willing to protect the readers from a destabilizing experience, are surprisingly similar to the political debate on Houellebecq's *Submission*, as will be detailed in the following chapter.

Considering the divided political responses to the film *Submission*, oscillating between artistic freedom and the film's moral implications, it seems that Ågerup's model could cover to a great extent the different categories of political statements outlined above. In addition to this, *Submission* is a curious example of discursive hybridity, in which a politician and a film maker joined forces in order to produce a film with a strong political message. This blurs the boundaries that usually differentiate a fictional work from a political statement, namely "the ambiguous relationship to historical truth, the lack of preconceived effects on society, and the primacy of form over meaning" (Ågerup, 2019, p. 616). As we have seen above, the political reactions to *Submission* engage precisely with these three aspects: either by focusing on Civic aspects such as the film's controversial claims and its possible societal implications, or by emphasizing the artistic dimension, referring to the Inspired World. Ågerup continues by analyzing the political response to Houellebecq's novel *Submission*, focusing on two of the above factors, leading to the distinction between a liberal discourse and a discourse of resistance. The former prioritizes aesthetic values of the artistic product and the latter, also described as "gatekeeping criticism" (p.620), considers the novel merely as a transmitter of moral values. In order to cover all three categories of political statements from my corpus in this model, I propose to add the discourse of identification, meaning a strong approval of the form and contents of the cultural product. Appendix C provides an overview of all the political statements in the corpus, and specifies to which discourse they belong.

As such, the liberal discourse, exemplified by the statements of Balkenende, Donner, Remkes, Verhagen, Bos, Zalm, Kamp, Bot and Van Aartsen, follows the Inspired World logic and considers the film to be a legitimate expression of free speech. Artistic freedom, in this case of Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh, outweighs the moral concern that the film might be offensive to certain societal groups. Moreover, by conceptualizing the Netherlands as an Enlightened country in which tolerance is a core value, it is widely assumed that citizens are resilient to critical artistic or humoristic expressions targeting their group. The discourse of resistance, by contrast, highlights the moral judgment of *Submission* as a problematic film that fostered further societal polarization instead of creating a much-needed dialogue between groups. This attitude is reflected in the statements of Rouvoet, Brinkhorst, Wiegel and Terwal, all alerting to the potential societal danger of the film. The discourse of identification, like the discourse of resistance, engages with *Submission* by foregrounding a moral

understanding of the film, classifying both as part of the Civic World. The crucial difference between these two discourses, however, is the belief that *Submission* provides an accurate description of a severe societal issue and thus contributes to raising awareness for the problem. Wilders, Hirsi Ali, Verdonk, Van Baalen, Bolkestein, Borghezio, Tybring-Gjedde, and Yade all identify with the film's message, and emphasize that Hirsi Ali's and Van Gogh's voices should be heard in the public sphere. Figure 5.2 provides a schematic overview of the different discourses, where the vertical axis represents the interpretation of the film and its makers in terms of Civic or Inspired debates, and the horizontal axis differentiates between the perceived effects of *Submission* and Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh in general.

Figure 5.2. Schematic overview of the discourses

Note: The horizontal axis represents the moral interpretation of the film in positive or negative terms. The vertical axis indicates the situation of the discourse in the Civic or Inspired realm.

Having distinguished these three political discourses, the next step is to take a closer look at how the configuration of *Submission* takes place, and coexists with a given affective pattern. The emphasis on affect, as explained in chapter 3, follows the assumption that especially populism is successful at mobilizing certain emotions, such as fear or anger, in order to attract votes (Ahmed, 2014; Demertzis, 2019; Moffitt, 2019; Rico et al., 2017; Wodak, 2015). By analyzing the way in which politicians engaged with

Submission, I aim to show how this cultural product became instrumental for conveying their political message. More concretely, I will look at the use of *Submission* in constructing and supporting the populist cultural narrative. This narrative centralizes an idealized Self, and excludes an evil Other, by appealing successfully to both positive and negative affects.

These patterns are reflected in the corpus of political statements, where the politicians belonging to populist parties (Wilders, Tybring-Gjedde, Borghezio) all adopted the discourse of identification. The other politicians in this category (Hirsi Ali, Bolkestein, Van Baalen, Verdonk and Yade) can all be considered as part of the right-leaning or conservative wing of their respective parties, VVD and UMP¹². Immediately after Van Gogh's killing, Hirsi Ali and Wilders responded with mixed feelings of shock, sadness, fear, disgust and anger. Wilders, for instance, stated that "of course I am scared, I was shaking in my shoes and my stomach turned around when I heard about the loathsome murder". In her letter published in NRC, Hirsi Ali recounts her emotional trajectory from "a first reaction of shock and disbelief" to "intense sadness", to "being furious that the murderer of Van Gogh was on the radar of the AIVD [the Dutch intelligence and security service]" and finally "feeling guilty about going to Theo with the script for *Submission*". The envisaged effect of these statements clearly is to mobilize fear of a dangerous and misogynistic Islamic Other, as well as anger towards a negligent left-wing (political) elite, with the ultimate aim of attracting voters. This mobilization of anger is well illustrated by the following quote from Wilders in 2009, who argues that the political elites haven't learned anything five years after Van Gogh's murder: "Actually that is the biggest insult to someone like Theo van Gogh. They made everyone who highly values the freedom of speech, and also someone who paid the ultimate price for it, look like a fool, literally and figuratively". This critique to the elites, more specifically "left-wing critics", is also present in Bolkestein's statement, for

¹² Rita Verdonk left VVD in 2007 and founded her own political movement, Trots op Nederland (Proud of the Netherlands), and can retrospectively be considered a populist (Vossen, 2010). In his book *De Conservatieve Revolte*, Oudenampsen (2018) labels (former) VVD members Bolkestein and Hirsi Ali, along with Fortuyn and Wilders, as the driving members of the Dutch "new right" movement, a radical combination of free market liberalism and cultural conservatism. Van Baalen, who until his sudden death in 2021 was leading the liberal faction ALDE in the European Parliament, is not part of Oudenampsen's qualification, but has always positioned himself on the right side of VVD party. Yade, finally, left the center right UMP party shortly after her statement, joining the right-wing Parti Radical, which emphasizes individual freedoms and *laïcité*. Her proximity to Hirsi Ali may also be explained by some similarities in their life trajectories: both were born into a Muslim family (Yade in Senegal, Hirsi Ali in Somalia) and came to Europe as refugees, which makes them familiar with the situation of Muslim women both in Africa as well as in Europe. Yade self-identifies as a feminist, and she has previously spoken in favor of a burqa ban in France.

allegedly “prioritizing the dogma of multiculturalism over the emancipation of women”. At the same time, he considers the fact that Hirsi Ali’s freedom has been drastically restricted as a result of Islamic threats “a crying shame”.

At the same time, positive affects are used to incite feelings of familiarity and admiration within the electorate. An example is Tybring-Gjedde’s reasoning behind his personal nomination of Hirsi Ali for the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize: “she is a fantastic woman, whom I admire for pursuing her fight, despite the threats and constant surveillance”. These words of praise, whether targeting Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh or their film *Submission*, generally contain references to the notions of awe, nobility and respect, giving it an almost religious connotation.

While the discourse of identification can be characterized as aiming for the emotional registers of anger and fear towards the Other, and praise for the Self, the other discourses may elicit a different affective response. In the comments of Rouvoet and Brinkhorst, both categorized as belonging to the discourse of resistance, *Submission* and its makers are depicted negatively, as dangerous elements jeopardizing a vulnerable situation. For instance, Rouvoet argues that “the film’s intentions were noble, but this is about religious feelings, and you should be careful with those. I would be the last one to say that religious criticism should be impossible, but this is a vulnerable method”. In the short statements of the other two politicians in this category, Wiegel and Terwal respond to Hirsi Ali’s departure from the Netherlands, which they affirm is good news. While Wiegel euphemistically states that “he does not really mind” about the loss of Hirsi Ali, with whom he would often disagree, Terwal is openly reproachful: “By putting all Muslims in one box and by being extremely harsh on them, she made us lose many Muslim voters”. These politicians allude to the potential danger of Hirsi Ali’s divisive politics, mobilizing some degree of fear, as well as care for the position of the demonized Other and the political Self.

Compared to the other two discourses, the statements qualified as liberal discourse tend to invoke a weaker affective response. This can be explained by the earlier observation that this discourse does not deliver a moral judgment on the film and its makers, but rather a more impartial view defending the artists’ freedom of expression (Inspired World). Within this discourse, any violation of liberal values is strongly condemned, eliciting feelings of discontent and the longing for a situation in which these values, most notably freedom of speech, are still guaranteed. For instance, the initial responses to Van Gogh’s death are marked by the emotions of shock and

disgust, consider Balkenende's claim that cruelly murdering a public figure because of their opinion is "unacceptable", or Donner's description of the situation as "horrible". Van Aartsen's response to Hirsi Ali's departure from the Netherlands is also illustrative: "this is painful for Dutch society and politics, because it is telling for the state of the country: overly sensitive and provincial". This stimulates negative feelings about the current political situation, where political correctness prevails over freedom of speech and authenticity.

If we translate these initial findings to the seven foundational affects discussed in chapter 3 (Asma & Gabriel, 2019; Panksepp, 2010), I would claim that each of the three discourses are mobilizing different affective systems. In the case of the liberal discourse, this is the system of grief, which is described as a sudden and tragic loss of feelings of safety, i.e. the liberal Dutch society as it was when liberal values were still widely respected. It is clear that grief and fear are not mutually exclusive, but while the former emphasizes feelings of sadness that are the result of loss or separation, the latter refers to the more instinctive fight-flight-freeze response. In the corpus, this leads to feelings of discontent with society as it is perceived on the one hand, but also to affection and pride with defenders of liberal values, such as Hirsi Ali. The discourse of resistance, then, is marked by the affective systems of care about the position of the Other within the fragile status quo on the one hand, and fear of potential future pain and destruction, on the other. We can clearly observe a tendency to moderate the tone of the debate by appealing to the (positive) emotional registers of caution and thoughtfulness, with the ultimate aim of avoiding confrontation. By contrast, the discourse of identification is confrontational by nature, stimulating the affective system of rage, functioning as a way to intimidate others by curtailing their freedom, thus generating fear. On the other hand, those who are seen to be part of the same camp, through identification, are met with praise and metaphorically framed as fighters, as is illustrated by Verdonk's reference to *Submission* in terms of weaponry ("strijdmiddel"). The opponents in this case are either the political establishment, as is exemplified with Wilders' use of pronouns in the following passage: "We have been busy with appeasing Islam and Islamic countries. Several ministers have tried to tighten up anti-blasphemy laws. Instead of standing up for the freedom of speech they tried to restrict it by making religious criticism even harder." The first "we" refers to Dutch politics as a whole, including Wilders, who obviously deplores the allegedly soft attitude towards Islam. He then continues by pointing at those whom he considers to

be directly responsible for this trend, using the pronoun “they”, explicitly setting himself apart. The second group that is being confronted in this discourse are the Muslim others. This is clearly illustrated by Hirsi Ali in her first response to Van Gogh’s death:

A human being has been killed in a horrendous way, only because of his opinion. For the Netherlands this is relatively new, but in Islamic countries this is very common. Now that a considerable number of the Dutch population is Muslim, it is time for the government and other authorities to take the reasonable fear of 70 percent of the population seriously. This doesn’t alter the fact that today this concerns only a minor part of the Muslim fellow citizens, but that the potential influence of extremists within that group is enormous.

In this citation, Hirsi Ali sketches a dystopian future scenario based on the assumption that Muslims, more precisely Muslim countries, are inherently violent, and that therefore more Muslims in the Netherlands equals an elevated risk of Islamist attacks. While the last sentence seems to relativize her claims, I consider this a clear example of what Wodak (2015) calls the Bad Apple frame, the idea that one bad apple spoils the whole barrel (Wodak, 2015, p. 60). In order to avoid that extremism spreads to the other members of the group, harsh measures should be taken against the entire group.

In short, in the second step of the typology, configuration, three modes of narrative emplotment are constructed through three different discourses: the liberal discourse (Balkenende, Donner, Remkes, Verhagen, Bos, Zalm, Bot, Van Aartsen), the discourse of resistance (Rouvoet, Brinkhorst, Wiegel, Terwal), and the discourse of identification (Wilders, Hirsi Ali, Verdonk, Van Baalen, Bolkestein, Tybring-Gjedde, Borghezio, Yade). As I have shown in the affective analysis of these statements, these discourses all appeal to certain affects, most notably those related to the affective systems of grief, fear and rage. While earlier research on the importance of emotions in politics tends to focus on populism exclusively (cf. Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019b; Wodak, 2015), my analysis shows that mobilization through affect is part and parcel of contemporary politics. This is in line with the conception of emotions as “social and cultural practices” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 9), rather than mere psychological states. In fact, they construe worldviews about the Self and the Other based on fear, hate or love, a process Ahmed convincingly labels the “cultural politics of emotions” (p. 12). The last

step of the typology, refiguration, will illustrate how the affectively supported discourses on *Submission* and its makers have become an organic part of both mainstream and populist political narratives.

In this final phase, the “becoming” of the cultural product, we can see a clear difference between the discourse belonging to the Inspired World, and those based on the Civic World (see Figure 5.2). In the case of the former, the liberal discourse, *Submission* is considered in light of the widely shared conviction that artists should be able to express themselves freely, as long as they do not violate any laws. This view follows general liberal principles, and should apply equally to all works of art. The opposite is true for the latter category, the discourses of resistance and identification, which engage with topics specific to the artefact, leading to two general strategies: identification and association.

Identification refers to a strong endorsement of the topics and viewpoints presented in the film, and can be ascribed to those employing the discourse of identification. More precisely, the liberal values of freedom of speech and emancipation of women, not necessarily part of far-right ideology, are embraced in order to depict Muslims as the uncivilized Other, a practice we have seen also in chapter 2 with the case of *laïcité*. As has been discussed above, the statements of Borghezio and Bolkestein are clear examples of how freedom of speech or women’s rights are used as arguments against both an evil Other as well as a negligent political elite. More concretely, the method of Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh has been embraced in 2008 by Geert Wilders, the leader of the right-wing populist party PVV, when he released his own short film *Fitna*.

Association, on the other hand, is the tendency to characterize the film as belonging to far-right discourse, in this case by politicians adopting the discourse of resistance. In my corpus, however, the connection with far-right populism stays rather implicit. Brinkhorst, Rouvoet, Terwal and Wiegel criticize a too liberal interpretation of freedom of speech that, according to them, is offensive and polarizes society, leaving no space for nuanced debate. It is quite plausible that, without explicitly naming him, these politicians are referring to Pim Fortuyn, the politician who strongly emphasized the relative importance of freedom of speech vis-à-vis the right not to be offended, especially in the case of Islam-criticism.

As we will see in the following chapter, the phase of refiguration is not as strongly articulated as it will be in the case of Houellebecq’s *Submission*, having

appeared around the heyday of populism. I assume that this is related to the relatively strong core of liberal responses to Hirsi Ali's and Van Gogh's film after its publication in 2004. In the current political climate, in which topics such as immigration and Islam have become mostly the domain of populist parties and resuscitate strong passions, I would expect that a vast majority of politicians would position themselves using one of the more polarizing discourses of resistance or identification, and that the role of affect would be all the more prominent. In that sense, this analysis can also provide us with useful information – and perhaps a wise lesson – about the positive emotions that are still fairly present in the political debates during the first decade of the 21st century, most notably care and praise. These may have become overshadowed by the negative affects of grief, fear and rage, although grief is not necessarily polarizing, as this analysis has revealed.

The analysis of political response to the film *Submission* and subsequent societal events aimed at clarifying which different political attitudes could be identified, and to what extent these can be considered populist. My typology of populism and culture has been helpful in establishing that political debates primarily took place within the Civic and the Inspired worlds. While a considerable number of politicians (9) adopted a liberal stance towards the matter, without deeply engaging with the contents of the film, more than half of the statements (15) contained a moral judgment and were part of a more polarizing discourse. These discourses appeal to the affective systems of fear (resistance), rage (identification) in order to frame the Other, while positive affects as care and praise are mobilized to support the image of the Self. The preponderance of Civic debates on the film *Submission* and the widespread appropriation of liberal values by politicians of the (far) right shows how *Submission* has certainly played a role in the overwhelming success of the “civic Zeitgeist” narrative (Halikiopoulou et al., 2013), confirming the “modernity vs. tradition paradigm” (Mepschen et al., 2010).

5.4 A quali-quantitative approach to *Submission*

The political analysis pointed out the need to further examine the prevalence of civic values in societal and political debates, more precisely their narrative articulation in a broader societal context. For this reason, the next section of the analysis will take a

detailed look at a larger corpus of media articles on the film *Submission*, and its producers Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh. Two questions will be central in this analysis. First, how were the film and its makers framed in mainstream media, and were there considerable differences between their respective (ideological) profiling? Section 5.4.2 will provide a data analysis that will enable us to grasp the interference between media outlets and societal narratives on the film. Second, how does the metaphorical framing of *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh reflect and orientate certain prominent societal narratives? This section, 5.4.3, will delve into commonly used metaphors that are used to make sense of the controversial film and makers. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in saying that “metaphors may (...) be a guide for future action” (p. 156), and the conceptual framework sketched in chapter 3, I regard conceptual metaphor as not simply mirroring ideas, thoughts and behavior, but their inherently evaluative nature can also promote certain worldviews over others. However, before analyzing how *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were framed, and which metaphors were prevalent, section 5.4.1 will present the corpus of media articles that will be used for the analysis.

5.4.1 Composition of the corpus

The analysis of media articles on the film *Submission* is based on a corpus of originally 1341 articles, composed with the online search engine LexisNexis¹³. From this list, articles that were published in regional press or in Dutch-speaking countries outside the Netherlands were filtered out, and articles with more than one appearance were removed. This resulted in a corpus of 306 unique items. As has been detailed in chapter 4, the focus on Dutch national press allows to adopt a national perspective, and to compare patterns between newspapers with different ideological orientations. Upon closer examination, 73 of the 306 remaining articles were selected for the final corpus. All these articles contained at least two different paragraphs in which *Submission*, and either one or both makers were discussed and framed. This is important, because the topic appeared often in reference to other events, such as the trial around the radical

¹³ Search criteria: “Theo van Gogh Submission”. Filters: articles published in Dutch language, in newspapers, magazines and journals, between 29-08-2004 (the day after the film was first broadcast) and 31-12-2019. Later on, the two articles published after 31-12-2014 were left out, because they were not sufficiently representative of the time period 2014-2019.

Islamist network *Hofstadgroep*, the Danish cartoons (2005), or Geert Wilders' film *Fitna* (2008), without being discussed in depth. The selected articles are taken from eleven different news outlets, which can be broadly divided into three main categories¹⁴. The first category comprises the so-called quality newspapers (*kwaliteitskranten*) directed at highly educated readers (*het Parool*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Trouw*, *de Volkskrant* and *het Financieele Dagblad*), with a daily appearance and a circulation varying between roughly 100.000 and 300.000 copies a day. The second category concerns the tabloid newspapers *Algemeen Dagblad*, *Sp!ts*, *de Telegraaf*, all targeting the lower- or middle-class population and printing more than 300.000 issues a day. *Sp!ts* was a free newspaper distributed in train stations, which ceased to exist in 2014. Finally, the third category contains weeklies or monthlies having a specific, mostly upper-class, audience and a limited circulation of 10.000-20.000 copies per week/month. To be clear, *de Groene Amsterdammer* and *Vrij Nederland*¹⁵ both target left-liberal readers, and *Opzij* is a feminist monthly. Table 5.2 provides an overview of the articles in the corpus and their source.

¹⁴ Originally most of these news outlets belonged to a certain "pillar" (cf. above): *Algemeen Dagblad*, *de Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Groene Amsterdammer* and *het Financieele Dagblad* were liberal, *het Parool* was socialist, *Trouw* and *Vrij Nederland* were Protestant, and *de Volkskrant* was Roman-Catholic. *Sp!ts* and *Opzij* are more recent and were therefore never part of a pillar. Although in some cases this pillarized identity has left some traces (e.g. in *Trouw* topics related to philosophy and religion receive ample attention), at present most outlets, if not all, are commercial and not affiliated with a particular political party or ideology anymore. Since the de-pillarization, Dutch media are seen to have "emancipated", and it is broadly acclaimed that they are professional and objective (Bergman, 2013). Most of their differences lie in the focus on a specific target audience (e.g. highly educated or working class, men or women, progressive or conservative). For this reason, I believe the categorization presented above to be most indicative in terms of what one might expect from these media.

¹⁵ *Vrij Nederland* was a weekly until 2016, since then the magazine appears once per month. Considering the time period covered by my analysis (2004-2014), I will refer to *Vrij Nederland* as a weekly.

Table 5.2. Composition of the corpus of media reviews on *Submission*

News outlet	Category	Number of articles
De Telegraaf	Tabloid newspaper	17
De Volkskrant	Quality newspaper	13
Trouw	Quality newspaper	11
NRC Handelsblad	Quality newspaper	10
De Groene Amsterdammer	Magazine	6
Opzij	Magazine	6
Het Parool	Quality newspaper	5
Algemeen Dagblad	Tabloid newspaper	2
Het Financieele Dagblad	Quality newspaper	1
Sp!ts	Tabloid newspaper	1
Vrij Nederland	Magazine	1
Total		73

After the selection of the articles, all texts were coded according to their genre (news item, interview, op-ed, editorial, analysis or review), the main focus of the text (*Submission*, Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh or Muslim communities), and whether the article included a positive, neutral or negative appraisal of the film and/or its makers. Finally, a second coding process identified all conceptual metaphors targeting *Submission*, Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh and the responses of both Muslim communities and Dutch society to the film and its aftermath. This led to a list of 747 metaphors, which will be analyzed in more detail in section 5.4.3. Before that, the next section will investigate the general framing of the film and its makers, focusing on two aspects: the framing of *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh in the different categories of news outlets, and how this evolved between 2004 and 2014.

5.4.2 Framing *Submission*

Given the controversy that surrounded the film since it was first aired, the first question that arises is whether this led to a mixed reception in Dutch media. As a matter of fact, almost half of the 73 articles (36) convey a positive standpoint, while less than a quarter (16) are negative, and the remaining articles (21) are neutral news items or analytical pieces. Obviously, these numbers do not tell the full story, as some

of the articles concentrate more on Hirsi Ali, and others accentuate Van Gogh's role. If we split out the data according to each article's main focus, it becomes clear that the medias' positive judgments are mostly directed towards Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh, while *Submission* received rather negative criticism. Table 5.3 gives a detailed overview, specifying the amount and percentage of articles focusing on either *Submission*, Hirsi Ali or Van Gogh, and whether those articles are assessing the respective subject positively, negatively or neutrally.

Table 5.3. General appreciation of *Submission* and its makers

Focus of the article	Assessment of the film and makers in Dutch media ¹⁶			
	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Submission	5 (26.3%)	9 (47.4%)	5 (26.3%)	19 (100%)
Hirsi Ali	13 (54.2%)	3 (12.5%)	8 (33.3%)	24 (100%)
Van Gogh	18 (69.2%)	4 (15.4%)	4 (15.4%)	26 (100%)

As Table 5.3 shows, almost half of the articles discussing *Submission* have a negative appraisal of the film. This is in stark contrast with the predominantly positive way Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh are considered in the articles focusing on their persona. It seems likely that the rather positive treatment of especially Van Gogh's in the media is influenced by the dramatic events following the film. Criticizing the makers would then have implied that Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were indirectly responsible for the consequences of their film, which would downplay the horror of the crime committed by Bouyeri. For instance, critics like Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash were denounced as "apostles of multiculturalism" and "inquisitors"¹⁷; Geert Mak was accused of political correctness and cowardice¹⁸. On the other hand, by portraying the makers as the defenders of freedom of speech, the journalist would take a firm stance against Islamist violence and intolerance. As such, the debate became divided into two camps, in which not just *Submission* but also Hirsi Ali's and Van Gogh's political

¹⁶ The notions "positive", "negative" and "neutral", used in this table have been defined as follows: the assessment of the film, whether for aesthetic or ideological reasons, was positive or negative. Similarly, the positive label was given when, overall, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were admired for their work, and the negative when they were criticized. The neutral articles are almost always news items, and in some cases an objective analysis of the events leading to the murder or a biographic text of one of the makers.

¹⁷ De heks en haar inquisiteurs, in *Trouw*: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/de-heks-en-haar-inquisiteurs~b78a2ff5/?referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> (accessed on 10-12-2020)

¹⁸ Huis, in *De Telegraaf*, February 26, 2005.

motivations were involved. While my corpus does unfortunately not contain data that could compare the makers' popularity before *Submission*, we can take a look at how opinions on the film, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh evolved in the ten years that followed its appearance. Figure 5.3 will give a detailed account of how the appraisal for each of the makers and the film developed over three time periods: 2004-2006, 2007-2010 and 2011-2014.

Figure 5.3. Appraisal for *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh seen over time

Note: The bars represent the number of news articles (vertical axis) focusing on either *Submission*, Hirsi Ali, or Van Gogh over time (horizontal axis). The composition of the bars represents the positive, negative or neutral assessment of the target in the articles. For instance, between 2004 and 2006 there were 11 articles focusing on *Submission*, of which 2 are positive, 4 negative and 5 neutral.

As Figure 5.3 shows, the share of neutral news items has strongly decreased over time, in favor of articles containing positive or negative critiques. This is most clearly illustrated by the coverage of *Submission*, which frequently appears in a neutral context up to 2006, but becomes more a topic of debate after that, often in a negative sense. Since 2011 the film *Submission* is barely discussed as a main topic anymore, appearing mostly as a side note in Hirsi Ali's or Van Gogh's turbulent careers. In fact, the number of articles focusing on Hirsi Ali and her role in *Submission* also drop after

2011. This may have to do with the fact that she started a new career in the United States in 2006, and published a number of books since then. As such, the focus of media articles shifted from *Submission* to her more recent achievements, making her less present in the Dutch public debates on the topic of *Submission*. Van Gogh, 10 years after his unfortunate death, has not been forgotten. Although media coverage on Van Gogh remains predominantly positive, the fact that his assassination is not so recent anymore has left some room for negative critiques as well.

To put it shortly, in the ten years after the airing of *Submission*, media reporting on the matter has shifted from objective news items to opinionated articles, and tend to focus more on Van Gogh and *Submission*. While the share of positive critics remains important, negative assessments have become more frequent, meaning that in 2014 the debate was more polarized than in 2004.

A last aspect that has not been considered yet, is the role of individual media outlets and their particular profile. Following the three categories of Dutch mainstream news outlets, which have been briefly outlined in section 5.4.1, Figure 5.4 provides insights in how these categories assessed *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and van Gogh.

Figure 5.4. Appraisal for *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh per category of news media

Note: The bars represent the number of news articles (vertical axis) focusing on either *Submission*, Hirsi Ali, or Van Gogh, published in different categories of news outlets (horizontal axis). QN = quality newspapers: het Parool, NRC Handelsblad, Trouw, de Volkskrant, het Financieele Dagblad; TN = tabloid newspapers: Algemeen Dagblad, de

Telegraaf, Spits; MAG = magazines: de Groene Amsterdammer, Vrij Nederland, Opzij. The composition of the bars represents the positive, negative or neutral assessment of the target in the articles. For instance, articles focusing on Van Gogh mostly appeared in quality newspapers, of which 13 are positive, 3 negative and 2 neutral.

As Figure 5.4 shows, there are considerable differences in the way *Submission* and its makers are portrayed across different media outlets: while the magazines, and – albeit less so – quality newspapers are largely positive, tabloid newspapers draw a more negative picture. It seems somewhat surprising that a sensationalist, right-wing newspaper such as *de Telegraaf* is rather critical on the matter, even though their editorial line appears to be closer to the standpoints related to Muslims uttered in *Submission*. On the other hand, outlets aiming for highly educated readers, such as *de Groene Amsterdammer* and *NRC Handelsblad* are predominantly positive. While these three newspapers originally belonged to the liberal pillar, differences have clearly increased since the depillarization process, to the point that it makes more sense today to focus on the target audience and their stance on culture. Targeting working-class readers, *de Telegraaf* often adopts a critical perspective towards what they consider to be elite culture, favoring entertainment and showbiz news. This constitutes a clear difference with quality newspapers and news outlets with a specific audience, where art, culture and literature receive ample (positive) attention.

In general, Figure 5.4 follows the tendencies shown in Table 5.3, in which the makers of the film receive mostly positive criticism, and *Submission* rather negative. This is especially true for the quality newspapers, which are particularly negative on *Submission*, and describe Hirsi Ali or Van Gogh in fairly positive terms. The magazines differ slightly in their positive appreciation of not only the makers, but also the film (although it must be said that *Submission* also receives two negative assessments in this category, the appreciation for the film is thus far from unanimous). In contrast, tabloid newspapers are somewhat more negative. That is to say, not immediately after Van Gogh's murder, when he is characterized as “the Pietje Bell¹⁹ of the Dutch film

¹⁹ Pietje Bell is the mischievous protagonist in Chris van Abkoude's eponymous children's book series, published between 1914 and 1936, which were made into two highly popular movies in 2002 and 2003. Today, this characterization is used to describe someone (usually masculine) who is obstinate, constantly causing commotions, and tries to stretch the rules as far as possible, but, above all, has a heart of gold (cf. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/11/25/het-geheime-leven-van-pietje-bell-14138071-a1582344>) (accessed on 10-12-2020).

scene”, “one of the best directors of the Netherlands”, and “a good person”; Hirsi Ali is described as “a heroine”. Since 2006, conversely, the tide is turning, with *Submission* being labelled “an artistic failure”, Hirsi Ali “the femme fatale of politics”, “a liberal diva”, a “prima donna” and a “whirlwind”. In a column in 2014, Van Gogh is linked with drug and alcohol abuse, and called a “sick man”, a “schizophrenic” and “a disaster that is about to break out”. Unfortunately, the amount of *Telegraaf* articles in my corpus is too small to further analyze what caused this drastic change of tone, but I suspect that it could be a counterreaction to the fact that *Submission* and its makers received quite positive acclaim in quality dailies, and that *de Telegraaf* went against the grain.

A final word should be dedicated to two newspapers with a religious background: *de Volkskrant* and *Trouw*, who have a relatively high number of both positive and negative reviews. In other words, the reception of the film and its makers is more divided in these newspapers than elsewhere. While it would deviate too much from the chapter’s main objectives to delve into these two newspapers, a careful observation could be that their religious heritage in terms of editorial line and reading audience complicates their interpretation of the film *Submission*, alluding to the delicate margins between freedom of speech and blasphemy.

As this section has shown, the media debates on *Submission* and its producers were controversial from the start. Some considered the film as a brave attempt of Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh to open the eyes of policy makers, who, allegedly, were unwilling to see the real problems Islam was posing to Dutch society. On the other hand, the film was interpreted as a provocation, which would unnecessarily widen the gap between Muslim communities and the rest of the country. Over time, the debate left more space for critical interventions in the initially positive consideration of Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh – the memory of Van Gogh’s assassination became more blurred, and Hirsi Ali relocated to the United States – and thus became slightly more polarized. Because of Geert Wilders’ electoral successes, debates on Islam became mainstream, but at the same time the boundaries between Islam criticism and Islamophobia faded. It is therefore all the more noteworthy that precisely quality newspapers and magazines with a specific audience, both read by the cultural elites, had a more positive stance towards the film and its makers than tabloids directed towards working class readers, who are usually associated with Wilders’ ideas. This is consistent with the work of De Jonge (2019), who observes a shift towards normalization of populist rhetoric in Dutch

media since the rise of Pim Fortuyn and his death in 2002. In order to better appreciate these complex debates and the underlying dynamics that may play a role, the next section will take a closer look at the articulation and orientation of ideas and narratives, focusing on the use of conceptual metaphor.

5.4.3 *Submission* and the use of conceptual metaphor

So far, this chapter has demonstrated that *Submission*, a film that is actively promoting Islamophobic worldviews, has been embraced by right and far-right politicians both in the Netherlands as well as in other countries that appeared in the corpus. I have argued that specific types of discourses and affect play a key role in the interpretation and framing of the film. In fact, media debates too reflect the presence of liberal logic and the logic of resistance and identification through which the film and its producers are processed. This final part of the analysis will shed light on the language that is used to convey this logic, and, by extension, the cognitive operations involved in this process. More precisely, the study of conceptual metaphor can help us understand which metaphors are most pervasive in the media debate and how they reflect underlying ideas and worldviews in society (cf. Thibodeau et al., 2019). Moreover, I will analyze how metaphor effectively contributes to the orientation of these predispositions, by appealing to related affective systems.

As has been mentioned above, a thorough analysis of the corpus texts has led to the identification of 692 metaphors, which have been subdivided into 93 metaphor scenarios. For instance, the qualification of Theo van Gogh as “our Pietje Bell” cited above was classified as belonging to the metaphor scenario CHILDHOOD. Conceptual metaphor allows to grasp a complex or abstract phenomenon (the target domain, in this case Van Gogh) using more simple or concrete terms (the source domain, here the mischievous protagonist from a Dutch children’s book and movie). The metaphor scenario or mini-narrative CHILDHOOD thus frames Van Gogh as a misbehaving yet innocent child with good intentions; someone one should laugh about and not take too seriously.

Figure 5.5 reports the five most frequent metaphor scenarios, contrasted to the calculated average of the remaining 88 metaphor scenarios. The metaphor scenarios that stand out in the corpus because of their frequency are FIGHTING, MENTAL ILLNESS,

WAR, SPEAKING UP and INSULTING²⁰. Interestingly, three out of these five metaphor scenarios refer to violent or malicious actions (FIGHTING, WAR and INSULTING) and two are references to irregular or disruptive behavior (MENTAL ILLNESS and SPEAKING UP). At a first glance, this suggests that the film and its producers were frequently framed using confrontational and divisive scenarios, or as distinctive voices in the debate. In particular, the MENTAL ILLNESS scenario implies that their strong presence is a consequence of the mental issues they are thought to experience, making them not fully accountable for their actions. Van Gogh consequently framed himself as a “village idiot” (dorpsgek), which may have contributed to the pervasiveness of the metaphor scenario MENTAL ILLNESS. In order to give a more detailed account of how these metaphor scenarios relate to the different target domains (*Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh),

Table 5.4 specifies the five most frequent metaphor scenarios for each target domain.

Figure 5.5. Most frequent metaphor scenarios in the corpus on *Submission*

Note: The bars represent the number of appearances (vertical axis) per metaphor scenario (horizontal axis). For instance, the metaphor scenario FIGHTING occurs 106 times in the database. The bar ‘Rest (average)’ indicates the average frequency of the remaining 89 metaphor scenarios in the corpus (5,3).

²⁰ The metaphor scenarios SPEAKING UP and INSULTING are considered not in their purest literal sense, but as a way of metaphorically framing a certain event or situation. Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh are not literally speaking up or insulting (which would not be a metaphor), but their work is framed as such.

In total, 244 metaphors involve as main actor Hirsi Ali, a comparable 241 metaphors imply Van Gogh, while *Submission* counts only 24 metaphors. The remaining 183 metaphors in the corpus involve other societal groups as side-characters, namely Muslims and Dutch public society. These two target domains are not included in Table 5.4, because they do not match the metaphor scenarios described below, framing the film and makers of *Submission*. Instead, I will briefly comment upon the metaphors used to frame these groups towards the end of this section.

Table 5.4. The five most frequent metaphor scenarios split out by target domain

Metaphor Scenario	Target domain				
	<i>Submission</i>	<i>Hirsi Ali</i>	<i>Van Gogh</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
FIGHTING <i>The makers of Submission are involved in a (physical) fight.</i>	0	48	21	37	89
MENTAL ILLNESS <i>The makers of Submission are having severe mental issues.</i>	0	2	28	7	37
WAR <i>The film and its makers are involved in a war.</i>	1	18	1	14	34
SPEAKING UP <i>The film and/or its makers are clearly audible voices in the debate.</i>	2	15	11	5	33
INSULTING <i>The film and/or its makers are insulting other individuals or groups.</i>	2	2	12	2	18

Looking at Table 5.4, it becomes clear that while most metaphor scenarios are used for all three target domains, although to a different extent, they certainly have preference for one target or another. In effect, there seems to be consensus in the media debate that *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh are speaking loud and clear, and will not stop doing so, about controversial topics related to Islam. This idea can be found in the way Hirsi Ali is framed as someone who will not be silenced (“ze laat zich de mond niet snoeren”), while Van Gogh is mostly depicted as a noisy blabbermouth (“roepstoeter”) and *Submission* as something much talked-about (“geruchtmakend”, lit. noise-making). Indeed, we will see below that this difference in the way Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh are framed – she as someone with an important yet controversial political message, he as a pathetic loudmouth – is persistent. In addition, the metaphor scenario

INSULTING underscores the conflictive and provocative nature of mostly Van Gogh as a professional provocateur (“een beroepsprovocateur”) and an unbelieving maligner (“ongelovige lasteraar”) who allegedly takes a sardonic pleasure in insulting others, while *Submission* is framed as a filmed slander (“een gefilmd schotschrift”).

The metaphor scenario FIGHTING was used only for framing Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh, though more frequently for the former. Most notably, Hirsi Ali is pictured as a champion of the emancipation of Muslim women (“een voorvechtster”), who is waging a fight (“een strijd”) and frontally attacking Islam (“een frontale aanval”). Van Gogh is often described as someone fighting for free speech (“strijder van het vrije woord”), “attacking” not only Islam but also being implied in a paper warfare (“pennenstrijd”) with public figures. Generally speaking, Hirsi Ali is framed as a politician with a clear objective, while Van Gogh appears to be a polemic figure. This becomes clear with the metaphor scenarios MENTAL ILLNESS as well as CHILDHOOD (13 appearances, not in the table), seemingly suggesting that Van Gogh cannot be taken seriously as his behavior is not that of a responsible grown-up. In the media he is sometimes diagnosed with serious mental issues (schizophrenia, paranoia, Tourette syndrome), or he is portrayed as a “maniac” or the earlier mentioned “village idiot”. On the other hand, Van Gogh’s behavior is also compared to that of a child, said to be boyish (“kwajongensachtig”) and he is described as a blond rascal (“blonde belhamel”). While both MENTAL ILLNESS and CHILDHOOD euphemize Van Gogh’s denigrating statements about Islam (among others), the latter highlights the idea that his behavior is rather humorous and harmless, and clearly suggests that Muslims should simply tolerate his comments. On the other hand, when Van Gogh’s murderer Mohammed Bouyeri is described using the scenario MENTAL ILLNESS, he is rather framed as a danger for society: a religious lunatic (“godsdienswaaninnige”), a “psychopath” or a madman (“een gek”).

For Hirsi Ali, as we have seen earlier, this is not the case as she is metaphorically conceptualized in terms of the metaphor scenario WAR. As such, she is a woman on a mission (“een missie”) or conducts a crusade (“een kruistocht”), she is also critically portrayed as a “rebel in the Islamic world” who is too much in the vanguard (“ze marcheert te ver voor de troepen uit” lit. she marches too far ahead of the troops). This critical stance towards Hirsi Ali also becomes clear with the metaphor scenario STARDOM (13 occurrences, not in the table), where some depict her as a “star”, an “icon”, having “glamour” and “with the allure of an American film star”. By contrast, the metaphor scenario can also have a critical connotation, with references to “prima

donna behavior”, “a liberal diva” and having “white male groupies”. This shows how Hirsi Ali’s conceptualization in terms of *FIGHTING* and *WAR* contributes to the logic of confrontation in the media, drawing a line between those who admire her (the so-called groupies) and those who don’t.

As we have seen above, metaphor scenarios are used in different contexts; they can refer to various targets (i.e. Van Gogh and his murderer), but also have both positive and negative connotations (i.e. in the case of the metaphor scenario *STARDOM*). In order to explain this, I argue that metaphor scenarios have to be considered in a broader perspective, namely as part of a regime of metaphor. This is not to say that each regime has its own set of metaphor scenarios and metaphors, which will become clear below, but regimes do provide clues about how metaphors should be interpreted and become narratively enacted and experienced (Valdivia, 2019). Certain prevalent metaphors in society, such as *FIGHTING*, can embody different types of logic, depending on who or what one is fighting against. For instance, this can be Islamic influence (“she fights for emancipation”), artistic freedom (“warriors of free speech”) or the political establishment (“as if she stabbed us in the back”). The latter example is from a fellow politician (Ben Bot), who criticized Hirsi Ali’s role in the passport affair that caused the fall of the government, and more generally her tendency to polarize rather than seek dialogue. Indeed, based on a detailed reading of the corpus texts, three recurring regimes or narratives can be distinguished, namely the *VAN GOGH AND HIRSI ALI AS PROPHETS*, *VAN GOGH AND HIRSI ALI AS DEMAGOGUES* and *VAN GOGH AND HIRSI ALI AS ARTISTS*. These regimes largely correspond with the three discourses cited above, and the division between a Civic or an Inspired framing. As such, the *PROPHET* and *DEMAGOGUE* regimes belong to the Civic World, the former following the logic of the discourse of identification and the latter the discourse of resistance. The *ARTIST* regime, on the other hand, uses an Inspired framing and is in line with the liberal discourse. I will further explain these regimes of metaphor below, while insisting on the metaphor scenarios that construe these regimes, as well as the affects they appeal to.

The first of these regimes, *VAN GOGH AND HIRSI ALI AS PROPHETS*, perceives Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh as crucial voices in the multicultural debate, for raising awareness for the prevailing conflict between Islamic and Dutch cultures. Their film *Submission* is a brave attempt to discuss the subordinate position of Muslim women and allow their emancipation and integration in Dutch society. This regime is clearly confrontational, as it opposes the allegedly open-minded and progressive Dutch culture to Islamic

culture, described as backwards and conservative. Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh are not only clearly seeing the danger of Muslim communities, they are also not afraid to speak their minds, in contrast to what is seen as the politically correct elites and authoritarian Muslim communities. Indeed, this regime is largely positive about *Submission* and its makers (21 positive, 1 neutral review).

The second regime, VAN GOGH AND HIRSI ALI AS DEMAGOGUES takes a completely different perspective, claiming that Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh's film *Submission* is mere provocation, and that it does not solve any real issues in society. Rather, their provocative film and statements in the media have made any constructive dialogue impossible. Instead of a nuanced debate between different groups in society, the film has led to further societal polarization. These ideas are reflected in a negative appraisal of the film and its makers (15 negative, 1 neutral review).

Finally, the third regime, VAN GOGH AND HIRSI ALI AS ARTISTS, holds that Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh are talented at their jobs and courageous enough to speak up about issues that are slightly politically incorrect. Their film *Submission* is to be seen as an expression of artistic rebellion, and the originality and eccentricity of the makers should be widely celebrated, although their artistic freedom is not without limits. Instead, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh are often misunderstood in public debates. Articles in which this regime is dominant are mostly positive about *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh, but there are also some negative reviews (15 positive, 3 negative, 1 neutral).

All corpus texts have been analyzed through several rounds of initial, focused, axial and theoretical coding (Johnson, 2014), and following their framing of *Submission* and its makers (see section 5.4.2), they were labelled PROPHET (22 articles), DEMAGOGUE (16 articles) or ARTIST (19 articles). The remaining 16 articles were news articles, and although they did contain some metaphors (50), they did not critically frame the film or the makers. For this reason, they were included in the analysis under the category "other". The ARTIST regime has the highest metaphoricity (284), followed by the PROPHET (226) and DEMAGOGUE (138) regimes.

Before delving deeper into the presence of certain metaphor scenarios within each regime of metaphor, I will first examine the relationship between these regimes and the media outlets in which these articles appeared. Table 5.5 specifies per category of news outlets (quality newspapers, tabloids or newspapers with a specific audience) the share of articles adopting the ARTIST, DEMAGOGUE or PROPHET regimes. While it is not too surprising that the most frequent regime in quality newspapers such as *De*

Volkskrant and *NRC Handelsblad* is the relatively liberal ARTIST regime, it is all the more remarkable that the PROPHET regime has such a strong presence. This is even more notable for newspapers and magazines with a specific audience, of which more than half of the articles uses metaphors inspired by the dichotomous and Islamophobic PROPHET regime. Tabloid newspapers, on the other hand, while being often accused of supporting (far) Right and populist parties, do take a mostly neutral stance, or dismiss *Submission* and its producers as demagogues. This means two things. First, as it appears, tabloid newspapers were less inclined to publish opiniated articles, in favor of neutral news reports. As we have seen in section 5.4.2, their consideration of art as elitist could account for the neglect of *Submission* as they considered the topic not sufficiently interesting for their readers. Second, quality newspapers and magazines took over the divisive and Islamophobic logic present in the film, as we can see by their wide adoption of the PROPHET regime. In other words, I suspect that with *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh paved the way for making such ideas *salonfähig*, but rather than by publishing articles that were outright Islamophobic, these ideas were implicitly promoted in their choice of metaphor. This is a clear illustration of what De Jonge (2019) describes as the “accommodative strategy” of media outlets towards populism: “media practitioners might incorporate some of [the populist] rhetoric in their news coverage” (p. 194). In the final part of this analysis I will consider the link between ideas, attitudes and worldviews on the one hand, and conceptual metaphor on the other. More concretely, I will reflect on how conceptual metaphor can actually orientate ideas and behavior, and argue that regimes of metaphor play a crucial role in this process.

Table 5.5. Appearance of regimes of metaphors in different categories of media outlets

Category media outlet	Appearance of regimes of metaphor in the media				
	ARTIST	DEMAGOGUE	PROPHET	Other	Total
Quality newspapers (<i>het Parool</i> , <i>NRC Handelsblad</i> , <i>Trouw</i> , <i>de Volkskrant</i> , <i>het Financieele Dagblad</i>)	15 (38.5%)	8 (20.5%)	12 (30.8%)	5 (12.8%)	39 (100%)
Tabloid newspapers (<i>Algemeen Dagblad</i> , <i>de Telegraaf</i> , <i>Spits</i>)	2 (10.0%)	6 (30.0%)	2 (10.0%)	10 (50.0%)	20 (100%)
Magazines (<i>de Groene Amsterdammer</i> , <i>Vrij Nederland</i> , <i>Opzij</i>)	2 (14.3%)	2 (14.3%)	8 (57.1%)	1 (7.1%)	14 (100%)

At this stage, it might be useful to recall the relationship between discourse and regimes of metaphor. In his article, Ågerup (2019) proposes a Foucauldian definition of discourse as “a structure of shared values and objectives” (p. 617) which is “controlled and organized as an exercise of power” (ibid.). In the debates on the film *Submission*, this notion of power becomes apparent as one interpretation of the film is foregrounded at the expense of others, which, as we have seen, is closely related to civic debates on the topic of free speech, gender equality and the multicultural society. Within these discourses, being linguistic structures, conceptual metaphor plays a crucial role in making sense of the film and its producers in terms of a different - related or unrelated - concept, and thus reflects unconscious thought patterns. In this sense, metaphor allows to shape discourse. Moreover, the hegemony of certain metaphors is not arbitrary, but defined by regimes of metaphor, reflecting and orientating powerful frames in our political and societal realities.

In Table 5.6, we find again the five most frequent metaphor scenarios, but now divided by the three regimes of metaphor cited above. This table shows that just like target domains, regimes of metaphor do not have their own specific set of metaphor scenarios, instead regimes may have preference for certain scenarios. For instance, within the *PROPHET* regime the metaphor scenario *WAR* is far more frequent compared to the other regimes. However, the general picture is that different regimes of metaphor have a lot in common, and given the cognitive link between metaphor and conceptual thinking, as established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), it follows that

different regimes may actually share certain basic ideas or worldviews. More concretely, **FIGHTING** is the most frequent metaphor scenario in all regimes, and also **SPEAKING UP** and **INSULTING** are omnipresent. Notwithstanding the fact that these metaphor scenarios may have a slightly different interpretation according to the regimes, as we have seen above, they do share an underlying logic, which is confrontational and contributes to the activation of widespread “us” vs. “them” patterns. This is most clearly illustrated with the scenarios **FIGHTING**, **WAR** and **INSULTING**, but also the idea of voicing controversial ideas (**SPEAKING UP**), like those of Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh, can be divisive. Similarly, the metaphor scenario **MENTAL ILLNESS** singles out an unstable individual, who does not necessarily have bad intentions, and cannot be held accountable for the collateral damage he or she causes to other communities. Even the most neutral news items, shown in the column “other”, use these conflictive metaphors (**FIGHTING**, most notably), which insinuates that this polarizing logic is deeply engrained in our social fabrics.

Table 5.6. The most frequent metaphor scenarios per regime in reviews on *Submission*

Metaphor Scenario	Regimes of metaphor				
	ARTIST	DEMAGOGUE	PROPHET	Other	Total
FIGHTING <i>The makers of Submission are involved in a (physical) fight.</i>	30	24	37	15	106
MENTAL ILLNESS <i>The makers of Submission are having severe mental issues.</i>	22	7	5	3	37
WAR <i>The film and its makers are involved in a war.</i>	7	3	22	2	34
SPEAKING UP <i>The film and its makers are clearly audible voices in the debate.</i>	14	9	9	1	33
INSULTING <i>The film and/or its makers are insulting other individuals or groups.</i>	12	3	2	1	18

Apart from these most frequent metaphor scenarios, regimes consist of more specific scenarios, giving each regime its particular taste. In the case of the **ARTIST** regime, the metaphor scenarios **MENTAL ILLNESS** and **CHILDHOOD** (14, not in table) are particularly frequent, highlighting the artistic values of originality and creativity, and,

as far as the interpretation of their work is concerned, vulnerability and lower accountability. This regime thus holds that the work of an artist is to independently criticize societal issues, but that their engagement should be considered as that of an eccentric outsider. The *PROPHET* regime paints quite a different picture, which is emphasized by the metaphor scenarios *WAR*, *BURNING* (10, not in table) and *SEEING* (8, not in table). This suggests that in *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh visualize a persistent violent conflict (“an ordeal by fire”). It is acknowledged that the makers of the film were “pouring oil on the fire”, but this is considered positive compared to the lack of action undertaken by the political establishment, which is seen to be “capitulating” to Islam. Finally, the *DEMAGOGUE* regime is mostly reflecting the confrontational logic present in the other regimes, its three most frequently used metaphor scenarios being *FIGHTING*, *SPEAKING UP* and *INSULTING*. In contrast to the *PROPHET* regime, however, the danger is not Islam or mainstream politics, but the behavior of Van Gogh (a “conflict-junk”, or a “noisy firecracker”) and Hirsi Ali (“her radical fight”, “a frontal attack”), exaggerating and worsening societal frictions. It is interesting, though, that a regime looking to avoid confrontation is actually reproducing metaphors that are used in a more confrontational regime like *PROPHET*, something that also applies to the liberal *ARTIST* regime. I assume that the predominance of certain polarizing metaphor scenarios and the interconnectedness of regimes of metaphor are due to the deep-rooted presence of cultural narratives of superiority, allowing to portray the Other as inferior (“a madman”), an outsider who thinks she is better than the rest (“a diva”), or dangerous (“a terrorist”), thereby activating certain affective systems (cf. Valdivia, 2019).

As we have seen in section 5.3.2, the three political discourses have a strong emotional core based on the affective systems of care, fear, rage and grief, which create and shape a dichotomy of the Self vs. the Other (Asma & Gabriel, 2019; Panksepp, 2010). We can add now that this dichotomy is also strongly present in media debates, and that conceptual metaphor, more precisely regimes of metaphor, can reflect and promote the underlying “us” vs. “them” logic, contributing to an emotional response. This creates a feedback loop in which discourse, metaphor and affect continuously influence each other, and explains how conceptual metaphor can effectively activate ideas, worldviews and, ultimately, behavior.

The three regimes of metaphor have their own way of dealing with the Other. The *PROPHET* regime mobilizes the affect of rage to intimidate the opponent, using

mostly violent or aggressive metaphors, while the DEMAGOGUE employs the affective systems of care and fear, speaking up for the Other and seeking to avoid a confrontation that they're afraid to lose. This is emphasized by metaphors that frame not Muslims, but Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh and their film *Submission* as disruptive others. The ARTIST regime, being the least polarizing regime, supports this view of Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh as artistic outsiders, but deems it vital for democracy that they can make their voices heard. The perception that such artistic rebellion led to the death of the artist evokes feelings of grief.

The predominance of negative affects seems to suggest a profound lack of equaliberty in society (cf. Balibar, 2014). The regimes of metaphor PROPHET and DEMAGOGUE, framing *Submission* primarily as a moral question (Civic World), show a reversed image, where the former defends civic liberties at the expense of the Other, and the latter condemns certain problematic (cultural) expressions in the name of equality. As we have seen above, the notion of equaliberty implies that equality and liberty cannot exist without one another, and an imbalance leads to the imposition of worldviews and a suppression of the Other – jeopardizing both liberty and equality. The ARTIST regime, on the other hand, considering *Submission* mainly as a work of art (Inspired World), strongly advocates artistic freedom, but turns a blind eye to the Islamophobic elements of the film. These limitations of both freedom and equality quite logically create dissatisfaction, or in more extreme cases, rage and fear. It is clear that the notion of equaliberty, established by Balibar as a universal truth, provides food for thought: “There are no examples of restrictions or suppressions of freedoms without social inequalities, nor of inequalities without restrictions or suppressions of freedoms” (Balibar, 2014, p. 49). Perhaps positive affects such as care and empathy can play a central role in thinking and creating new types of communities and definitions of belonging.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has looked into the impact of the 2004 short film *Submission part 1* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh in politics and Dutch mainstream media. My main interest was to analyze the complex interplay between politics and controversial cultural products, given that *Submission* engaged with a highly political topic, which

in turn generated vivid political and societal responses to the film and orientated political debate and decision-making. As became clear in the academic debate on *Submission* (see section 5.2 of this chapter), the film depicts the Islamic Other as culturally backward, stressing the idea that no peaceful cohabitation between Dutch and Islamic cultures is possible, unless Muslims actively embrace Western Enlightenment values. Additionally, the images of naked female bodies calligraphed with Qur'an texts – considered blasphemy – upset many Muslims, and inspired the radical Islamist Mohammed Bouyeri to kill Van Gogh. Certainly, this act of brutal violence convinced many people that Islam indeed represents a danger to Dutch society.

The strong presence of “us” vs. “them” logic in *Submission*, which was further enhanced by the events that followed, divided the audience and polarized the debate into those defending the makers of the film, and those taking the side of the negatively portrayed Muslim communities. These attitudes become apparent in both the political and media debates. As we have seen in section 5.3, politicians interpreted the film in terms of Civic and Inspired framings, following their pre-existing worldviews regarding the topics of free speech and multiculturalism. This led to the identification of three discourses, namely the liberal discourse (focusing on aesthetic values of art), the discourse of resistance (pointing at the potential danger of the film) and the discourse of identification (identifying with the film's contents). The latter two discourses are highly polarizing, and the idea of a dangerous Other is further emphasized by the dominating negative affects fear and rage (respectively).

A similarly divisive climate was found in the analysis of the media debate (section 5.4), both in the way *Submission*, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were framed in mainstream newspapers, as well as reflected by the choice of conceptual metaphor. Indeed, the omnipresence of violent and confrontational metaphors was undoubtedly inspired by the violent aftermath of the film, but it also shaped and reinforced various popular dichotomies opposing heroes and villains. Again, the affects rage, fear and also grief play a key role in this process, as I argue that regimes of metaphor activate these emotions, which then orient the choice of metaphor scenarios. Contrary to what is often suggested in academic literature (cf. Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019b; Wodak, 2015), the use of affect, and more specifically the affect of fear, is not limited to populists but in fact widely shared across the political landscape. Future research should shed more

light on the synergies between political and societal narratives, conceptual metaphor and affect.

In a similar vein, it would be interesting to analyze more broadly the use of conceptual metaphor in political discourse, using a larger corpus of political statements. This would allow for a more systematic comparison between (strictly) political and public discourse, and could perhaps elucidate the way in which metaphors travel – from politics to public discourse, the opposite, or both – and why some metaphors become more pervasive than others. In my analysis of media articles on *Submission*, the most frequent metaphor scenario was FIGHTING, a metaphor that was also used by politicians employing the discourse of appropriation. I would hypothesize that this metaphor scenario finds its origin in the polarizing and confrontational PROPHET regime, and then diffuses to the other regimes. Similarly, further academic research could analyze where certain political metaphors originate and to what extent divisive imagery becomes part of the mainstream.

Finally, it is worth noting that “us” vs. “them” narratives, whether populist or not, do not exclusively build on negative images and emotions. The idea of “the politics of fear” (Wodak, 2015) seems to be more complex, as this chapter has shown. Both in *Submission* as well as in the political and public response to it, the Other is depicted as evil and backward, but at the same time positive emotions and imagery allow for the necessary social bonding and creation of solidarity within the in-group. The affective systems responsible for this social bonding, social learning and display of curiosity for other human beings, namely care, play and seeking (Asma & Gabriel, 2019) suggest that there are alternatives to the dichotomous view of society, and that we can draw on these affects to become more inclusive as a society or social group. A critical reconsideration of socio-political narratives based the notion of equaliberty (Balibar, 2014), as well as the potential of positive affects, could play a crucial role in exploring such alternatives, in which new metaphors and affects are creative powers to bolster social change.

Chapter 6 “Un cadeau pour Marine Le Pen?”: Analyzing the debate around Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (2015)¹

6.1 Introduction

The analysis of the short film *Submission part 1* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh in the previous chapter has revealed that its reception in Dutch media and politics mirrored, reproduced and orientated “us” vs. “them” patterns present in the film. In fact, its interpretation largely followed the typology of populism and culture, discussed in chapter 2, suggesting that populist logic is indeed not limited to certain political actors or far-right groups, but that such ideas are widespread in Dutch society. Practices of Othering were paramount in the analysis, and were articulated through the adoption of certain discourses, the use of affect, and the choice of conceptual metaphor. At the same time, both in the political and media corpora, a strong core of liberal attitudes could also be identified, focusing not on (positive or negative) moral implications of the film, but rather on the notion of artistic freedom, resulting in a less divisive stance towards the makers (discourse of resistance) or Muslim communities (discourse of identification).

In order to place the outcomes of this analysis in a broader international context, and to compare different artistic genres and products, this chapter will now take a closer look at the political and media debate around Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission* (2015). Studying a more recent case allows to examine whether the above-mentioned polarizing dynamics are still manifest – or if they intensified in the era that saw the international breakthrough of populism. In this light, the case of France is particularly interesting, with the Rassemblement National (formerly known as Front National) playing a significant role in both national and regional politics since its foundation in 1972. Furthermore, by shifting our focus from a relatively transparent and straightforward short film to a more stylistically complex novel, the link with

¹ Some parts of this chapter have appeared earlier in Jansma (2018).

actual politics might be more diffuse. In a similar vein, the ambiguity of Houellebecq's novel may give rise to a wider array of possible interpretations. As I will specify below, this may have to do with my characterization of *Submission* as an organic cultural product, while I consider *Soumission* to be autonomous.

For this reason, this chapter will use the same methodological tools as above, more precisely the three-stage process of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration – a terminology based on the theory of mimesis (Ricoeur, 1991) – and a deep analysis of the specific forms, affects and conceptual metaphors that articulate the populist narrative. In adopting a broader societal perspective, which comprises not solely populist, but also non-populist perspectives on the novel, I am interested in how exactly these cultural narratives are created, and how they spread so successfully across French society. Following my line of argumentation in this dissertation, I will conceptualize populism as an organic phenomenon, rooted in and contributing to a larger “culture of fear” (Castells et al., 2012). More precisely, I argued that populism's use of culture manifests itself on two different levels. First, populists engage with concrete cultural products that become part of their political narrative. Second, these cultural products allow to define who can belong to the people and who cannot. As such, the successful articulation of these populist narratives will have a feedback effect on the definition of culture on a societal level. Similar to the previous chapter, the analysis of the political and media debates on the novel *Soumission* will address both these levels.

Cultural products can play with and challenge these narratives of community. This is clearly the case with the 2015 novel *Soumission* by the French author Michel Houellebecq, depicting a near future France on the verge of Islamization. In the story, situated in the year 2022, we see France at the end of François Hollande's (fictional) second mandate in a deep economic, political and existential crisis. The following presidential elections wipe out the traditional power block, and the second round opposes Marine Le Pen's Front National² to the (fictional) leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Ben Abbes, the latter coming out as the winner. After Ben Abbes' victory, France is rapidly transformed into an Islamic Republic, and all its former problems disappear in thin air: unemployment rates drop as women are no longer allowed to work, friendly states sponsor the new regime, *banlieue* violence

² In his book, Houellebecq speaks of the Front National, which was still the name of the political party at that time. I will follow his terminology to indicate that I am speaking about *Soumission*.

suddenly stops, and, most importantly, Islam provides a spiritual alternative to the felt emptiness of post-1968 individualism. Essentially, as will be detailed below, the novel challenges populist binaries of “us” versus “them”, blurring the boundaries between the Islamic Other and the Western Us.

Due to the ambiguous strategies employed in the novel, the reception of *Soumission* revealed the omnipresence of underlying predispositions usually associated with populism, such as the predominance of the “us” vs. “them” narrative and the configuration of conceptual metaphors. For this reason, *Soumission* provides us with an interesting case study, showcasing to what extent populist narratives are widespread in French politics and society. This is why I will analyze both the political and media debate that followed the publication of this controversial novel. For the political debate, I will analyze how French politicians framed *Soumission*, focusing on the predominance of certain discourses and affects, and to what extent they identified with the novel. The typology developed chapter 2 will be used to elucidate the process of political appropriation of *Soumission*.

Given that political ideas do not exist in a vacuum, but that they emerge in their societal context, this analysis will be complemented by a detailed study of the novel’s reception in the media, based on a corpus of book reviews that appeared in French newspapers and magazines. In order to fully appreciate the political use of *Soumission*, I believe that it is crucial to consider the societal debates that these politicians interact with and that may nourish their political agenda. At the same time, as chapter 3 pointed out, these narratives are activated by cognitive operations that do not always appear on the surface level. This is why the second part of the analysis will attempt to dissect common cultural narratives in society, focusing on regimes of metaphor, metaphor scenarios and conceptual metaphor. I consider conceptual metaphor as an enactivist dynamic, a creative power that can thus orient behavior, and potentially foster societal change and renewal. In the case of *Soumission*, this implies that metaphorically framing Houellebecq as a prophet or as a terrorist is informed by a certain (opposite) perception on the relationship between the West and the Islamic world. Therefore, this analysis will shed light on ways in which conceptual metaphors reproduce and reconfirm certain ideas and attitudes that are present in society.

The next section of this chapter will first present the novel, mapping the two main challenges readers of *Soumission* are confronted with: Houellebecq’s use of both ambiguity and paradox. As a consequence of this rhetorical strategy, interpretations of

Houellebecq's novels tend to be rather polarized, as will become clear in the analysis of the data. The analysis will be divided into two sections (6.3 and 6.4), which, after a short presentation of the corpus, will study the framing of the novel by politicians, and analyze its reception in French mainstream media respectively.

6.2 Presentation of the novel: complexity and paradox in *Soumission*

Being a best-selling and prize-winning French author of controversial novels, Houellebecq has received ample academic attention over the past decades. While some of these contributions highlight Houellebecq's controversial persona and the way it influences the interpretation and readability of his work (Baroni & Estier, 2016; Korthals Altes, 2014), others focus on the nature of his texts, more precisely the author's use of rhetorical tools such as dark humor, paradox and irony (Berg-Sørensen, 2017; Carlson, 2011; Nilsson, 2019; Ungureanu, 2017). A third group of scholars consider Houellebecq's work in a broader societal context, analyzing the political reception and use of his novel *Soumission* (Ågerup, 2019; Jansma, 2018), or study the novel as an illustrative example of cultural pessimism (Lilla, 2016). As most scholars conclude, and as my analysis will show, these different factors lead to a highly polarized reception of Houellebecq's work, and the novel *Soumission* in particular.

While Houellebecq's *Soumission* as well as the previous case study have this divided critical acclaim in common, it is the degree of opacity and ambiguity in Houellebecq's novel that distinguishes both case studies. Following my theoretical model laid out in chapter 2, it could be said that with their film *Submission*, Hirs Ali and Van Gogh fall within the realm of the organic authors, identifying mostly with the content of their work. In the case of Houellebecq's novel, on the other hand, it is much harder to draw such conclusions, as this section will further detail. For this reason, I consider Houellebecq to be an autonomous author.

In order to gain more insights in the interpretation of Houellebecq and his novels as the work of an autonomous author, I will explore the academic debate. This will lead to the observation that while most scholars consider Houellebecq a disruptive voice in society, systematic studies of the concrete societal impact of Houellebecq's work, and *Soumission* in particular, are still fairly underrepresented. An important exception is the work of Ågerup (2019), who is right to state that the debate on *Soumission* should be considered an example of discursive hybridity, "the

contemporary trend of blurring or renegotiating the boundaries between fiction and reality, and literary and political discourse” (p.616). In other words, it is key to study the novel in its political and societal context: the way in which the public deals with a controversial text such as *Soumission* reveals valuable information about our society at large. However, in order to understand what makes Houellebecq a disruptive voice, and *Soumission* a controversial novel, I will first present the novel *Soumission* and academic interpretations of the author and his work.

Already before its publication *Soumission* was a highly controversial novel, not only because of its content, to which I will return later, but also for the remarkable conjuncture between the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and the publication of the book, both on the 7th of January 2015. Interestingly, Houellebecq featured on the cover of the latest *Charlie Hebdo* issue, which came out that same day, where he was portrayed as a magician predicting the future: “en 2022 je fais Ramadan” [in 2022 I will observe Ramadan]. As a consequence, the first reactions to *Soumission* were quite harsh, claiming the novel was Islamophobic, and accusing Houellebecq of playing with the fear of Islam and thus creating a bigger audience for the Front National³.

Besides the unlucky coincidence of events that made the novel already controversial before people could actually read it, its provocative content also contributed to the debate. We see France’s transformation to an Islamic Republic through the eyes of François, a middle-aged lecturer specialized in Literature, more specifically the author Joris-Karl Huysmans⁴, at the Sorbonne University. If the society is in crisis, this idea is also present in his personal life: he leads a rather miserable existence in which the only sparkles are his sexual escapades with female students. Contemporary society has turned him into an individualist and passive creature: alone, out of touch with his family, not eating anything else than take-away or microwave food, and his professional career is based on an achievement he has made a long time

³ Examples include former prime minister Manuel Valls stating that “France is not Houellebecq. It is not intolerance, hate and fear”, and the article by Laurent Joffrin in *Libération* “*Soumission: Le Pen au Flore*” (see https://next.liberation.fr/livres/2015/01/02/le-pen-au-flore_1173182) (Accessed on 02-05-2019)

⁴ Huysmans was a late 19th century French writer, first of naturalist novels, until the publication of his most famous work *A Rebours (Against the Grain)*, in 1884. This book is one of the most representative examples of European decadentism and symbolism. The connections between Houellebecq’s novel and Huysmans’ life and works are multiple: 1) Huysmans’ late conversion to Catholicism is echoed by François’ own attempts to convert to Catholicism, and his final successful conversion to Islam; 2) Decadence as an artistic or cultural movement is mentioned several times in the novel, in relation to the idea of the decline of Western societies; 3) The title *A Rebours* also applies to François’ (and France’s) return to a stage of religious submission, running ‘against the grain’ of growing secularization.

ago. François narrates the events of the 2022 presidential elections, in which the Muslim Brotherhood wins with the support of the traditional power block, against the Front National. France's Islamization is smooth, as is shown by the transformation of the emblematic (secular) Sorbonne university into an Islamic institution. François is told that he can only keep his position at the university if he agrees to convert to Islam, but he refuses and accepts a generous retirement offer. His life now becoming even emptier than before, he turns towards spirituality: he follows his beloved Huysmans to a monastery retreat, and, disillusioned, tries to make the best out of the situation by using a new Arab escort service. Ultimately, his life changes as he meets the Rector of the Sorbonne, Rediger, who offers him a prestigious job, although François will have to convert to Islam. His early skepticism turns into enthusiasm as he finds out about the possibilities Islam has to offer, mostly those related to Arab cuisine and polygamy:

Et je ne pouvais pas m'empêcher de songer à son mode vie : une épouse de quarante ans pour la cuisine, une de quinze ans pour d'autres choses... sans doute avait-il une ou deux épouses d'âge intermédiaire, mais je me voyais mal lui poser la question. (p.262)

[And look at how he lived: a forty-year-old wife to do the cooking, a fifteen-year old wife for whatever else ... No doubt he had one or two wives in between, but I couldn't think how to ask⁵.]

After reading Rediger's *Dix questions sur l'Islam* he decides to take the chance, his conversion being the final chapter of the book. In a way, the novel can be read as a critique of political and academic elites – stressing their alleged moral bankrupt – and the French people, having exchanged religion for individualism and consumerism, thus becoming empty, unhappy and lonely. Islam is then presented as a way to turn back time and provide the French with a moral compass.

It goes without saying that the novel was explosive material since its publication in 2015, an era marked by Islamic terrorism in various Western European cities, amongst others Paris, and the rise (and fall) of Islamic State, promoting the image of Muslims as a dangerous Other. This makes Houellebecq's scenario somewhat hard to

⁵ Taken from the English translation of *Soumission* by Lorin Stein.

swallow, especially given the near time frame of the story (2022) and the eagerness with which “la Patrie des Droits de l’Homme” gives up liberal achievements such as gender equality and LGBT+ rights. As such, the novel seems to tap into populist narratives of “us” vs. “them”, according to which the sovereignty of the French people is being jeopardized by the Muslim Other, with the subtle cooperation of the political and academic elites. Chapter 2 of this dissertation has shown that such a reading of the novel was indeed put forward by the Front National.

On the other hand, the question is whether the reader can really take Houellebecq’s writings at face value. Ever since the publication of *The Elementary Particles* in 1998 – Houellebecq’s second novel and his international breakthrough – many scholars have sought to deal with the complexity of his work. This is particularly relevant in the case of Houellebecq, as he tends to write about sensitive topics (misogyny, sexual tourism and Islamization among others), and his protagonists usually have controversial opinions (cf. Baroni & Estier, 2016; Korthals Altes, 2014). Carlson (2011) therefore rightfully points out two important questions for the analysis of Houellebecq’s work: 1) To what degree does the author agree with the controversial ideas expressed by his narrators? and 2) What is the interrelation between the author and his protagonists? This latter point refers both to the presence of autobiographic elements in the novels and to the author’s supposed embodiment of his literary heroes in interviews.

In her chapter “Ethos as a social construction”, Korthals Altes (2014) argues that the notions of posture and ethos expectations – the character or authority attributed to the author – allow us to make meaning of literature, just as other aspects such as textual properties and literary techniques. She illustrates this by comparing two critics of Houellebecq, Noguez and Patricola, the former seeing the author as “a prophet of our age” (p. 57), the latter as “the perfect fraud” (p. 58). Ethos reconstruction can thus vary from sincerity to dishonesty. Whereas for Noguez, Houellebecq successfully manages to go beyond the boundaries of literature, dedicating his talent to making “high culture” more accessible for the public, Patricola argues that Houellebecq is mostly interested in commercial and media success, lacking literary craftsmanship and being obsessed with catchy themes such as sex, violence and political incorrectness (Korthals Altes, 2014). As suggested by these polarizing interpretations, Houellebecq seems to be the quintessential elusive and polarizing author, whose works face the

reader with the challenge of reconstructing an ultimate message out of the texts' controversies and ambiguities.

Focusing on what they label the 'ordinary' public, Baroni and Estier (2016) find a similar situation where readers either love or hate Houellebecq's novels *The Elementary particles* and *Soumission*. They argue that the 'paradox of readability' plays a role; that is, Houellebecq's style is transparent and thus readable, but this contrasts with the presence of highly controversial topics, which divides readers and critics, and makes it unreadable for some. In other words, Houellebecq's work is readable and unreadable at the same time. In the case of *Soumission*, the terrorist attack against Charlie Hebdo as well as the ample appearance of the novel in the media – often in relation to Eric Zemmour's *Le Suicide français* (2014) – accounted for its unreadability.

In order to make sense of *Soumission*, scholars argue that it should be understood as a form of satire, maliciously pointing at the weaknesses of modern society: the deficient political system and the slumbering fear of an Islamic take-over of the Old continent (cf. Berg-Sørensen, 2017; Carlson, 2011; Ungureanu, 2017). Ungureanu (2017) specifically analyzes Houellebecq's attitude towards Islam and the role Islam plays in *Soumission* compared to the earlier novels *Platform* (2003) and *The Possibility of an Island* (2007). He states that "literary critics and commentators have generally overlooked the fact that Houellebecq's representation of Islam has shifted significantly. He turned from an unmitigated secularist vision hostile to Islam to regarding it as *the* religion of the future" (Ungureanu, 2017, p. 515). Whereas in earlier works Houellebecq allegedly presented Islam as "an essentially stupid and violent religion denying life (*Platform*), or as a religion of austerity absorbed by capitalist modernity (*The Possibility of an Island*)" (p. 521), *Soumission* offers a far more positive perspective, as Islam "is portrayed as the religion of strong-willed men capable of superseding Europe's decline." (p. 522). In the novel, submission, thus Islam, is presented as the key to bringing the society and the individual together, thereby resolving their crises, Ungureanu concludes. Nevertheless, he adds that *Soumission* should not be considered a critical dystopia or utopia, but rather a provocation: "Paradoxically, Houellebecq commends Islam as the religion of the future by means of Islamophobic and sexist imagery" (p. 525).

In effect, this paradox highlights the key difference between *Soumission* and (right-wing) populism, where "our" (Western) modernity is contrasted with "their"

(Islamic) backwardness (Brubaker, 2017). It is precisely this rhetoric that was identified in the film *Submission* in the previous chapter. In turn, *Soumission* shows us the complete opposite image, or at least a much more complex one: Islamization is paradoxically presented as the cure for the problems of modern societies, and, simultaneously, for its troubled civilians. That said, it is not merely Islam that is the center of criticism in the book, but rather the severe societal problems that lie at the heart of François' misery:

Whatever Houellebecq thinks of it, Islam is not the target of *Submission*. It serves as a device to express a recurring European worry that the single-minded pursuit of freedom – freedom from tradition and authority, freedom to pursue one's own ends – must inevitably lead to disaster (Lilla, 2016, p. 127).

As Lilla (2016) clearly explains, *Soumission* presents a critique of the West. However, contrary to an author like Zemmour, who seeks to identify those groups or individuals allegedly responsible for the decline of the West (among others feminists and immigrants), Houellebecq's criticism is more directed towards the Self. He deplores rampant individualism, but also subtly questions conventional hierarchies of the Western Self and the non-Western Other, for example by alluding to the "erotic fantasy of the Oriental harem" (Berg-Sørensen, 2017, p. 137):

The one and only time the notion of 'submission' is mentioned explicitly is in the European male fantasies about polygamy and the submission of Muslim women to their lust and sexual desire – a thick caricature of the Occidental fantasy of the Oriental harem. (p. 136).

Just like Huysmans does in *A Rebours*, *Soumission* thus inverts concepts of "us" and "them". In the case of the latter, this is done to such an extent that the utopian dream of the Western man, based on Orientalist stereotypes of unlimited access to money and sex, coincides with the Islamic Other. In the book, this dream is eventually fulfilled thanks to the presence of that same Other. This multi-layered depiction of the relationship with the Islamic other who is both feared and unconsciously admired, constitutes an ultimate example of irony, as defined by Booth (1974):

[...] irony is usually seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation. It is thus a subject that quickly arouses passions. (p. ix)

More specifically, I argued in an earlier paper (Jansma, 2018) that the notion of unstable irony⁶ could well capture the complex rhetorical strategy of Houellebecq. Unstable irony denotes the process in which the reader knows that the statement is ironic, and that something is thus being undermined, but they cannot reconstruct a stable meaning behind the irony. Furthermore, the author stays in the background, refusing “to declare himself, however subtly, for any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies.” (Booth, 1974, p. 240). The result of unstable irony is that one cannot be sure whether a statement really means what it says at face value. This is precisely what characterizes Houellebecq’s work, where the central question is always to which extent the narrator is the mouthpiece of the author, and what the ultimate underlying meaning of the complexities of the text is.

As for the reception of *Soumission*, Ågerup (2019) draws an interesting parallel with the work of Gustave Flaubert, the 19th century author of realist novels and another brilliant example of unstable irony: “both Houellebecq and Flaubert challenge conventional thinking through realist fiction that includes negative examples without overt moral orientation, evoking similarly oriented responses” (p. 621). Analyzing political responses to the novel, Ågerup (2019) proposes to divide these into two categories that have been discussed in the previous chapter, namely the so-called discourse of resistance and the liberal discourse. The former, considered as “gatekeeping criticism”, denounces the novel on moral grounds, and qualifies Houellebecq as racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic. The latter, by contrast, puts forward the reader’s individual freedom and responsibility, and “trusts [their] capacity to judge the work” (p.623). If the discourse of resistance is primarily concerned with the novel’s transmission of moral values, then the liberal discourse focuses on its aesthetic values. These discourses will be analyzed more in detail in the following section.

⁶ The notion of unstable irony is also present in Korthals Altes (2014, p. 225), although it has not been analyzed in relation to Houellebecq.

As this section has shown, Houellebecq's work tends to be interpreted in quite opposite ways (cf. Baroni & Estier, 2016; Korthals Altes, 2014), while at the same time, paradoxically, Houellebecq's use of ambiguity, dark humor and irony makes it difficult to understand *Soumission* using rigid dichotomies such as "we are good" and "they are bad". In *Soumission*, both Western civilization and Islam are presented with the tropes of paradox and ambiguity, which confronts the reader with a bewildering reading experience. Following the intellectual legacy of Ricoeur, this is where the world of the text and the world of the reader meet, and where one's verdict of *Soumission* is informed by underlying predispositions and worldviews (Baker, 2017; Ricoeur, 1991). In order to examine these predispositions as well as other factors that play a role in the interpretation and reception of *Soumission*, the next section will analyze political and societal debates on the novel. By going beyond traditional left/right or populist/non-populist divides, the analysis aims to provide new insights in prevailing political, societal and cultural narratives that shape and orientate our worldviews.

6.3 Political reactions to the novel: a qualitative approach

The analysis will now investigate the political and societal debates that followed the publication of the novel *Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq. Two questions are key: 1) How did French politicians frame the novel, in terms of the extent to which they identified with its contents? and 2) How did the French media frame *Soumission*, and what metaphors are used to construct these narratives? While the first question is concerned with mapping the instrumentalization of the novel by both populist and non-populist politicians, the second question aims to shed light on the activation of latent attitudes among citizens. Understanding populism as an organic phenomenon, it is implied that populist interpretations of the novel – in terms of "we are good" and "they are bad" – are not necessarily limited to populists. Indeed, it is no surprise that a populist politician utters populist cultural narratives, or, on the contrary, that an academic is rather critical towards populism. However, it would be all the more noteworthy if these patterns appeared all over the political and media landscape – from the far left to the far right, thus supporting my thesis that potentially populist attitudes are more widespread in society than we might suspect. For this reason, my analysis

will consider both populist and non-populist politicians, and a broad variety of media reviews of the novel. The composition of the corpus will be further specified below.

Following a similar approach as in the previous chapter, I will attempt to answer the first question by applying the typology of populism and culture established in chapter 2 to a series of political statements on *Soumission*. This will show how leading political figures in France responded to the controversial novel, making sense of it from their particular standpoint. The second part will then use a quali-quantitative approach to unravel underlying patterns of thinking in French society, fostering a deep analysis of how media narratives on the novel are built. This discussion will use conceptual metaphor theory, as discussed in chapter 3, to illustrate how popular narratives of belonging are constructed and propagated in society, focusing on conceptual metaphor, metaphor scenarios and regimes of metaphor.

It is clear by now that *Soumission* is a novel of political interest, in which an imaginary – one might even argue dystopian – future scenario is combined with a realist writing mode and the appearance of real politicians as literary characters. To recall the notion of discursive hybridity (Ågerup, 2019), we can see how this process works in two ways: the novel is integrating political figures and events into a literary context, and, as the vast number of political responses to *Soumission* proves, politicians made the novel a part of their political discourse. In the following part of the analysis, I will focus on the latter aspect of this discursive hybridity.

For this, I will use the typology of populism and culture, developed in chapter 2. This typology distinguishes between three essential phases in the making of the populist cultural narrative: prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. To put it simply, prefiguration and refiguration are respectively the pre-narrative framing and the post-narrative organic integration of the cultural product in the narrative. While all three steps are incontestably relevant, in the analysis the phase of configuration – the discursive framing of the cultural product – will be central. More precisely, I will again apply to my corpus the division between the discourse of resistance and the liberal discourse, as proposed by Ågerup (2019). Similar to the previous case study, an important set of political responses cannot be captured in these two categories of discourses, justifying the adoption of a third discourse. In this particular case study, I will introduce the discourse of appropriation, as politicians not only identify with Houellebecq's novel, but appropriate it as part of their political narrative. Furthermore,

following the outcomes of the affective analysis in the previous chapter, the analysis will study the use of affects that characterize these discourses.

More concretely, my analysis will refer to the theory by Voelz and Freischläger (2019) on the aesthetics of polarization, distinguishing between the affect of resentment and the affect of indignation. Focusing on US politics, they define the two affects responsible for polarization as follows: “Indignation [...] emphasizes the need to uphold norms and standards against the forces of disruption, whereas the other – resentment – adopts the stance of insurgency in wanting to demolish the system, the “deep state”, etc.” (p. 276). In the following, I will further elaborate on these affects, and explore how they apply to the political responses. Finally, I will explain how these notions can be useful for understanding the political logic underlying the appreciation and use of the novel *Soumission* by politicians.

6.3.1 Presentation of the corpus

However, before taking a close look at ways in which populist and non-populist politicians responded to the novel, I will set out the corpus of political reactions that will be used. All statements were found using the LexisNexis online database, as well as through a Google keyword search, which was aimed at leading politicians of the mainstream parties, in combination with the keyword “*Soumission*”. As detailed in chapter 4, these political reactions to the novel appeared in different media outlets, sometimes in written form (in an online blog or an opinion column) or during live radio or TV interviews. Fragments from these interviews were then reported in written press, sometimes in a slightly rephrased manner. Whenever the statements were made during a radio or TV interview, I located the original recording (most frequently on YouTube) and transcribed the statement for the purpose of the analysis. For the sake of completeness, I will use the transcriptions of the entire fragment.

Table 6.1 will provide information on the 14 politicians that make up the corpus, their political affiliation and function at the time of their statements. The politicians in question are members of parties of the French Left or center Left (Hollande, Valls, Pellerin, Corbière), the center Right (Bayrou, Solère, Sarkozy, Wauquiez) and far Right

(M. Le Pen, Philippot, Collard, Bay, J.-M. Le Pen). Thierry Baudet⁷, leader of the Dutch far right party Forum voor Democratie might seem an outsider here, but he is relevant because of his contribution to the debate in France by means of his column (in French) in *Valeurs Actuelles*.

Furthermore, as I mentioned briefly above, it is noteworthy that some of the politicians in the corpus are key characters in *Soumission*: François Hollande, fulfilling a very unsuccessful second term, Marine Le Pen, being Mohamed Ben Abbes' opponent in the presidential elections, and François Bayrou, serving as Prime Minister under Ben Abbes' presidency, thus personifying the alleged moral deficiency and naivety of the French political elites. While all three are depicted in a fairly negative way, only Bayrou responds to this fact, stating that the book "me décrit comme un nul" [describes me as a nobody]. Notwithstanding the relevance of this (satirical) appearance of political leaders in a fictional work, my analysis will instead focus on the impact of the novel in the political debates, and its use by both admirers and adversaries of Houellebecq.

⁷ Baudet is also known for his essay on Houellebecq's follow-up novel *Sérotonine*, which was published – in English – in *American Affairs* on May 20th 2019. This essay is not part of the corpus, for two obvious reasons: 1) It does not reply directly to *Soumission*; and 2) It was not published in France, nor was it written in French language, which means that it does not directly contribute to the French political debate this analysis focuses on.

Table 6.1. Composition of the corpus of political reactions to *Soumission*

Name of politician	Political party	Date	Medium
François Hollande	Parti Socialiste (President 2012-2017)	5-1-2015	France Inter
Marine Le Pen	Rassemblement National (leader 2011-)	5-1-2015	France TV Info
Florian Philippot	Rassemblement National (vice-president 2012-2017)	6-1-2015	Talk Orange
Thierry Solère	UMP (Member of National Assembly 2012-2017)	6-1-2015	i>Télé
Alexis Corbière	Parti de Gauche (General Secretary 2008-2016)	6-1-2015	Europe 1
Gilbert Collard	Rassemblement National (Member of National Assembly 2012-2019)	7-1-2015	i>Télé
François Bayrou	MoDem (leader 2007-)	7-1-2015	France Culture
Manuel Valls	Parti Socialiste (Prime Minister 2014-2016)	8-1-2015	RTL
Fleur Pellerin	Parti Socialiste (Minister of Culture and Communication 2014-2016)	19-1-2015	Vœux à la Presse
Nicolas Bay	Rassemblement National (General Secretary 2014-2017)	13-2-2015	Edito Tribunes Libres
Thierry Baudet	Forum voor Democratie (Netherlands) (leader 2016-)	3-12-2015	Valeurs Actuelles
Jean-Marie Le Pen	Front National (-2011)	14-12-2015	BFMTV
Nicolas Sarkozy	UMP, today Les Républicains (President 2007-2012)	9-2-2018	Livres & Vous
Laurent Wauquiez	Les Républicains (leader 2017-2019)	9-4-2018	Tribune in Le Figaro

6.3.2 A continuous process

The 11 political statements about the novel will be analyzed using the typology developed in chapter 2, which is represented in Figure 6.1, following the three phases of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration.

Figure 6.1. The making of the Populist Cultural Narrative applied to *Soumission*

To define which pre-narrative forms and modes of thinking are predominant, here too the “orders of worth”, discussed in chapter 5, play a role. To sum up, these seven value regimes (or “rationalized myths”) – more specifically the Market World, the Industrial World, the Civic World, the Domestic World, the Inspired World, the World of Fame, and the Green World – guide public judgments based on legitimized logic (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Patriotta et al., 2011). In this specific case, this would entail evaluating Houellebecq in terms of his commercial success, artistic craftsmanship, political engagement, (parental) care, geniality, celebrity status or contribution to a sustainable future. As Table 6.2 points out (see column “summary of statement”), almost all political responses to the novel contained a civic framing, referring to the role of Houellebecq in the public debate (e.g. Valls) or drawing parallels between the perceived political reality and the plot of *Soumission* (e.g. Le Pen). Most importantly, these comments present Houellebecq as an important spokesperson, and consider his fictional texts to be politically relevant. Two exceptions to this rule are Bayrou and

Sarkozy. The former combines a Civic framing with a reference to the Market world: “une operation commerciale soigneusement montée” [a commercial operation set up with care]. Bayrou criticizes Houellebecq’s marketing strategy for creating a cheap scandal, obfuscating the alarming main message of the book, namely that women are the source of the misfortune of modern men. Sarkozy, on the other hand, stays away from the Civic World, characterizing Houellebecq as possibly the greatest poet of our times, and alluding to the author’s lucidity. As no further references are made regarding the societal implications of the novel, I categorized the latter statement as pertaining to the Inspired World.

Given the predominance of civic logic in political discussions about *Soumission*, it makes sense to believe that a reader’s previous political experiences and expectations play a crucial role in the evaluation of the story. In the context of this analysis, this essentially translates to politicians identifying with the plot of *Soumission*, and, on the other hand, those who reject that particular reading of the novel, based on their personal or political convictions. In this case, identifying with the plot concretely means that the politician draws a parallel with French society, and expresses the idea that the fictional might become reality in a near future. Examples of this are Marine Le Pen stating that it is “un livre qui pourrait un jour devenir [...] réalité” [a book that one day could become reality] and Nicolas Bay asserting that the book addresses “un sujet auquel l’actualité donne un étonnant écho” [a topic which is stunningly echoed in current society]. In his paper, Ågerup (2019) notes the following:

Judging from the initial responses in France, representatives of the political centre-left displayed a more negative attitude towards *Soumission* and Houellebecq, while the republican right was neutral and the nationalist right was positive. This pattern emerged even though none of Houellebecq’s novels defends a right-wing position, let alone a nationalist right-wing position. If anything, it can be noted that all of his novels present negative images of liberal capitalism (p.629-630).

Following Ågerup (2019), clear differences can be observed between politicians of different parties in their interaction with the novel *Soumission*, suggesting that political ideas indeed shape the initial response to the novel. My corpus reveals that in the prefiguration phase the political reactions are undoubtedly oriented by the framing

in terms of either the Civic or Inspired Worlds, based on their broader political ideas on French identity, most notably related to topics as Islam, secularism and democratic culture in general.

The second step in the typology, configuration, refers to the discursive framing or emplotment of the above-mentioned claims about *Soumission*. When taking a closer look at the responses to the novel (see Table 6.2 below) we can distinguish three categories, although they do not entirely correspond to the political orientations as stated by Ågerup (2019). First, there is a group of politicians expressing their deep discontent with the novel and the way it promotes a certain image of society which they do not support or identify with. This is the case for Hollande, Bayrou, Corbière, Pellerin and Valls. Despite the fact that these politicians stress that the book is a literary work, and not a political discourse, they still consider it at face value. They feel indignant by the way France is presented in the book, and seek to protect readers from the political ideas allegedly advocated in the book (the so-called gatekeeping criticism). The second category is represented by M. Le Pen, Philippot, Solère, Collard, Bay, Baudet, J.-M. Le Pen and Wauquiez. Their statements show a strong tendency to interpret Houellebecq's novel as a realistic depiction of French society, a dystopian future scenario that should be avoided at any cost. Interestingly, their reading of the novel, which is not covered by Ågerup's typology, seems to be similarly insensitive to nuance as that of the first category. Namely, the idea of France becoming an Islamic country is not interpreted in light of the notions of irony and paradox, instead these politicians accept it as a fact and propose harsh measures to counter such a change. Both readings are thus examples of how politicians "read fiction as nonfiction" (Ågerup, 2019, p. 619). I would add that both sides closely link the novel to their own political agenda, completely neglecting the book's literary complexity and Houellebecq's use of paradox, parody and irony, as has been discussed in section 6.2.

Finally, the last category is formed by the statement of Sarkozy, which is a bit ambiguous. When asked in a TV show to comment on his favorite book, he chooses the highly controversial *Soumission*. While this by itself can hardly be considered a political statement, we have seen above that the book strongly divides readers across both sides of the political Left/Right divide. Moreover, by calling Houellebecq an extremely lucid author, and maybe even the biggest poet of our times, he implicitly seems to suggest that readers should take Houellebecq's words seriously. Being a former president and member of center right party Les Républicains, he might not

want to align himself with politicians of the far Right, nor does he agree with the Left, his political opponent. For this reason, he chooses the middle way of subtlety and ambiguity, instead of drastically choosing one side or the other. However, it is clear that Sarkozy highlights the aesthetic value of *Soumission*, which evokes the possibility that Sarkozy simply is a fan of Houellebecq's use of style, humor or his attitude, the so-called liberal discourse as we will see below.

As I will show, these configurations can be categorized according to the discourse they belong to and the affects they employ. Following the distinction between the discourse of resistance and the liberal discourse proposed by Ågerup (2019), Sarkozy's statement can be considered liberal discourse, as he does not openly denounce the novel as immoral, and instead focuses on its aesthetic qualities. The statements of Hollande, Bayrou, Corbière, Valls and Pellerin can be regarded as discourse of resistance, as they are clearly "alerting the public to the dangers of Houellebecq's book" (Ågerup, 2019, p. 624). They can be merely seen as disclaimers for innocent and naïve readers who might interpret *Soumission* as a realistic scenario and turn hostile towards Islam. If Ågerup's terminology is quite convincing for these two categories, he does not provide an adequate solution to the set of statements by M. Le Pen, Philippot, Solère, Collard, Bay, Baudet, J.-M. Le Pen and Wauquiez. These politicians, as we have seen, do have a moral understanding of the novel, as they believe it has an obvious societal message. Instead, rather than considering this message as inflammatory, they applaud Houellebecq's lucidity. In order to include these statements into the model, I suggest to introduce a third discourse, namely the discourse of appropriation.

This discourse of appropriation goes a step further than the discourse of identification in the previous chapter, which has to do with the nature of the cultural product. While the short film *Submission* was categorized as the work of an organic author, i.e. someone who strongly identifies with the populist narrative, I consider Houellebecq as an autonomous author. That is, Houellebecq does not openly support a specific political agenda (rather, he is skeptical towards politics in general), and as the next section will further detail, his ambiguous texts give way to a myriad of interpretations. More specifically, Houellebecq's use of unstable irony provides the reader with little to no clues about the novel's ultimate message and its societal signification. It is this vagueness that provides the possibility to foreground one

particular interpretation of *Soumission*, and as such to appropriate the novel as part of the populist narrative.

In order to better appreciate how the discourses of resistance and appropriation differ from each other, the next section of the analysis will examine the role that affects play. Building on the work of Voelz and Freischläger (2019), I will propose that the discourse of resistance is here characterized by the affect of indignation, while the affect of resentment sets the basis for the discourse of appropriation. Both affects, labelled “affective mirroring structure”, are to be understood in the context of polarization, the area of interest of Voelz & Freischläger. For my analysis, these affects can be helpful as both the discourse of resistance and the discourse of appropriation are constructed through the antagonization of an external Other.

Starting with the first category – Hollande, Bayrou, Corbière, Valls and Pellerin – this Other is conceptualized as a group of people promoting xenophobic and/or misogynist ideology. More specifically, Houellebecq and his editor, Flammarion, are criticized for exploiting polemic topics as a part of an ill-considered commercial strategy, an idea most clearly found in the words of Bayrou: “c’est une opération commerciale soigneusement montée. Chapeau Flammarion! C’est fait pour vendre” [it is a commercial operation set up with care. Well done Flammarion! It is made for selling]. It is made clear in all the statements that Houellebecq is considered an irresponsible agitator, contributing to a climate of fear. This is clearly illustrated in Corbières statement that “le livre de Houellebecq participe à la xénophobie du FN” [Houellebecq’s book contributes to the xenophobia of the FN]. The second category of politicians, on the other hand, strongly identifying with the plot, blames the political elites, mostly UMP and PS, for having created the crisis that France is facing in the book, and – allegedly – in reality. Two points are key here. First, UMP and PS are seen to have a history of blocking RN from power. This is quite strongly expressed by Jean-Marie Le Pen, speaking of a “union sacrée” [a sacred union] against RN, referring to the truce between the French Left and Right during World War I. Second, both parties, having alternated political power over the last decades, are held accountable for the multicultural society, and, by extension, Islamic fundamentalism. As Marine Le Pen states: “le fondamentalisme islamiste avance avec l’accord et même la complicité de l’UMP et du PS” [Islamic fundamentalism spreads with the agreement and even the complicity of UMP and PS]. Collard also indirectly blames the political establishment, as he considers the scenario depicted by Houellebecq highly realistic: “je pense que ça

peut arriver pour des raisons démographiques, pour des raisons de lâcheté” [I think it can happen because of demographic reasons, because of cowardice]. It is clear that Collard refers to the Great Replacement theory of Renaud Camus (2011), which understands non-European immigrant populations to eventually take over European civilizations, among others because of their higher birth rates. An important part of the conspiracy is the complicity of global elites, as well as the lethargy of mainstream politicians, underestimating the consequences of their immigrant policies.

Besides this vertical dichotomy aiming at the political elites, a horizontal dichotomy is equally present, disqualifying, as expected, the Muslim Other. Solère states that “l’islam doit se soumettre à la République” [Islam should submit to the Republic], rather than the other way around. Florian Philippot illustrates this idea saying that “nous voulons offrir autre chose à nos compatriotes religieux que la dérive communautariste. Et c’est cette question politique que pose, à mon avis, le livre, qui reste un roman” [we want to offer our religious compatriots an alternative to the communitarian drift. And to my mind, that is the political question that is posed by the book, which remains a novel]. Here, it is important to note that being communitarian is opposed to being patriotic, meaning that communitarianism should thus be considered a synonym of anti-patriotism. Hence, in this context communitarianism is a euphemism for a group of evil Others, jeopardizing national unity.

In general, both horizontal and vertical dichotomies are present in all the statements, although most focus more on one than on the other. Voelz and Freischläger (2019) introduce the notion of the “resentment sandwich”, meaning the “combined attack of the political opponent and the racially marginalized others” (p. 276). When asked which seemed to her the most plausible scenario, PS and UMP allying against her in favor of the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, or the arrival to power of a Muslim party, Marine Le Pen replied “les deux” [both]. This constitutes an important difference with the first category, where only a xenophobic Other is excluded.

The distinction between affects of resentment and indignation is close to the conceptualization of the populist/anti-populist divide as a cultural high-low axis⁸ (Moffitt, 2018; Ostiguy, 2017):

⁸ A clear example of the explicit use of the terminology “high” vs. “low” is Michelle Obama’s famous quote “when they go low, we go high”, during the 2016 Presidential campaign. Referring to the Trump campaign, she later explained that by going “low”, she meant responding angrily and vengefully, to prefer short term success over a long term search for a solution (see:

This distaste [of Trump's dietary preferences] has little to do with ideology, but rather, codes of what is "appropriate" in sociocultural terms in the US: the implication, here, being that Trump's – and his followers' – tastes are vulgar, inappropriate and childish. Their "lowness" marks them as populist, against a far more refined and proper anti-populist high, who perceive themselves as the adults in the room (Moffitt, 2018, p. 7)

Needless to say, notions of high vs. low, normal vs. abnormal, or the affects of indignation and resentment are hard to carve in stone, and therefore problematic for the construction of a universal and transposable model of populism. On the other hand, this confirms once more the significance of cultural norms and values for the study of contemporary politics and populism in particular.

As a matter of fact, my modest corpus of 14 political statements, presented in Table 6.2, exemplifies the ideas cited above. Those adopting the discourse of resistance – Hollande, Bayrou, Corbière, Valls and Pellerin – disapprove of the depiction of France in *Soumission* and, more importantly, of the political ideas allegedly connected to this. By rejecting the xenophobic Other, they put forward their own supposed moral superiority. This, as I have shown above, can be considered the aesthetics of the affect of indignation, or an expression of doing "high" politics. Conversely, the politicians using the discourse of appropriation – M. Le Pen, Philippot, Solère, Collard, Bay, Baudet, J.-M. Le Pen and Wauquiez – embody the aesthetics of the affect of resentment. They point at the political establishment and Muslim Others, blaming them for the way France is, to their mind, transforming into an Islamic Republic. In other words, they demand a new political order and promote an alternative vision of French society, disrupting commonly held beliefs and values, using "low" tactics.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/books/michelle-obama-tracee-ellis-ross-interview.html>) (accessed on 02-05-2019).

Table 6.2: Corpus of political statements on *Soumission*

Politician	Summary of statement	Discourse	Affect
François Hollande	Not be consumed by fear, the idea of submission, submersion and invasion is a constant in history; I stand for the positive forces in France.	Resistance	Indignation
Marine Le Pen	A fiction that could, one day, become reality; a plausible story, especially the way in which the behavior of UMP ⁹ and PS are described; UMP and PS render Islamic fundamentalism possible.	Appropriation	Resentment
Florian Philippot	Emergence of a fundamentalist communitarian party is inevitable; Houellebecq hits the mark by describing the alliance between UMP and PS, it is very well seen; link with Zemmour.	Appropriation	Resentment
Thierry Solère	It is interesting to respond to these topics. I'm not naïve about what the French are feeling today, there is a widespread fear of radical Islam, of globalization. Islam, like all other religions, should submit to the Republic.	Appropriation	Resentment
Alexis Corbière	Houellebecq's book contributes to the xenophobia of the FN, and to the lie that all Muslims are fundamentalists.	Resistance	Indignation
Gilbert Collard	I think this can happen for demographic reasons, and because of cowardice. The risk of Islamization is real.	Appropriation	Resentment
François Bayrou	A well-executed commercial operation; an unimaginable idea; totally opposite to what we are; I revolt against this way of presenting a reality.	Resistance	Indignation
Manuel Valls	France is not Michel Houellebecq, not intolerance, hate and fear; it is time to say "no" to these traumatizing discourses.	Resistance	Indignation
Fleur Pellerin	It is difficult to see where the work of a novelist ends and political ideas start; I do not want to judge the novel as if it were a political pamphlet, but in his fiction, the France he depicts is not how I see it; I see a France standing up, not submitted.	Resistance	Indignation
Nicolas Bay	The topic of the novel is stunningly echoed in current society; we are in Houellebecq's novel; if we are still far from the submission in Houellebecq's book, despite some worrisome	Appropriation	Resentment

⁹ Union pour un Mouvement Politique is the political party that was rebranded Les Républicains in 2015.

	signs, we see how multiculturalism – made possible by “UMPS ¹⁰ ” – can lead to the collapse of the Nation.		
Thierry Baudet	Point of no return is approaching; radical measures are needed to avoid that our continent is submerged, as described by Houellebecq.	Appropriation	Resentment
Jean-Marie Le Pen	The hypothesis of Houellebecq; a government of president Mustapha.	Appropriation	Resentment
Nicolas Sarkozy	An author with an extremely profound lucidity; everything he says is exciting; a grand poet with an extraordinary capacity to define characters.	Liberal	NA
Laurent Wauquiez	We are in a situation depicted by Houellebecq with the word “soumission”.	Appropriation	Resentment

The second step of configuration leads thus to the identification of three different modes of narrative emplotment, which is materialized through adopting either a liberal discourse (Sarkozy), a discourse of resistance (Hollande, Bayrou, Corbière, Valls and Pellerin), or a discourse of appropriation (M. Le Pen, Philippot, Solère, Collard, Bay, Baudet, J.-M. Le Pen and Wauquiez). While the latter discourse is characterized by the use of the affect of resentment, the discourse of resistance employs an affect of indignation. This observation highlights the importance of the combined study of discourse analysis and affect theory for understanding and evaluating the success of identity politics, an interplay with which scholars such as Ahmed (2014), Eberle (2019), and Wodak (2015) have already engaged. For instance, Ahmed (2014) convincingly explains how fear is constructed through fantasies of a dangerous Other, justifying (violent) measures against the supposed threat; a mechanism she labelled the “affective politics of fear”. The last and final step of my typology will address the result of such affective politics, namely the political embodiment of discourse and affect.

Refiguration is the “becoming” of the cultural product as an organic part of the populist cultural narrative, both by the populist party themselves (through appropriation) as well as by others (through association). In my corpus, consisting of both populist and non-populist responses, I hold that those politicians employing the

¹⁰ The notion of “UMPS”, a contraction of the two mainstream parties UMP and PS, is often used by members of the Rassemblement National to denounce the idea of the political “caste” keeping the power to themselves.

affect of resentment strongly identified with the book, and appropriated it as part of their narrative, while those employing the affect of indignation quickly took distance from *Soumission*, and associated it with far-right populism. It is thus important to realize that a cultural product is both claimed by populist actors as part of their narrative, and rejected by anti-populists – thereby indirectly assigning it to the populist narrative. This actually shows how the theory of polarization proposed by Voelz and Freischläger (2019) works in practice.

A fierce manifestation of the appropriation of *Soumission* by the Rassemblement National is its integration in a reading list that was spread among their followers¹¹. Interestingly, the creators listed Houellebecq's *Soumission* under "formation générale" [general training] (and not "culture" or "immigration"), together with essayists Alain Finkielkraut and Éric Zemmour, among others. At the same time, the discourse of resistance equally associates *Soumission* with populism, rather than trying to provide an alternative, non-populist interpretation. The association of *Submission* with Islamophobic far right ideology is best illustrated by Valls' statement that "France is not Michel Houellebecq, it is not intolerance, hate and fear". The mainstream media also had an important role in this association. A clear example of this is an interview with France 2, in which Houellebecq was asked whether he considered the novel a Christmas present for Marine Le Pen. He promptly denied this: "Elle a pas besoin de ça, ça marche assez bien pour elle déjà, je crois pas que ça changerait grand-chose à son destin" [She doesn't need that, things work out quite well for her already, I don't think that it would change her fate in any way]. Houellebecq continues to say that he is convinced that novels can't change the course of history, instead "c'est des essais, c'est le manifeste du parti communiste, des choses comme ça, mais pas de romans" [it's essays, it's the Communist Manifesto, things like that, but not novels]. Indeed, novels may not directly lead to political action, but they do have an active role in influencing public opinion, and they can provoke political and societal debates, challenging and re-confirming certain pre-existing ideas through discourses and affects.

This first part of the analysis has shown that through prefiguration, configuration and refiguration, the political debate on the novel created a clear

¹¹ For the complete list, see: <https://www.franceinter.fr/politique/la-liste-de-lecture-des-militants-fn> (accessed on 02-05-2019)

polarization between those identifying with the novel and those rejecting its contents. Two insights are key. First, the so-called “aesthetics of polarization” (Voelz & Freischläger, 2019) ultimately leads to a loss of nuance, as political actors are prevented from developing a more articulate reading of the novel. This is unambiguously illustrated in the corpus, where 13 out of 14 politicians adopted the openly polarizing discourses of resistance and appropriation. Ågerup (2019) acknowledges the lack of critical reflection on the ambivalent nature of both Houellebecq and his work: “One essential characteristic of this critical stance is the firm and direct link established from the writer to the characters and ideas expressed in his or her fictional universe” (p. 618). Second, the focus on affects has highlighted the importance of pre-cognitive operations, which may play a role in activating certain ideas and attitudes. As I discussed in chapter 3, new research in the field of affective neuroscience may lead to a deeper understanding of the relationship between unconscious affects and conscious emotions, feelings and thoughts, orientating ideas, worldviews and behavior (Asma & Gabriel, 2019). Although Asma & Gabriel do not explicitly examine this, conceptual metaphor could be particularly interesting in this sense, as it involves “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). As a matter of fact, by alluding to both understanding and experiencing the authors disclose that conceptual metaphor inherently engages different layers of cognitive activity, in which semantic content, as well as more basic affects or passions such as fear, lust and grief play a role. The next section will therefore examine this direction in more detail.

6.4 The media debate on *Soumission*: a quali-quantitative discussion

As the previous section has shown, the political responses to *Soumission* are divisive, and follow pre-narrative framing, narrative emplotment through discourse and affects, and post-narrative organic integration in the narrative. More concretely, it has become clear that the political debate on the novel is marked by populist dynamics of resentment and indignation, leading to a lack of nuance. In this section, the objective is to understand the societal impact of populism as an organic phenomenon, and to explore how populist attitudes are activated, narratively enacted, and thus become successful on a broader societal level. In chapter 3, I laid out the theoretical basis for

understanding how lived experience is both processed and narratively enacted through four main cognitive operations: conceptual metaphors, metaphor scenarios, regimes of metaphor and cultural narratives, ultimately permeating public discourse, and, with that, creating a new playfield in which similar or new metaphors, scenarios and regimes are activated. The objectives of this second part of the analysis are thus twofold. First, it aims to put the findings on the political debate in a broader societal context, by integrating media discourse into the analysis. Second, and more importantly, this part will include abstract cognitive operations activating ideas and attitudes, focusing on their hierarchical organization and how they orientate our framing of society.

6.4.1 Composition of the corpus

At the center of my analysis is a corpus of media articles, which was obtained by running an empirical analysis of a corpus consisting of 1151 media articles collected through the online search engine LexisNexis¹². As I am interested in the framing of the book in France on a national level, by news outlets having a clear editorial line, I filtered out all the regional newspapers and those originating in other Francophone countries, leaving a corpus of 873 articles. In terms of content, I selected the texts in which *Soumission* was discussed in at least two paragraphs of each review. Furthermore, I only kept the op-eds and discarded the interviews with the author and (too factual) news reports, providing no clear interpretation of the novel by a third party. This constitutes a difference with the previous chapter, in which news items were analyzed, although not in detail. More than the film *Submission*, the ambiguous nature of *Soumission* provided room for different interpretations of the text's supposed meaning. These reviews allowed for an in-depth analysis of how Houellebecq was framed in the media, both explicitly (assessment of the novel) and implicitly (through conceptual metaphor). This resulted in a final corpus of 36 articles, taken from eleven different news outlets, categorized by their political orientation, as shown in Table 6.3:

¹² Search term: "Houellebecq Soumission". Filters: all articles in French language and published in France, between 1-12-2014 (right before the pre-publication of *Soumission*) and 31-12-2018 (around the publication of *Sérotonine*, Houellebecq's following book).

Table 6.3. Composition of the corpus of media reviews on *Soumission*

News Outlet	Number of articles	Political orientation ¹³
Le Figaro/Le Figaro Online	12	Center right
Le Point/Le Point.fr	6	Center right
Valeurs Actuelles	4	(far) Right
Le Monde/Le Monde.fr	3	Center left
Marianne	3	(far) Left
L'Express	2	Center right
L'Humanité	2	(far) Left
La Croix	1	Center left
Les Echos	1	Center right
L'Obs	1	(far) Left
RFI	1	NA ¹⁴
Total	36	

The 36 newspaper articles that constitute the corpus have been analyzed through several rounds of close reading, using the Atlas.ti coding software. The analysis started with a general framing – was the article a rather positive, negative or neutral critic of the novel? Second, following the analysis of the political debate, I looked at different categories of responses to the level. Considering aforementioned discourses and affects, I connected this to the notion of regimes of conceptual metaphor discussed in chapter 3, and linked to the outcomes of the previous case study. Four regimes of metaphor were defined: HOUELLEBECQ AS A DEMAGOGUE, HOUELLEBECQ AS A PROPHET, HOUELLEBECQ AS A FOIL, and HOUELLEBECQ AS A SATIRIST. Table 6.4 shows how these regimes relate to the discourses and affects that were introduced in 3.1. Finally, in order to better understand how these regimes are constructed, I coded 486 metaphors, divided into 41 metaphor scenarios (e.g. France as a sick body, France as a fatigued body, France is in war). However, before moving to the analysis of these metaphors, this section will first provide more insights in the framing of the novel in the French

¹³ The political orientation is indicative and based on information on the website of the news outlet and/or the Wikipedia page of each outlet.

¹⁴ RFI, Radio France Internationale, is a multimedial, multilingual and pluralist outlet, working on 5 different continents, and headquartered in Paris. On the website, one can read the following: “La règle générale de l’impartialité, notamment dans le domaine politique s’applique évidemment à RFI. Elle tend à respecter un équilibre entre personnes représentatives de partis, de courants ou d’opinion différents”, with the exception of op-eds: “Ainsi en est-il de l’éditorial dans lequel un journaliste donne son point de vue, formule éventuellement des critiques, s’exprime personnellement” (cf. Charte de Déontologie de RFI). The article in question is an op-ed, meaning that it provides an interesting interpretation of the novel, but it cannot be incorporated in a larger editorial line of the outlet, hence the use of the notion NA in the table.

media, firstly by identifying the four main regimes of metaphor present in the articles, and secondly by looking into the 486 metaphors that have been labelled.

Table 6.4. Regimes of metaphor and corresponding discourse and affect

	Discourse	Affect
DEMAGOGUE	Resistance	Indignation
PROPHET	Appropriation	Resentment
FOIL	Liberal	NA
SATIRIST	Liberal	NA

6.4.2 The framing of *Soumission*

The first of the four regimes, HOUELLEBECQ AS A DEMAGOGUE, considers the book as a smart marketing strategy aiming at creating a commotion and – as a result – selling many books. This regime also appeared in the previous chapter, and focuses on the controversial nature of the text as potentially dangerous. From this perspective, the book does not provide a deep reflection on societal issues, but is rather cynically exploiting the growing success of right-wing and Islamophobic ideology. One would expect that this viewpoint is mostly shared by left-leaning news outlets, being critical of the (far) right and relatively progressive with regard to multiculturalism. As we have seen, the political statements of Hollande, Bayrou, Corbière, Valls and, albeit to a lesser extent, Pellerin, would belong to this regime.

Secondly, the regime HOUELLEBECQ AS A PROPHET holds that the book is animated by a strong political vision about the future, namely the end of Western civilization as we know it. This regime was also frequent in media debates on the film *Submission*. There is a belief that the story told by Houellebecq is true, or could become true in due time, as there are strong parallels with the real world, France's political and societal situation in particular. It makes sense to believe that these views are coming from rather right-wing or far right newspapers and magazines, having little faith in France's politicians, and that these ideas are fed by popular books such as Eric Zemmour's *Le Suicide Français* (2014) and Renaud Camus' *Le Grand Remplacement* (2011). Considering the political statements in the previous section, the statements of M. Le Pen, Philippot, Solère, Collard, Bay, Baudet, J.-M. Le Pen and Wauquiez would be part of this regime.

The first two regimes make it clear that the reading of *Soumission* leads to quite opposite interpretations of the novel. The third regime, HOUELLEBECQ AS A FOIL, emphasizes this ambiguity, putting forward the idea that everybody can see in the novel a confirmation of their preexisting beliefs. The author, in this case, is a neutral receptor, and instead of providing an analysis of societal issues, he aesthetically reproduces fears, affects and ideas that are already circulating in society. The above-discussed statement of Sarkozy could be an example of this regime. This regime, which did not appear in the previous chapter, is characteristic for Houellebecq's work, due to its countless interpretations, and where the author's refusal to clarify his stance is clearly part of the game.

Lastly, the regime HOUELLEBECQ AS A SATIRIST conceives the book as a satire in the tradition of Voltaire or Flaubert, where the aim is not that of criticizing Islam, but rather ridiculing the shortcomings of French society through humor, irony, exaggeration and parody. This regime is closely connected to the ARTIST regime discussed in the previous chapter, focusing on the notions of artistic freedom, originality and eccentricity, but highlights the satirical and/or ironic elements in the novel.

Whereas the former two regimes both foreground the Islamophobic element in the book, the latter two are subtler. For this reason, it is less obvious to make claims about whether these regimes are mostly associated with the Left or the Right. Given that they are more nuanced points of view, it could be expected that both are predominantly related to the political center. In other words, if the DEMAGOGUE and PROPHET regimes support a strong polarized view of society (i.e. Houellebecq denouncing the Other as alien and dangerous to "our" Western society), the FOIL and SATIRIST do so to a much lesser extent. This is also reflected in the general appreciation of the novel. As Table 6.5 points out, the articles categorized as DEMAGOGUE all have a negative appraisal of the novel, which is very much the opposite for the PROPHET regime. As expected, the FOIL and SATIRIST regimes account for a more mixed and neutral reception of *Soumission*.

Table 6.5. General appreciation of *Soumission* per regime

Regime	Assessment of the novel in reviews		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative
DEMAGOGUE	0	0	10
PROPHET	8	4	1
FOIL	2	2	2
SATIRIST	4	2	0
NA	1	0	0
Total	15	8	13

Furthermore, I predicted that the more polarizing regimes, DEMAGOGUE and PROPHET, would connect more closely to a certain political orientation, left-wing in the case of the former, and right-wing for the latter, in line with the political statements analyzed above. However, looking at the political orientation of the news outlets, there does not seem to be such a straightforward relation, as Table 6.6 shows. Instead, in the media debate the data point at an absence of a typical “left-wing” or “right-wing” regime, with the exception of the SATIRIST regime. This seems to make sense; according to the satirical interpretation of the novel, Houellebecq engages with topics such as multiculturalism – a theme usually defended by the political Left – and makes a caricature of president Hollande’s left-wing governments.

Table 6.6. Regimes organized by political orientation of media outlets

Political orientation media outlets	Appearance of regimes of metaphor in different media outlets					
	DEMAGOGUE	PROPHET	FOIL	SATIRIST	NA	Total
(far) Left (<i>Marianne</i> , <i>L’Humanité</i> , <i>L’Obs</i>)	2 (33.0%)	3 (50.0%)	1 (17.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (100%)	6 (100%)
Center left (<i>Le Monde</i> , <i>La Croix</i>)	0 (0%)	1 (25.0%)	3 (75.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)
Center right (<i>Le Figaro</i> , <i>Le Point</i> , <i>L’Express</i> , <i>Les Echos</i>)	8 (38.0%)	6 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	6 (28.6%)	1 (4.8%)	21 (100%)
(far) Right (<i>Valeurs Actuelles</i>)	0 (0%)	3 (75.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)
NA (<i>RFI</i>)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)

This first step in the media analysis provides us with an important insight. As we have seen above, there are two more polarizing regimes, the DEMAGOGUE and the PROPHET. Both oppose “us”, the French people, to a specific Other. In the case of the former this is a xenophobic Other, which should be stigmatized, whereas the latter refers to an alien Other, constituting a potential danger for Western civilization. In addition to this, both blame the political elites for either normalizing xenophobic discourse (the DEMAGOGUE regime) or for tolerating the very presence of this Other (the PROPHET regime). As such, it becomes clear that the regime which is most dismissive of populism is itself also polarizing, which confirms again the idea discussed in chapter 3 that there is more than one force responsible for the polarization of the public sphere (Moffitt, 2018; Ostiguy, 2017; Voelz & Freischläger, 2019). In this climate of polarization, it could be said that the FOIL and SATIRIST regimes frame Houellebecq's novel in a different light, that of “radical indeterminacy” (Voelz & Freischläger, 2019). Focusing on the virality of controversial memes, they claim the following:

Not unlike a polarizing politician who rallies his base around himself and unites his opponents in aversion, memes that go viral manage to reach both in-group and out-group recipients in polarizing fashion. But whereas Donald Trump tends to aim for the most divisive message, creators of memes have the option of choosing the path of ironic, parodic, or satirical indeterminacy to achieve this end. (Voelz & Freischläger, 2019, p. 282)

In other words, the interpretation of the novel following the FOIL or SATIRIST logic is by no means neutral, and may even have a similarly polarizing effect. Yet, in comparison to the divisive DEMAGOGUE and PROPHET regimes, its message is more nuanced, focusing on ambiguity, humor and satire. This can explain why reviews classified as FOIL or SATIRIST are more prone to neutrality, with 4 neutral reviews out of 12 (33%), compared to 4 out of 23 (17%) for the DEMAGOGUE and PROPHET regimes.

Finally, Table 6.6 shows that most of the texts categorized as DEMAGOGUE or PROPHET are found in conservative mainstream media such as *Le Figaro* or *Le Point*. This seems to confirm the idea that polarizing attitudes, whether populist or not, are omnipresent in France's public life, and that they follow a similar rhetoric in which the Other is depicted as abnormal. In other words, if populism is defined by its “us” vs. “them” attitudes, then these are not restricted to populist actors in the strict sense.

Instead, they are latent in society and can be activated at any time, by any actor. This raises the question how these polarizing ideas can spread so successfully. I suspect that conceptual metaphor, metaphor scenarios and regimes of metaphor play a central role in the configuration of the populist cultural narrative, being a powerful tool for the framing of reality and the orientation of political action. For this reason, the analysis will now focus on metaphors and metaphor scenarios, investigating which are the metaphors and scenarios that “work”.

6.4.3 Successful metaphors

As set out in chapter 2, I understand narratives as being evaluative of reality (Caracciolo, 2014). Narratives are tools for structuring and organizing human experiences, and with that, they provide information on underlying cultural norms and values. A similar process is at work for conceptual metaphor, defining, as we have seen above, an abstract concept (the target domain) in terms of another, more concrete, concept (the source domain) and thereby creating a conceptual link between the two domains. Here, the main question is what concepts and experiences are used as a reference point in order to make sense of the reading of *Soumission*. To answer that question, I analyzed which metaphor scenarios are key in the 36 newspaper articles constituting the corpus. Figure 6.2 shows the six most frequent metaphor scenarios for each target domain.

Figure 6.2. Most frequent metaphor scenarios in the corpus of *Soumission*

Note: The bars represent the number of appearances (vertical axis) per metaphor scenario (horizontal axis). For instance, the metaphor scenario *SEEING* occurs 49 times in the database. The bar 'Rest (average)' indicates the average frequency of the remaining 35 metaphor scenarios in the corpus (9,3).

To provide more insight in the connection between metaphor scenarios and regimes of metaphor, Table 6.7 will show the five most frequent metaphor scenarios for each regime.

Table 6.7. The most frequent metaphor scenarios per regime in reviews of *Soumission*

Metaphor Scenario	Regimes of metaphor					Total
	DEMAGOGUE	PROPHET	FOIL	SATIRIST	NA	
SEEING The author sees things that no one else sees or wants to see	8	24	10	6	1	49
PROPHET + The author foresees the future	5	18	6	3	0	32
FATIGUE France and/or the Western world is exhausted	3	7	3	7	1	21
PAINTING The author depicts the present and/or near future	3	8	6	3	1	21
WAR France and/or the Western world are being conquered by Islam	4	7	4	6	0	21
DECAY France and/or the Western world are decaying	3	3	3	9	0	18

Similar to the results presented in the previous chapter, Table 6.7 points out that regimes do not have their own original set of metaphor scenarios that fits to each specific regime. In fact, all the metaphor scenarios in the table appear in the four different regimes, suggesting that they are largely intertwined. More interestingly, the two metaphor scenarios SEEING and PROPHET+ are appearing in all four regimes, even though one would expect these to be scenarios typically fitting the PROPHET regime. Only when looking at concrete examples of the metaphor scenario SEEING, and asking the questions “what does Houellebecq see?” and “what does the book allow us to see?” we can identify differences, as examples a-c show:

- a) C'est absurde, tant **la vision houellebecquienne** de l'islam est irénique. [It is absurd how peaceable the Houellebecquian vision of Islam is.] (DEMAGOGUE). Source : L'Express, 1/7/2015
- b) C'est **en regardant la France droit dans les yeux** qu'il est parvenu à construire cette **œuvre témoin** du désenchantement post-Trente Glorieuses. [It is by looking France straight in the eye, that he managed

to construct this work testifying the disenchantment of the post-Trente Glorieuses era.] (PROPHET). Source: Valeurs Actuelles, 8/10/2017

- c) C'est une œuvre littéraire acide et **clairvoyante**, lâchée dans une France décrite comme déroutée, déstabilisée et prête à implorer. [It is a biting and lucid (lit. clear-seeing) literary work, released in a France described as gone astray, destabilized and about to implode] (FOIL). Source: RFI, 1/7/2015

In short, example a) recognizes that Houellebecq sees, but his vision is openly challenged by calling it absurd. Examples b) and c), by contrast, confirm the idea that Houellebecq is seeing something that is fundamentally true, and that his work is thus to be taken seriously. These examples show the different positions of the regimes when it comes to identifying and assessing what exactly the author is seeing.

In a similar vein, for the PROPHET+ scenario a pattern can be observed, with more negative metaphors for the DEMAGOGUE regime as opposed to the PROPHET and FOIL regimes. Consider examples d-f:

- d) Houellebecq, **Cassandra lucide** ou **oiseau de mauvais augure**? [Houellebecq, a lucid Cassandra or a bird of ill omen?] (DEMAGOGUE). Source: Le Figaro Online, 6/1/2015
- e) Cela dit, dans la littérature comme au cinéma, bien des fictions politiques ont **annoncé des futurs terrifiants ou farfelus**. [That said, in literature as in cinema many political fictions announced terrifying or odd future scenarios] (DEMAGOGUE). Source: L'Humanité, 1/8/2015
- f) Surtout, les musulmans commencent à s'organiser non plus seulement comme une communauté religieuse, mais aussi politique, ainsi que le **préfigurait** le formidable roman *Soumission*, de Michel Houellebecq. [Especially, Muslims start to organize themselves not only as a religious but also as a political community, just like the formidable novel *Soumission* prefigured.] (PROPHET). Source: Valeurs Actuelles, 6/12/2016

In addition to this, in the PROPHET and – to a lesser extent – the FOIL regimes more objective and almost scientific concepts such as “to foresee”, “anticipations” and “predictions” were omnipresent. This alludes to the idea of Houellebecq as a trustworthy authority, whereas this idea is absent – rather openly challenged – in the DEMAGOGUE regime. Once more, examples a-f show that although there are differences on the semantic level, there is a strong overlap in metaphor use between all four regimes, most notably between the PROPHET, the FOIL and the SATIRIST.

Several reasons can account for this. First of all, this could be explained by the composition of the corpus, in which articles categorized as PROPHET make for the biggest group (13/36). Consequently, these texts contain 33% of all the metaphors in the corpus (160/486). One could therefore argue that the PROPHET regime is thus overrepresented in the corpus, and that this affects the analysis. On the other hand, I hold that the corpus is a random sample of texts that appeared in French media, and if the PROPHET is the most frequent regime in the corpus, then we should wonder whether this is more telling about (French) media than about the corpus itself. When looking at the metaphor/word ratio, however, it turns out that the SATIRIST has the most metaphorical language (2,2%¹⁵), compared to the DEMAGOGUE (1,4%), PROPHET (1,6%) and FOIL (1,6%) regimes. That is to say, proportionally the PROPHET regime is not the one with the highest metaphoricity, but its metaphors and scenarios are shared by the other regimes.

Secondly, building further on this observation, I hold that an overlap in the use of metaphor and metaphor scenarios inherently designate an overlap in conceptual thinking. This presupposes a certain level of shared concepts and ideas between the regimes. The next section will take a closer look at these convergences. Finally, it is worth thinking about the type of metaphors that are used in the PROPHET regime: are these perhaps popular metaphors that constitute a great deal of our daily language, in contrast to more personal and creative metaphors? And, if this is the case, what does this say about our day-to-day language if our metaphor use corresponds with that of a regime thought to be representative for (far) right-wing movements? Before delving deeper into these questions, I will first show how the other three regimes differ from the PROPHET regime.

¹⁵ This percentage is calculated as follows: [total number of metaphors of narrative X] / [total amount of words of narrative X] x 100. In the case of the SATIRIST regime, this means 122 coded metaphors for a total of 5544 words.

6.4.4 Regimes, scenarios and metaphors

As we have seen above, the main issue at stake is the observation that none of the most used metaphor scenarios of the PROPHET regime are exclusive: they are all shared by at least one other regime. As such, the corpus reveals a network of interrelated regimes in which the PROPHET seems to be at the center. In order to shed more light on this network and its interconnections, this section will first focus on how the other three regimes distinguish themselves from the PROPHET: which are their unique metaphor scenarios and how does this tie in with each regime? The second step will then be to analyze which are the ideas and concepts expressed by the metaphors in the PROPHET regime, and, more precisely, how they relate to the other regimes.

Two frequent metaphor scenarios that are unique for the DEMAGOGUE regime are PROPHET- (7, not in table) and BOMB (6, not in table). These two scenarios allow to shape the idea that with his book Houellebecq is mainly looking for media attention, instead of promoting a political viewpoint. As such, reviewers state that Houellebecq is “incapable de prévoir” [unable to foresee], “pas davantage un prophète” [not that much of a prophet] or no “puissance visionnaire” [visionary power]. Interestingly, there are also references to oracles, such as “[il] n’est pas Cassandre annonçant sur les murailles la chute de Troie” [he is not Cassandra standing on the wall announcing the Fall of Troy] and “un Nostradamus postmoderne” [a postmodern Nostradamus]. Saying that Houellebecq does not even meet the level of accuracy of Nostradamus, is a powerful way to denounce his novel as a mere marketing strategy.

Similarly, the BOMB scenario is used frequently to conceive the message that the book will have considerable effects, not only the explosive media debates (“une bombe médiatique à mèche lente” [a mediatic bomb with slow match]), but also the sales (“l’explosion finale, celle des ventes” [the final explosion, that of the sales]). Evidently, this scenario also refers to the plot of the novel (“le fond très explosif” [a very explosive setting]) and the societal debate on Islam (“cette bombe H n’est pas posée par un islamiste” [this “H bomb” is not placed by an Islamist]). To put it differently, *Soumission* is simply a cynical attempt to obtain media attention and lift the book sales, and by doing so, it is grist to the mill of the far Right.

The main difference between the FOIL and the PROPHET regime, with which it shares five out of eight scenarios, is the neutrality of the author, who is depicted as a rather objective sociologist of contemporary France. Besides this, another difference is

the opacity of the novel. While the PROPHET regime points at Islamization as the main topic of the novel, and connects this to the actual French society, the FOIL regime might have different interpretations (i.e. the book is really about nihilism or sexuality). As a result of this, metaphor use in this regime is more diverse, using a more diverse set of different metaphor scenarios that reflects the different societal issues the novel is linked to. This makes sense, since this regime allows for different interpretations: everyone can see in *Soumission* a confirmation of what they already believe.

The three metaphor scenarios SICK (4, not in table), FIRE (4, not in table) and MONEY (4, not in table) each allude to the idea that France is not doing too well, and that the publication of this book will make things worse. France is sick and Houellebecq uncovers its “symptômes” [symptoms] in his books, and this time goes even further by “mettre les doigts dans les plaies¹⁶” [lit. to put your finger on the wound]. Similarly, he plunges into a “débat déjà surchauffé” [already overheated debate] on Islamization and is happy to “souffler sur les braises” [blow on the embers], using two metaphors that remind us of the DEMAGOGUE regime. In addition to this, the MONEY scenario does not suggest that Islamic culture will make France a richer country, but quite the contrary: “[il y a un] prix à payer” [a price to pay], “la culture au rabais” [culture on sale] and “[cela] conduit l’Europe à s’avilir” [Europe will lose value]. In other words, the book is a rather painful way to confront the reader with urgent societal issues of different kinds.

In the SATIRIST regime, lastly, the metaphor scenario DECAY stands out. This scenario is functioning as a way to exaggerate, ridicule or ironize France’s state of affairs, following the idea that *Soumission* presents the reader a parodic image of contemporary France, and in essence, of the whole Western world. As such, the decay scenario constructs the idea of French culture being mainly remnants of past glory, as good as dead, and that this fate is irreversible. France is depicted as a rotting body, “gangrenée par la crise” [decayed by crisis], “agonie” [agony], or as a destroyed building, as shown by the metaphors “ravages” [havoc], “délabrement” [dilapidation] “odeur de moisi” [musty smell] and verbs such as “effondrer” [to collapse], “pulvériser” [to pulverize] and “briser” [to break]. Moreover, the deterioration and following death

¹⁶ This seems to be a combination of two common expressions: *mettre le doigt sur la plaie* (lit. to put your finger on the wound, i.e. to put your finger on something) and *mettre le doigt là où ça fait mal* (lit. to put your finger there where it hurts). The reviewer seems to suggest that Houellebecq is not only identifying societal problems, but that he does that in the most painful way (note also the plural “les doigts”, causing even more damage).

of the West is quiet and inescapable: "l'Occident judéo-chrétien s'enlise et se noie, inaudible, périmé": the West is caught in quicksand, and will eventually drown, having become completely obsolete.

Having examined which metaphor scenarios are constitutive for the DEMAGOGUE, FOIL and SATIRIST regimes, the last part will reflect on the metaphor scenarios, and therefore the ideas and concepts that these regimes have in common with the PROPHET. Two ideas seem key: firstly, the perception of Houellebecq as a visionary or even a spiritual leader, depicting our present and near future. This view is supported with the scenarios PROPHET+, SEEING and PAINTING, which are also to be found in the DEMAGOGUE, FOIL and SATIRIST regimes. It should be pointed out that there is dissensus about what exactly it is that Houellebecq "sees". Whereas the PROPHET considers the Muslim Other to be the main source of France's problems, the other regimes might actually identify a broader range of issues, such as a French obsession with collaborationism, general questions of religion and gender equality.

The second idea, primed by the metaphor scenarios WAR, FATIGUE, and DECAY considers France and the Western world in general to be in a deep existential crisis, out of which it cannot escape, reminding us of the idea of the "politics of fear" (Wodak, 2015). *Soumission* is thus a wake-up call for a France that is soothed to sleep, and subtly being conquered: "la douce islamisation de la France" [the soft Islamization of France], or "une apocalypse tranquille" [a quiet apocalypse]. However, it is important to point out here that the regimes differ in their interpretation of who exactly is at war. If the PROPHET, FOIL and SATIRIST regimes consider the war to be operated by Muslims, against France, then the DEMAGOGUE regime sees Houellebecq and *Soumission* as the aggressors: "un guerillero apathique" [an apathetic guerilla fighter]. The conceptual overlap between the PROPHET, FOIL and SATIRIST regimes lies in the diagnose they make – France is in a critical situation and should become aware of that – but the suggested remedies may differ depending on what is considered the source of the crisis. This could vary from replacing badly functioning politicians to women denouncing sexist behavior and to the stigmatization of the Muslim population.

It is clear now that the four regimes overlap in the use of conceptual metaphor and metaphor scenarios. If the regimes seem fairly different at face value, the analysis shows that they can actually follow a similar rhetoric, and the use of metaphor reveals closer links on the conceptual level. The choice of metaphor is therefore not a random process, but some ideas, scenarios and metaphors are simply more attractive to us than

others. For instance, the idea of crisis, present in the PROPHET, FOIL and SATIRIST regimes, creates and confirms “us” vs. “them” dynamics, victims versus aggressors, leading to the use of extreme metaphors, which deeply affects the way we perceive the world. The next and final section of this analysis will further explore the ubiquity of certain types of metaphor and its consequences.

6.4.5 Metaphors that work

So far, this media analysis has focused on the role and significance of conceptual metaphor, metaphor scenario and regimes of metaphor as different conceptual levels of sense-making, in this case individual reviewers’ opinions on the novel *Soumission*. However, it is also worth thinking about the societal impact of these processes, following the example of Burgers (2016), Musolff (2016) and Valdivia (2019) amongst others. As pointed out earlier, metaphors, scenarios and regimes form a direct link to the cultural narrative, as Valdivia (2019) rightly argues: “populism has been successful at creating an alternative cultural horizon for social renewal by activating and making visible a rising regime of fundamentally anti-European metaphors” (p. 296). Consequently, it could be said that both the individual metaphor and regimes of metaphor are hierarchically structured, defining the choice of either, and that they orientate ideas, attitudes and behavior. A question that remains unanswered, and that – unfortunately – exceeds the scope of this chapter, is thus what determines whether a metaphor, scenario or regime, becomes successful. It goes without saying that to answer this pertinent question, an extensive study using larger data corpora of public discourse is necessary. At the same time, this does not prevent me from making two observations based on my own, rather modest, case study; the prevalence of metaphors related to the human body, and metaphors of extreme events. These initial findings reflect the observations that were made in the previous chapter, where the analysis of media discourse on the film *Submission* revealed the prevalence of violent metaphors as well as metaphors referring to human behavior.

Looking at the metaphor scenarios with more than 10 appearances in the corpus, it turns out that 12 out of 16 of these scenarios are bodily experiences (5) or extreme events (7). By contrast, the least frequent metaphor scenarios (22) include only three scenarios that can be considered extreme (SHOOTING, FLOOD, EARTHQUAKE).

This indicates a link between frequency and type of metaphor. For the record, scenarios categorized as bodily experience are SEEING, FATIGUE, DRINK, SICK, and NOT SEEING. The scenarios PROPHET+, WAR, DECAY, FIRE, PROPHET-, DEATH and BOMB were labelled extreme events.

Trying to explain the predominance of metaphors related to the body and extreme events, I would hypothesize that, in this case, reading *Soumission* is a rather bewildering experience, radically undermining societal structures as we know them, to a point where the reader is almost unable to recognize them anymore. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the human reflex is to make sense of this reading by relating it to an experience we do know well, our own bodies: “allowing to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms – terms that we can understand on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions and characteristics” (p. 34). Similarly, I would argue that extreme events allow to grasp the highly complex world of Houellebecq’s fiction, because of their lack of nuance – it is either X or Y. Furthermore, these extreme events are mostly concepts that are familiar to us in a way, due to their omnipresence in popular cultural narratives of religion and foundational myths of past conflicts. More generally, this can be connected to media sensationalism and its interaction with populist politics of fear (Wodak, 2015). Also Musolff (2016) evokes the use of what he calls hyperbolic rhetoric in mainstream media: “it has the function of catching the readers’ attention rather than invoking a whole conceptual frame” (p.16). This seems to support the conclusions of Hart (2020), who analyzed the effect of dehumanizing and militarizing metaphors on readers of texts that dealt with the topic of immigration. In fact, Hart found that extreme metaphors were more easily identified as such by readers, who then tended to reject their specific framing, and favored more positive perspectives on immigrants. Again, this highlights the need for more research on the topic, in order to better appreciate how metaphors, scenarios, regimes and narratives shape our thoughts, attitudes and worldviews.

The first part of the analysis has shown that the political debate was characterized by extreme affects such as resentment and indignation. These affects are grounded in what Asma and Gabriel (2019) and Panksepp (2010) labeled the foundational affective systems present in all mammals, namely fear, lust, care, rage, play, seeking and grief. It is fair to say that in populist “us” vs. “them” narratives the negative affects of fear, rage and grief are preponderant: they are responses to anticipated pain and destruction (fear), restricted freedom of action (rage) or loss of

feelings of security (grief) (Panksepp, 2010, p. 537). More concretely, in her chapter on the affective politics of fear, Ahmed (2014) focuses on post 9/11 narratives of crisis in security, driven by the extreme fears of “degeneration, decline and disintegration” (p. 78). Such fears lead to the emergence of survival mechanisms that consist in maintaining the cultural status quo: “Indeed, it is fear of death – of the death of oneself, one’s loved ones, one’s community and one’s people – that is generated by such narratives [of crisis] as a means of preserving that which is” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 77). In other words, these narratives advocate a return to a more traditional way of life – which has proven to be successful in guaranteeing survival in the past – and a dismissal of cultural Others, who are seen as threats. Similar narratives have appeared more recently, for instance in the Brexit debates or the election of Donald Trump, in response to crises of security – the financial and migrant crises – and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East (cf. Buckledee, 2018; Lilla, 2016). It is clear that the affective systems of fear, rage and grief are reflected in the extreme metaphor scenarios cited above, creating division rather than connection. Following the reasoning of Asma and Gabriel (2019), the affective systems care and seeking could be alternatives to dichotomous thinking, foregrounding (maternal) protection (care) and curiosity or interest in other humans (seeking).

If reading *Soumission* – or as we saw in the previous chapter, watching *Submission* – is a complicated literary and conceptual exercise which can only be understood in terms of certain metaphors and extreme affects, then one wonders whether this could not be illustrative of widely shared thought patterns. Making sense of today’s highly complex, fast-changing, technologically advanced, economically and politically unstable world is a very demanding task, and it comes to no surprise that certain metaphors are prevalent. Consider for instance the metaphor of the “populist wave”, which is widely used – among others by anti-populists – to understand the sudden upsurge of populism around the globe. However, this metaphor is limited in the sense that it conceives populism as a phenomenon that has a natural cause and (potentially) devastating effect. This conception, as pointed out above, is ultimately deceptive, as it presents populism as an external force menacing the safe shore, ignoring the possibility that these populist conceptualizations, metaphors and narrative patterns are already latent in society – only waiting to be activated. The results of both my case studies show that this latter option is a more likely interpretation of populism; populist narratives and metaphors promoting a culturally

defined “us” against a dangerous Other, as well as polarizing and hyperbolic language, were found all over the media debate on *Soumission*. It is therefore relevant not only to analyze regimes of metaphor in contemporary society, but even more so to be critical towards prominent metaphors, and to challenge them whenever they tap into the populist rhetoric of polarization and simplification.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed the political and media debates around Houellebecq's novel *Soumission*, a book that drastically challenged cultural narratives of “us” and “them”, and transcended the borders between the discursive fields of literature and politics. The analysis was divided into two parts. First, by mapping how French politicians framed *Soumission*, I sought to understand whether they identified with the story and how the novel was integrated into their political discourse. Second, by extending the focus to French mainstream media, I aimed to analyze the construction of broader societal narratives on *Soumission*, as they are both reflecting and orientating the political debate. Given that the main goal was to explore the societal impact of populism, the approach was not limited to populist actors only, but a wide range of politicians and media outlets adhering to different political ideologies were included in the analysis. The assumption was that an analysis of both political and media discourse could reveal underlying predispositions often related to populism, confirming that populism is not an external political phenomenon, as we like to believe, but rather that its ideas and attitudes are woven into our operational cultural narrative. In other words, the media debate around this novel could illustrate that there is a dormant Marine Le Pen inside all of us (cf. Hawkins, 2010). Moreover, this ties in well with the conception of populism as a thin-centered ideology, theorized by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), according to which populism never appears in its pure form, but is combined with other ideologies. As such, instead of studying populism as an isolated phenomenon, this chapter, together with the previous chapter on *Submission*, could shed light to the ways in which it is deeply connected to and interacting with these other ideologies.

The analysis used three different tools that were introduced in part I of the dissertation: the typology of populism and culture, affect theory, and Conceptual

Metaphor Theory. The typology, analyzing political reactions to the novel, provided a valuable insight into the different phases of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration: from pre-existing worldviews and beliefs regarding the Other, to the discursive emplotment and use of affects, to the final organic integration in the populist narrative. It was clear that some politicians, mostly of the far Right, appropriated the novel, using it to promote, underpin and even justify their own political agenda, fueled by the affect of resentment. By contrast, other politicians, mostly of the Left, dismissed the novel's scenario and depiction of France's state of affairs, using the affect of indignation, thus associating it with the populist far Right. These outcomes clearly illustrate how politicians of both the Left and the Right based their statements on a similar reading of *Soumission*, or even a non-reading, since many admitted not having read the novel at all. It is therefore safe to say that these political reactions were selective and unfounded, and most importantly, that they illustrated the same polarizing dynamics, namely depicting the Other as abnormal. Interestingly, while Houellebecq is often described as an agitator, exploiting a marketing strategy based on controversies, this seems to be equally true for the politicians in my corpus. Perhaps their reactions to the novel should be seen as a cynical manifestation of widespread political opportunism in a highly polarized political system.

The analysis of the media debate, for which a model based on CMT was used, provided a slightly different picture. Here, the aim was to get a deeper understanding of public discourse and why some ideas seem more attractive to us than others. To this end, I delved into underlying discursive patterns, their interconnection and relation to populism, considering regimes of metaphor, metaphor scenarios and conceptual metaphor. This led to the identification of four regimes, of whom two were labelled as polarizing (DEMAGOGUE and PROPHET), and the other two as more nuanced alternatives (FOIL and SATIRIST). However, a detailed look at metaphor use in the reviews revealed that metaphors are not exclusively related to one regime, instead there is a lot of overlap between them, especially with the PROPHET regime. This means that making sense of the book – as was done in the selected corpus texts – implied using metaphors and concepts that belong to a polarizing and exclusionary narrative, which can even be found in well-respected mainstream newspapers as *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*. This led to the main finding of this chapter that the populist cultural narrative is not isolated nor limited to populist actors, but that it is all around us. Populism is part and parcel of our daily language and conceptual thinking.

Based on the findings of the analysis, this chapter has two take-away points. First, as both corpora have shown, polarization is a common practice both in politics and (mainstream) media. A vast majority of the political responses to the novel used the more polarizing discourses of appropriation and resistance, and most of the media reviews were categorized as the openly divisive DEMAGOGUE or PROPHET regimes. These findings are also confirming the trends discovered in the previous case study on the film *Submission*. While there is widespread agreement that populism is inherently polarizing, it turns out that other political parties do polarize as well, portraying populists as the abnormal Other. The study of anti-populism is a relatively understudied field, but owing to the work of Voelz and Freischläger (2019), I could identify different affects of polarization – indignation and resentment – in both of my corpora. It goes without saying that the polarization of the public sphere is a worrying trend, and that more research is needed in order to formulate alternative ways of doing politics and opinion-making.

A second take-away point amounts from the analysis of media reviews, showcasing that public discourse cannot be strictly divided into rigid categories of Left vs. Right, or progressive vs. conservative. Instead, as we have seen, regimes of metaphor share properties, and in my analysis – in fact, in both case studies – they mostly did with the PROPHET regime. This finding can set the basis for further research on how certain metaphor regimes circulate and become prominent over others. In order to gain more insight into these phenomena, it would be desirable to develop quantitative methods for detecting and analyzing metaphors in large corpora. Furthermore, the concrete relationship between affects – being pre-conscious forms of experience – and conceptual metaphor deserves additional investigation. In my analysis, there was some correspondence between the affects of resentment and indignation, and the regimes of metaphor DEMAGOGUE and PROPHET. Given the fact that regimes do not have their own exclusive set of metaphor scenarios, I suspect the relation between the two not to be linear, but I rather see them as two connected processes that emerge simultaneously and reinforce each other as such. In the final chapter of this dissertation, the conclusion, I will compare and discuss the findings of both case studies. In doing so, I will emphasize that while following similar dynamics, the political and media debates on Houellebecq's *Soumission* were more strongly polarized than those on the short film *Submission*. The conclusion will discuss several

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possible explanations for this, and present in more detail the new questions arising from my work and their potential for future research.

Conclusion. From *Submission* to *Soumission*: towards a new understanding of populism and culture

The first pages of this dissertation discussed the French presidential elections of 2017, which marked a break-up with French political tradition. While previous elections usually opposed two candidates with different socio-economic agendas, the candidates of Front National and En Marche did not precisely embody the traditional Left-Right debate – consider Macron’s adage *Ni de droite ni de gauche*. Instead, the choice presented to the French electorate was one between cosmopolitanism and patriotism, rooted in different conceptions of French identity and culture. As we have seen, Le Pen imagined an idealized, nostalgic version of a France that got lost, whereas Macron evoked a more progressive, or even futuristic image of the country. This identitarian or cultural approach to politics is not unique to France, as the worldwide upsurge of (far right) populist parties illustrates. All around the world, populist parties strive to make their country great again, at the expense of ruling elites and alien Others. Culture thus emerges as an indispensable ingredient of populist rhetoric, and politics at large, to define what the “real” people look (or do not look) like.

The combined study of populism and culture could therefore shed light on the role culture plays in politics, and vice versa. It allows to grasp the notion of “cultural discontent” (Rensmann, 2017), that seems to drive voters into the arms of populist parties. At the same time, it is possible to explore the place of (national) culture in our contemporary globalized societies, and understand how ideas about culture are shaped by populist parties. This final chapter of the dissertation will answer the two research questions presented in the introduction, by combining insights from the six previous chapters. Furthermore, I will discuss a number of additional observations emerging from the analysis of the case studies, that would deserve further investigation. Finally, taking this dissertation as a starting point for future research, I will critically engage with its potential limitations, on the basis of which I formulate new avenues of research on culture and populism.

Populist engagement with culture

The first research question that this dissertation proposed to answer is the following: “Which images, cultural institutions and products do populists identify with or promote, and how do they become an organic part of their narratives?”. This question, that explores the role of culture in the construction of the populist narrative, was addressed in part I of this dissertation (chapters 1 to 4). Broadly speaking, the different chapters analyzed the articulation of populist “us” vs. “them” dichotomies, how culture plays a role in defining both groups, and whether populists prioritize a certain kind of cultural products over others. Additionally, I looked at the affective dimension of populist dichotomies, more precisely the mobilization of positive affects about the Self and negative affects about the Other. This led to four key findings.

First, my analysis supports the conception of populism as an organic phenomenon, rather than the direct result of an economic or societal crisis. This view implies that populism is not an isolated political phenomenon, instead it activates ideas and worldviews that are already present in society. Simply put, the populist articulation of “us” and “them” is not new per se, but rooted in widely shared, yet unarticulated, latent attitudes towards the Self and the Other. For this reason, I problematize populism as culturally grounded. In addressing existential questions related to identity, self-representation and connected societal norms and values, populist narratives frame and orientate ideas about the cultural Self and Other. Following this logic, populism is not likely to go away by itself. Rather, it becomes more and more entangled in society, as its presence in the political arena normalizes populist rhetoric, and orientates new forms of being. This is why the study of the populist use of culture is so relevant, as it allows to better understand the success of populist narratives, and invites to present more optimistic alternatives to their exclusionary rhetoric.

In addition to being grounded in culture, or more specifically as part of a culture of fear (Castells et al., 2012), populism also engages with concrete manifestations of culture. My second finding, which is built on theoretical considerations from chapters 1 and 2, signals that populists use culture to forge identities of “us” and “them”. To be precise, populists tend to dismiss elite culture, or the “sociocultural high” (García-Santamaría, 2020; Ostiguy, 2017; Westheuser, 2020a) through their refusal of “good manners” (Moffitt, 2019) – e.g. appropriate language or clothing – or express a preference for certain kinds of popular foods or drinks. But this is not the entire story.

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On the horizontal dichotomy, populists reject expressions of hybrid culture, considered too international or multicultural. Here, we could think of their aversion to (religious) festivities such as Eid al-Fitr or Ketí Koti (the yearly commemoration of the emancipation of former slaves, celebrated in Suriname and Amsterdam). The inclusion of both the vertical and horizontal dimensions makes it possible to grasp why populists do sometimes identify with elite culture, such as literature (*Soumission*), or classical piano music (Thierry Baudet). Here, I argue that the cultural products serve to articulate an anti-minority stance, towards Muslims as undemocratic Others for the former, or by singling out the cultural ingenuity of European civilization against a barbaric Other, in the case of the latter.

I used the term *Leitkultur* (Ossewaarde, 2014; Pautz, 2005; Tibi, 2001) to describe the result of these horizontal and vertical demarcation strategies; the culture populists identify with and actively promote. In addition to the “flaunting of the socio-cultural low” (Westheuser, 2020a, p. 267), or, in Bourdieusian terms, an embodiment of the people’s “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1989), this *Leitkultur* implies a celebration of the culturally familiar (Ylä-Anttila, 2017). As we have seen, these cultural products can be both tangible and intangible, ranging from ways of speaking to art, from cuisine to literature. A good example of this is Wilders’ recent tweet featuring a picture of freshly cooked traditional Dutch meatballs, accompanied by the text “Niks couscous. Leve de #gehaktbal!” [Couscous, no way. Long live the meatball!]¹. This tweet reflects anti-elitist sentiments by epitomizing socio-economic familiarity (meatballs being a typical working-class meal), and as a silent protest against the lifestyle of highly-educated urban elites who embrace vegetarianism. At the same time, cultural familiarity is expressed through the message that Wilders prefers traditional meatballs over “foreign” couscous. While we do not know for sure if the meatballs were made with beef or pork (both are possible in Dutch cuisine), it is possible that the tweet also constitutes a more implicit religious statement against Muslims and Jews.

Wilders’ meatballs are an example of an autonomous cultural product – meatballs were never designed with the aim of supporting PVV or any political party at all, but they were appropriated as such. In fact, a characteristic of autonomous cultural products is that they have no stable meaning. Rather, their meaning depends on the way they are framed, based on their function in the given political narrative. Opposed

¹ Tweet by Geert Wilders, March 1st, 2021. See: <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1366170535542063111> (accessed on 31-05-2021)

to this category of autonomous cultural products, of which Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* is an example, I identified so-called organic cultural products, such as Wilders' film *Fitna*, Eric Zemmour's *Le Suicide français*, and *Submission* by Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh. Given that these organic cultural products were constructed with the aim of supporting a political agenda, their interpretation is less ambiguous. Therefore, this division has implications for the process of appropriation. In order to appropriate a cultural product, there has to be room for the negotiation of meaning, to frame or emplot the work in such a way that it can be organically embedded in the political narrative. In chapter 2, we have seen that the appropriation of *laïcité* and Houellebecq's *Soumission* follows the three stages of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration (cf. Baker, 2017; Ricoeur, 1991). These stages refer to the activation of forms and modes of thinking that precede the interaction with the cultural product, its subsequent emplotment or framing, and its final organic integration in the populist narrative. In the case of the short film *Submission*, on the other hand, the refiguration stage is articulated in a slightly different manner; rather than appropriating the film, populist engagement resulted in a process of identification with the film's statement. I will further address the relevance of the organic/autonomous divide below, in my discussion of research question 2.

Populists thus identify with culture that constructs and supports their dichotomous worldview. They promote cultural products that allow to create a nostalgic, familiar image of the people, and to portray its antagonists as elitist or alien Others. For that matter, populists may either position themselves as opposed to elite culture, hybrid culture, or even both, as we have seen with the example of the meatballs. The integration of these cultural products in the populist narrative – whether organic or autonomous – visualizes, symbolizes and embodies the visceral connection between those belonging to the people. This cultural bond between the people, and the exclusion of non-belonging Others, carries a strong affective core (Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019b; Rico et al., 2017). My third finding refers to this successful mobilization of affects by populists, which connects positive feelings, for example affection, to the Self, and negative emotions such as anger, contempt and fear to the Other. In other words, the study of populist narratives should not be limited to electoral programs, speeches, tweets and other types of discourse, but it should take into account the full story. A substantial part of the populist success lies in the

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emotional component in their message, which speaks to their voters, thus allowing and mobilizing further political engagement.

As my analysis has shown, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) plays a key role in activating these affects. Metaphors allow people to grasp a complex situation – supranational politics, a financial crisis, a pandemic – in terms of something they know and understand (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). As such, the choice of metaphor defines which frames and affects are activated. For instance, metaphorically representing Covid-19 as a sport match or a war implies that there is an enemy that should be defeated. Both metaphors seek to motivate the people not to give up and to be strong, and suggests the presence of a danger, an adversary that may arouse fear. Metaphors thus translate complex situations to more concrete or familiar images, evoking emotions or affects connected to that image. In that sense, CMT orientates feelings, ideas and behavior, and, as we have seen throughout the several chapters of this dissertation, it is an important tool for politicians. I therefore argued that an extended framework of CMT, including metaphor scenarios, regimes of metaphor and cultural narratives, could shed light on the configuration of political and societal narratives (Musolff, 2016; Valdivia, 2019). More precisely, the insight that conceptual metaphor activates certain images and frames over others, and mobilizes connected affects, could provide the tools to analyze and challenge existing cultural narratives grounded in a culture of fear. Instead, this can set the basis for thinking about more hopeful alternatives.

Finally, as chapters 1, 2 and 3 have shown, populist narratives consist of political rhetoric that promotes a socio-culturally defined Self and Other, in which cultural products play a key role. In addition to this, they have a performative character, as their use of affect and metaphor perpetuates populist worldviews. Given this multi-layered nature, it is clear that the study of populist narratives should be interdisciplinary. In effect, the very notion of a performative populist narrative supports the idea of political realities as a construction, which consist of interconnected forms (Levine, 2015). For this reason, my fourth finding refers to the necessity of adopting methodologies that support these theoretical premises, considering (political) reality not as purely neutral or objective, but as constructed or (re-)imagined. In this dissertation, I argued that Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are methodologies that could well grasp the complex phenomenon of populist narratives.

Ideally, these complexities should be tackled by a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, offering detailed interpretation as well as rigorous analysis.

In short, the answer to the first research question is that populists identify with and promote organic and autonomous cultural products. This process, aiming to foster wider societal electoral support, takes shape through identification for the former, and appropriation for the latter. Culture, in this sense, materializes the identities of the Self and the Other; the authentic, good people versus the corrupt elites and alien Others. The distinctive feature of populist narratives is their explicit articulation of the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy, to use culture as a means to connect the in-group, which is contrasted to an evil out-group. As a result, not the type of cultural products is key – in fact, this dissertation has shown that populists engage with popular and elite culture, tangible and intangible products, both autonomous and organic works. Instead, the way in which these cultural products are used or framed and finally incorporated in the populist narrative has revealed to be of key interest. I claimed that it is through prefiguration, configuration and refiguration that cultural products become an organic part of the populist narrative. They elicit an affective response – affection for the own, aversion to the unfamiliar – a process that is reinforced through the use of conceptual metaphor. As will be further discussed below, chapters 5 and 6 have demonstrated that these dichotomous thinking patterns are organic to such an extent that they have become mainstream and widespread throughout the entire society.

Submission and Soumission: populist intervention in public debates

The second research question that this dissertation sought to answer is the following: “How do populist actors intervene in public debates on controversial cultural products?”. The vivid debates on the short film *Submission* and the novel *Soumission* provided a useful starting point to analyze populist narratives. First of all, the case studies confirmed the findings of part I that populists do in fact actively engage in these cultural debates about film and literature. Second, by taking a broader societal scope, it was possible to consider populist narratives in comparison to other political narratives, and to reflect on essential differences and similarities between them. Finally, considering narratives as performative phenomena that orientate attitudes and worldviews, I focused on the mobilization of affects and the use of metaphor in these debates. In doing so, I aimed to explore the presence of Islamophobic and/or

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populist ideas in societal debates, as a result of the successful articulation of populist narratives over the past years.

The main insight emerging from chapters 5 and 6 is that populist rhetoric is indeed not exclusive to populist actors. This manifested itself in two ways. First, the response of some politicians of center-right parties (e.g. VVD, UMP) was highly similar to that of populists. In my analysis, I identified the categories of discourse as defined by Ågerup (2019); the liberal discourse, foregrounding artistic freedom, and the discourse of resistance, emphasizing the artwork's (negative) moral implications. In addition to this, I pleaded in favor of a third discourse of identification/appropriation to denote those who strongly approve and endorse the form and contents of the cultural product. The populist politicians in my corpora were systematically adopting the latter discourse, but also politicians from mainstream parties would occasionally embrace this populist logic. Second, the most evident counter-narrative to populism revealed to be equally divisive, duplicating populism's dichotomous thinking patterns. More precisely, my analysis demonstrated that the anti-populist discourse of resistance resembles the populist narrative in its strong articulation of "us" vs. "them" rhetoric, excluding populists as the xenophobic Other. Concretely, this means that latent populist narratives are prevalent in political speech, both on the political Left and the Right. The results of the media analysis point in the same direction; mainstream media outlets were found to reflect and reproduce dichotomous and exclusionary thinking patterns.

A vast majority of the political statements in my corpora could be categorized as discourse of identification/appropriation or discourse of resistance, two discourses that I thus consider highly polarizing. As the analysis demonstrates, the former opposes the Self to an Islamic Other, whereas the latter excludes the populist Other, seen to be incompatible with their image of politics as rational and professional. Indeed, both propose a positive self-image, whose continuity is threatened by the presence of a disruptive Other. In the discourse of identification (chapter 5) or appropriation (chapter 6) there are two culprits. On the horizontal level, the Muslim community allegedly neglects human rights and promotes Islamic fundamentalism and terrorist violence. It is clear that this alien Other represents an immense danger, and could even lead to "*l'éclatement de la nation*" [the collapse of the nation], according to Nicolas Bay. The vertical dichotomy opposes the Self to political elites who have been promoting multiculturalism for decades, who have been blind to the potentially

harmful consequences of their generous policies, and are therefore held responsible for the feared decline of the nation. The discourse of resistance, on the other hand, dismisses the populist Other who polarizes society with their provocations in the name of free speech, or even their outright xenophobia. While the nature of these othering practices may differ slightly, we cannot ignore that both discourses – whether populist or anti-populist – exclude an undesired Other.

I classified both the discourses of identification/appropriation and the discourse of resistance as part of a Civic World logic (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), which considers the cultural product and its makers as significant actors in current societal or political debates. The third discourse (the liberal one) is centered around the notion of artistic freedom, rejecting the cultural product's eventual moral or political implications, and thus alludes to the Inspired World. As my analysis showed, the liberal discourse was less frequent than the other two, with 9 out of 24 statements on *Submission*, and 1 out of 14 statements on *Soumission*. I argued that all three discourses have a problematic component, linked to a lack of equaliberty in society (Balibar, 2014). The discourse of resistance condemns certain controversial works of art in the name of equality, and the discourses of identification/appropriation defend civic liberties at the expense of others. The liberal discourse, finally, takes a more ambiguous stand. By staying away from moral judgments, it fails to denounce Islamophobic elements present in the cultural works, neither approving nor disapproving potentially destabilizing narratives. Considering these findings, I deem it essential to think about discourses and narratives that acknowledge the importance of both freedom and equality – a question that I will return to below.

The three discourses were reflected in the media debates in the form of regimes of metaphor. The discourses of identification/appropriation corresponded to the PROPHET regime, the discourse of resistance to the DEMAGOGUE, and the ARTIST, FOIL and SATIRIST regimes were all variants of liberal discourse. This shows that there are conceptual links between worldviews and discourse, but this does not translate to exclusive links between a particular worldview and a given set of metaphors. Rather, regimes of metaphor connected to Islamophobic and xenophobic ideas were found in mainstream media, regardless of their political orientation. This was for instance the case with the metaphor scenarios WAR, FATIGUE, SICKNESS and DECAY, which suggest that the Western world is suffering a severe crisis, caused by internal or external enemies. The predominance of metaphors related to the human body and extreme

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events was also striking. I argued that such metaphors evoke familiar frames – one's own bodily functions, or popular cultural narratives of past conflicts – that allow to make the eerie relatable (Hart, 2020; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Thibodeau et al., 2019). These metaphors allow us to grasp the complexities of controversial and/or ambiguous cultural products like *Submission* and *Soumission*, and to make sense of their intricate connection to our own daily lives. Additionally, metaphors of extreme events (WAR, DECAY) have the power to present a complicated situation in simplistic terms of good vs. bad, following and enacting populist dichotomies, which causes a loss of nuance.

In sum, populist interventions in public debates on the controversial film *Submission* and the novel *Soumission* translate to their adoption of the discourses of identification/appropriation, and their preference for the metaphor regime PROPHET. However, this is not the entire story. As my analysis shows, non-populist actors also use these discourses and regimes. Similarly, the anti-populist discourse of resistance and the metaphor regime DEMAGOGUE revealed to be equally polarizing. Therefore, I conclude that the populist intervention in these cultural debates should be considered in a broader societal perspective; populist logic is not limited to populist actors, but is omnipresent in our political and societal fabric.

These findings support strong evidence for the conceptualization of populism as an organic phenomenon, deeply engrained in society. In effect, we have seen that populist narratives spread beyond populist parties and partisan news media, and are all around us. An implication of this finding is that populism will not go away by itself. It is not enough to simply make fun of populist politicians, ignore them, or to establish a *cordon sanitaire*, because the ideas and attitudes that populists seek to activate are latent in society. Therefore, it is necessary to promote new ways of thinking that go beyond binary thinking and sensationalism that is typical of both populism and prevailing forms of anti-populism. As I have shown, an essential way to do this is through metaphor. Metaphor can be a bridge between fiction and lived experience, but also between political reality and individual experience. It allows to translate something we hear, feel, see or read into an experience or feeling we know well, and by doing so, frames it, constitutes meaning, convinces us that this is the only way to see it. If we want to create alternative realities, bring about social change, then one essential part is to develop new metaphors. Considering this, populism should not be studied as a separate or external political phenomenon, but in a broader context that includes other political parties and societal actors. My dissertation has been a first

attempt to capture this multidirectional relationship between language, our culturally oriented conceptual system and the social and political realities we operate in.

Comparing *Submission* and *Soumission*

Both case studies provide valuable insights in the multiple ways in which populists in France and the Netherlands engage with culture, but also reveal interesting differences between the two cases. I am aware that these differences may depend on multiple factors, including their respective chronological and geographical contexts. However, these observations are still worth reflecting on, and could provide a starting point for future research on the topic of populism and culture. More precisely, one observation stands out. The analysis suggests a more extreme political response in France than in the Netherlands, which is reflected in the adoption of more extreme discourses and affects in the debate on Houellebecq's *Soumission*. In the following, I will first sketch the main differences between the results of the case studies, and then introduce three possible reasons for this, namely a more polarized political context, a changing political climate since the early 2000's, and the different nature of the cultural works under discussion. In effect, I will discuss the distinction between autonomous and organic cultural products and its repercussions for the interpretation of the cultural product, as well as the articulation of certain metaphor regimes over others.

The results of chapters 5 and 6 clearly show that the political debates on Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* are more polarized than the ones following the screening of the film *Submission* in the Netherlands. This is illustrated by the share of statements pertaining to the Civic World, leading to the adoption of polarizing discourses, and the use of the extreme affects of resentment and indignation. These mechanisms affect the degree to which both cultural works were organically integrated in the populist narrative, both by populists themselves, but also indirectly by other political actors. In the analysis of *Submission*, 9 out of 24 political statements (37.5%) were classified as liberal discourse, compared to 1 out of 14 (7%) of the statements on *Soumission*. More concretely, this means that more than a third of the politicians refused to take a side in the debate on *Submission*, claiming that the artists' freedom of expression was key, and should be respected as long as no laws were violated. In the debate on *Soumission* this stance is rather rare, leading to a strongly polarized debate.

This debate was further shaped by the affects of resentment and indignation, two affects that were absent in the political debate on *Submission*. According to Voelz

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and Freischläger (2019), these affects are responsible for the strongly polarized political debates, the affect of indignation leading to a “stance of superiority” and the affect of resentment being a “demand for disruption” (p. 276). I argued that both affects played a key role in the articulation of the discourses of resistance (indignation) and appropriation (resentment). The polarized stance was also reflected in the refiguration of the cultural products in the populist narrative. Since its publication, the novel *Soumission* has been appropriated by populist actors, as is revealed by its inclusion on a reading list produced by the Rassemblement National (RN). At the same time, politicians from other parties as well as journalists quickly associated the novel to the RN, framing it as *un cadeau pour Marine Le Pen*, reducing the book to an Islamophobic pamphlet. This straight qualification of the cultural work by mainstream politicians and journalists as populist propaganda has not been observed in the case of the film *Submission*.

To explain these differences, I propose three possible reasons. First, it could be that the French political climate is more polarized than the Dutch as a result of its organization. In the French electoral system, it is necessary to win an absolute majority, and in most cases a conclusive second round opposes the two candidates with most votes in the first round. The Netherlands, on the other hand, has a coalition system in which several parties collaborate to form a government and opposition. It could thus be argued that there is stronger polarization in systems where the winner takes it all, and the success of the new government does not depend on the willingness of other parties to form a coalition. In other words, this explanation would predict that France is more prone to polarizing discourses and the affects of resentment and indignation than the Netherlands.

A second reason could be that the political climate has changed over time. The first two decades of the 21st century witnessed several significant events (e.g. Islamist terrorism, a financial crisis, a refugee crisis) that sparked social unrest and increased tensions between different groups in society. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, this context turned out to be a fertile soil for populist parties. More importantly, through their dichotomous and confrontational rhetoric, populists were able to transform the political sphere by promoting distrust towards political elites and normalizing exclusionary logic towards Others (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2017; Wodak, 2015). Following this reasoning, the increase of the polarizing discourses of identification/appropriation and the discourse of resistance, as well as

the use of extreme affects, should be considered a consequence of this political development.

Lastly, the different response to both case studies could be explained by the cultural product itself, more specifically the extent to which it is deemed controversial, the societal topics it engages with, and the role of its author. While *Submission* and *Soumission* both engage with the topic of Islamization, and the makers are all controversial public figures, they differ in their categorization as organic or autonomous cultural product. Here, the rationale would be that debates on autonomous cultural products leave more room for different interpretations, including those in the realm of the Inspired World. In other words, a reader of Zemmour or Camus will quickly understand the intentions of the author, and simply accept or reject their thesis, whereas the ambiguity of Houellebecq's text complicates this sense-making process. Furthermore, it is technically possible to appreciate *Soumission* for its artistic quality even if one does not agree with the protagonist's choices or the empirical author's ethos (Korthals Altes, 2014). Yet the results of my analysis do not reflect this logic, as all but one of the political statements on *Soumission* are grounded in the Civic debate, as opposed to the response to *Submission* (37.5% Inspired debate). This suggests that the organic/autonomous divide certainly has implications for the interpretation and framing of the cultural product, but that the precise way in which it is framed or emplotted (configuration) plays a more decisive role in activating Civic or Inspired debates, discourses and (extreme) affects. Finally, another explanation for the different response to both cultural products could be that Houellebecq's *Soumission* simply is a more powerful narrative, as it presents a highly shocking scenario to its readers. Felski (2008) defines shock as "a reaction to what is startling, painful, even horrifying" (p. 105), and lists it as one of the four main modes of the reader's engagement with literary texts. To further examine this possibility, it would be necessary to include additional case studies that deal with shock in different ways.

Thus, the different nature of both case studies does not seem to determine the type of debate that will follow, but it does define the degree to which a cultural product can be framed or emplotted, given that an autonomous cultural product has no stable interpretation. Ultimately, appropriation of the cultural product is only possible as long as this negotiation of meaning is possible. This is well reflected in the metaphor analysis of both case studies. Although the use of conceptual metaphor is similar over all, in the way that metaphors reflect and feed into confrontational dynamics, there are

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some small differences related to the nature of the case studies. While two regimes of metaphor overlapped in both case studies (DEMAGOGUE and PROPHET), and two were found to be fairly similar (ARTIST and SATIRIST) the FOIL regime was only present in the media debate on Houellebecq's *Soumission*. I interpret this as a direct consequence of the text's polysemy and the cultivated mysticism around the author. In other words, the higher complexity of meaning-making in autonomous cultural products is reflected in the configuration of metaphor regimes.

Finally, it is clear that my work on *Submission* and *Soumission* gave a detailed picture of political and media debates on controversial cultural products. However, in order to test any of the hypotheses stated above, a more systematic comparative analysis is needed. Ideally, such studies would focus on one variable at a time, and incorporate a more elaborate set of countries, time frames or cultural works. As such, my findings could be embedded in a larger context, and lead to a more complete understanding of today's polarized climate, more precisely the configuration of the populist narrative and its multi-layered interaction with culture.

Where to go from here?

Throughout this dissertation I have advocated the rethinking of predominant populist narratives and the creation of more inclusive alternatives. In this final section, I will attempt to concretize this by identifying three groups of societal actors that I believe could play a key role in boosting the desired societal change. As we have seen, such change is necessary given the problematic dichotomous worldview that populists promote, opposing the "good" people to "evil" elites and "alien" Others. While populist parties often detect and address important societal issues (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018), I argued that the answer to those structural political, socio-economic and cultural problems cannot lie in a division of society in terms of "those who matter" and "those who don't". Rather than making the world a better place for the "people" only, I see more potential in cultural narratives that seek to improve the lives of everyone.

I am certainly not the only one to do so. Over the past years, several economists and social scientists openly questioned unbridled neoliberalism, holding it accountable for the growing income and capital disparities, unequal career opportunities, technocracy (Piketty, 2014, 2020; Sandel, 2020), the gender gap, global warming, racism (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019), and mental issues such as stress and loneliness (Hertz, 2020). In denouncing neoliberalism as well as the solutions

proposed by populism, these authors suggest alternative policies that could improve society as a whole. For instance, Arruzza et al. (2019) coined the notion of “feminism for the 99%”, an intersectional framework that they describe as follows: “standing for all who are exploited, dominated, and oppressed, it aims to become a source of hope for the whole of humanity” (p. 14). This narrative of hope is in clear dissonance with current (populist) narratives in which fear predominates (Castells et al., 2012; Wodak, 2015).

As such, I consider academic and non-academic authors a first group that could greatly contribute to the development of new ideas, narratives and models of what the 21st century should look like. These narratives typically present an alternative to the culture of fear, by focusing on positive affects such as solidarity (Hertz, 2020; Sandel, 2020) and compassion (Bloom, 2016). Another example worth mentioning is the book *Humankind: a hopeful history* by the Dutch author Rutger Bregman (2020), who refutes the widespread belief in the Western world that human beings are intrinsically evil and need to be controlled with repressive institutions. Instead, Bregman argues that humans more often than not attempt to do the right thing, intend to help each other, and that most of them can be trusted – a sharp contrast with our (neoliberal) societal system that is based on institutionalized distrust, punishment and expulsion (cf. Sassen, 2014). This positive self-representation could inspire solidarity and hope rather than reproduce fear of fellow citizens as well as immigrants and other minorities.

In the previous chapters, I already referred to the notion of equaliberty (Balibar, 2014), that I believe to be essential for any truly inclusive cultural narrative. According to Balibar, freedom cannot exist without equality, and equality cannot flourish without liberty. As my analysis has shown, the discourses of identification/appropriation used by populist actors champion freedom but not equality, while the opposite is true for the discourse of resistance, employed by anti-populists. Both discourses are therefore problematic. The populist interpretation of freedom that is suppressing not like-minded Others leads to inequality, and cannot be completely free. In contrast, the anti-populist appeal to equality limits the freedom of not like-minded Others; an equality that is illiberal, and thereby not completely equal. The result of both discourses is thus the same: they lead to an unequal access to liberty. Revealing the shortcomings of both populist and anti-populist narratives, the theory of equaliberty excludes both as realistic options for new cultural narratives. At the same time, it provides a starting

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point for the renewal of cultural narratives that strive to balance both notions of equality and liberty. It is my personal conviction that the national community should only play a limited role in this new paradigm, in which global communities and identities are central.

In order to create such new cultural narratives, I argued that affect and conceptual metaphor should be taken into account. More precisely, rather than reconfiguring cultural narratives that are built on the negative affects fear, anger and grief, positive affects (care, seeking, play) should be at the forefront (Asma & Gabriel, 2019; Panksepp, 2010). Similarly, proved by the fact that metaphors are a helpful tool for articulating these affects, I suggested that new narratives should go beyond the usual metaphors of crisis and war. Instead, we should imagine new semantic domains that highlight a sense of community, solidarity and compassion (Valdivia, 2019). Although characterized by some as a populist party (García Agustín, 2019), the recently established Danish party *Alternativet* (The Alternative) constitutes an interesting example of a new cultural narrative. The party diagnoses three major challenges in the neoliberal society, namely an empathy crisis, a system crisis and a climate crisis, but rather than calling upon fear, its aim is to translate these worries into hopeful politics (García Agustín, 2019).

This is reflected in their manifesto of ideas “The Next Denmark. Freedom and Community – A New Narrative²”, written by former leader Uffe Elbæk. This narrative, which Elbæk considers a “constructive revolt”, seeks to transform the neoliberal economic system into one that is green, that redistributes resources, and that respects human rights and values. Besides this, positive emotions are central in the manifesto, which aims to construct a strong community characterized by “the feeling of meaning”, “a trust culture”, and “a diverse and tolerant Denmark [that] sees our differences as strengths” (p. 8). The centrality of positive affects is typical for the party: “The use of emotions does not aim at shaping a collective subject in society but rather at strengthening the sense of affective belonging by sharing values and participating in the internal dynamics of the party” (García Agustín, 2019, p. 127). García Agustín adds that this principle is further emphasized by the metaphor of “the orchestra playing in

² The full manifesto can be found on <https://alternativet.dk/application/files/1815/2872/9443/thenextdenmark.pdf> (accessed on 31-05-2021).

concert” (p. 126), used to underline the importance of collective effort and a focus on the joyful process instead of the (quantifiable) result.

With their emphasis on positive affects (hope, empathy, care), The Alternative could be considered an inspiring political experiment. It would be worth looking more closely at their use of conceptual metaphor, more precisely metaphors that express collectivity, such as the orchestra, as opposed to more confrontational metaphors (the revolt) that are also present in The Next Denmark. In short, the example clearly shows that politicians and policy makers too can make a difference by forging new movements or establishing political parties with fresh ideas.

Returning to one of the key topics of this dissertation, culture, I will lastly discuss the potential of art, literature and cinema as a breeding ground for societal change. As this dissertation has demonstrated, the two examined cultural products exposed and reinforced societal division. While Houellebecq certainly is one of the most influential authors of the 21st century, and the impact of his cynicism should not be underestimated, this is certainly not true for all contemporary literature. As a matter of fact, new trends and debates are developing, in which a socially and politically engaged art and literature are seen to play a crucial role in new movements of societal activism (so-called “artivism”) (cf. Ricardo, 2013; Steinbock, Ieven, & Valck, 2021; Toth, 2010). Such cultural works could actively challenge patterns of Islamophobia, xenophobia or racism in society, or provide new models of community-building and activism. Examples include the award-winning documentary *Fuocoammare* by Gianfranco Rosi (2016) about the island of Lampedusa, the novel *L’art de perdre* (2017) by Alice Zeniter, portraying the lives of three generations of Algerian immigrants in France, and the polyphonic novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Booker laureate Bernardine Evaristo. I am hopeful that such narratives can actually foster solidarity and compassion with individuals or groups that (young) readers would otherwise only encounter in the news or on social media, where they are usually depicted less poetically.

Finally, I would like to point out the potential role of artists and writers in the renewal of cultural narratives. I am convinced that their creativity and vivid imagination could contribute to the development of new frameworks that bring people together. Literary authors in particular are experts in creating compelling narratives and in mastering the art of metaphor. They know how to manipulate their readers so that they empathize with a certain character, feel happy or sad, and become enchanted,

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“a state of intense involvement” (Felski, 2008, p. 54). Literature and art are powerful devices that are too often underappreciated in today’s society; not only by populist actors, but also by neoliberal governments and their drastic cutbacks on culture. I hope that this dissertation has revealed the importance of culture for understanding contemporary politics and society at large, and that it will also convince readers of its creative potential in imagining the cultural narratives of tomorrow.

Appendices

A – Relative frequency of the Google search query "populisme" in France

Note: The figure includes data from the time period between January 2004 and March 2021.

B – Relative frequency of the Google search query "populisme" in the Netherlands

Note: The figure includes data from the time period between January 2004 and March 2021.

C – Corpus of political statements on the film *Submission*

Politician	Summary of statement	Discourse
Jan Peter Balkenende	It is unacceptable if freely expressing one's opinion would be the reason for such a cruel murder. In the Netherlands people are able to express their opinion and we should make a firm stand for that right.	Liberal
Piet Hein Donner	It is horrible for Van Gogh's family and for the country if this has to do with the recent airing of <i>Submission</i> . If these are the consequences for people who are simply expressing an opinion, then we cannot live here properly anymore.	Liberal
Johan Remkes	Apparently, it is no longer in our society to express your opinion freely without being threatened. This is a severe problem for the legal order of democracy. Of course, the climate in society has coarsened severely for some time now.	Liberal
Maxime Verhagen	Whatever you say, it should never lead to you being murdered.	Liberal
Wouter Bos	I summon everyone to condemn this murder uncompromisingly and to most urgently devote themselves to free speech and free society. I am aware that there are sharp contrasts in neighborhoods and cities between fanatics and people with common sense.	Liberal
Geert Wilders	Van Gogh's murder is "bestial" and "disgusting", but I will not stop. Of course, I fear terrorist violence, but I will continue my parliamentary work and will not withhold my opinions on Islam, but I will not add fuel to the fire.	Identification
Ayaan Hirsi Ali	I am sad for Theo's death, a "ritual slaughter", and furious because the Amsterdam police and justice departments did not protect van Gogh sufficiently. I also feel guilty for involving him in the production of <i>Submission</i> . Theo's death should give rise to a strong stance against Islamic extremism.	Identification
André Rouvoet	I have hesitated from the start whether <i>Submission</i> was the right way to achieve the goal. The film's intentions are noble, but it deals with religious feelings, with which you should be careful.	Resistance
Gerrit Zalm	After I viewed <i>Submission</i> , I thought that the combination of Qur'an texts and naked bodies was unfortunate, and I wondered if it was the right way to reach out to Muslims. At the same time, <i>Submission</i> is not crossing a line, it should be possible to make such a film in the Netherlands.	Liberal
Henk Kamp	Hirsi Ali has very quickly become an authority. She is sensible, brave and intelligent, but she can also take criticism, which is important in politics. She has achieved a lot during her time as a politician.	Liberal
Laurens Jan Brinkhorst	I was worried when I saw <i>Submission</i> , you know what happens when you light a cigarette in a munition depot. The	Resistance

	film is foolish and it is understandable that Muslims took it as an offense. Polarizing and provoking is not the way to solve deep societal issues, and this has nothing to do with free speech. You should think before you insult someone.	
Rita Verdonk	<i>Submission</i> is an impressive complaint against the position of women in the Muslim world. In order to achieve change, controversial methods are sometimes necessary, think about emancipation of women in the Netherlands. I agree with Hirsi Ali but would never use the medium of film. I aim to achieve change in my role of minister.	Identification
Marco Borghezio	Airing <i>Submission</i> in the European Parliament is the appropriate response to the silencing of <i>Submission</i> and Van Gogh's sacrifice, because it deals with the position of Muslim women.	Identification
Marco Borghezio	Forbidding this film is surrendering to the murderer of Theo van Gogh. The European Parliament thus restricts the freedom of speech.	Identification
Ayaan Hirsi Ali	I wanted to tell Theo that he was "stout", a "bad boy", for willfully hurting and insulting people publicly. You didn't make <i>Submission</i> as a provocation, but it was a noble act to make visible the suffering of Muslim women. You saw the real problem Islam was posing, and you were proven right in the cruelest way.	Identification
Christian Tybring-Gjedde	Nominated Hirsi Ali as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize 2006, because she fights for equality, equal treatment, freedom of speech and freedom of religion, putting her life at stake. She is a fantastic woman, who, in spite of threats and constant surveillance, doesn't give up her fight.	Identification
Ben Bot	The Dutch government doesn't see any objections to <i>Submission part 2</i> , but the Netherlands should accept the eventual consequences.	Liberal
Jozias van Aartsen	Hirsi Ali's departure from the Netherlands is painful and is telling for the state of our country: overly sensitive and provincial.	Liberal
Hans Wiegel	Hirsi Ali is a brave woman, but her political positions were polarizing, I would often not agree with her. After her relocation to the US we will probably not hear much from Hirsi Ali again, which I don't regret.	Resistance
Hans van Baalen	A fantastic person, who fought for human rights and who warned for the dangers of religious fanaticism.	Identification
Klaas Jeroen Terwal	By putting all Muslims in one box and being extremely harsh on them, she made us lose many Muslim voters.	Resistance
Frits Bolkestein	Hirsi Ali is right to denounce the subordination of Muslim women, a message that can be compared to the movement of the Suffragettes. Hirsi Ali's mostly left-wing critics of are favoring "the dogma of multiculturalism" over "the emancipation of women". Did Ayaan insult Islam? Did Luther, Molière and Darwin insult Christianity? I don't see	Identification

	why we cannot criticize Islam, and we need the help of Muslims to avoid Islamic terrorism.	
Rama Yade	France thinks that Hirsi Ali, a Voltaire of our times, should be protected. We are your friends, the eternal France, of 1789, of Hugo, of De Gaulle, and we are thinking about ways to naturalize Hirsi Ali.	Identification
Geert Wilders	I didn't know Van Gogh personally, but we had similar thoughts on integration and Islam. Van Gogh's use of the word "goat fuckers" was funny, although I wouldn't use it myself. He deserves a big compliment for helping Hirsi Ali with her film, and it is sad that five years later, we haven't learned anything, freedom of speech has been curtailed. This is a huge insult for Van Gogh.	Identification

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Samenvatting

Lange tijd is verondersteld dat populisme en cultuur simpelweg elkaars tegenpolen waren. Populistische politici zouden weinig op hebben met cultuur, die gezien wordt als elitair. Dit blijkt bijvoorbeeld uit de bekende uitspraak van Geert Wilders in 2007 waarin hij spreekt over zogenaamde “linkse hobby’s” waar wat hem betreft fors op mocht worden bezuinigd. Tegelijkertijd zou in de culturele wereld de opkomst van het populisme met argusogen worden bekeken. Zo wordt cultuur vaak gepresenteerd als een manier om het populisme beter te doorgronden of zelfs onschadelijk te maken. Een duidelijk voorbeeld hiervan is de dystopische roman *1984* van George Orwell uit 1948, die kort na de verkiezing van Donald Trump tot president van de Verenigde Staten opnieuw in de bestsellerlijsten terechtkwam. Zo bezien beschouwen populistten cultuur als een verspilling van tijd en geld, terwijl de culturele wereld zich uiterst kritisch opstelt ten opzichte van het populisme. In dit proefschrift heb ik geprobeerd om deze zienswijze te nuanceren, door aan te tonen dat de relatie tussen populisme en cultuur veel meer is dan wederzijdse afwijzing. Ondanks hun kritische houding tegenover cultuur, maken populistten er juist zelf handig gebruik van. Om die reden stel ik dat deze culturele component, die nog vaak ondergeschikt is aan politieke of economische analyses, een centraal onderdeel zou moeten zijn van de studie van het hedendaagse populisme.

Het populisme wordt veelal gedefinieerd als een “dunne” ideologie, die altijd voorkomt in combinatie met een andere ideologie (bijvoorbeeld het socialisme of het nativisme). Zo kan het populisme dus verschillende verschijningsvormen hebben, vaak versimpeld weergegeven als links-populisme en rechts-populisme, die soms op het eerste gezicht weinig met elkaar gemeen lijken te hebben. Volgens Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) hebben alle vormen van populisme twee centrale kenmerken. Ten eerste is er sprake van een antagonistisch wereldbeeld waarin twee groepen stevast tegenover elkaar worden gepositioneerd: wij tegen zij. Ten tweede staat de soevereiniteit van een puur en onschuldig volk altijd centraal. Zoals ik bespreek in hoofdstuk 1 resulteert dit in een verticale en een horizontale dichotomie, waarvan de eerste de tegenstelling tussen het volk en de elite benadrukt, en de laatste die tussen het volk en de nader te definiëren Ander. Vaak is het echter zo dat beide dichotomieën een dynamisch geheel vormen, waarbij populistten bijvoorbeeld de elite verwijten dat

ze te veel immigranten toelaten, en daarmee het belang van anderen boven dat van het volk stellen.

Binnen het populisme zijn dus drie groepen van belang; het volk (dat van nature goed is), de elite (corrupt) en de Ander (een bedreiging). Maar hoe komen deze drie entiteiten precies tot stand? In mijn proefschrift beargumenteer ik dat cultuur een essentieel onderdeel is voor de vorming van deze groepen. Het stelt populistten in staat om het volk te positioneren aan de hand van diens culturele kenmerken, en anderen uit te sluiten omdat zij niet aan deze specifieke definitie (kunnen) voldoen. Het benadrukken van culturele overeenkomsten maakt de band tussen het volk tastbaar, terwijl een nadruk op culturele verschillen de indruk wekt dat de groepen uiteindelijk onverenigbaar zijn. Volgens die logica is de uitsluiting van zowel de elite als de Ander dus legitiem.

In hoofdstuk 2 beschrijf ik dat deze uitsluiting op de verticale dichotomie plaatsvindt door een afwijzing van de elitecultuur en de daarbij behorende normen en conventies. Zo manifesteren populistten zich graag door authentiek taalgebruik (“doe normaal man!”), een eigen visie op kledingvoorschriften (denk aan het ontblote bovenlijf van Matteo Salvini), of door hun voorkeur voor “gewoon” eten (Donald Trump en zijn geliefde hamburgers). Op de horizontale dichotomie worden uitingen van hybride cultuur uitgesloten, die als te internationaal of multicultureel beschouwd worden. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan de commotie die ontstond toen Florian Philippot, de toenmalige rechterhand van Marine Le Pen, een foto op Twitter postte waarop hij met zijn campagne team aan het eten was in een Marokkaans restaurant in Straatsburg. Uit de reacties was op te maken dat de keuze voor exotische couscous in plaats van het regionale gerecht *choucroute* in strijd werd geacht met het gedachtegoed van het Rassemblement National. Het onderscheid tussen de verticale en horizontale dichotomieën is belangrijk, omdat niet alle populistten ook beide dimensies expliciet benoemen. Daarnaast blijkt uit mijn analyse dat populistten zich ook mengen in debatten over zogenaamde hoge cultuur. Thierry Baudet bijvoorbeeld belichaamt de elitecultuur met zijn verwijzingen naar klassieke muziek en Griekse filosofie, maar doet dit volgens mijn redenering voornamelijk om de Ander als cultureel minderwaardig neer te zetten, waardoor deze Ander automatisch een bedreiging vormt voor de eigen, als superieur beschouwde, cultuur. Indirect is dit ook een punt van kritiek richting de elite, die de Europese beschaving niet voldoende zou beschermen.

In mijn proefschrift gebruik het begrip *Leitkultur* (Pautz, 2005; Tibi, 2001) om de cultuuropvatting te benoemen die het gevolg is van de bovengenoemde verticale en horizontale uitsluitingsmechanismen. Ik stel dat deze *Leitkultur* de socioculturele status en leefwijzen – of om met Bourdieu te spreken, de *habitus* – van het volk claimt als authentiek en puur. In de woorden van Westheuser (2020a) leidt dit tot een verering van de “sociocultural low”, waarin de “culturally familiar” (Ylä-Anttila, 2017) een centrale plaats inneemt. Deze *Leitkultur* beslaat een brede definitie van cultuur, van immateriële zaken als normen, waarden, gebruiken en tradities tot materiële vormen van kunst. Ik maak hierin het onderscheid tussen organische culturele producten, die gemaakt zijn met de bedoeling om de specifieke politieke boodschap te onderschrijven, en autonome culturele producten, waarvoor dit niet geldt. Voorbeelden van de eerste categorie zijn de film *Fitna* (2008) van Geert Wilders, het essay *Le Suicide Français* (2014) van Eric Zemmour en het polemische pamflet *Le Grand Remplacement* (2011) van Renaud Camus. Houellebecq’s roman *Soumission* (2015) daarentegen beschouw ik als voorbeeld van een autonoom cultureel product, dat weliswaar vaak wordt gelinkt aan rechts-populistische ideeën, maar dat in feite een hoge mate van ambiguïteit aan de dag legt. Zoals ik in een eerdere publicatie reeds concludeerde is dit een gevolg van Houellebecq’s gewiekste gebruik van ironie, spot en paradox.

Om te begrijpen hoe deze verschillende uitingen van cultuur zich precies vertalen naar een politieke retoriek, stel ik een circulair proces voor dat bestaat uit de drie stappen prefiguratie, configuratie en refiguratie. Deze drie fasen zijn gebaseerd op de theorie van mimesis van de Franse filosoof Paul Ricoeur, die de samenhang bestudeert tussen de achtergrond van lezers en hun kijk op de wereld (prefiguratie), hun specifieke omgang met en interpretatie van teksten en verhalen (configuratie), en het feedback effect van deze verhalen op hun realiteit (refiguratie). In het geval van de bovengenoemde roman *Soumission*, waarin Houellebecq een toekomstig islamitisch Frankrijk schetst, speelt politieke overtuiging een grote rol in het activeren van ideeën over belangrijke thema’s in het boek, met name de politieke invloed van Moslims in Frankrijk. Dit komt vervolgens duidelijk naar voren uit de manier waarop politici de tekst interpreteren en framen. Tot zover zien we dat de wereld buiten de tekst een rol speelt in de interpretatie van de roman, maar de roman beïnvloedt op zijn beurt ook weer de wereld buiten de tekst. Het meest voor de hand liggende voorbeeld hiervan is de opname van *Soumission* in een leeslijst van het Rassemblement National, en wel in

de categorie “formation générale”; algemene ontwikkeling. We zien hier dus hoe het boek door het RN wordt geïnterpreteerd als serieuze waarschuwing voor de nabije toekomst, hetgeen hun (eerdere) standpunten over de Islam rechtvaardigt dan wel bevestigt. Daarnaast wordt het boek zelf ingezet als propaganda voor hun eigen politieke programma, hoewel Houellebecq steevast ontkent het met die intentie te hebben geschreven.

Kort gezegd maken populistten dus gebruik van cultuur om hun dichotome wereldbeeld, gebaseerd op een positief zelfbeeld en een negatief beeld van de elite en de Ander, te creëren en onderbouwen. Dit uit zich bijvoorbeeld in een afkeer van elitecultuur of hybride vormen van cultuur, en soms ook allebei. Zoals hierboven beschreven is cultuur uitermate geschikt voor het verbinden van de eigen identiteit, en het uitsluiten van anderen op basis van culturele andersheid. Ik beargumenteer in hoofdstuk 3 dat affect, een pre-cognitieve en dus onbewuste emotionele gemoedstoestand (Leys, 2011), een cruciaal onderdeel is van deze culturele band. Zo wordt dit wij-gevoel opgewekt door positieve affecten als genegenheid en trots, en worden negatieve affecten als angst, boosheid en jaloezie gelinkt aan de aanwezigheid van de elite en de Ander. Het aanboren van deze tribale gevoelens ten opzichte van de eigen identiteit en die van anderen is een belangrijk deel van het succes van het populisme.

Om beter te doorgronden hoe deze affecten dan precies worden opgeroepen gebruik ik de term “narratief”. Deze term heeft betrekking op het actief interpreteren van het eigen bestaan, een soort zingeving, die sterk ethisch is geladen (Meretoja, 2017). Mensen zijn geneigd om hun dagelijkse ervaringen als een logisch geheel te presenteren en te structureren, met als gevolg dat we onszelf en elkaar constant verhalen vertellen (Damasio, 2018; Meretoja, 2017; Ricoeur, 1991). Dit geldt ook voor groepen; politieke partijen hebben een narratief (bijvoorbeeld een populistisch narratief), en volkeren gebruiken een cultureel narratief, een gezamenlijk en geïnstitutionaliseerd verhaal over wie zij zijn en waar ze voor staan, om hun onderlinge band te benadrukken en zichzelf als uniek te presenteren. Het is belangrijk om te onderstrepen dat een narratief een actief proces is – het is altijd in beweging – en dat het een sterk performatief karakter heeft; door het uitdragen van een bepaald narratief wordt dit uiteindelijk realiteit.

In hoofdstuk 3 ga ik eveneens in op het belang van conceptuele metaforen (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) in het cultureel narratief. Metaforen zorgen ervoor dat een

complexe of abstracte situatie wordt vertaald in termen van een bekend en meestal concreet fenomeen; denk bijvoorbeeld aan de Europese Unie die wordt voorgesteld als een familie, of de vluchtelingen crisis als een tsunami. Het is duidelijk dat het eerste voorbeeld vooral warme gevoelens zal opwekken ten opzichte van de EU, terwijl het tweede voorbeeld juist angst zaait voor een ongecontroleerde en ontwrichtende toeloop van vluchtelingen. Conceptuele metaforen sturen dus op subtiel wijze onze kijk op de realiteit, en activeren daarnaast bepaalde positieve of negatieve affecten. Het analyseren van metafoorgebruik in de politiek en de media kan dus meer inzicht verschaffen in de manier waarop een (populistisch) cultureel narratief is gevormd. Daarnaast biedt het aanknopingspunten om dit narratief zodanig te hervormen dat er geen groepen mensen worden uitgesloten.

Uit het bovenstaande blijkt dat de relatie tussen cultuur en populisme zich op twee verschillende niveaus manifesteert. Ten eerste maken populistten zelf actief gebruik van cultuur met als doel hun narratief vorm te geven; het centraal stellen van een puur en authentiek volk wiens voortbestaan ernstig wordt bedreigd door zowel een corrupte elite als een culturele Ander. Ten tweede beïnvloedt de verdere verspreiding van een dergelijk “wij” vs. “zij” narratief breed gedragen ideeën over de eigen identiteit en die van de Ander. Dit leidt tot een veranderende kijk op cultuur in de samenleving als geheel. Het is daarom van groot belang dat, zoals ik in hoofdstuk 4 benadruk, de studie van populisme inzichten uit verschillende disciplines combineert. Het is een veelzijdig en complex politiek en cultureel fenomeen, en dat vraagt om een interdisciplinaire aanpak die zowel kwalitatieve als kwantitatieve onderzoeksmethoden combineert. In mijn analyse maak ik gebruik van Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) en Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), die het mogelijk maken om te focussen op de constructie en verspreiding van politieke en culturele narratieven. Dit stelt mij in staat om populisme niet te beschouwen als een paar geïsoleerde politieke partijen die opkomen voor de belangen van de zogenaamde boze witte mannen, maar eerder als een dichotomisch wereldbeeld dat tot ver in de haarvaten van onze maatschappij is doorgedrongen.

In hoofdstukken 5 en 6 breng ik het bovenstaande theoretische en methodologische raamwerk in de praktijk. Het is daarbij mijn doel om beter te begrijpen hoe populistten zich manifesteren in publieke debatten rondom de controversiële culturele producten *Submission* (2004) van Ayaan Hirsi Ali en Theo van Gogh en *Soumission* (2015) van Michel Houellebecq. Hierbij zal ik me richten op

Nederland en Frankrijk, de landen waar deze producten werden gepubliceerd, en waar ze bij hun verschijning veel ophef veroorzaakten. In beide gevallen is dit voornamelijk te verklaren door de keuze van een omstreden thema (de islam) en een controversiële aanpak (de aanwezigheid van aanstootgevende beelden of een choquerend plot). Daarnaast hebben beide werken een sterke link met terroristisch geweld; Van Gogh werd enkele maanden na de filmvertoning op straat doodgeschoten, en de publicatie van *Soumission* viel samen met de aanslag op het satirische weekblad *Charlie Hebdo*. Het is duidelijk dat beide geweldsuitpattingen de kijk op de makers en hun werk heeft gevormd. Zo werden bestaande negatieve sentimenten ten opzichte van moslims versterkt door de moord op Van Gogh, en werd de terreurdaad als bewijs gezien voor het gevaar dat moslims zouden vormen voor de Westerse maatschappij. Houellebecq werd door sommige lezers geprezen om zijn zogenaamde voorspellende gaven, terwijl anderen hem verweten misbruik te maken van een al gespannen maatschappelijk klimaat. In beide gevallen ontstond er een levendig politiek en maatschappelijk debat over de vraag of dergelijke culturele producten een positieve of juist negatieve bijdrage leveren aan de maatschappelijke discussie over de multiculturele samenleving en de plaats van de islam daarin. Het is daarom ook interessant om specifiek naar Nederland en Frankrijk te kijken, twee landen met aanzienlijke rechts-populistische partijen.

Mijn analyse bestudeert in het bijzonder de rol van populistische politici in deze debatten, maar trekt dit ook breder door te kijken naar de aanwezigheid van populistische “wij” vs. “zij” retoriek bij andere politici en in nieuwsartikelen die verschenen in de mainstream media. Drie bevindingen springen het meest in het oog. Ten eerste bevestigen beide analyses dat populistten inderdaad een prominente bijdrage leveren aan culturele debatten, ook als het gaat om complexe literaire werken zoals dat van Houellebecq. Ten tweede concludeer ik dat populistische retoriek niet beperkt blijft tot populistische politici. Reacties van populistten vertonen grote overeenkomsten met die van politici van centrumrechtse partijen op het gebied van affecten en metafoorgebruik. Daarnaast blijken narratieven die juist hard stelling nemen tegen het populisme (het zogenaamde anti-populisme) ook gestoeld op uitsluitingsmechanismen, waarbij de populistische Ander als xenofob wordt weggezet. Dit laat naar mijn mening zien hoe diep verankerd dit soort antagonistische wereldbeelden zijn in onze maatschappij, en hoe groot de noodzaak is voor een ander, inclusiever, narratief.

Ten derde brengt de vergelijking tussen *Submission* en *Soumission* aan het licht dat de politieke debatten in de Franse casus sterker gepolariseerd zijn dan in de Nederlandse. Waar in de debatten rondom *Submission* nog ruim een derde van de reacties werd geclassificeerd als een liberaal *laissez-faire* discours, worden de debatten naar aanleiding van *Soumission* gemarkeerd door sterke politieke stellingname. Het boek wordt ofwel gepresenteerd als een waarheidsgetrouwe weergave van de huidige politieke situatie, die vraagt om een snel ingrijpen, ofwel het boek wordt gezien als een demagogisch pamflet dat bestaande verschillen tussen groepen alleen maar vergroot. Daarnaast is er in de Franse casus sprake van extremere affecten. Mogelijk is dit verschil te verklaren door politieke verschillen tussen Frankrijk en Nederland, of is er de afgelopen 20 jaar een verharding opgetreden in het politieke debat. Vervolgonderzoek, waarin gebruik wordt gemaakt van een brede selectie aan casestudy's, zou kunnen uitwijzen welke factor doorslaggevend is.

Mijn analyses verschaffen nieuw inzicht in de manier waarop het populistische narratief is opgebouwd, hoe het in de praktijk werkt, en hoe wijdverbreid het is in de Nederlandse en Franse politiek en mainstream media. Het voert daarnaast aan dat het populistische narratief, net als anti-populistische alternatieven, uiteindelijk leiden tot verharding en verdeling. Door de uitsluiting van zekere groepen zijn zij niet gericht op het welzijn van de samenleving als geheel, maar slechts op dat van hun eigen doelgroep, meestal ten koste van anderen. De bevindingen van mijn onderzoek bieden echter ook de kans om populistische narratieven te hervormen, bijvoorbeeld door de nadruk te leggen op positieve affecten als compassie en solidariteit in plaats van de nu dominerende negatieve affecten angst en woede. Het zal niet verbazen dat ik conceptuele metaforen van centraal belang acht bij het bewerkstelligen van een dergelijke ambitie. Metaforische beelden van oorlog, natuurrampen en crisis werken angst en woede in de hand, en het is daarom hoog tijd om na te denken over alternatieve metaforen die positieve sentimenten kunnen vertalen. Het is om die reden dat mijn proefschrift eindigt met een oproep aan politici, journalisten, academici en kunstenaars, waaronder literaire auteurs, om actief bij te dragen aan de ontwikkeling van zo'n nieuw narratief. Ook voer ik enkele suggesties aan over hoe zo'n narratief eruit zou kunnen zien. Het mag voor zich spreken dat de rol van cultuur daarbij op waarde moet worden geschat.