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Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* and (the Means of Uncovering) the Truth

(Smjer: engleska književnost i kultura)

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# 1. Introduction

The aim of the thesis is to provide an exploration of the representation of truth in Christos Tsiolkas' 2008 novel *The Slap* and subsequently propose the very truth of the novel itself. This requires that, firstly, the notion of truth, debated since the dawn of thought in numerous fields of human endeavour and inevitably escaping definitiveness, be put into a much narrower context. Therefore, the thesis will first consider this evasive notion in the context of literature from the perspectives of both aesthetic and literary theory. Since aesthetic theory is an especially vast, complex field laden with contradictions, its key concepts and points (of conflict) will be introduced by relying on the philosophical underpinning of Jerrold Levinson and John Powell Ward, while Kenneth Dorter's theory of aesthetic truth will be tested against core principles of literary theories highly relevant for Tsiolkas' novel. Secondly, the analysis will turn to the text of *The Slap* in order to examine the way truth is presented in the novel, with the final goal of identifying a universal truth of *The Slap*'s microcosm based on a close-reading of the text. It will be argued that the novel's hard-boiled prose and crude aesthetic do not serve simply to shock and provoke controversy, but to defamiliarise for the reader, especially the Australian one, their own hypocrisy and ugliness in order to vindicate the value of uncertainty in the globalised world.

## 1.1. The Truth in Literature

Originating in philosophy, the notion of truth is both fundamental and elusive when it comes to literature. The relationship towards truth constitutes one of key determinants that differentiate literary theories. Consequently, there is no consensus thereon. Though little justice can be done to the expansiveness and complexity of the subject through a potted history, a brief theoretical overview is indispensable for the analysis which is to follow. The subject will be approached from different angles and from the perspective of both aesthetic and literary theory, with emphasis on the points of conflict especially relevant for the novel in question.

Philosophically, the notion of truth in art is closely linked to the equally elusive notion of aesthetic value. Aesthetic theory is "devoted to conceptual and theoretical inquiry

into art and aesthetic experience” (Levinson 3), meaning, namely, that it is concerned with the questions of what *good* art is, what its value is, and in what conditions (in the broadest sense) can this goodness be determined. As aesthetic theory was, up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a study of *beauty* found in art and nature rather than a “philosophy of art,” these questions are often interwoven with those regarding the notion of beauty (Levinson 25). This is especially problematic in literature, as there is no direct sensory experience. It is also worth noting that, when it comes to literature, the term “aesthetic” is widely used to describe the main determinants of specific literary movement, such as, for example, a postmodern aesthetic. John Powell Ward’s survey of some of the key points in the debate concerning art and the aesthetic reveals the complexity of the topic:

“As to what is meant by aesthetic value [...] *I don’t know*,” wrote Mark Sagoff in 1981 (his emphasis), while Clifford Geertz had declared in 1974 that “art is notoriously hard to talk about.” In April 1999 the usually so-confident Brian Sewell stated that “I don’t know what art is [though] I know what it is not.” (1) [...] Diametrically opposed positions pervaded the criticism of centuries. For Plato art was harmful, for Aristotle the reverse. For Hegel and John Stuart Mill art embodied perfection, for Ruskin and Hardy the touch of imperfection was hallmark. For Auden and Maugham attention-span to beauty was brief, for Keats it lasted forever. For Kant the aesthetic has no concept at all. The work of art is desired, but our very desire for its existence lets it resist us. In a famous article of 1956, Morris Weitz stated that “aesthetic theory is a logically vain attempt to define what cannot be defined [...],” for art simply “has no necessary or sufficient conditions.” (Ward 1-2)

The thesis will, therefore, focus on a specific question of aesthetic theory – that of aesthetic truth. Dorte provides a take on that notion when he writes about the two types of knowledge whose juxtaposition dates all the way back to Plato: rational and irrational, i.e. conceptual and aesthetic (37). He designates four spheres of human experience in which art can express a certain truth: “1) our emotions, 2) cultural values, 3) sensory experience, 4) the elusive *significance* of our experience” (37). Respectively, they imply the following:

- 1) [t]o be aesthetically effective, the feelings [in a work of art] expressed must reflect more than the personal idiosyncrasies of the artist: [...] the feelings must be held in common, the particular must reveal the universal. In this sense art is able to disclose truth about our shared life of feeling. [...]
- 2) [e]ven when an artist does not set out deliberately to influence, interpret, or simply express the values of his culture, he will unavoidably reflect them, and even if a work of art is a failure of expression in other respects, this feature remains in evidence. (Dorter 38)

Dorter exemplifies this by Hegel's *Zeitgeist* and his claim that the very nature of art is to reflect the culture of the period in which it is created and further corroborates it with Heidegger's remark that "the nation first returns to itself for the fulfilment of its vocation" through art (38). The third category of truth is mainly concerned with non-literary properties (color, shape, sound, scent, taste and feel in Dorter), though what Dorter in essence describes here is the effect that the Russian Formalists called *ostranenie*:

"defamiliarization" or "making strange", though one might also think here of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's idea that art can provide a "freshness of sensation". The basic point, in any case, is hardly strange: a poem's dense, unfamiliar, and difficult language can induce readers to attend more carefully, making them refrain from habitual or 'stock' responses and a purely instrumental, nonaesthetic mode of comprehension. (Levinson 744)

The final category is clearly the most philosophical (i.e. ontological):

In the case of particular events we can give particular explanations, but when such questions are addressed to some aspect of the world of experience as a whole, they can be answered only in terms of something outside that range of experience itself, something that does not appear within the world but which imparts significance to it. (Dorter 39)

Dorter then renames these categories to fully reflect their implications, as will be discussed anon: "1) individual subjective feeling, 2) the collective subjectivity of a historic people, 3) the primitive perceptual qualities that constitute our experience from below, 4) the

significance that illuminates its meaning from above” (40). As Dorter goes on to vindicate the value of aesthetic knowledge against the backdrop of Plato’s philosophies, here follows a brief overview of the development of literary theory in the context of literary truth, which serves a practical purpose of laying the groundwork for the analysis of this complex notion in *The Slap*.

Like aesthetics, liberal humanism, dubbed “theory before theory” by Barry (17), is concerned with good literature, but it does not know what this implies: it is timeless, has meaning without context and can indeed only be properly understood if studied in isolation. Its purpose is to teach moral values, albeit implicitly; form follows function and ideas are enacted, *shown*, not expressed. Finally, that is how a work of literature achieves *sincerity*. The roots of this approach formed in the 1830s and 1840s when teaching literature was introduced into universities, but the consensus was established between 1930s and 1950s. The decades to come brought waves of literary theories opposing the liberal humanist standpoint (Barry 20-22).

The Russian Formalist critics set out to make the study of literature scientific, “contiguous with [linguistics] in regard to the material under investigation, but [...] approaching that material from a different angle and with different kinds of problems to solve” (Eichenbaum 8). This resulted in what Eichenbaum called “The Formal Method,” an approach based on the conviction that

the object of literary science, as literary science, ought to be the investigation of the specific properties of literary material, of the properties that distinguish such material from material of any other kind, notwithstanding the fact that its secondary and oblique features make that material properly and legitimately exploitable, as auxiliary material, by other disciplines. (7)

In Jakobson’s words, the “object of study in literary science is not literature but ‘literariness,’ that is, what makes a given work a literary work” (qtd. in Eichenbaum 7). Therefore, *Poetic language*, the object of literary science, is differentiated from *practical language* as a language system in which form does not simply accompany meaning, but has autonomous value (Eichenbaum 8): “The facts testified that the specificity of art is expressed not in the

elements that go to make up a work but in the special way they are used. By the same token, the concept of 'form' took on a different meaning; it no longer had to be paired with any other concept, it no longer needed correlation" (Eichenbaum 9).

A fundamental formalist concept is Shklovsky's *ostraneniye*, or "defamiliarisation," already introduced in the thesis as it comprises Dorter's third category of truth. Or, in the wording of Shklovsky:

In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark – that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism or perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension in space, but, so to speak, in its continuity. (19)

Defamiliarisation is both an example of content's dependency on form and a technique which differentiates poetic and practical language. Moreover, Shklovsky maintains that "the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important" (16).

Structuralism, which "derives both historically and logically from Formalism" (Rivkin & Ryan 53) found, however, that nothing can be properly understood in isolation as everything is a part of a more abstract structure. Moreover, those structures are not objectively in the world as such; meaning is attributed and not intrinsic to them. This is true of text, language and culture as well. As Culler writes, "Structuralism is thus based, in the first instance, on the realization that if human actions or productions have a meaning there must be an underlying system of distinctions and conventions which makes this meaning possible" ("The Linguistic Foundation" 56). Culler reiterates the correlation between language and culture established by Levi-Strauss:



The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations, both internal and external. (“The Linguistic Foundation” 56)

Culler further points out that the range of concepts and methods useful for such an analysis is fairly restricted. Saussure's differentiation of *langue* from *parole* is singled out as the

basic distinction on which modern linguistics rests, and which is equally crucial to the structuralist enterprise in other fields. [...] The former is a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms, while the latter comprises the actual manifestations of the system in speech and writing” (“The Linguistic Foundation” 58)

Therefore, when looking at a literary work, content is disregarded as unimportant in itself and attention is focused on building a *scheme* of the text's internal relations in terms of parallels, contrasts and patterns, for example, in order to reveal the way it functions, rather than what its function is. As opposed to formalists, however, structuralists maintain that this cannot be determined without studying the text in terms of its (external) relations to more abstract structures governed by established rules, such as genre, for example, of which the particular text is only a manifestation.

Poststructuralism follows their predecessors' ideas to their final conclusion, which, according to them, is that there is no possibility of establishing objective knowledge; if meaning is attributed, everything is inherently relative. Nietzsche asks and answers the question “What therefore is truth?” in the following terms:

A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a notion fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless

to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal. (Nietzsche 263)

Since this undermines the very notion of authority and with it the possibility of reliable validation, what this means for literature is that texts are fully independent and their meaning is actually produced by the reader time and again. Barthes famously calls this the death of the author (and the birth of the reader), stating that “a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original” (4). Deleuze and Guattari (fittingly) almost paraphrase this when they, also famously, write that a “book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements” (Deleuze & Guattari 3). Culler neatly lays down the difference between structuralism and poststructuralism:

In simplest terms, structuralists take linguistics as a model and attempt to develop “grammars” —systematic inventories of elements and their possibilities of combination—that would account for the form and meaning of literary works; post-structuralists investigate the way in which this project is subverted by the workings of the texts themselves [through deconstruction]. Structuralists are convinced that systematic knowledge is possible; post-structuralist claim to know only the impossibility of this knowledge. (*Deconstruction* 22)

Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* “announced a new moment in cultural history called ‘Post-Modernism’.” (Rivkin & Ryan 355). Postmodernism shares poststructuralism’s kind of nihilism, but Lyotard defines the postmodern condition specifically “as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), which aim to offer a comprehensive and therefore totalising truth and “determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what

they do” (Lyotard 23). Lyotard maintains that “[m]odernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities [...] (77) Postmodernism [...] is [therefore] not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (79).

It is worth noting at this point that Dörner’s first category of truth is, therefore, manifoldly dismissed as such since nothing particular can ever reveal the universal.

While all of literary theory finds liberal humanism biased and limited, post-colonialism takes it personally. To maintain that great literature is universal and timeless and therefore true is to marginalise those to whom its truth does not apply. Post-colonial criticism, in Bhabha’s words, “bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order” (171). It challenges the self-imposed authority of the Western representation of norms, beliefs, values etc. through “the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ [...] They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples” (Bhabha 171). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write of postcolonial criticism’s future as inevitably strongly engaged with the notion of globalisation:

Theories of globalization have moved, over the last half century, from expressions of the process as “cultural imperialism” or neoimperialism to analyses of the “hybridization”, “diffusion”, “relativization” (Empire 216) [...] When we observe the actual complexities of the cultural interchanges in imperial relationships and, in particular, the activities of the supposed passive subjects of imperialism, we find the beginnings of existing global energies for interchange, circulation and transformation. (*Empire* 217)

Ashcroft himself further dwells on these “actual complexities” in the context of Australia, a country which he deems perhaps the most vivid example of “post-colonial ambivalence” (“Australian Literature” 2). It lies in the fact of Australia simultaneously being “drawn to and repelled by the imperial centre [manifested through strong nationalism and art, respectively]”

(“Australian Literature” 3) and the reality of the fact “that the colonised can be the colonisers, the marginalised can be the marginalisers, that imperial power circulates and produces rather than simply confines” (“Australian Literature” 4). Since Western representations of space, history and language did not match the reality perceived by its new inhabitants (Ashcroft exemplifies this in the context of space, language and history), the colonial experience for them was “an ideological struggle over representation itself” (“Australian Literature” 5). He concludes by deeming Australian literature post-colonial “because it is a literature constantly engaged, in one way or another, with the imperial discourses that ‘constructed’ Australia [...] The term ‘post-colonial’, then, does not refer to a particular way of being, but to a set of struggles that occur nowhere more powerfully or imaginatively than in literature” (“Australian Literature” 12). Finally, Dörner’s second category of truth is therefore strongly dismissed as well, or rather shown to be infinitely more complicated.

In the course of the analysis, the thesis considers and employs some of each of the outlined standpoints and methods. This results in a kind of a methodological hybrid which, other than aiming for a higher level of comprehensiveness, honours the novel’s intrinsic ambiguity.

## 1.2. The Slap

When the Sydney journalist Paul Somerville sat down with Christos Tsiolkas to quiz him on sex, drugs and politics, he noticed Tsiolkas’ specific humbleness:

Tsiolkas is highly quotable but he won’t be reduced to sound bites. He often begins an answer with a wry chuckle, as if to say: how can I compress everything I want to say about *that*? Then, after a series of preliminary observations and anecdotes, he continues with: ‘so, back to your question ...’ But these precursors are not deviations. They are essential to understanding his final position, which he is at pains to show is alert to ambiguities. His sentences are long and heaped with clauses to ensure that the expression of his opinion is adequately nuanced. Many statements are tempered with ‘if you like’ or ‘in my view’. Clearly, this is a less dogmatic man than the uncompromising 28-year-old who wrote *Loaded*. Words such as ‘complexity’, ‘ambiguity’ and ‘paradox’ surface again and again in his responses. It isn’t that

he's sold out, or even mellowed; it's just that he's against fundamentalism in any of its forms, whether political or religious, of the left or the right. (198)

The interview was published in 2002, 6 years before Tsiolkas would publish *The Slap*, preceded by the novels *Loaded* (1995), *The Jesus Man* (1999) and *Dead Europe* (2005). McCann calls *The Slap* “a watershed publication of Tsiolkas’ career” which “transformed him from a writer of local notoriety to an international bestseller” (85). He did not lose his notoriety, but did gain celebrity<sup>1</sup> with this multi-award-winning novel, most notably the winner of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 2009, which earned the title of “the most divisive Booker-nominated novel in years” (Edemariam 2010). What some proclaimed to be “a contemporary Australian masterpiece” (*Australian Bookseller + Publisher*), “[h]ard-edged” and “powerful” (*The Washington Post*),<sup>2</sup> etc. others dismissed as “offensive and cynical and ‘unbelievably misogynistic’ [...] [having] no joy, no love, no hope, no beauty [in it]. [...] Just hideous people beating each other up, either physically or emotionally” (Knight qtd. in Edemariam). The readership is divided as well, and one reader’s review on the novel’s *Goodreads* page stands in particularly amusing opposition to its critical acclaim:

A more apt title would have been “Slaps All Around”, which is what I wanted to do to every character. [...] If this author won an award that wasn't presented by his mother after a panel of close family members voted on a ballot with this single book as the entry, then I am stunned. [...] Many reviewers voiced displeasure with some of the crudeness and explicit scenes in the book. Crude or gratuitous, in the context of a good story, can make perfect sense. Crude and gratuitous because you have nothing else of interest or substance to offer is unforgivable. (“Shawn”)

The reader has exactly three tame sentences before the novel’s aesthetic wakes up: “His eyes still shut, a dream dissolving and already impossible to recall, Hector’s hand

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<sup>1</sup> As McCann argues that, since the novel was adapted for a high-profile and successful television miniseries (which was then further adapted into an “American version” of the miniseries), Tsiolkas was integrated “into a broader media apparatus in which diverse forms of cultural consumption could conveniently undergird each other.” (85)

<sup>2</sup> Reviews printed on the backcover of *The Slap* (London: Penguin Books. 2010).

sluggishly reached across the bed. Good. Aish was up. He let out a victorious fart, burying his face deep into the pillow to escape the clammy methane stink” (Tsiolkas, *The Slap* 1).<sup>3</sup> By the end of the first paragraph there is mention of more farting, pissing, burping and “the moist, heady fragrance of sweet young cunt” (1). The thesis aims to bear witness to both interest and substance *The Slap* has to offer to the reader in the midst and indeed with the help of this aesthetic.

The triggering event of the novel is a slap delivered to another’s child at a friends-and-family barbecue gathering in contemporary suburban Melbourne. The hosts are Hector and Aisha, he a second-generation Greek-Australian public servant, she an Anglo-Indian vet with a successful private practice. The slapper is Harry, a self-made garage owner and Hector’s cousin, and the slapped little Hugo, son of Aisha’s lifelong Anglo-Australian friend Rosie, now a working-class full-time mother who still breastfeeds Hugo at the age of almost four (which is emblematic of her parenting approach), and her alcoholic, failed artist husband Gary, “an exemplary Australian” (256) whose lineage can be traced back to the first convict ships. The guests include Hector’s parents Manolis and Koula, Aisha’s other lifelong friend Anouk, a successful Jewish soap opera writer dating a younger actor, and teenagers Connie, originally a Londoner, and Richie, her Anglo-Australian best friend, having an uneasy affair with Hector and a troubled crush at him, respectively. The novel is divided into eight chapters with different focalisers, namely Hector, Anouk, Harry, Connie, Rosie, Manolis, Aisha and Richie: four men, four women, one of each in their final year of high school, five in their forties and a 71-year-old man. Rosie and Gary press charges against Harry and the incident leaves the social group divided, but not simply into two opposing sides. As the chapters provide a voyeuristic view into the everyday lives of its focalisers, the slap itself is “sidetracked [...] to concentrate instead on the very soul of multicultural Australia. [...] Far more important events, tensions, animosities, fissures and relationships unfold in this book, which could well be one of the most successful state-of-the-nation novels of our times” (Mukherjee). The analysis begins by considering the realities of the novel – both literal, meaning its own realism, and conceptual, meaning reality as presented in it.

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<sup>3</sup> All subsequent quotes from the novel are taken from this edition with page numbers indicated in parenthesis.

## 2. The Realities of *The Slap*

### 2.1. *The Slap*'s Realism

Besides proclaiming it was “a hell of a read,” *The Australian* called *The Slap* “a perfect social document.”<sup>4</sup> It goes without saying that *The Slap* is a realistic novel, but there is much to be said about the particularities of its realistic mode.

Free’s “sceptical look at the Miles Franklin shortlist” elevates Tsiolkas’ unapologetic realism as a sign of hope for the future of Australian fiction:

To crack open *The Slap*, after reading some of the other Miles Franklin contenders, is like stepping from Plato’s cave into a shopping mall. Tsiolkas’s novel is unashamedly packed with the phenomena of the here and now: New Idea, Delta Goodrem, the Big Day Out, “the tell-tale canaryyellow bag from JB Hi-Fi”. It’s strange to have to use the “unashamedly” in this context. But the idea has certainly got around that one demonstrates one’s seriousness, as an Australian novelist, by pretending that such things don’t exist. Tsiolkas’s novel, while it isn’t perfect, provides a vigorous corrective to this idea. (“Australian Fiction” 7)

In another review, Free repeats his praise, but this time in the context of Tsiolkas’ oeuvre and with emphasis on the social aspect of his realism: “Tsiolkas, unwilling to serve as a poster boy for the minority groups to which he notionally belongs, has developed a gift for writing about other minorities unsentimentally, unselfconsciously, unpatronisingly – and therefore realistically. This is a feat our Anglo-Australian novelists don’t always manage” (“The View”). The central themes and underlying mechanisms of *The Slap* do not differ from those of his earlier works. As McCann succinctly puts it, Tsiolkas is a master at uncovering “fissures and inequities underpinning notions of cosmopolitan freedom” (qtd. in Birns). Nevertheless, there is a substantial difference in execution. The aforementioned, pre-*The Slap* Somerville’s interview with Tsiolkas points to this shift. McCann identifies two ways in which *The Slap* differs from his earlier novels which are highly relevant for this thesis. First, its organisation around eight different focalisers which are given equal weight enables it to

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<sup>4</sup> Printed on the backcover of *The Slap* (London: Penguin Books. 2010).

escape subjectivity. As McCann puts it, despite the fact that the inner states experienced through these focalisers are often intense, this kind of organisation enables the novel to lose

the sense of being caught up in or defined by the delirium of an individual. [...] [T]he orientation of the novel is really toward a quotidian reality that can contain this multiplicity. By contrast, the experience of reading the earlier novels was one of confronting subjectivities so volatile that they threatened to demolish the everyday altogether. (86)

McCann's second point concerns the representation of this "everyday," which, in literary realism, is often inseparable from its political circumstances. In *The Slap*, Tsiolkas is faithful to his own view of realist art:

Initially, in the nineteenth century, [the urge of realist art to convey something of the texture and meaning of ordinary life] emerged as the detailing of bourgeois life but it was to eventually become a movement that also spoke for working-class people. (The social and economic conditions, however, dominating the production and exchange of the art product meant that rarely did art emerge *from* working-class people. This, I believe, is a bit of an ongoing story which also says something about the precarious premises of realism in the arts.) ("Realism" 45)

Realist art that Tsiolkas admires is rather characterised by a "dual commitment to documenting proletarian life coupled with the knowledge that the creative work can never be a simulation of real life" ("Realism" 46). Maintaining that the possibility of a faithful representation of material reality is better served by the documentarian ("Realism 45), real authenticity for Tsiolkas lies in celebrating "the knowledge that the 'real' of objectivity, of something we call normalcy does not exist except as a system of beliefs that enforces the rule of bourgeois notions of the same: rules that do harm against the deviant, against the poor" ("Realism" 46). Thematically, as Verevis points out, *The Slap* revolves around "the so-called 'culture wars' of the John Howard-led era of conservative government (1996 –2007)" (773), but this fact is explicitly mentioned only once:



Perhaps the key component for understanding *The Slap* is its perceived representation of Australian-ness: what it is to live in a conservative (post-Howard government) Australia. *The Slap* was published just after Australia had experienced over a decade of John Howard's prime ministership, a period during which debate in Australian public life was thought to be "stifled and conflicted." As Mandy Treagus (2012) points out, rather than present a tedious affirmation of Howard's "middle Australia," with *The Slap* Tsiolkas succeeded in presenting a radically different – more realistic and recognizable – view of "mainstream" Australia. [...] Davis points to a passage – the only direct reference to the Howard government in the novel – in which Connie responds to the suggestion that a partygoer is "not normal" (for wanting the evening's euphoria of drugs and alcohol to last forever), by asking "What's so great about being normal? It's better to be different, not like everybody else. Who wants to be normal in John Howard's Australia?" (775)

In this context, *The Slap* is contrasted to *Dead Europe* in terms of scale: "*Dead Europe* plays out against momentous histories and political processes [...] At moments it is as if the historical-political background of the novel threatens to consume the foreground. At other moments, the hyperbolic depiction of individual pathology obscures any sense of a realistically or objectively verifiable context" (86). *The Slap*, on the other hand, lacks this shift between background and foreground:

*The Slap* [...] effectively contains the political, holds it at arm's length, and prevents it from proliferating through the formal structure of the text. At moments, in fact, the foreground is so overwhelming in its everyday detail that it feels both trivial and distracting. What we have here is a middle-class world so obsessed with the struggles of individuals that everything else seems to drop out of the view. (McCann 86)

Of paramount importance here is the novel's free indirect style, which enables it to maintain an otherwise unsustainable balance which characterises its realism. The third-person narrative lays the events down in an objective manner, while the characters' subjective thoughts protrude into this objectivity. This type of discourse "divides into subclasses, attributable to

character [narrated monologue] or to narrator [narrative report]. In between, there are statements of varying degrees of ambiguity” (Chatman 203). This is perhaps the main reason why some accuse the novel itself of being racist, misogynistic, crude etc. The novel thus fulfils Dorter’s first two truth categories – “individual subjective feeling” and the “collective subjectivity of a historic people” (40) – in a very specific way. First, there is a sea of “feelings,” as Dorter puts it (37), expressed in *The Slap* and its wild variety ensures both that they simply cannot all “reflect the personal idiosyncrasies of [one] artist,” (37) and that it is virtually impossible for none of them to “be held in common” (37) by a reader. Its truth is its multiplicity of truths. Second, Tsiolkas does indeed “set out deliberately to express the values of his culture” (Dorter 38), though not for promotional purposes. The Australian middle-class culture is shown to, ultimately, turn a blind eye to the multiplicity of truths, while every character self-righteously practices their own. In terms appropriated from Lyotard, who writes that postmodernism’s principle in terms of narratives “is not the expert’s homology [grand narratives], but the inventor’s paralogy [little narratives]” (xxv), *The Slap* exposes his focalisers as inventors who think themselves experts and offers “a vision of an Australian middle class in a state of denial” (Hawker qtd. in Verevis 776). By merging objectivity with *multiple* subjectivities, Tsiolkas lays bare a possible reality in its otherwise unobservable complexity, all the while giving up his authorial authority. Though this is exactly what makes *The Slap* “one hell of a read,” to quote anon *The Australian*’s praise, it also lets the reader’s judgement run riot: Tsiolkas “[withholds] his judgment, thus encouraging [the reader] to exercise [theirs]. To discuss the book was therefore to argue about it, sometimes ferociously” (Free, “The View”). The analysis of the text itself begins by exploring the way in which two of the more controversial instances of *The Slap*’s everyday function within the novel’s realistic mode.

## 2.2. Submerged Violence and Explicit Sex

From the controversial slap delivered to Hugo by Harry to Tracy’s “just” slapping of Richie for his accusation of Hector sexually assaulting Connie, *The Slap* is filled with violence: explicit, submerged, self-inflicted (e.g. Koula beating her fists bloody on the

kitchen floor in shame for her daughter's divorce) even consensual (e.g. Aisha initiating extremely painful intercourse with Hector to erase guilt of adultery). However, the vast majority of the novel's violent instances are those of submerged, unrealised violence. McCann writes of *The Slap*'s violence as of another differentiating factor between the novel and Tsiolkas' previous work. He ascribes to it a "mundane," "everyday" quality, which, with the exception of Harry slapping Hugo, "remains localized, contained in a bedroom or the imagination. They aren't moments that might eventually reconfigure an entire narrative" (86). This, however, does not make them any more disturbing; on the contrary. McCann points out that Harry's slapping of Hugo – an event that does reconfigure, or rather trigger, the narrative – is "exceptional only by virtue of its visibility" (86). He argues that this makes the narrative more coherent (86), but it also lays bare a kind of hypocrisy.<sup>5</sup> Seen, witnessed violence is, generally speaking, only the tip of the iceberg. Not only is it easy to condemn it, but it makes it easier for oneself to excuse one's own repressed violence. Tsiolkas aims to uncover what is usually overlooked, though ever-present, by putting it right next to its most explicit form:

I think one of the things about being an adult is realising that violence is both something that is inherent in you but also something that has to be controlled. [...] Violence is not necessarily bashing or hitting or what happens at 2.30 a.m. outside a strip joint in Melbourne. Violence is about how you yell at a neighbour or yell at someone in a shop. It's about how you relate to the individuals who come into your path as part of your daily existence. And in that way *The Slap* is full of submerged violence, all the way through. (Tsiolkas qtd. in Williams 153)

In this way, applicable not only to violence, *The Slap* fulfils Dorte's third category of truth: it makes the (Australian) reader question the actual implications of what they have been taking for granted and mechanically carrying out. Tsiolkas insists that recognising darkness and contradiction within oneself leads away from those tendencies surfacing in another form. According to him, sex is a particularly revealing sphere:

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<sup>5</sup> Consider Aisha's remark and Anouk's unuttered reply: "Yes, maybe we all felt like slapping him at that moment but the point is no other adult did. We exercised self-control, which is what makes us different from children. We didn't slap him because we knew that was the wrong thing to do." No, some of us didn't because we were too scared. (78)

I believe that sexuality and the body constantly undermine our attempts at mastery and transformation. [...] If misogyny, racism and homophobia are real—and I believe they are—we cannot pretend that they are forms of hatred or violence that don't inform each and every one of us. The repression of this understanding becomes manifest in our masochism, in our sadism, in our intolerance, and in our desire to punish and to silence. It is in sex that we play out and reveal the extent of our immersion in such hatreds. (Tsiolkas qtd. Taylor 182)

Harry is emblematic of this. When he visits Rosie and Gary in order to reluctantly apologise, he is provoked by the hosts, but cannot release his violence without consequences: “Then they would crucify him. What a world, what a lousy, ugly, unjust world that allowed the weak and fucked-up and hopeless scum to survive, to have the upper hand. A bullet into each of their heads, three sharp pops” (Tsiolkas, *The Slap* 131-132). He sits in his car and is calmed by his freedom to destroy because he *owns*: “He'd allow the car to fill up with smoke if he wanted, let it burn if he wanted, smash it up and drive it in the river if he wanted. He drove carefully, steadily. The smoke felt good. It felt real fucking good” (132). He finally realises that he “had not even been conscious” (133) that he was driving towards Kelly – his agreeable mistress whose bills he pays and cocaine he uses. “Without answering he barged into the flat, and started dragging her into her room. [...] He lunged at her” (133). Sex and violence are intertwined. Since he can have Kelly sexually, and could not release his violence on Rosie, Kelly “suddenly seemed so ugly, so dark, such a wog. She was not Rosie” (134). Unable to effectively blow off steam through sex, he turns to drugs: “The cocaine was good; slowly he felt his head clear and a warm rush sweep through his body” (134). This represses his inner contradiction and doubt and he can proceed to finally regain his macho stability by reducing his rage to pity and resolutely inflating his own happiness (by reminding himself of his status symbols and functioning patriarchy at home):<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Tsiolkas 125-126 and 407 for Harry's violence towards Sandi and her submission. However, it is worth noting that Harry is a proud, loving and committed father to Rocco, just as Harry's otherwise abusive father was to him. (“they were all their fathers' sons,” 34)

On the cocaine high he had fantasised about a bullet in each of their brains. There was no need. It would be a waste of bullets. They were scum. He and Rocco and Sandi weren't even part of the same species. They were as far above them as the moon was from the earth. There was nothing for him to do. The future would exact his revenge. (135) [...] He thought of his house that he loved, with the pool and the new kitchen, the double garage, the sound system, the plasma television, he thought of his barbecue and fishing lines, and then he thought of his beautiful wife and his beautiful son. (135-136)

Birns points to a political allegory hidden underneath the raw realism of the novel's central act of violence. In accordance with *The Slap*'s all-encompassing ambiguity, the allegory contains a tension within itself. He maintains that Harry's slap "is at once emblematic of and resistant to the neoliberal order" (99). It is resistant in its representation of a patriarchal punitive regime as opposed to the contemporary lenient attitude, taken to the other extreme by Rosie and Gary. "The slap can even be seen as an instinctive response to the deliberate disorganisation sown by neoliberalism," he argues, "a disorganisation used to disguise the arbitrariness of the search for personal excellence and success" (99). The fact that the slap is preceded by Hugo refusing to accept that he lost in a children's game then seems highly appropriate. On the other hand, the slap is also *emblematic* of neoliberalism:

It symbolises how, for all its rhetoric of freedom and transparency, neoliberalism retains a residual and fiercely enunciated sovereignty. [...] That Harry is a self-made entrepreneur drives home the way the slap can be a metaphor for the hidden exercise of violent force by the self-proclaimed winners of society. Compulsion and violence underlie neoliberalism's rhetoric of autonomy. (99)

This tension uncovers a hypocrisy and contradiction at the core of the neoliberal order. Tsiolkas' subversiveness operates on constructing a disturbingly veracious representation of reality and then dismissing the very concepts that shape it as essentially empty. This is where his unapologetic realism meets postmodernism and postcolonialism, the implications and further manifestations of which are further explored in the following chapters.

### 3. The Aesthetics of *The Slap*

Notwithstanding its undeniable bleakness in some respects, there is beauty in *The Slap*. Even though its most explicit instances serve the same purpose of subversion, they also lead to the uncovering of a *constructive* truth of the novel. What follows is a close-analysis of the text drawing on aspect of aesthetic theory. While the conclusions will primarily be based on the here-proposed analysis, they will be tested against Tsiolkas' statements that have become influential due to the importance and popularity of his novel.<sup>7</sup>

#### 3.1. Communal Philoxenia

In determining the boundaries of aesthetic as opposed to other kinds of experience, theorists have proposed, among others, a state of detachment from desire as a condition for making an aesthetic judgement (Levinson 6). Eco introduces the complex issue in the simplest of terms:

Often, to describe virtuous deeds that we prefer to admire rather than perform, we talk of a 'beautiful' thing to do. If we reflect upon the detached attitude that allows us to define as beautiful some good that does not arouse our desire, *we realise that we talk of Beauty when we enjoy something for what it is, immaterial of whether we possess it or not.* (8, emphasis mine)

It turns out that the text of a novel full of desire at its most instinctive – in Skidelsky's words, "endless porny sex" – rewards an inquiry based on detachment from desire with substantial answers. What is the most obvious instance of beauty in *The Slap* is upon close examination even more subversive than the novel's ugliness. It is in many ways the central scene of the novel, and is the setting in which the titular slap is delivered:

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<sup>7</sup> McCann points out that Tsiolkas has a rare privilege: "The interviews that proliferated in [the wake of *The Slap*] became the most influential and authoritative discourse about the novel [...] Today, that discourse is probably the decisive context for critical appreciations of *The Slap*." (85)

It was a feast. Charred lamb chops and juicy fillet steak. There was a stew of eggplant and tomato, drizzled with lumps of creamy melted feta. There was black bean dahl and oven-baked spinach pilaf. There was coleslaw and a bowl of Greek salad with plump cherry tomatoes and thick slices of feta; a potato and coriander salad and a bowl of juicy king prawns. Hector had been completely unaware of the industry in the kitchen. His mother had brought pasticcio, Aisha had made a lamb in a thick cardamom-infused curry, and together they had prepared two roast chickens and lemon-scented roast potatoes. There was tzatziki and onion chutney; there was pink fragrant tara-mousalata and a platter of grilled red capsicum, the skins delicately removed, swimming in olive oil and balsamic vinegar. The guests lined up for plates and cutlery and the children ate seated around the coffee table. (36)

This scene is especially significant for two reasons. First, having one of the novel's main characters as an *observer*, it introduces the notion of aesthetic detachment. Hector does not participate in the feast; he “could taste nothing. The amphetamines still rushed through his body and each mouthful he took seemed bland and dry” (36). The wonderful food does not arouse his desire – he enjoys it “immaterial of whether he possesses it or not” (Eco 8) – enjoys its beauty *selflessly*. It also elevates the feast into a beautiful work of art which is later to be deconstructed. Second, it has a palpable atmosphere of synergy, which is defined as the

product of two (or more) forces that are reducible to neither [...] [which] emphasizes the positive and energetic aspects of the process of transculturation and the equal but different elements that the various historical periods and forces have contributed in forming the modern post-colonial condition. (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Studies* 210)

The scene, again allegorical in this sense, therefore reflects the ideal aesthetic of multiculturalism, and with it the ideal aesthetic of a modern Australian (middle-class) community. The cast of *The Slap*, “in point of ethnic origin, religious affiliation and sexual orientation” is “almost belief-strainingly diverse” (Free, “Australian Fiction” 29). Tsiolkas’ depiction of this idyll through the ritual of eating might be very deliberate. In his conversation with the author, Papastergiadis explains the notion of *Philoxenia* – “the

generosity without expectation of anything in return,” or what Tsiolkas in turn pinpoints as what he wants to be his guiding principle in politics, writing and thought (393):

Philoxenia, as it was defined by Homer, was meant to be done blind. The host receives the guest without asking who or what you are. [...] So your first action was to just invite them in to share food. After food was received, then you start talking, but the reception was done in silence. Now, if the principle has to be done blind, the principle means that justice is done before you ask the question: who are you, or more to the point, are you worthy of my hospitality? (396)

The idyll is preserved for only as long as the guests gratefully enjoy the hospitality they have been offered: “There was hardly any conversation: everyone was too busy eating and drinking, occasionally stopping to praise his wife and his mother for the food” (36). The titular slap is delivered only several pages later and, in Birns’ words, “disrupts several assumptions about the contemporary: that people of all ethnic stripes and backgrounds are getting along, and that we can all unite around how wonderful today’s children are; that their well-adjusted temperament represents a new utopia, a different and redeemed humanity” (98). This is also signaled by a disturbing return of desire in the moment of the slap: “[Hector] could not forget the exhilaration he had felt when the sound of the slap slammed through his body. It had been electric, fiery, exciting; *it had nearly made him hard. It was the slap he wished he had delivered*” (41, emphasis mine). This is the exact opposite of “some good that does not arouse our desire [such as] virtuous deeds that we prefer to admire rather than perform” (8) or “the beautiful” as defined by Eco. What Tsiolkas’ community lacks is what Papastergiadis defines as “the sign of a good family. It says: the black sheep is welcome. The door is not only open for the good ones. Also there is a recognition that the friction is productive, it not only causes the bother and heat of disruption, but it also provides energy for new kinds of solutions, new ways of living with each other” (396). “The good ones,” for Tsiolkas’ characters, would mean the ones who are the same as them, and Tsiolkas “think[s] that the entitled, narcissistic bourgeois subject at the heart of the neo-liberal globalised world is an infection, a virus. It is a subject and a politics that wants to force



everyone to become a mirror of itself, to force everyone to be the ‘same’, to desire the ‘same’, to live the ‘same’, to believe the ‘same’” (Tsiolkas qtd. in Taylor 181). This is almost a quote of Terry Eagleton’s view on the very concept of the aesthetic as one that aims to

create a universal order of free, equal, autonomous human subjects, obeying no laws but those they give to themselves. This bourgeois public sphere breaks decisively with the privilege and particularism of the *ancien régime*, installing the middle class in image, if not in reality, as a universal subject. (19)

Ashcroft refers to Eagleton’s claim when he identifies the universal subject as “an old bête noir of postcolonialism” (“Postcolonial Aesthetics” 411) and, even though *The Slap* is not exactly a post-colonial novel, it passionately shares this position: Tsiolkas participates in Bhabha’s dissemi-nation, but not by writing “the history of the modern western nation from the perspective of the nation’s margin” (291), but by exposing the ugliness of the dominant, albeit multicultural, middle-class from within. “I had to put myself in the middle of it,” Tsiolkas admits, practicing what he preaches about embracing one’s inner contradictions, “[b]ecause I didn’t feel separate from the things that were disgusting me. I saw in my own behaviour, I saw in the circles around me, I saw in the world around me” (qtd. in Papastergiadis 389). He exposes the confident, “centred” – though paradoxically different in each of the focalisers – “causal logic” (Bhabha 293) as the root of the ugliness. Tsiolkas deconstructs *every* identifiable label, finds a loose thread and pulls it. He is not content with exposing the artificiality of nationhood as something homogenous. Rather, he constructs a multitude of voices to come up with a heterogenous group that is equally flawed. In the introduction to his *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson lists as one of the three paradoxes that theorists have often been perplexed by “the formal universality of nationality as a sociocultural concept – in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender – vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, ‘Greek’ nationality is sui generis” (5). Tsiolkas’ characters embrace their diversity in this

respect, but this does not make them any less discriminative. Moreover, the illusion of synergy only makes them more condescending and entitled:

The Aboriginal Muslim and his white Muslim wife. The odd couple. She had found that she had nothing to say to either of them at the barbecue. She could see why Rosie would like them. The three of them had all obviously shed their pasts and grown new, vastly different skins. She glanced over at Aish and she was suddenly convinced that her friend was thinking exactly the same thoughts. It was a shared moment in which they were both pitying and ridiculing the experiences of the three true authentic Australians. Aish and herself, they had real pasts, real histories. Jewish, Indian, migrant; it all meant something, they had no need to make things up, to assume disguises. (71)

Bilal and Shamira recognise these concepts as constructs and they *choose* the ones that effectively make them better. Aisha and Anouk do not, so they feel entitled to judge and self-justify. Tsiolkas follows the paradox Anderson speaks of to its final end – he is interested in the particularity of concrete manifestations *within* a concrete manifestation of a nationality and other sociocultural concepts. In the aftermath of the slap, ethnicity, race, sex, age, religion and other categories individuals belong to are shown to guarantee, and ultimately mean, nothing – all things considered, everyone acts according to their own disposition which is irreducible to a combination of these categories. The futility of labels is expressed perhaps most explicitly through Manolis’ disappointment: “He believed he had glimpsed a truth, a possibility: equanimity, acceptance, a certain peace—in old age, all men were equal. Not in work, not in God, not in politics, only in age. But it was not so” (324).

Finally, Tsiolkas quotes Bilal’s confrontation of Rosie – “I don’t want you to talk to my wife, I don’t want you to be her friend. I just want to be good, I just want to protect my family. I don’t think you’re any good, Rosie.” (287) – as “the real slap in the book,” a slap which he aimed at “a culture in Australia that had literally made [him] sick, sick to the stomach. A middle class culture that struck [him] as incredibly selfish and ungenerous” (qtd. in Papastergiadis, 389). McCann points to another deeply significant point of tension between the novel’s realistic mode and allegory. Upon characterising the quoted passage as an

allegorical encounter between an Anglo-Celtic character and an Indigenous Australian character which provides a “powerful, polemical point about a longer history of racism, neglect and abuse,” he concludes:

[T]he realism of the novel – and realism is its dominant mode – works against this sense of encounters between characters standing for broader historical processes. The tension consolidates but also compromises the normative value of the novel’s multiculturalism. [...] The force of realism is precisely that it dispels stereotypes, or sees through the fictions of racially inflected ideologies. On the other hand, this realistically evoked world is underpinned by the centrality of the allegorical encounter with an “Anglo” character who also, in the broader scheme of the novel, embodies the anti-suburban ethos rejected by the novel’s unembarrassed embrace of a quotidian Australian reality. As a result, *The Slap* is constantly creating moments at which the political eventfulness of its multiculturalism is subsumed by a suburban landscape that itself feels like the same stifling, banal, aspirational place [...] but now merely with different and more diverse markers of identity, and no possibility of resistance. (101)

Nevertheless, some of the members of this group are more to blame than others and there is hope of resistance. Moreover, there is a way to determine this distinction and this hope unambiguously. The analysis now turns to another explicit, telling and subversive instance of beauty in *The Slap* in order to uncover an unambiguous and constructive truth of the novel’s microcosm.

### 3.2. Individual Aesthetics and Ethics

*The Slap* is “dialectical rather than didactic” (29), Free writes, “Tsiolkas is content to live with moral ambiguity. Not just to live with it: to make a novel out of it” (28, “Australian Fiction”). Meyer, in her zealous introduction to her interview with Tsiolkas, draws the same conclusion as Free, but expresses it in simpler terms; the novel, she writes, “never goes into right and wrong – everyone is an a\*\*hole, everyone is weak in some way, everyone is stinking with humanness.” Tsiolkas himself goes further and reduces “moral ambiguity” and

“humanness” to *ugliness*. In his conversation with Papastergiadis, Tsiolkas wistfully states: “I wish I could create, say something optimistic could emerge from [our selfishness]. But I don’t think so, I think we are [...] *ugly*” (qtd. in Papastergiadis 396, emphasis mine).

Considering the aforementioned, it seems fitting to begin the scrutiny of Tsiolkas’ focalisers with another fundamental piece of western-oriented aesthetic theory in order to turn it against them. Umberto Eco begins his already mentioned study *On Beauty* with a simple observation:

‘Beautiful’ – together with ‘graceful’ and ‘pretty’, or ‘sublime’, ‘marvellous’, ‘superb’ and similar expressions – is an adjective that we often employ to indicate something that we like. In this sense, it seems that what is beautiful is the same as what is good, and in fact in various historical periods there was a close link between the Beautiful and the Good. (8)

Though Eco announces that his study does not “start off from any preconceived notion of beauty” (10) this premise is at the core of traditional aesthetics, and Eco’s study is, accordingly, “a history of Beauty and not a history of art” (Eco 10). Also in accordance with traditional aesthetics is its predominantly Western perspective. This premise serves as an ideal point of departure for an evaluation of *The Slap*’s characters’ ethics in the context of Tsiolkas’ deliberately formulated syntax. In other words, what follows is an exploration of whether it is possible to argue that the quintessentially Western concept of beauty and goodness holds true in Tsiolkas’ novel, which focuses on a quintessentially Western democracy.

The very first sentence that Tsiolkas dedicates to Hugo echoes the premise: “Hugo looked *like* a cherubic, gorgeous child” (20, emphasis mine). The particularity of the observation may pass unnoticed as Hector proceeds to reflect on Hugo in grammatically straightforward terms and expresses the contradiction with the help of a simple “but” – “He was a delightful-looking kid, *but* Hector was very of him, having once witnessed the boy’s vile temper” (20, emphasis mine). The spheres of beauty and goodness are separated in the more reader-friendly sentence, stating simply that looking *at* and looking *after* Hugo are two wholly different experiences. The initial observation, on the other hand, hints at the

*expectation* of the two being the same. Hugo is denied his beauty because of his temper – he is only an impersonator of gorgeous children. This may well be written off either as a bit of a stretch or as just another example of Tsiolkas’ lack of “literary graces [...]”: One doesn’t, for example, ‘unsheaf’ a condom. I’m not even sure you can *unsheathe* one. A condom *is* a sheath” (Free, “Australian Fiction” 29). Nevertheless, this particular solecism directs the careful reader’s attention to an instance striking once noticed in a novel operating on ambiguity – a *pattern*, which is visible in the following excerpts :

[Hector] knew that women loved him. Women *loved* him. (1) [...] He was the most handsome man [Aisha] had ever seen and he was still the most handsome man she had ever seen. (401)

[Anouk] was not a beauty, but she held herself well, she had style and she was striking. She was chic, and with age, that mattered more than looks. Chic didn’t desert you. She did look her age but she looked fantastic. (65)

Harry felt a smug pride at the attention his cousin received that afternoon. They were a good-looking family, no fucking doubt about it. Here they were sliding towards middle-age and they still turned the chickadees’ heads. (117)

Jenna had screamed when [Connie] opened the door. Tina, behind her, let out a series of gasps. They pushed Connie down the long, dark corridor into the living room. [...] Hannah gave a low whistle and took the girl’s hand. “Connie. You look fabulous.” (189)

Rosie had been a beautiful young woman. She could have been a model. (69) [...] She was ice-bitch beautiful, a stunner blonde with crystal blue eyes. (128)

Aisha [...] would always look beautiful, no matter what she wore. [...] She was the most splendid woman Rosie knew. (268) [...] [Aisha] caught her reflection in the mirror on the dresser. *She was smart and attractive and good. She did not deserve this.* This was not what she deserved at all. (392, emphasis mine)

[Richie] had his mother’s fair colouring and freckled skin. One day he would be a striking man. He had strong, fine features, high cheekbones and attractive, kindly eyes. (38)

“Often,” writes the Marxist philosopher Bloch, “the true, the good, or the beautiful, or rather what is proclaimed as such, has nothing to do with daily life and so serves the purpose of deception, as an opiate of the people” (qtd. in Ashcroft, “Postcolonial Aesthetics” 411). This

is true both of the feast and its guests. The discrepancy between the effects of Hugo's looks and temper – a deceiving beauty much more explicit in a spoilt child than it is in more or less accomplished adults – reverberates throughout the eight chapters. As was already pointed out, the thesis does not attempt an analysis of the characters' particular moral failings nor does it attempt to draw conclusions on the significance of the nuances that differentiate them – ultimately, that is a matter of personal interpretation. The analysis simply follows the identified pattern. What is interesting is that a close examination reveals two anomalies and an exception to the rule – occurrences even more telling than the pattern itself, as visible in the following examples:

[Connie's] aunt Tasha always said of her that she had her father's features, and it was true that when she looked at a photograph of him she recognised as her own the strong, square jaw and the slightly over-sized ears that she hated about herself. But she had also inherited her mother's thick blonde hair and large mouth. (She also hated this about herself. Her mouth was too big, her lips were too full, her teeth protruded—that was why she rarely smiled in photographs.) (137)

[Richie] looked down at his body. So fucking white, so many freckles, pimples still on his shoulders. His bush looked ridiculously hairy in the harsh light of the naked bulb above him. His cock looked too big, grotesque, on his too-thin body. (447)

The waitress brought Koula another coffee and Manolis thanked her. The girl smiled, a smile sweet and indulgent. I'm just a grandfather to you, aren't I? Just an old *papouli*. (305) [...] Manolis went to assist the teenager but she dismissed him with a simple wave of her hand. 'I'm okay.' *Papouli*, he thought, I'm just an old man. (308) [...] The smaller girl watched him walk away and he just caught her hiss. 'You shouldn't swear at him. He's no one, just an old man.' She was right. He was no one, just an old man. (342)

Connie and Richie are the only ones who see themselves as physically ugly. This insecurity can undoubtedly be justified simply by them being teenagers, just as it should not come as a surprise to the reader that the young strangers' vision of Manolis never amounts to anything more than that of an old man. Nevertheless, this distortion of the pattern of physical beauty in the two teenagers and the complete absence of this kind of characterisation in the case of

Manolis (even when he refers to his youth) point to what Tsiolkas makes explicit in an interview for *The Guardian*:

I feel that the novel is anchored by Manolis, and by the teenage Connie and Richie. These are two generations that offer an optimism. Manolis [...] espouses values and beliefs that are outrageous. But he does have a system of honour and I wish we could create a language for it. Also Richie and Connie [...] young people are really demonised in the Australian media, but I find that they negotiate relationships now in a way that I find really admirable. There is an acceptance of difference. It's my generation that I think is screwed up. They're selfish, and hypocritical, and that's what I want to reveal (qtd. in Edemariam).<sup>8</sup>

Manolis and the teenagers do not need to be allegorically slapped – they are already shaken. This is most evident in Richie, as the final chapter of *The Slap*, suggestively, opens with:

Richie, who believed the world was spiralling out of control, that it had dislodged from its axis, that the ether could not expand fast enough to contain the implosion, that it was all leading to a violent, catastrophic and, for the human species if no other, a deservedly sadistic end, was certain of only three things in his life. (428)

Manolis is humbled by his experience and Connie and Richie by their (awareness of their) lack of it; Manolis by his desires being mellowed, the teenagers by the intimidating intensity of theirs. Manolis' "age did silence dreams, did mellow desires, even the most ferocious lusts and fantasies" (295). On the other hand, Aisha's nonchalant, if frequent, expressions of love towards Hector are contrasted to Connie's: "Telling someone you loved them should never be dispassionate. Connie had spat out the words in terror, not knowing or trusting their consequences" (8), while Richie fears that his body will betray him: "he and Nick would [sometimes] swim together. But it was uncomfortable [...] He was too conscious of his friend's body, of the ferocity of his own desire" (449). Furthermore, there is a "clenched fist"

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this is how Anouk describes the young people of Australia: "These kids, they're unbelievable. It's like the world owes them everything. They've been spoilt by their parents and by their teachers and by the fucking media to believe that they have all these rights but no responsibilities so they have no decency, no moral values whatsoever. They're selfish, ignorant little shits. I can't stand them." (279)

– a possible emblem of submerged violence – in every focaliser, except these three. When Hector and Aisha find themselves alone after the incident on the barbecue, Aisha is “spoiling for a fight. (47) [...] [Her] eyes were alive and shining, she was clenching her right fist” (48). After the anger is diffused through sex and Aisha asks him to be kinder to their son, Hector is suddenly overwhelmed by guilt and love, realising that he “could not bear life without her. His chest tightened, his fists clenching in determination” (50). Anouk is further assured of terminating her secret pregnancy after Rosie and Aisha shame her by implying that she did not have the right to judge Hugo’s behaviour: “I don’t want to become like either of you. [...] Anouk realised that she was repeatedly clenching and unclenching her fists” (78). When Hector tells Harry he thinks he did the wrong thing, Harry regrets the slap, albeit not out of repentance, but frustration: “Harry’s fists were clenched. (122) [...] *Panagia*, he whispered to his God, I want that child dead” (123). Finally, after Aisha tells Rosie that she is going to visit Harry and newly pregnant Sandi, Rosie’s friendship-ending outburst begins with the same reaction: “Rosie’s fists were clenched. [...] Rosie had raised her voice” (423). It is worth noting that there is a spectrum here, with Harry – simultaneously the most violent and the most stable of these characters – on one end, and Hector – the only character drastically changed in the course of the novel – on the other.

Manolis subtly touches on this correspondence of the opposing sides of the spectrum: “Had [Koula] forgotten the long, poisonous years *in between youth and age*, the years of argument and spite and disillusion and despair?” (306, emphasis mine). Connie forgives Richie for telling her secret (478), Richie forgives Connie for telling him a false one (479). They know they both are “stinking with humanness” (Meyer). Manolis dismisses such things as petty in the first place – “The suffering and the pain and the arguments and the mistakes of the past did not matter. In the end, they did not matter” (323). It is he who makes explicit the reasoning behind Bilal’s “slap” and pinpoints humility and generosity as actually good, as a beauty that *is* substantial:

She, Hector, the whole mad lot of them, they knew nothing of courage. Everything had been given to them, everything had been assumed as rightfully theirs. [...] One war, one bomb, one misfortune and she would fall apart. He meant nothing to her because *like all of them she was*



*truly selfish*. She had no idea of the world and so believed her drama to be significant. [...] *Her beauty, her sophistication, her education, none of it meant anything. She had no humility and no generosity.* (339, emphases mine)

There is satisfaction in seeing how systematically following the implications of a small, but basic piece of western-oriented philosophical theory in a novel as aesthetically challenging as *The Slap* can establish a truth otherwise easily lost in the sea of ambiguity.

The “joy, love, hope and beauty” that some of the reviewers quoted earlier failed to recognise in the novel stem from humbleness and uncertainty, which are achieved through an awareness of “complexity,” “ambiguity” and “paradox.” Richie, in the end, shortens his list of certainties – “[t]here really were only two that mattered. [...] That his mother was the best mum in the world, and that he and Connie would be best friends forever” (482) – and Hector, who seems to have felt the figurative slap especially acutely, ends up with one only: “I don’t know anything in the moment except that I want to be with you, that I love you and that you are the only thing I am sure of in my life. I’ve been so stupid” (391). Interestingly, this is how Hector’s chapter, and with it the novel, begin in an early version of *The Slap*: “Don’t believe anything they tell you. Don’t believe the churchmen or the politicians. Don’t get led astray by the artists and always distrust a general. That’s the one piece of advice my father loved repeating. [...] My father forgot to add, *don’t get fooled by men of principles either, those people are the worst*” (Tsiolkas, “Hector” 7, emphasis mine).

Finally, Richie dismisses the very concept of truth, but does so in an unselfish manner:<sup>9</sup> “Truth was this supposedly sacred thing, this thing that everyone—teachers, his mum, everyone—seemed to believe was important, that must be respected above all else. But the truth did not seem to matter here, not to Connie. Maybe not to anyone. Certainly, at this moment, not to himself” (471). The teenagers reconstruct the notion of truth again through a different, more ambiguous perspective: “Maybe this was what Connie understood, that the

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<sup>9</sup> Unlike, for example, Aisha, who does it to justify not admitting to being unfaithful:

She took his hand, kissed his knuckles, and she told him about Art. *Not the truth, only the things that mattered*. She did not tell Hector about their lovemaking, but she did describe the intimacy and excitement of being attracted to another man. It was possible— she thought of this later, back home—that she had hoped to hurt him by revealing the details of her near betrayal (396-397, emphasis mine).

Aisha seems almost instantly convinced that the actual betrayal had indeed not happened.

truth did not always have words” (472). *The Slap*, in the way defined in the thesis, exudes a firm belief in what Ferry calls the truth and what he ascribes to great art: “‘The truth’ is precisely the multiplicity of truths, and art expresses this better than anything else [...] [a]s the finally adequate expression of the essence of what is, of life or the will to power.” He argues that the very history of aesthetics teaches humanity “that the withdrawal of a shared world is not synonymous with decadence,” but opens up the possibility of “a return of the principle of excellence within the democratic universe” (qtd. in Levinson 41).

## 4. Conclusion

Tsiolkas may not have the practical solution to the problem he has identified, but he does know where its roots lie:

I am becoming more and more aware how a certain language arising from identity and sexual politics, one emerging from a history of civil rights and human rights struggles, is in danger of becoming censorship and selfsurveillance. It is a language of moral absolutes and I think it may be having a pernicious effect on much of contemporary writing. I am struggling with these ideas so I can't pretend any great insights and certainly no conclusions, but much of the contemporary literature I am reading annoys me with its smug certainty. The writers are not the only ones at fault here, so are the readers. I have given up reading blogs because so many people are dismissing work because they 'don't like the characters' or because the resolution of a book is not neat, is not easy. We are reading for confirmation of ourselves rather than to challenge ourselves and I think that is a real danger. (qtd. in Taylor 185)

In *The Slap*, Tsiolkas unashamedly exposes the ugliness in the “beautiful” Australian middle-class, but withholds his judgement. In doing so, like post-colonial writers do, he calls for “aesthetic *engagement* rather than aesthetic *judgement*” (Ashcroft, “Postcolonial Aesthetics” 412), but the intention escapes many. Without engaging in *The Slap*'s aesthetic of ugliness in order to be able to question, judge *themselves*, the reader sees no substance, no value in the novel and goes straight to *judging the work*, thus only confirming the soundness of Tsiolkas' positions. Digging into the tension between what Free and McCann respectively call the

novel's "unashamed" ("Australian Fiction"), "distracting" (86) realism and the use of allegory and following discernible textual patterns both lead to the same conclusion: that repressing contradictions and forcing certainty only causes the dark places no human is void of to surface in forms of violence or bigotry or simply protective tunnel vision. Tsiolkas' conviction is that "[i]llumination is what [...] good and/or honest and/or beautiful and/or savage art can offer" (qtd. in Meyer) and this precisely is the conclusion of Ward's study on the aesthetic and literature:

The aesthetic cognition re-orientates our attitudes to the political, social, historical, psychological and ecological, not by providing outlets for our angers or right answers to our dilemmas but by opening us up to a different, clarifying, widening orientation altogether. By it we are enriched, because they neither uphold nor refute our political, religious and social positions, but illuminate them, or evolve them into larger versions of themselves. (16)

However, if the reader fails to engage with the novel's aesthetic, they remain in the darkness, angered. Free already played with the novel's analogy to Plato's allegory of the cave, but left it at a critique of other Australian writers denying the society's consumerist reality, while it can also serve as the explanation for the backlash Tsiolkas suffered, in a nutshell:

At first, when any of [the prisoners in the cave] is liberated and compelled suddenly to [...] walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one [sic] saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision. (197-198) [...] And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him? (Plato 198)

Plato's prisoner hypothetically grasps the truth and is able to "contemplate [it] as [it] is" (198) only after repeated exposure and repeated discomfort. But once he grasps it, he revels

in his knowledge and does not want to return to the empty shadows and his fellows “in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future” (Plato 198-199). A reader who is not inclined to contemplate the ambiguities of (modern) existence is more likely to find *The Slap* distressing and inaccurate, and consequently judge the novel crude and gratuitous. Nevertheless, as Bradley writes, fiction for Tsiolkas is about confronting society with “unpalatable truths, disrupting consensus” (qtd. in Birns 98). Even those who cannot stomach *The Slap* discuss it – and at least there is dialogue, and with it increased possibility of resistance. *The Slap* fulfils Dorter’s final category of truth by allowing, if not forcing, human consciousness to escape subjectivity – its otherwise hopelessly permanent state. This is, finally, perhaps the single most powerful “something” that is otherwise perfectly “outside the range of experience itself,” as Dorter writes of his final category of truth, “something that does not appear within the world but which imparts significance to it” (39), brought to humanity by Tsiolkas, in a novelistic form.

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## Abstract

Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* is a 2008 multi-award winning novel notorious for its unrefined and unembellished representation of the multicultural Australian middle-class society. After a man slaps another couple's child at a friends-and-family barbecue in contemporary suburban Melbourne, little cracks escalate to expose the group's collective and individual hypocrisy and selfishness. The text heavily operates on ambiguity and proved especially divisive; while some call it a contemporary masterpiece perfectly documenting the tensions of multicultural society, others dismiss it as crude and gratuitous, especially because it does not shy away from explicit representations of sex, violence and bigotry.

This thesis ventures into uncovering the truth of *The Slap* hidden underneath its all-encompassing ambiguity. The groundwork for this is laid first by exploring the notion of truth in art in the context of aesthetic theory, and by briefly looking at how different literary movements and theories define themselves in relation to truth, namely formalism, structuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. Second, it looks at the particularities of the novel's realistic mode, especially the way in which free indirect style and the novel's eight focalisers help constitute *The Slap's* reality. The thesis then again turns to aesthetic theory in order to provide a sounding board for the analysis of the text's patterns as two striking instances of beauty are identified in the novel. Both of these are subversive, passionately sharing some of postmodern and postcolonial dispositions, particularly the complete deconstruction of sociocultural labels and (with it) the notion of the universal subject, in this case, the Australian multicultural middle-class. However, the analysis of the instances simultaneously points to an alternative, a cure for the inherently hostile reality that they lay bare. The conclusions are based on a close-reading of the novel, and are then corroborated by the author's own statements.

The final goal of the thesis is to uncover a constructive truth that the novel offers to the reader who is willing to engage with its aesthetic, rather than judge it.

Key words: Christos Tsiolkas, *The Slap*, Australian middle-class, literary truth, aesthetics