

BOOK REVIEW

Bhatia Aditi, *Discursive Illusions in Public Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London & New York: Routledge, 2015. viii + 172 pp.

Reviewed by **Jacob L. Mey** (University of Southern Denmark (emer.))

“Illusions”, says author Bhatia, “surface when we believe our subjective representations of the world to be objective truths and realities” (45). As to the ‘discourse of illusion’ (or ‘illusive discourse’), it is the “product of one’s subjective representations of reality” – a product that is due to the historical, political, social, semiotic, linguistic and environmental factors which it embodies. In this sense, the discourse of illusion is close to Foucault’s notion of *discours* in that it also leads to both “intended [and non-intended] socio-political consequences” (ibid.), some of which are scrutinized in the present work under the various rubrics of ‘Political Voices in Terrorism’, ‘Activist Voices in New Media’, and ‘Corporate Voices in Climate Changes’. Doing this, the author locates herself right in the center of current debates on security, globalization, ecological threats, the rise of religious fundamentalism and its political arm, always placing her emphasis on how these debates are structured along the lines of “metaphorical illusions”, such as the “battle between good and evil” (74), with the concomitant “(e)vilification” of ‘them’ and the superbly unimpeachable ‘good’ characteristics of ‘us’. These illusions are symbolized e.g. in former US President George W. Bush’s ‘coalition of the willing’ (namely those willing to combat the pure, “flat evil” (75) that he saw arising in the Middle East, even before the ascendance of ISIS); in this way, he “recontextualis[ed] a socio-political phenomenon like terrorism, a political issue, into a metaphorical battle between good and evil” (74).

Aditi Bhatia says that illusion should be kept apart from fiction (17), and she quotes Saul Smilansky (2000: 147), according to whom fiction is a “false idea, contradicting experience and itself, and vanish[ing] as our capacity for rationale and logic increases” (17); by contrast, illusion is a “necessity”, due to “people’s subjective understanding of the world” (ibid.) People live in an objective world, but they experience it subjectively, as the author remarks elsewhere; thus, even though “all the world’s a stage” (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene vii), the plays enacted upon this scene are real enough for the spectators to be moved to action, sometimes even revolutionary activity, as it happened in 1830, when the performance of Daniel-François-Esprit Auber’s 1828 opera *La muette de Portici* on the Brussels scene provided the impetus to the Belgian rebellion against the Dutch

unitary state, ultimately resulting in the secession of its Southern provinces as an independent state in 1839.

More recently, one could observe how fictional discourse, such as that of the celebrated HBO series *House of Cards*, has led people to the illusion that e.g. the main actor and instructor, Kevin Spacey, would be a better President of the USA than the current incumbent of that position, simply because in his role as POTUS, he provided the illusion of performing better than, say, President Obama.¹ In other words, illusion, while contradicting the facts (as does fiction), still gains the upper hand because it satisfies a *subjective* need for identification with causes or persons perceived as superior to those observed in one's everyday *objective*, real-world context.²

The illusions illustrated in the book deal with the three areas of discourse mentioned above: the war on terrorism, the 'young' revolts against oppressive established, paternalistic regimes, and the antagonistic debates on the ecological threats to our planet. Common for these discourses is their strong reliance on metaphors and abstract conceits (such as the 'New World Order'; 77); for one who has lived through the thirties and forties of the past century, such concepts inevitably conjure up the specter of *Neuordnung*, a 'new order' in Europe which was supposed to result in the establishment of an entire new entity (which the Nazi ideologues called *Neuropa*), long before the EU became the controversial reality that we are living with today.

In this connection, the author remarks that the illusions of 'new', 'order', 'good', and 'evil' (as in 'the evildoers', the younger Bush's favorite epithet for the 'others', the terrorists) have strong Biblical, even Evangelical connotations. Such connections are mainly, though not exclusively, typical for the US discourse on terrorism, and natural in a tradition where "religion acts as a base theme", and "creates an illusive 'standardised relational pair' collocating good and evil", as Bhatia says (151). By contrast, the religious card is not played as significantly and authoritatively in other illusive discourses, such as that adopted by the Tunisians and Egyptians rebelling against their dictatorial father-figure autocrats (the late Habib Bourguiba and his successors, respectively the now discredited Hosni Mubarak).

As to the events in Tunisia and Egypt, taking place two decades after the beginnings of the Iraq disaster and punctuated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, these were characterized by a strong 'directional' difference, compared to the earlier

1. One is reminded of another movie actor, who actually did make it into the presidency, and was acclaimed by many after his death as 'the greatest President we've ever had': Ronald Reagan.

2. The strongly mediatized aspect of this type of illusion comes to the fore when one realizes that as early as the 'fifties of the past century, some people would dress nicely and apply make-up when listening to a popular radio host such as the legendary entertainer Rolf Kirkvaag in Norway.

US-led efforts to ‘establish democracy’ in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Tunisian revolt started, as did the later Egyptian uprising, from below, and manifested itself in a willedly non-sectarian, secular discourse, metaphorically embodied in a completely neutral symbol: a public place, the ‘square’. Tahrir Square in Central Cairo thus became the visual, strongly mediatized symbol of the revolt, its “reified product”, as Bhatia expresses it (127). Tahrir Square was seen as the ‘hub of the revolution’, the place where the people congregated to claim their rights.³ Overall in Egypt, the ‘square’ became – first metaphorically, then metonymically – identified not just with the events taking place locally: it was perceived as the embodiment of the revolution, and in effect its institutionalized expression, proclaiming the need “for all citizens to come to Tahrir Square and all the squares of Egypt to fulfill the demands of the revolution, in order to preserve the blood of the revolutionaries ...” (*Tahrir Documents* 2011, quoted on p. 125). The ‘square’ is thus given status as a body with legitimizing authority; there is mention of “the spirit of the square”, or “the square’s blessing; it is said that “legitimacy comes from the square”, and so on (all quotes from revolutionary documents, cited on pp. 126–127).

As the author points out (34ff), the role of the ‘new media’ in this and similar processes should not be underestimated: it was a major factor in coordinating demonstrations and avoiding confrontations with the representatives of the oppressing powers. However, society’s underlying tensions always tend to erupt somehow, often violently, as they did in the Brussels of 1830, but without assistance from any not yet existing media; which suggests there is another role to play for the ‘hub’ of the revolution than merely functioning as its ‘birthplace’. As Bhatia says in connection with the Egyptian revolt, “the square is “metaphorized into both a spirited being and a product, conceptualising it as both ultimate ruler and final ruling” (127); it is “the space of social practice ... which becomes the metaphorical underpinning of society”, as Henri Lefebvre expressed it (1991: 225; quoted on p. 127). But the ultimate discursive illusion depends on the square being ‘productive’, in the sense that it engenders other squares as “spaces of social reproduction”, in the words of David Harvey (1989: 186, quoted on p. 127). Here, too, the new media (mostly Facebook and Twitter, as opposed to the ‘old’ ones, like TV and radio) have played a decisive, and not least “more documentable” role in “creat[ing] a story that is built around the activists’ struggles and fights in the revolution” (35).

In her Introduction, the author specifies the purpose of the book as “developing and implementing a multi-perspective theoretical framework, that of the

3. As they would do some years later in Ukraine, where the name ‘Maidan Square’ (‘Independence Place’ in Central Kiev) would likewise become metaphorically synonymous with the revolutionary movement.

discourse of illusion”, in order to make possible “a closer investigation of ... public discourses” (1; italics original). The discourse of illusion, defined as “the product of a subjective conceptualisation of reality, emerging from a historical repository of experiences” (ibid.), has shown itself to be a powerful tool, helping to explain what happens when we objectify our subjective experiences – in particular, when we ‘naturalize’ them into concepts that are just as elusive as they are illusive. Such notions nevertheless present themselves as objective representations of reality – especially if they are nurtured and adopted by what the author felicitously dubs a “discourse clan” (31), to wit, a community of users framing their experiences in a commonly accepted framework of concepts, “naturalised over time ... as relevant to audiences’ thought processes because they are part of their habitus” (46). Here, the author links her theorizing to that of the late Pierre Bourdieu, whose ‘habitus’ captures modes of thought and “dispositions to act and react in certain ways ... [and] are regular and accepted without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any rule” (Bourdieu 1991: 12; quoted on p. 7).

Another classical theoretician whose name comes to mind in this connection is Antonio Gramsci, who gets a nod on pp. 13–14 for his concept of *hegemony*, correctly characterized as the locus of ideological leadership, but also as a locus of resistance. On my view, the idea of hegemony, as originally introduced by Gramsci when working from his prison cell in the twenties of the past century, still is a workable tool for dissecting today’s conceptual and political *tohuwabohu*. The notion of ‘resistance’, so dear (not to say natural) to the late writer because of his personal experiences and sufferings under an egregiously vile type of hegemony, the fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini, should be made available more explicitly by referring to, and quoting his work, since in fact, one could maintain that all the contemporary variants of ‘critical social theory’ and ‘critical discourse’, be they linguistic, semiotic, or political in nature, are contained *in nuce* in Gramsci’s often sidelined works.

That said, I have nothing but praise for the author’s efforts to realize her aims, as stated in the Introduction and quoted above. Her analyses of the three domains of ‘illusive discourse’ (terrorism, the Arab Spring, and climate change) are perspicacious, clever, and extremely well-documented. In particular, since studies in the domain of corporate response to climate change are often couched, not to say mired, in technical lingo and political double-speak, the authors of such purposefully underdeveloped and manipulative ‘clarifications’ and ‘justifications’ are liable to be irked by the author’s fresh approach, which classifies such efforts as ‘discursive illusions’. Bhatia’s intimate knowledge of the Indian situation in particular debunks the ‘corporate voices’ emerging from what is often called, a bit misleadingly, the world’s largest democracy. In this connection, it is hoped that the author, being stationed in Hong Kong, will see fit to apply her ‘illusive discourse’

tool also to the Special Administrative Region's recent anti-authoritarian, democratic surge, briefly referred to on p. 160 as the 'Umbrella Movement'; see Mey & Ladegaard 2015).

Concluding, then, the book is a very welcome and needed complement to the existing 'critical' literature and the works of its protagonists (van Dijk, Chilton, Fairclough, Wodak, to name a few). It should be required reading for anybody interested in critically examining the social responsibilities incumbent on users of 'discourse illusions', and applying this critique in their daily routines, lectures, and conversations, as well as in their more abstract, theoretical considerations and publications.

Technically, Bhatia's present work is appointed with near-perfection. A hilarious typo occurs on p. 82, where an 'Operation Dessert Fox' is mentioned (this made me contemplate the implicit rapacious, not to say voracious, associations linked to this 'operation'). On p. 110, 'mediacape' should read 'mediascape'; the word 'sombre' on p. 141, by its collocation with 'explicit', makes me believe that it should read 'sober'. P. 148 has 'Hestiant' for 'Hesitant'; some gibberish has been left to stand in the second entry for Kammerer, 2000 on p. 106. A minor, perhaps idiosyncratic, beef: the copious, almost flawless references (18 pages in all) are grouped together chapter by chapter – something which, in addition to creating a slight imbalance (e.g. Chapter 1, with its 38 pages, has 7 pages of references, whereas Chapter 2, with 36 pages, has a mere 3), makes it a bit hard on the reader who is trying to locate a particular title; it also reflects some duplication of efforts.

Coming to the book's final chapter, the natural question is if the author has succeeded in realizing her aim, to facilitate "a closer investigation of ... public discourses". Answering my own question, the answer is a resounding Yes. I congratulate Aditi Bhatia on a major achievement in an area where much is said of general truth value, but not everything that is uttered stands out as both innovative, well-thought out, and clearly presented. Bhatia's current work under review is to be commended (and highly recommended) on all these three counts.

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Jacob Mey is the author of numerous articles on pragmatics and other linguistic subjects. Among his works are a study of linguistic pragmatics (*Whose voice?*, 1985), a textbook (*Pragmatics*, 1993, 2001) and a volume on literary pragmatics (*When voices clash*, 2001). He founded (with Hartmut Haberland) and edited the *Journal of Pragmatics* from 1977 to 2010, when he founded (with Hartmut Haberland and Kerstin Fischer) the journal *Pragmatics and Society*, of which he is still the Editor-in-Chief. In 2008, he edited the *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics* (2d ed.). In 2016, he published (with Alessandro Capone) the edited volume *Interdisciplinary studies in Pragmatics, Culture and Society*.

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