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CHAPTER SEVEN

SPEAKING UP IN THE AGE OF MEDIA CONVERGENCE: PATRICK NEATE'S *BABEL* (2010) AND PLAN B'S *ILL MANORS* (2012)

CHRISTOPH REINFANDT

So even as I wrote this
I knew there was only one solution
To stop writing and notice
To stop watching and see the system
To stop speaking and listen
—Patrick Neate, *Babel*

I am the narrator
The voice that guides the blind
Following not with your ears but your mind
And allow me to take you back and forth through time
To explain the significance of things you may think are insignificant now
But won't ... farther down the line!
—Plan B, "I am the Narrator"

There is an urgency to the two voices printed above. They want to make the reader *aware* of where the world stands, they insist on the necessity of making the reader *see* the significance of things. Only the first of the voices, however, actually reached me in printed form, i.e. the Oberon Modern Plays edition of Patrick Neate's rant *Babel* (2010). The other one came to me through the headphones of my iPod while listening to Plan B's album *iLL Manors* (2012). Why did the voices reach me in particular? Because I have a history with both 'speakers', having enjoyed their previous work in my spare time and then ending up publishing academic

papers on them.¹ All things considered, this is a highly unlikely constellation, but there you have it: voices are speaking to you in all kinds of media formats, and how seriously you are going to take them or how strongly you will let yourself be affected by them depends on the moment and context of their occurrence. Or, as Henry Jenkins memorably put it in 2006:

Welcome to convergence culture, where the old and the new media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.²

In this essay I will tackle the unpredictability of convergence culture from the producer's point of view: How can I make myself heard if I feel the urge to speak up for, against or about something? As opposed to the qualified enthusiasm about participation and spreadability expressed by Henry Jenkins and others,³ I will adopt a spoilsport's position by following German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's counterintuitive hint that successful communication actually becomes less likely when the opportunities and occasions for communication proliferate in the course of media history.⁴ Luhmann formulated his argument only against the backdrop of the emergence of writing and print, which supplemented face-to-face interaction with more occasions for mediated communication in reaction to written or printed texts. If this is the case, then the age of media convergence should all but prohibit successful communication and make the position of the 'speaker', author or media producer much more precarious than it used to be. But then, as Luhmann's work shows, the increasing "improbability of communication" has been counterbalanced by social and cultural differentiation, which in turn led to the emergence of what Luhmann calls "success media" of communication.⁵

As Niklas Luhmann's media theory has not been widely received and discussed in media studies circles, the first section of this essay will give a brief outline of his basic assumptions and discuss the possible significance of his 'improbability of communication'-thesis for an inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of 'speaking positions' in convergence culture.

¹ Cf. Reinhardt "White Man Tells the Blues" and "Greeting from Forest Gate".

² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 259–260.

³ Cf. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Jenkins, *Fans, Gamers, and Bloggers* and Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* as well as Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*.

⁴ Cf. Luhmann, "The Improbability of Communication".

⁵ Luhmann, "The Improbability of Communication," and Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, 120–123.

The second and third sections will then introduce two instances where voices have entered convergence culture in different media formats:

Early versions of *Babel*, written by established novelist Patrick Neate, seem to have their origins in much shorter pieces of performance poetry in the context of Neate's involvement in poetry and book slams.⁶ A longer version was then commissioned by Channel 4 as the basis for a twenty-five minute TV version shown in 2005, which has been available in four instalments on YouTube since 2007 (for URLs see Neate 2005). On television it was watched by avant-garde choreographers Liam Steel and Rob Tannion (also known as Stan Won't Dance), who decided to turn it into a sixty-minute dance performance, which was touring successfully throughout the UK in 2010 but was, again, never issued on DVD or any other medium beyond the original performances (and even YouTube provides only the briefest of fragments in very poor quality). Success in the theatre however, led to the book publication of the text in the Oberon Modern Plays series later that year.

iLL Manors, on the other hand, is the title of a feature film written and directed by Ben Drew (also known as Plan B). It marks his debut as a director. The film's premiere took place at the Empire Cinema on London's Leicester Square on May 30, 2012. It was subsequently released to cinemas in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the Netherlands, and screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and the Festival do Rio in September 2012. A DVD was made available in the UK in October of that year.⁷ Central to the film's plot are six hip hop tracks, which were also released on Plan B's album of the same title in July 2012. Though partly marketed as an Original Soundtrack Album the CD nevertheless contains five additional titles and stands on its own as the third album by Plan B, following in the footsteps of his quite aggressive hip hop debut *Who Needs Actions When You Got Words* (2006) and his mainstream mega-success as a retro-soul crooner with *The Defamation of Strickland Banks* (2010).

What makes these examples so interesting for our current purpose is that in both cases convergence culture has opened up opportunities for the speakers' authority and cultural capital to move from one cultural sphere

⁶ Neate is on record on the Internet as one of the inventors and founders of "Book Slam: London's Best Literary Club Night" (cf. <http://www.bookslam.com/>, last accessed March 7, 2014), which has been running successfully for years. There is, alas, no trace of *Babel* on the Book Slam website, and Neate's author website has been, as I will describe later, defunct for a while by now.

⁷ Plan B, *iLL Manors: A Ben Drew Film*. In Germany the film was only released on DVD under the title *Ill Manors. Stadt der Gewalt* in February 2014.

to another: in Patrick Neate's case from literature to television, the Internet (YouTube) and dance theatre, in Plan B's case from hip hop to mainstream pop and on to feature film-making. How does this work? Did it work? And what can we learn about media convergence and the metamorphoses of (new) media from these examples? These are the questions that the present essay will discuss.

The Improbability of Communication

Why should communication be improbable, especially when there is a widely shared feeling that we are living in "the age of communications overload"?⁸ Niklas Luhmann arrives at his thesis by simply not taking communication for granted "despite the fact [that] we experience and practice it every day of our lives and would not exist without it."⁹ Instead, he asks "how communication is possible at all"¹⁰ given that (at least) three improbabilities can be identified:

At the zero point of evolution, it is, first of all, improbable that ego *understands* what alter means, given that their bodies and minds are separate and individual. Only in context can meaning be understood, and context is, initially, supplied by one's own perceptual field and memory. Furthermore, understanding always includes misunderstanding, and if one does not add on presuppositions, the component of misunderstanding becomes so great that the continuation of communication becomes improbable [...]

The second improbability refers to *reaching* the addressee. It is improbable for communication to reach more persons than are present in a concrete situation [...] The problem lies in spatial and temporal extension [...]

The third improbability is *success*. Even if a communication is understood by the person it reaches, this does not guarantee that it is also accepted and followed.¹¹

What counters these improbabilities are media of all kinds, which assume an increasingly central position in Luhmann's work. Beginning with an abstract distinction between medium and form which provides the

⁸ Cf. Harper, *Texture*.

⁹ Luhmann, "The Improbability of Communication," 87.

¹⁰ Luhmann "The Improbability of Communication," 87.

¹¹ Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 158; emphasis in the original.

foundation for a multi-layered expansion of the media concept,¹² Luhmann discusses meaning (*Sinn*) as the foundational medium of all social and psychic systems.¹³ On this basis, language emerges as the interface between meaning and media in a more conventional sense, and Luhmann goes on to distinguish ‘dissemination media’ (writing, printing, electronic media) from symbolically generalised ‘success media’ which are countering the improbability of communication that comes with increasing dissemination by utilising the differentiation of communicative spheres that comes with the functional differentiation of modern society.

While meaning and language address the problems implied by the first improbability of communication, ‘dissemination media’ actually solve the problems implied by the second improbability, but they do so at the cost of intensifying the third through the sheer proliferation of occasions and opportunities for communication provided by media texts of all kinds. So while it becomes potentially easier ‘for a communication to reach a person’, the likelihood that this person ‘accepts and follows’ it dwindles given the innumerable interpellations by texts (in the broadest sense of the term) that a person has to field. In the course of the evolution of modern culture, this is in turn counteracted by communicative specialisation along the lines established by functional differentiation: social systems, Luhmann argues, superimpose success media on the dissemination media which, in spite of their success in overcoming the second improbability, create the communications overload that intensifies the third. These success media foster connectivity within the systems by establishing a distinct symbolically generalised horizon of meaning and a specific binary code for each system. In some cases, these success media are not textual, such as, for example and most prominently, money as the medium which facilitates the continuous negotiation of +/- ownership in the economic

¹² Cf. Wellbery, who sees this as a major advantage of Luhmann’s media theory: “From the perspective of systems theory [...] the terms *medium* and *form* are relative; what counts as a medium will depend entirely on the plane of analysis selected. On this model, media studies is free to investigate meanings while nonetheless remaining true to itself, and the theoretical alternatives of Platonism and materialism can both be consigned to the junk heap of outmoded thought.” (Wellbery, “Systems,” 302; emphases in the original).

¹³ Cf. Luhmann, *Theory of Society, Vol. 1*, 18–28. While ‘meaning’ seems to have established itself as the official translation of *Sinn*, the closeness of the original German concept to the English phrase ‘making sense’ is so strong that ‘sense’ can also occasionally be found in English translations or discussions of Luhmann in spite of the fact that it does not always make sense given the predominant English meanings of ‘sense’. See for example Moeller, *Luhmann Explained*, 225 in his otherwise excellent introduction.

system. In others they are: publications such as this essay, for example, facilitate the continuous communicative negotiation of +/- truth in the science system, and readers who are reading this sentence most likely do so because certain markers of academic interest and respectability (the titles of the volume and the chapter, the publisher, the reputation of editors and author, whatever) have led them here. Ideally their reading of this essay should foster connectivity in the science system by provoking them to publish academically in reaction to it themselves. Similarly, literature partakes in the mode of communication that Luhmann has described for the art system:¹⁴ works of art facilitate the continuous negotiation of +/- beauty, interestingness, aptness or whatever symbolic preference value one would want to propose for modern art and literature.¹⁵

So how does this differentiation of communicative modes and spheres respond to the de-differentiation that comes with the digitally boosted media convergence of recent years?¹⁶ The answer is: it depends. As the science system with its rigid specialisation makes sure that participation is largely confined to professionals who both read and write academic publications, margins of interaction with the general public (on interactive websites, for example) can be policed, and “disintermediation”¹⁷ through open access is more of a problem for academic publishers afraid of losing their cash cow and only occasionally for an academic author in terms of the prestige (and sometimes even financial success) of a book. However, the much fuzzier fields of art, music, literature and popular culture, which were traditionally characterised by audiences who did not actively produce works, seem to be in greater disarray due to the increasingly (inter-) active modes of reception and seemingly barrier-free possibilities of going public with whatever creative undertakings on the Internet. With digital copying, mechanical reproduction or reproducibility in Walter Benjamin’s sense has reached its technological and democratic apotheosis, with as yet

¹⁴ Cf. Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*.

¹⁵ ‘Works of art’ may or may not be textual in the narrower sense. When communicated in the art system or the literary system textual and non-textual works of art share a similar horizon of concerns (representational vs. non-representational, education vs. entertainment, affirmation vs. subversion etc.).

¹⁶ While de-differentiation does not figure prominently in Luhmann’s theory of modernity, it has begun to feature in more recent discussions of his work (cf., for example, Borch, *Niklas Luhmann*, 121–123). On the implications of Luhmann’s *Theory of Society* for an assessment of the emerging computer culture cf. Baecker, “Niklas Luhmann in the Society of the Computer”.

¹⁷ Cf. Bhaskar, *The Content Machine*, 61–70.

unforeseeable consequences for the publishing industry,¹⁸ and a persistent erosion of the gatekeeping functions which are necessary if the ‘work of art’ is to maintain the promise of relevance on which its function as a symbolically generalised medium of communication is based. What is more, the seemingly clear-cut boundaries between art and popular culture established on Romantic and modernist grounds seem to erode, too, in the face of a clash between a (post-)modernist production aesthetics based on criteria of formal complexity on the one hand and persistently Romantic reception co-ordinates based on more general registers of performativity on the other. ‘Works’ in both registers frequently address similar concerns or move from a media format that suggests a preferred connectivity in the art or literature system towards a media format that indicates a less specific mass media or popular culture context as in the examples to be discussed presently.¹⁹ There are, of course, innumerable openings for ‘speaking up’ in this partly de-differentiated sphere of communication—in fact, more and with greater reach than ever before—but it is doubtful whether this quantitative increase will automatically increase the chances for “meaningful participation” either in Jenkins, Ford and Green’s sense of “creating value and meaning in a networked culture”²⁰ or in Luhmann’s less emphatic, merely functional sense of fostering connectivity in a particular system—or if not that, then at least in the undifferentiated sphere of general social communication and interaction that surrounds the functionally differentiated subsystems of modern society.²¹

“We are living in Babel. Did you know that?”

In the television version of Patrick Neate’s *Babel*, the (original) act of speaking up in the institutional framework of a poetry slam figures prominently as a framing device: On a black screen the face of a

¹⁸ For the most recent and exhaustive stocktakings see Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*, 313–376, Bhaskar, *The Content Machine*, 41–77 and Hall, *The Business of Digital Publishing*.

¹⁹ In Luhmann’s understanding, the mass media mark the culmination point and convergence of dissemination media, establishing the fully-fledged virtual reality of modernity. As he puts it in the notorious opening sentence of *The Reality of the Mass Media*: “Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media” (Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 1).

²⁰ As the subtitle of Jenkins, Ford and Green, *Spreadable Media*, suggests; on “meaningful participation” cf. 153–194.

²¹ Cf. Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, Vol. 2, 131–140 on “Interaction and Society”.

recognisably black announcer appears behind the contours of a microphone, both dimly lit from beneath. He announces the speaker:

Ladies and gentlemen, I like to welcome to the stage tonight poet, writer, and novelist, and self-appointed cultural critic (cause there really isn't any other kind)—would you please make some real noise for Mr Patrick Neate!²²

Then the face of Neate himself appears behind the microphone and it takes him quite a while to fully focus himself to shouts of encouragement from the audience, leaving enough time for the title credit to appear, which provides the following explanation:

babel. noun. a confused noise made by a number of voices ORIGIN from the Tower of Babel, where God confused the languages of the builders. (Genesis, 11: 1–9).²³

After this opening, the film leaves the original performance situation of the text behind and begins to depict days in the life of the speaker who is time and again woken by his alarm clock, goes through the motions of preparing for the day and finally leaves his flat for seemingly random walks as well as occasional tube and taxi rides in London. Parallel to the visuals, the free form poetry of *Babel* with its flexible and frequently virtuosic and surprising insistence on rhyme and rhythm is continuously railing against the abuse and misuse of language in contemporary Britain in terms of commodification, racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, violence, hypocrisy, and other grievances. After an initial voiceover that clearly continues the rant that was about to be forthcoming on the poetry slam, the words are for long stretches taken over by the character Patrick Neate in the film. Occasionally, however, Neate gives way to a variety of other characters such as an elderly gentleman beggar dressed in coat and hat whom he meets repeatedly in tube stations and on the streets (Part 1, Part 3), a black woman, perhaps a teacher, with a bunch of black girls, a black friend who visits Neate in his flat and contributes to the writing process (Part 2), another black man whom Neate meets in the streets and with whom he shares a virtuoso rap based on brand names (Part 3)²⁴, and a

²² Neate, *Babel*, 2005, Part 1, 0:00–0:26.

²³ Neate, *Babel*, 2005, Part 1, 1:04. The book version (Neate, *Babel*, 2010, front cover, title page, epigraph to text on p. 19) omits the explicit reference to the biblical origin.

²⁴ This culminates in “Lycos we’ve gone Microsoft / Can’t you Intel? / Stuck in our Microsoft Office / At our Microsoft Works / And our only Outlook Express is

number of liberal friends with whom he shares a meal (Part 4).²⁵ At the end of the film Neate enters the location of the poetry slam, walks up to the microphone and speaks the final words of the text:

The tower of Babel is here / It stretches above us and pierces the sky / And
we have to notice now / Or when it collapses we'll be left asking ... //
How? / What happened? / And, above all, why?²⁶

Only here does the text of the film fully coincide with the printed version published later, while the thematic foci have come in a seemingly random order suggested by Neate's chance encounters in the streets of London. This general impression of uncontrollable randomness is supported by the rapid montage of material from a handheld (mobile?) camera ranging from close-ups of speakers and random details to long shots of the city landscape at strange angles supplemented with closed circuit television footage as well as repeated motifs of tunnels, slamming doors and voices through telephones. At the end, the visuals actually continue after the last words have been spoken with the alarm clock going off once more, but Neate is no longer able or willing to get up to face the day.²⁷ This sense of futility is supported by a joke which appears exclusively in the TV version: When Neate is visited by his black friend (who may actually be the announcer at the poetry slam opening the film), they proceed to work on the text of *Babel* together. After his friend has come up with some particularly punchy lines ("It's not important what you say / But to say it long and loud / WMD—Words of Mass Distraction / Doesn't it make you proud?")²⁸ Neate answers: "Ok. We're gonna go to Part 2. But first: Break for Ads. [...] Someone's gotta pay for this stuff."²⁹ And when his buddy looks at him in exasperation, he keeps it up for a moment and then breaks

from our Windows NT / Yahoo! / There is no Netscape" (Neate, *Babel*, 2005, Part 3, 1:16–1:31). In the printed version, this is updated and expanded with a succinct punchline: "[...] / And our only Outlook Express is from our Windows 7 / Yahoo! We broadband of brothers! We podcast of / thousands! We Internet Explorers on Safari who are iPhone / app to wikithis and wikithat and Twitter the hope that / information might save us ... / But there is no Netscape now that they've got us by the / Googles!" (Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 37).

²⁵ Here, a climax is marked by the clinging of classes and voices exclaiming "Cheers!" after climate change is mentioned in the poem (Neate, *Babel*, 2005 Part 4, 1:42–1:45).

²⁶ Neate, *Babel*, 2005 Part 4, 4:54–5:11. See also Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 54.

²⁷ Neate, *Babel*, 2005 Part 4, 5:13–5:32.

²⁸ Neate, *Babel*, 2005 Part 2, 4:53–5:03.

²⁹ Neate, *Babel*, 2005 Part 2, 5:17–5:42.

up laughing.³⁰ While this scene positions *Babel vis-à-vis* the fully commercialised world it lampoons without too much hope of success, a second TV-specific addition links *Babel* to the realms of history and cultural criticism: The black teacher is engaged in dialogue with her pupils who reproduce soundbite messages and begin to trade quotations identified in response to the teacher's question "Who said that?" to be by Napoleon Bonaparte and George Orwell.³¹ The last quotation brought forth by a pupil is "We're living in Babel," and in response to the question "Who said that?" the pupils all shout "He did!" pointing at Neate.³² Here, the text claims its historical, political or critical relevance in a move which seems as precarious as its relation to the commercial world.

The printed text, on the other hand, transforms the TV version's insistence on orality and polyphony (of the poetry slam performance, of Neate speaking to himself and others, of dialogues and phone calls) into something altogether more focused and abstract. After opening with the line "We are living in Babel. Did you know that?" the text oscillates between the speaking 'I' and the addressed 'you' ("I ask you this") on the one hand and an assumed complicity encapsulated in a persistent 'we' on the other ("We speak one language," "We hardly use words anymore").³³ While generally maintaining the impression of randomness, the printed text is more clearly focused upon a conclusion or even solution at its end, and here the authority is actually handed over to the individual reader in the passage quoted as an epigraph to this essay, which is preceded by "So / What do we do? / Is the only solution revolution?"³⁴ The answer to this question ("No") leads *Babel* into an insistent plea for heightened awareness centred around the triad of 'notice', 'see', and 'listen', which is repeated backwards thrice with individual commentary for each injunction

³⁰ It is interesting to note that the 'Words of Mass Distraction' are still intact in the printed text (Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 43) but become 'Words of Mass Destruction' on the back cover of the book, thus robbing the allusion of its subtlety in linking the topic of *Babel* to early 21st-century Anglo-American politics.

³¹ "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter / What do you think? Yes? / One man's politician is another man's terrorist / Good. Get it off your chest [...] History is just a lie that nobody can contest / Who said that? / Napoleon / During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act / Who said that? / George Orwell" (Neate, *Babel*, 2005 Part 2, 1:45–2:07; see also Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 35).

³² Cf. Neate, *Babel*, 2005 Part 2, 2:08–2:15.

³³ All quotations are from the very first page of *Babel* (Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 21; the text is prefaced with material on "Stan Won't Dance" and an Introduction by Liam Steele).

³⁴ Neate *Babel*, 2010, 52.

and then once more in the original sequence before the final words with their insistence on “we have to notice now” close the piece.³⁵ But this enlightenment impulse directed at the individual remains sceptical given the complete arbitrariness of the culture that is going to receive it³⁶ and the reduced likelihood of anybody heeding the call at all given the overdose that comes with the new media, as the text itself points out earlier in a passage reminiscent of Luhmann’s improbability-thesis:

So we’re free to choose to represent ourselves on blogs / Or forums / Even demonstrations / But we live in a nation where freedom of speech / Now means the freedom to be ignored.³⁷

This scepticism seems fully justified in view of the subsequent reception of *Babel*, which, in both the television and the book format, sunk without much of a trace: All in all, YouTube registered some 160.000 hits for all four parts between 2007³⁸ and now, and there is no substantial review of the book whatsoever anywhere. And while the Stan Won’t Dance production at least received generally positive reviews, it does not seem to have made any lasting impact: Neither did the performances (or at least substantial excerpts from them) find their way on to YouTube nor were they issued on DVD.³⁹ In fact, the crossover from literature to new media has turned out to be a dead end for Neate in spite of his early enthusiasm. Even his quite inspired idea to produce a provocative video clip in which a gang of rappers kidnap the Queen to the sounds of a hip hop version of “Jerusalem” (with which a guy called Nobody has a hit in Neate’s 2009 novel of the same title) bombed completely,⁴⁰ and afterwards Neate

³⁵ Cf. Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 52–54.

³⁶ Cf. Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 44: “And even creativity is now commercially specific / With a novel, piece of art, or song / No more than a list of brands / [...] / And critics [...] / Claim it’s clever, relevant, postmodern / In the way it draws attention to convention by the very / invention of its absence—/ Suckers!”

³⁷ Neate, *Babel*, 2010, 38. See also: “We know that information’s everything, information is the / key / But what we need to know about information is it’s quality / not quantity / And quality describes the message not the medium of / transmission” (48).

³⁸ For details cf. footnote 59, below.

³⁹ For reviews of the dance performances see, for example, Wilkinson, “Babel,” Watson, “Babel Is Brilliantly Organized Chaos,” and Roy, “Stan Won’t Dance”.

⁴⁰ Cf. Neate, “Penguin Books – Jerusalem – Patrick Neate”. By the time of writing (early March 2014), the version available on YouTube had a mere 222 (!) hits. The novel *Jerusalem*, let that be stated here, is actually a brilliant take on contemporary Britain which should have been much more successful.

retreated from the brave new world of the new media on which he had for a while maintained a quite active profile. When you go to patrickneate.com these days (i.e. March 2015), you will get the following ‘handwritten’ notice:

This is the website of writer, [sic] Patrick Neate—me. Sadly I’ve long since dropped my public persona down the back of the radiator and I can’t get it out. Besides, it’s probably starting to smell and I’ve got work to do. If you want to find out about me, why not use Google. I believe the Internet is probably a more reliable source of information about me than I am. If you want to contact me, e-mail’s fine—patrick@patrickneate.com. Thanks X.

“Let’s all go on an urban safari”

This kind of neglect has been unknown to Ben Drew ever since his phenomenal international success as Plan B with the album *The Defamation of Strickland Banks* (2010), and it is to his great credit that he did not take the soft option of following this up with more retro-soul crooning but turned to filmmaking instead after earlier attempts had met with some success.⁴¹ *iLL Manors* (the film) opens with the main character Aaron (Riz Ahmed) watching some TV documentary on neglected children before a voiceover narrator (for those familiar with his work clearly recognisable as Plan B) addresses the audience:

Are you sitting comfortably? Then put your seatbelts on cause you’re in for a harrowing ride. Cause this is Ill Manors where dark shit goes on at night,⁴²

followed by the passage quoted as an epigraph to this essay (“I am the narrator ...”). This is in turn followed by the opening credits over a montage of sped-up footage from the setting of the film in East London as well as various characters of the film engaged in typical actions (drugs,

⁴¹ See the short film *Bizness Women* (2006), which was produced for a film festival at very short notice and then shown on Channel 4 (just like Neate’s *Babel*), available on YouTube (Plan B, “Bizness Women”), and later the slightly longer “Michelle” (2008), available on Vimeo (Plan B, “Michelle”), which then fed into *iLL Manors*, with the title track of this film evolving into “Deepest Shame”.

⁴² Plan B, *Ill Manors: Ein Film von Plan B*, 0:39–1:50. On the album, this passage actually marks the end of track 2, “I am the Narrator” (cf. Plan B, *iLL Manors (OST)*).

mobile frauds, prostitution etc.) to the soundtrack of “I am the Narrator”.⁴³ The film is thus clearly framed by a narrator who self-reflexively comments on his activity in the chorus of the track:

I'll be that ... / Lyrical narrator, social commentator, / Socially
commentating, what I say's verbatim, / Verbal stipulator, oral illustrator, /
Orally illustrating, what I'm stipulating.⁴⁴

At the end of the film, this narrator is also (again, for those in the know) clearly identified as Ben Drew/Plan B, who has a cameo as the taxi driver whose face appears in the rear view mirror of the taxi which takes Aaron away.⁴⁵

Taking its cue from this programmatic introductory comment, the film oscillates between a verbatim illustration of East End reality which, in its specific montage and narrativisation, offers social commentary, criticism and stipulation on the one hand, and lyrical idealism on the other: In all its gritty and at times quite devastating realism and its unflinching engagement with the social deprivation and pointless violence of the depicted milieu, the film identifies remnants of humanity and hope in most of its characters, even to the point of sentimentality and sometimes bordering on melodrama.⁴⁶ This concession to mainstream film aesthetics is, however, always kept at bay with a degree of irony that is recognisably not of the relativist postmodernist kind and thus never undermines the seriousness of the agenda. And while the filming techniques of some scenes show a clear parallel to Neate's *Babel* (handheld mobile cameras, defamiliarising long shots and close-ups, quick and seemingly random cuts etc.),⁴⁷ other passages go for a more polished surface: Especially the

⁴³ Plan B, *Ill Manors: Ein Film von Plan B*, 1:51–4:19.

⁴⁴ Here and in the following, the lyrics will be quoted as heard on Plan B, *iLL Manors (OST)* and verified with recourse to various Internet resources.

⁴⁵ Plan B, *Ill Manors: Ein Film von Plan B*, 1:51:50–1:51:53.

⁴⁶ For a scholar of English Literature the idea that this is the kind of script that Charles Dickens would come up with were he alive today is not at all far-fetched: Aaron and Ed (Ed Skein) share a background as orphans in a children's home (repeatedly alluded to in flashbacks during their occasional moody moments), Aaron hears from his mother for the first time at the end of the film, Ed insists on selling Katya's abandoned child to 'proper parents' and then saves the child from the burning pub before failing to save himself, and Michelle (Anouska Mond) frees Katya (Nathalie Press) from her Russian pimps.

⁴⁷ *iLL Manors* was actually produced on a very low budget, but these strategies were also part of an authenticity seeking agenda in line with hiring many amateur actors from the neighbourhood in which the film is set and where it was also shot.

accelerated panoramic ‘Timelapse’ sequences which punctuate the action of the film time and again provide a fraught link to the polished surface of contemporary London in the summer of the Olympics, which were taking place in the very same area when the film was released one year after the 2011 riots, thus indicating a similar rift between polished and real reality in reality at large.⁴⁸

All in all, then, the author-producer-narrator of *iLL Manors* seems to be an idealist or even moralist at heart, as had already been clear after closer scrutiny of his hard-hitting hip hop debut *Who Needs Actions When You Got Words*.⁴⁹ But it is also clear that this moralist does not easily distinguish good from evil characters. Instead, he is acutely aware of the influence of the environment on people’s actions, and Ben Drew has pointed out in interview after interview that he needs the medium of storytelling for dealing with just this complexity. At the same time, he also seems to be acutely aware of the demands of different media formats, which would explain why the album *iLL Manors* does away with some of the Dickensian sentimentality and provides a somewhat starker resume: While the sequencing of tracks basically remains the same,⁵⁰ the album opens with the title track “iLL Manors”, which in the film plays only over the closing credits after not having been completed in time. When the video was released separately, the track was hailed by the *Guardian* as “the greatest British protest song in years.”⁵¹ What is most striking about the lyrics is the acknowledged complicity between the narrator and the outsider audience:

Let’s all go on an urban safari / We might see some illegal migrants / Oi
look there’s a chav / That means council housed and violent.

⁴⁸ These ‘Timelapse’ sequences were collected as an extra on Plan B, *Ill Manors: Ein Film von Plan B*.

⁴⁹ Cf. Reinhardt, “Greeting from Forest Gate”.

⁵⁰ “I am the Narrator” is followed by “Drug Dealer” introducing drug dealers Kirby (Keith Koggins) and Chris (Lee Allen), “Playing with Fire” introducing youngsters Marcel (Nick Sagar) and Jake (Ryan De La Cruz), “Deepest Shame” introducing crack-whore Michelle (Anouska Mound), “Pity the Plight” introducing the murderous triangle of Chris, Marcel, and Jake (and incorporating an amazingly old-fashioned poem by punk poet John Cooper Clark who appears in the film as himself), “The Runaway” introducing Eastern European prostitute Katya (Natalie Press) and her baby daughter, and finally “Falling Down” as the closing track of both film and album. Album only tracks are “Lost My Way” (between “Pity the Plight” and “The Runaway”), “Great Day for a Murder” and “Live Once” (before “Falling Down”).

⁵¹ Cf. Lynskey, “Why Plan B’s *Ill Manors* is the Greatest British Protest Song”.

This is followed by a change of perspective for the chorus that is clearly antagonistic to the implied audience:

Oi! I said oi! / What you looking at, you little rich boy! / We're poor round here, run home and lock your door / Don't come round here no more, you could get robbed for / Real because my manor's ill / My manor's ill / For real / You know my manor's ill, my manor's ill!

Here, the tension between realism and idealism as well as between inside and outside perspectives that is only obliquely alluded to in the film—Ben Drew as someone who made it out acting as a taxi driver who takes Aaron out at the end—is explicitly addressed. The very title itself leans towards the inside by combining the territory ('manor' in the sense of residence, seat of power) with the antagonistic behaviour of its inhabitants ('manor' in the sense of 'manner'), but the epithet 'ill' seems to be ambiguous here ('bad' in the sense of 'good' as inside slang usage has it and 'ill' in the sense of pathologically afflicted as the outside perspective sometimes suggests).

Similarly, the music on the entire album combines all kinds of influences, from being "basically bassline, soul, with a bit of hip hop"⁵² to clear echoes of reggae and other 'subcultural' and politically oppositional genres for many of the main tracks on the one hand to culturally more 'established' sources for the narratorial frame on the other, with prominent samples of Shostakovich (by way of Peter Fox's 2008 German hit "Alles Neu") and Saint-Saens establishing the sonically defining features for "iLL Manors" and "I am the Narrator" respectively. While definitely not as mainstream-oriented as the film, the album was arguably quite successful on its own terms (which is to say, if you do not compare it to *The Defamation of Strickland Banks*), being attested 'universal acclaim' (83 out of 100) by the aggregate review Website *Metacritic*,⁵³ spending time as #1 in the U.K. album charts and being the first soundtrack album to be shortlisted for the Mercury Prize in 2012.⁵⁴ The film, on the other hand, did not quite reach the mainstream audiences that it seems to envisage and was not quite as unanimously well-received as the album, with aggregate review website *Rotten Tomatoes* documenting a 6.4 out of

⁵² Plan B, "iLL Manors interview".

⁵³ Cf. <http://www.metacritic.com/music/ill-manors/plan-b> (accessed March 7, 2014).

⁵⁴ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ILL_Manors_%28album%29 (accessed March 7, 2014).

10 rating based on 28 reviews.⁵⁵ So it seems that the agenda of getting an inside view of the underlying causes of the 2011 London riots across to the mainstream was only partly successful.⁵⁶ But then, both film and album are there for the taking, and even the initial outing had a far greater reach than Patrick Neate's *Babel* could ever dream of.

The Improbability of Being Heard

As these two case studies indicate, the probability of being heard has not necessarily increased with the proliferation of media formats and outlets, and tried and tested forms of safeguarding the connectivity within specific spheres such as the reliance on the 'work of art' as a symbolically generalised medium of communication have come under pressure from the erosion of demarcations between art and literature on the one hand and popular culture on the other. The two examples discussed in this essay have willingly moved into this open field, albeit from different directions. Given the relative success of *iLL Manors* in two registers (film and music), the insistence on improbability might seem somewhat implausible at first glance. But if one considers that Plan B moved into the newly open field from a position of huge mainstream popularity, it is significant that this popularity was then reduced (though by no means catastrophically so) by his insistence on relevance, both artistic and political. This seems to indicate that convergence-induced crossover does not necessarily result in greater quantitative reach. Both film and album seem to mark interesting compromises between artistic autonomy and institutional integration, and it has to be noted that in spite of its low budget and its partly oppositional stance the film had to (and could) rely on public funding by Film London, the UK Film Council Lottery Fund and the BBC when private funding appeals ran into a stalemate due to the financial crisis. Ultimately, then, in spite of providing an interesting example for the convergence of music and film practices and media formats, *iLL Manors* is fully institutionally and commercially embedded and utilises the formats of 'feature film' and 'album' as symbolically generalised communication media on the border between the art system (in its film dimension) and mainstream popular

⁵⁵ Cf. http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/ill_manors/ (accessed March 7, 2014).

⁵⁶ This agenda is most clearly spelled out by Ed Skein in the interview accessible in the 'Making of' that comes as an extra with Plan B, *Ill Manors: Ein Film von Plan B* (cf. 13:26–14:02).

culture. Its fate in the wild west of the Internet, on the other hand, remains to be seen, but currently its visibility is high.⁵⁷

Babel, on the other hand, seems to demarcate the limits of spreadability. While topical and, once the TV version was made freely available on YouTube, an excellent example for an attempt at “creating value and meaning in a networked culture” in Jenkins, Ford, and Green’s sense⁵⁸, it did not catch on, neither enticing viewers enough to watch the whole piece nor provoking debate.⁵⁹ And even the book version, in spite of relying on the established symbolically generalised communication medium of the book as literary work, did not receive any attention in the literary world at all.⁶⁰ Thus it seems that Patrick Neate’s foray from literature into other formats remained firmly entrenched in the art world of late-night television, avant-garde theatre performances and special interest book publication, and while it only met with a limited response even there, the initial impulse to cross over into popular culture in the register of poetry slams evaporated in its subsequent mediatisation on television and the Internet.⁶¹ Why this is so is hard to say, but it seems that the systems-theoretical framework with its insistence on the (post-) modern trajectory of differentiation and de-differentiation on the one hand and the functional and qualitative dimensions of successful communication in their dependence on technologically available media formats on the other could be an indispensable tool for approaching the chances and limitations of convergence culture induced by the metamorphoses of the new media.

⁵⁷ By the time of writing (March 2014), a title search on Google yields c. 920.000 hits, with quite extensive treatments on Wikipedia and elsewhere among them.

⁵⁸ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*.

⁵⁹ The hits count on YouTube seems to indicate that the film is not sufficiently absorbing to merit watching all four parts (Part 1: 124,745, Part 2: 21,298, Part 3: 4,338, Part 4: 5,909 by March 7, 2014). While some viewers were enticed enough to at least check out the ending, one can also assume they would not have made it to the end of a late night broadcast. Even more worryingly, the film has stirred up barely any discussion, which is quite striking, given its provocative and quarrelsome stance.

⁶⁰ While yielding some 50,000 hits on Google, there do not seem to be any substantial reviews or other engagements with the text available on the Internet.

⁶¹ However, Neate is still mentioned as part of the Book Slam team (see footnote 6).

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