Spectacle, Fear, and the Anatomy of Authoritarianism: Fascist Dynamics in Krasznahorkai's The Melancholy of Resistance

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Abstract: Drawing on a conceptual apparatus of fascist studies based on Umberto Eco (1995), Paxton (2004), Griffins (1993), and Arendt's (1962, 1963) critiques, this research paper analyses how László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998) delineates the classic sociopolitical matrix of fascist authoritarianism, which tends to originate in an eruption of violent irrational forces among masses. Several principal characters of the novel embody various facets of this fascist playbook. The novel reveals how spectacle, rumor, mob violence, and collective fear create emotional, cultural, and institutional conditions for a fascist political ascendancy. The novel's political dimensions gain sharper focus when we trace how ideological control, demagoguery, and complicity play out among its characters. This research's significance lies in the fact that it situates a work of fiction in dialogue with the study of fascism/totalitarianism, thereby enriching our understanding of both. This article further argues that Krasznahorkai depicts the genesis of an authoritarian regime through its apocalyptic narrative: his characters, The Prince, Mrs. Eszter, Colonel Harrer, and others, enact a fascist schema of power, and the plot shows how communal fear and collapse enable them. *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998) dramatizes the process by which a civilization collapses into a fascist authoritarian regime and charts the road to tyranny as one paved with fear, illusion, and false promises of a restored order.

Keywords: Fascism, Totalitarianism, László Krasznahorkai, The Melancholy of Resistance, Mob Violence, Palingenetic Ultranationalism, Authoritarianism, Spectacle, Demagoguery, Scapegoating, Mass Hysteria

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1. Introduction

The Melancholy of Resistance is a 1989 [1] novel by the 2025 Nobel Prize in Literature-winning author László Krasznahorkai [2] and was the first of his novels to appear in English translation in 1998. Invoking comparisons with the likes of Gogol and Melville, the Hungarian master's novel is often celebrated as a "magisterial, surreal novel," as it "depicts a chain of mysterious events in a small Hungarian town" (The Melancholy of Resistance, n.d). Its dense narrative dramatizes social collapse, mob violence, and the resurgence of authoritarianism. Set in a desolate Eastern European town during a relentless winter, the novel unfolds a chain of mysterious events that drives the populace to hysterical extremes. Critics have noted that the novel functions as a political allegory of late Communist Eastern bloc unrests, warning how social rupture facilitates authoritarian consolidation and how "individual resistance is futile in the face of ruthlessly opportunistic forces (such as populism and fascism, those ever-latent viruses of the body politic) that inevitably emerge to fill the vacuum once a politeia vacates its

responsibility to the commons" (Parsons, 2019, para. 2) [3]. According to Vasquez Heilig (2025), *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998) emerges as "a parable about how societies trade freedom for security when fear takes hold" (para. 8) [4]. This shift of collective terror to the prospect of draconian rule exalts the very dynamics of the emergence of authoritarian figures. It is no wonder that Mrs. Eszter (an emerging fascist in the novel) declares that the town's anarchic condition has made the community "ripe and ready for the onslaught of hooliganism" (Bowie, 2025, para. 45) [5]. The frustration and panic among the community make its emotional situation unstable, where an authoritarian takeover might appear reasonable. This paper has discussed how the fear, mob violence, and social anxiety that pervade the novel show how the broken reality and the mass confusion create a paved way to solutions that are despotic.

The story by Krasznahoki (1998) demonstrates the typical sociopolitical grid of fascist authoritarianism that is inclined to begin with an outburst of violent, irrational energies of the masses. There are a number of main protagonists of the novel that represent different aspects of this fascist playbook. The grotesque circus performance of The Prince is a hallucinatory, broken-word speaker exhorting the mob with slogans such as "Build a new world upon the ruins" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 232) [6] and purifying them through destruction. In comparison, Mrs. Eszter comes out as the cynical lady politician who tries to use municipal bureaucracy and the policing structures to have power. Mrs. Eszter expresses a harsh social Darwinism, reminding the audience that life is "a war where there are winners and losers" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 254) [7], which explains why she has been raised to the top as the strong overthrew the weak. The army officer, Colonel Harrer, collaborates with her to "restore order and civility" (Bowie, 2025, para. 44) [8], which gives her project the appearance of legal and military justification, the muscle of the force of the state. Cruelty makes the villagers passive, and the crowds simply recycle conspirational myths (one interrogation depicts the mob repeating the creed that "toads like you are of no use" and to "tear down everything" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, pp. 231-232) [9] at the hands of The Prince, indicating how slogans borrowed replace independent thinking. All the ideological domination (Mrs. Eszter), irrational panic (The Prince cult of ruin), and brutality of enforcement (Col. Harrer) led to a story of authoritarian conquest, and how a shattered society can be restructured on violence as a rule of order.

Interpreted through a conceptual apparatus of fascist studies, *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998) exposes how mass irrationality and collective fear create the emotional, cultural and institutional conditions for authoritarian rule. Contemporary critiques show how fascist propaganda and myth-making work to foster a "perception of 'others' as threatening (threat othering), [through] the adoption of conspiracy-oriented propaganda (Dunwoody et al., 2022, p.

1) [10]. The characters descend into confusion and can no longer distinguish reality from rumour, fact from fantasy, private fear from public narrative. The mob violence is portrayed in the novel, not as senseless chaos but as a misplaced righteousness. The rioters act as though "they are engaged not in the joy of mindless rioting, but in a kind of dutiful, silent, unpleasant but necessary activity" (Bowie, 2025) [11], as if cleansing a corrupt society. In articulating this novel's literary insights within a political-theoretical frame, this article seeks to demonstrate how *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998) anticipates the psychology of fascism.

The novel's political dimensions gain sharper focus when we trace how ideological control, demagoguery, and complicity play out among its characters. It is significant for scholarship because it situates a work of fiction in dialogue with the study of totalitarianism, thereby enriching our understanding of both. This article further argues that Krasznahorkai depicts the genesis of an authoritarian regime through its apocalyptic narrative: his characters, The Prince, Mrs. Eszter, Colonel Harrer, and others, enact a fascist schema of power, and the plot shows how communal fear and collapse enable them. In short, *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998) dramatizes the process by which a civilization collapses into a fascist authoritarian regime and charts the road to tyranny as one paved with fear, illusion, and false promise of a restored order.

2. Literature Review

The Melancholy of Resistance (1998) by László Krasznahorkai is set in a desolate provincial Hungarian town, where the fragile societal order disintegrates with the arrival of a mysterious circus showcasing a colossal stuffed whale. This event acts as a catalyst, unleashing a movement of fear, paranoia, and violence that consumes the towns and exposes the latent tensions, frustration, and resentments simmering beneath the mundaneness of life. Critics have commonly read the apocalyptic atmosphere of the novel as an indictment of social disintegration under pressure, moral degradation, spiritual fatigue and susceptibility of the populace to brutality and manipulation. Susan Sontag (as cited in Szalai, 2012) remarks that "Krasznahorkai is master of apocalypse, and his novel is both an anatomy of desolation at its most appalling, and a stirring manual of resistance to desolation - through inwardness" (para. 1) [12] This reading underpins the stylistic richness of novel which complements the novel's focus on desolation and resilience against it. James Wood (2011) describes *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998) as "a comedy of apocalypse… [with an] unfathomable strangeness. … Less manic, has elements of traditional social novel" (para. 16) [13]. He further argues that the novel is notable for its pessimistic character, which blends with a dark humour and an exorability of decline. Catherine Keller (2005) in her article, "Territory, Terror and Torture: Dream-reading the Apocalypse" contends that the concept of apocalypse in the novel is not biblical but

functions instead as a "cultural habit" (p. 2) [14]. She said this cultural habit emerges as a response to disappointed historical hopes, where "righteous people slide toward the end-time apocalypse" (Keller, 2005, p. 2) [15] and apocalyptic imagination offers fantasy of final judgment instead of confronting political responsibility in the contemporary times.

The Melancholy of Resistance (1998) is saturated with themes of decay, profound disillusionment and apocalypse, which are deeply merged with the historical drama of twentieth-century Eastern Europe, particularly the still unresolved legacy of complicity with Nazi and Soviet regimes and the moral exhaustion that followed their collapse. The novel has been interpreted as an articulation of post-Soviet trauma by Tamara Hundorova (2016) in her research, "Symptom of the Loser and the Melancholy of the Post-Soviet Generation". Hundorova (2016) describes this trauma as a collective psychological wound resulting from the collapse of the socialist system, which both shattered ideological uncertainties and attempted to erase the memory of its totalitarian past. She adds that the "trauma has to be thought and talked through, otherwise it transforms into a spectre – one that pursues, provoking excessive behavior and melancholy" (Hundorova, 2016, p. 2) [16].

Krasznahorkai's (1998) persistent exploration of themes like fear, trauma, decay and hopelessness has often critics compared to Franz Kafka, whose narratives depict a world loaded with absurdity, suppression of freedom and the arbitrary logic of some formidable power apparatus [17]. TOI World Desk (2025) notes that, "Krasznahorkai has long carried both the weight and the warmth of the Kafka comparison" (para. 1)[18]. Both writers construct the labyrinthine worlds where individuals face opaque institutions which cripple their agency and intensify their alienation and trauma.

Werkmeister Harmonies (2000), a Hungarian film directed by Bela Tarr, is primarily based on the middle parts of Krasznahorkai's novel (1998) [19]. Shot in black and white and composed of 39 languidly placed long takes, the film portrays the lives of János Valuska and his uncle György Eszter during the late communist era in Hungary as they witness their town's descent into chaos and moral exhaustion. Michael Tawa (2017), in his research, asserts that the film is remarkable for its use of long, uninterrupted takes [20]. According to him, Tarr's (2000) cinematic adaptation creates a palpable atmosphere of dread by emphasizing the interplay of mist and occluding spaces, of light and dark places in the town streets and interiors [21]. For instance, the film repeatedly cinematizes "labyrinthine aporetic streets that have no exit" (Tawa, 2017, p. 5) [22]. Tawa's (2017) research further suggests that the camera is often seen trapping the passive subjects of novels within its frame, reinforcing their immobility and disconnection from a world in which hopelessness and self-interest breed despicability and decrepitude [23].

A pessimistic outlook on human nature and social order is a defining feature of the philosophical essence of the novel (1998) with references to the notions of Thomas Hobbes about fear, insecurity and fragility of civil peace. In his research article, "The light of reason": Reading the Leviathan with The *Werckmeister Harmonies*, Michael J. Shapiro (2016) creates a comparison set-up between the Leviathan and the novel (the film adaption) and states that the novel "thinks both with and against Hobbes" (p. 1) [24]. Then, Shapiro (2016) goes on to say that the Hobbesian sovereign can be viewed in the form of the imposition of a new order by Mrs. Eszter. This total authority is created to put an end to the anarchy at the expense of true freedom and plurality. Accordingly, the vision of Hobbes political philosophy is in one way disproved and justified by the story that at the same time criticizes the form of sovereignty in his system and performs it, using its pessimistic aesthetic form.

The novel also utilizes musical structure and musicology as a central metaphor, according to Shapiro (2016), to figure questions of harmony, dissonance and orchestration in political life [25]. The title itself, along with Georgy Eszter's obsession with the Wreckmeister temperament system. In this sense, the temperament system figures the modern compulsion to impose rational harmony on a world that inherently resists total organization. According to Shapiro (2016), Eszter's belief that the impurities in the musical system are responsible for universal decay functions as a metaphor for flawed human impulse to perfect society by means of ideology, an impulse which often leads to massive catastrophic failure [26].

The Melancholy of Resistance (1998) dramatizes many facets and contours of fascism that scholarship has only recently begun to emphasize in relation to 20th-century fascism. One such facet is the way that fascism stages violence as spectacle through orchestrated propaganda, as shown by Tarr's (2000) film adaptation. Despite the emergence of a substantial body of criticism on the novel since its publication and a renewed interest in Krasznahorkai's oeuvre after the award of the Nobel Prize, *The Melancholy of Resistance*'s (1998) engagement with fascism and fascist ideology remains largely unexplored. This research fills a gap in the existing scholarship on the novel. Many researchers have noted the novel's apocalyptic atmosphere and allegorical richness, but specific dynamics of spectacle, bureaucracy and crowd psychology have not been examined in a sustained way.

3. Theoretical Framework

Fascism has been theorized variously as a modern form of mass politics, characterized by extreme nationalism, dictatorial power, and mythic invocation to unity and communal regeneration. Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (1932) in his *Doctrine of Fascism* equates fascism to a regime in which "the State is absolute, individuals and groups relative. Individuals

and groups are admissible in so far as they come within the State" (p. 7) [27]. Such statement highlights the idea of totalitarianism that individuality of existence is largely made within the whole that is the state. The perceptions of Mussolini (1932) therefore result to the consideration of the state as a "spiritual and ethnic community" (p. 7) [28] requiring total obedience of the citizens and in many cases conceiving violence as a civil duty. The fascist politics in his opinion is driven by an ecstatic and militant will that puts the individual interest behind the national community.

Modern theorists have gone further to redefine the idealized fascist architecture on analytical typologies. The idea proposed by Robert Paxton (2004) *The Anatomy of Fascism* assumes that the phenomenon under discussion is a dynamic process that passes through the phases of mobilization, starting with the activation of the grassroots and the subsequent emotional appeal of the elite cooperation and culminating with the cohesion of power and the formation of a totalitarian regime. The outcome is the regime that abandons democracy and justifies redemptive violence, "without ethical or legal restraints … [to achieve] goals of internal cleansing and external expansion" (Paxton, 2004, p. 231) [29]. The analysis of fascism by Paxton (2004) describes the spirit of the ideology as "obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood" (p. 218) [30], where cults of purity and unity bring a mythological interpretation of the nation as sacred. British historian, Roger Griffins (1993) on fascism explains that the very essence of fascism, the "mobilizing myth" (p. 280) [31], was national rebirth, a populist pledge to save and restore a corrupted society. To Griffins (1993), fascist ideology is "revolutionary ultranationalism (palingenetic ultranationalism)" (p. 294) that is based on the idea of the nation's "imminent rebirth from decadence" (p. 75) [32]. The fascism in his formulation comes in the shape of an emotionally colored story of communal renaissance, an amalgamation of politics and myth, politics and spectacle. Hence, the fascist political ideology will trigger mass movement of a ritualized renewal which energizes the masses and perpetuates totalitarian influence.

By surrendering individual liberty to a larger mythos of national identity, fascism seeks to reclaim historical destiny for a supposedly unified imagined community. Italian thinker Umberto Eco's (1995) essay "Ur-Fascism" analyzes many forms and manifestations of fascism. While identifying many properties of fascism, he explains how fascist myths are saturated with symbolic traits and recurring emotional motifs. Eco (1995) stresses that fascism valorizes action over thought: "Action being beautiful in itself… [and] thinking as a form of emasculation" (p. 7) [33] reflects an anti-intellectual, mystical ethos that is antagonistic to critical reflection and democratic debate. It simply amplifies fear and hatred of difference: "Ur-Fascism grows up…

by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference" (Eco, 1995, p. 7) [34], defining itself against outsiders and enemies who are viewed as existential threats. It romanticizes struggle and death as redemptive and purifying forces carrying the promise of greatness. Eco (1995) contends that in fascist ideology, "everybody is educated to become a hero" (p. 8) [35], a pedagogical project that is linked to a cult of death so that the movement hero craves heroic death by sending others and potentially themselves to death. Through this, fascist ideology provides a group catharsis, the leaders of the community and the masses as the champions of martial virtues, purity and sacrifice in an ever-mobilized quasi-militarized society. The critiques of Eco revolve around the systemic and systematic undermining of critical thinking by ideology and the propaganda. Ur-Fascism (1995) preempts the inadequacy to enrich discourse in newspeak and rallying slogans to bring the complicated political situations to reductive cliches and thus restrict language and reason. Intensive propaganda advances a kind of what Eco (1995) terms as "selective populism" (p. 8) [36]. The masses are imagined as a homogeneous "monolith" (Eco, 1995, p. 8) [37] with a single will, which the leader alone is authorized to interpret.

Hannah Arendt's critique of totalitarianism is also instrumental in illuminating social mechanics by which fascist myths translate into mass psychology, political consent, and mass terror. In her classic analysis in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt (1962) argues that "total terror is the essence of totalitarian government (p. 466)" deployed to "man are being born and therefore each of them is a new beginning, begins, in a sense the world anew (p. 466)" and to "destroy… the love for freedom from the hearts of man" (p. 511) [38]. Such mass surveillance, terror, propaganda, and arbitrary violence atomizes society, reducing people to isolated 'superfluous' beings who no longer identify themselves as citizens embedded in a shared global sociopolitical order. Arendt (1962) explains that totalitarian regimes create a majority segment of this socio-political group, who are cut off from social roots: the alienated masses thus form the base for fascist rule by means of collective fear about the futility of resistance.

Arendt's (1963) study of Adolf Eichmann further illustrates how ordinary individuals become tools for bureaucratic authoritarian regimes. Eichmann was a mid-level Nazi bureaucrat whom Ardent (1963) describes as "mental gift" (p. 65) [39], motivated not by overt sadism but by careerism, conformity, and thoughtlessness. He "became completely muddled and ended by stressing the virtues and voices of blind obedience" (Ardent, 1963, p. 65) [3] and did not think critically about the consequences of his actions for millions of his victims. Ardent (1963) dubs this phenomenon as the "banality of evil (p. 134)" [3] to show how, under authoritarian conditions, atrocities can be executed by bureaucrats who are not monsters but passive

conformists who lack moral responsibility. Thus, fascist terror is not only a top-down imposition but also relies on the routinized and machinic obedience of ordinary citizens and functionaries.

Adorno et al.'s (2019) analysis of the authoritarian personality demonstrates that certain personality traits make people easily receptive to fascist ideology. The authoritarian personality is drawn to power and hierarchy. In his introduction to Adorno et al.'s *The Authoritarian Personality*, Peter E. Gordon (2019) states: "The psyche of a fascist is 'authoritarian' in the sense that it attaches itself to figures of strength and disdains those it deems weak" (p. xx) [40], which is a highly conventional, rigid, and stereotypical disposition. These individuals are very strict on the in-group/ out-group boundaries and are obsessed with purity, morality and conspiracy. As a response to the ambiguity, they live in fear and project the intolerable impulses onto the outside in the form of various forms of hatred towards minorities and other stigmatized factors. Adorno et al (2019) suggests they go out in search of a person to blame instead of confronting complicated social realities [41]. They project their frustrations onto an easy target which is mostly a weak minority, blindly follow men of strength, and cast accusatory fingers at strangers. These individuals are never willing to patrol and discipline those that violate their rules or even think differently, and this serves to strengthen the air of conformity and disciplined obedience.

William Reich (1970) introduces the psychoanalytic dimension to apprehend the workings of the fascist psyche [42]. He traces fascism back to patterns of submission to the family and sexual mores. He explains that in patriarchal structures where authority is absolute and sexual expression is repressed, the children are conditioned to obey without question and internalize rigid authority figures. He argues that Nazi authoritarianism is rooted in such patriarchal families so that, "the sons, apart from a subservient attitude towards authority, develop a strong identification with the father, which forms the basis of the emotional identification with every kind of authority" (Reich, 1970, p. 43) [43]. He believes that when "primary biological needs" (Reich, 1970, p. 2) [44] are crushed by an authoritarian, people become susceptible to mass-mystical movements. Indeed, he writes that fascism is a collective symbol of "average human beings" (Reich, 1970, p. 1) [45] whose natural desires have been thwarted. In effect of this, the revolt against private impulse is channeled into mass violence and fanaticism. William Reich (1970) believed that when "primary biological needs" (p. 1) [46] are crushed by an authoritarian order, individuals become susceptible to mass-mystical movements. Fascism thus, becomes a collective expression of "average human beings" (Reich, 1970, p. 2) [47] whose natural desires have been thwarted. Repressed desires are then directed from the private, intimate sphere

towards political sphere so that the revolt against private impulse is channeled into mass violence and fanaticism.

Combined, these theoretical strands end up with a multidimensional approach to the study of the way in which fascism is not only produced by political structure, but also by social pressure, habitual emotional reaction and psychic seeds. Arendt (1962) describes how populations are prepared to totalitarian control in a systematic manner via fear as well as isolation and breakdown of common reality. Adorno (2019) reveals the reasons why inflexible personalities move towards the hierarchy and blame [48]. Reich (1970) evaluates the psychology of fascism that undergoes several phases of its development via repressed sexual desires and antique patriarchal obedience that ultimately culminates in mass aggression [49]. These threads are helpful in conjunction with theoretical constructs of Eco (1995) and Paxton (2004) in approaching *The Melancholy of Resistanc*e where Krasznahorkai (1998) envisions a degrading town, which is plagued with fear, isolation and desire to power. He sets alive one such town, with its turgid ambiance, anxious people, social alienation and vulnerability to conquest, who seem to be awaiting a dictatorial conquest. The mob violence, the entire spectacle and The Prince authoritarian rule, as retold by Krasznahorkai (1998) is a complete critical analysis interwoven in this thread-like structure. Having this interpretative scheme in place, analysis is now able to look at how these dynamics become actualized into the characters and events depicted by Krasznahorkai (19980 the mood and course of the catastrophe depicted in the novel.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1 The Whale Spectacle, Populist Theatrics, and Mass Manipulation

In László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998), a giant taxidermied whale is brought into the town inside a huge metal container. The circus-like spectacle is exhibited as a grotesque public attraction and soon becomes narrative's central symbol of chaos, manipulation, and mass hysteria. The whale spectacle hints at the populist theatrics through which the masses are manipulated by spectacle rather than substance. Krasznahorkai's (1998) whale show is a fascist-style spectacle of mass mobilization staged through popular theatre. It transforms the town square into a staged arena of rituals. Paxton (2004) observes that fascist regimes glorify public spectacle (rallies, marches, symbols) to incite collective emotions, especially fear and awe [50]. The novel describes the state of the crowd after seeing the whale as," People are talking about aristocracy of some sort ... their eyes were restless, scanning the entire effect of wagon as if there were something else to be found" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 80) [51]. The whale show hints at a fascist's employment of unreason and blind participation. As Umberto Eco (1995) foregrounds the argument that fascist "action being beautiful in itself, … must be

taken before or without any previous reflection" (p. 7) [52]. Eco (1995) contends that action is guided by instincts and remains untethered from scrutiny. Such a view deems inquiry and criticism as an obstacle to their vision of dominance and order. In the novel, Valuska observes that, "they [mass crowds] are completely mesmerized by the whale, they queued again to enter it; it was as if seeing it once was not enough for them" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, pp. 79-80) [53].

> The novel depicts the socio-psychological conditions of the mob:
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> We simply flooded every street and square, a hollow sense of fear combined with resignation that left us with some hope of mercy; nor were there any orders or words of command, no attempt at calculation, no taking of risks and no danger, since there was nothing left to lose. (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 202) [54]

The passage points towards fascism's exploitation of social disintegration, foregrounding Arendt's (1962) articulation of totalitarian dynamics, where atomized individuals –the victims of institutional failure and enforced isolation–become ripe for manipulation [55]. In Arendt's (1962) analysis, totalitarian regimes atomize society to the point where risks vanish because personal stakes (family, property, community) have corroded, promoting a nihilistic drive where "anything that distinguishes one man from another is intolerable" (p. 477) [56] and thus incite actions without forethought. The spectre of "the worst have lost their fear, and the best have lost their hope" (Ardent, 1962, p. 466) [57] captures fascism's psychic grip, aligning with Arendt's claim that loneliness breeds a heightened susceptibility to ideologies offering belonging via violence. This crowd situation parodies Robert Paxton's (2004) mobilization stage of fascism, where passions like victimhood fuel action without consideration of the aftermath effects, creating an effective atmosphere of authentic despair out of carefully manipulated hysteria [58].

As the news of the whale's arrival spreads, the town's fatigued and strained citizens become attendees of the spectacle along with a sizable number of strangers who are attracted to the show: "The great majority of those present were foreign, clearly peasants, attracted here" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 54) [59]. The novel particularly highlights the otherness of the non-local arrivals, bringing into focus the social and cultural discords and disruptions caused by their presence, a phenomenon that deeply unsettles the town's local population. The whale show serves as a magnet that induces encounters between the known and stranger; the novel's precise diction (foreign, clearly peasants, unsettling alien qualities) illustrates that the whale attraction immediately becomes political; the town's identity is forced to define itself against the newcomers (Krasznahorkai, 1998) [60].

Eco (1995) argues that fascism thrives and manufactures consensus by exploiting the supposedly 'natural' fear of difference. The first maneuver of a fascist or pre fascist government

is often hostile rhetoric against the 'intruders' (Eco, 1995) [61]. Eco's (1995) insight into fascist minds can be mobilized to understand how the whale show staged as a spectacular object, attracts outsiders and becomes a convenient weapon for converting the fear of difference into a political demand for exclusion [62]. The villagers of Krasznahorkai (1998) do not perceive the peasants in isolation; they explain their being by an existing culture schema according to which foreignness is a contamination [63]. The spectacle is not the cause of xenophobia per se but rather it is a kind of outlet of the repressed anxieties into an overt hostility towards strangers. The gossip of strangers resembles fascist xenophobia; the whale is the factor that is used to determine membership of the exclusive local ingroup. The situation closely parallels Eco's (1995) assertion about fascism's "exploitation of the natural fear of difference and the call to purge intruders" (p. 7) [64].

The circus show brings the town people together in a harmonious and unquietly disjointed crowd. Krasznahokai (1998) explains the situation "dense wave of people" and "the frozen and impatient crowd" (p. 74) [65] facing the front of the whale's wagon. The eyes of the people cannot be taken off the show of the whale. This is exactly the impact that organizers want to create through such complete absorption of individual attention in one collective gaze. Federico Caprotti (2005) shows that Mussolini employed aesthetic pageantry to such an extent that "spectacle became a tool through which consensus was organized, and... hegemony was articulated" (p. 12) [66]. The whale exhibition in the novel works similarly. It is a choreographed march of the town underclass into little balls of frustrations and converting them into focused and exploitable energy. This is evident in the scene that runs in Krasznahorkai (1998) text where the spectacle dominates any ability to think rationally [67]. In the analysis of fascist aesthetics, Caprotti (2005) has found political power to be aiming at seeming transcendent to the masses. This transcendence practically frees the fascist regime of any reference to the "democratic responsibility in the political process" (Caprotti, 2005, p. 3) [68]. The crowd's attention captured by the whale thus foreshadows Caprotti's (2005) account of the fascist spectacles, which transforms the mob into a cohesive and compliant mass [69].

The whale factions as an idol that commands collective obedience. The townspeople are so mesmerized by the colossal carcass that they form a relentless queue," it was as seeing it once was not enough" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 222) [70]. The compulsive return of villagers recalls the fascist tactics in which the individual is fully subsumed into the collective idea. Benito Mussolini (1932) asserts in *The Doctrine of Fascism* that "the Fascist conception of the State is all embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist" (p. 2) [71]. Similarly, in the novel of Krasznahorkai (1998), the individuals in the novel have their individual will before the

whale spectacle. They end up causing a ritual of loyalty to some outside power by attending the whale house again and again without a valid excuse [72]. In this instance when Krasznahokai (1998) declares that individuals are forced back to the same he dramatizes how citizens are trained by fascist propaganda to offer obedience to the official spectacle time and again [73]. Considered generally, in the text and the history of fascist regimes the people are engaged in such hollow rites, not due to curiosity, but to obedience and habitual submission.

4.2 The Prince as Fascist Demagogue

The Prince, in László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998), is an enigmatic, even mythic character, who makes violent and firebrand speeches to whip crowds into irrational mass hysteria. He is a speaker and a fascist demagogue who has such enormous power over people, and he exercises it through spectacle and manipulating the masses with their psychology. He purposefully leaves this ambiguous in the text to support the notion that authoritarian power does not exist due to personal desires but to the result, spectacle and the need of the masses to be played around with. He is introduced into the narrative during the display of the giant whale in the circus. He is shown as a kind of living freak whose own existence remains inexplicable. The title of Prince has been bestowed upon him by the circus director as part of a marketing strategy. The director describes The Prince as “an aberration”. Then he adds, “I'll say it slowly so you can understand it, an ab-ber-ray-shun, who—and he knows this, as well as I do—has no knowledge or power” (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 139) [74].

The director perceives The Prince as a fabricator of lies who incites a mob of followers from street to street and town to town, explicitly identifying him as the agitator of mass violence. Commenting on The Prince’s fabricated and manipulative rhetoric, the director remarks: “I have the faintest conception of the world about which he piles lie upon outrageous lie, whose mob he agitates” (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 139) [75]. This mob motif appears in the novel as soon as The Prince’s messages are relayed through his factotum and interpreter, so that his speech appears to address the crowd directly and exclusively. The Prince is immediately cast as a demagogue and charismatic leader, a figure whose performative presence acquires real power before the assembled masses. In pivotal scenes where the director is confronting him, The Prince’s thoughts (as described by factotum) are shrouded in vague dark nihilism. He disavows any allegiance to authority, his interpreter states, “He says, he doesn’t recognize a superior authority” (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 138) [76].

Through his almost hypnotic ability to send the townsfolk into trance-like frenzy, The Prince triggers violent riots that tear down the social order of the village. He rejects the world’s suffering, not to alleviate it. Rather, he delights in its collapse: “he likes it when things fall to

pieces. Ruin comprises every form of making: lies and false pride are like oxygen in the ice. Making is half: ruin is everything" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 141) [77]. His dark nihilist aesthetics call for the collective frenzy and unraveling of the social order, which he eventually unleashes. As a demagogue, his orientation is towards total destruction and entropy. In assigning a superior status to chaos and destruction, he embodies a philosophy that all human social, political, and moral edifices carry seeds of their destruction, and all sorts of meaning are unstable. Mussolini (1932) contends that fascism "conceives of life as a struggle" (p. 1) [78], demanding heroic sacrifice. The Prince, however, treats life as a raw material for perpetual ruination. Eco (1995) lists among fascist characteristics "a cult of action for action's sake and devotion to war" (p. 7) [79]; The Prince embodies these traits, elevating destruction to end in itself rather than a means to an end.

The definition of fascism by Roger Griffin, (1991) as "palingenetic ultra nationalism" (p. 48) [80], a resurgence of the society or community by the annihilation of the corrupt order, is vividly described in the manner in which The Prince preaches renovation by devastation. These implications are that the old world is being based on lies and corruption and that only through ripping up the old world at the core, something real, something authentic can come about. This logic can be made clear by a conversation between The Prince and his factotum and the soldier: the former tells the latter, who replies: "He commanded you to 'tear down everything'" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p .232). Then the conversation follows, "He said, 'build a new world upon the ruins!' Correct?" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p .232) [81]. In the process, The Prince has been reduced to a black mantra where destruction and violence are consecrated and made the order of the day; all we have to do to create a new world is to place it on the corpse of the old. The point to observe is that The Prince does not make any speech that is commanding in the entire novel. As it has been mentioned above, his factotum insists, "The Prince never commands" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 230) [82]. Rather than provide any direct orders, he provides cryptic and incendiary aphorisms that his students/followers view as the mandate to go out there and kill. This type of theatrical indirect speech reminds of Mussolini (1932) saying that fascism appeals "cult of action" (p. 1) [83], making myths and slogans march in favor of instant mass action.

The director gives the pessimistic prophecy regarding the nihilistic worldview of The Prince that can trigger general disintegration: "I do not imagine anything. What I do know is that if he (Prince) rouses the crowd rather than calming it, they will tear this town to pieces" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 141) [84]. The factotum also describes The Prince's apocalyptic urges: "A town built on lies will continue to be a town built on lies. … He says he likes it when things

fall to pieces" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 141) [85]. These words show that The Prince lacks any consistent program, just an apocalyptic vision and a vague and destructive vision. Instead of stating policy, he speaks the language of mob violence, and this is the hallmark of an archetypal fascist demagogue. The narrative is inundated by every trivial detail of his life, again and again, a glass was smashed, a crowd is waiting, a clock is broken, etc.- pulling together the fears and resentments of the masses into a single sphincter of horror, just as fascist leaders use and exploit collective grievances.

4.3 Mrs. Eszter as Fascist Sovereign

As the Prince is the representation of irrational mass hysteria, Mrs. Eszter turns out to be the creator of an authoritarian society and detached political desire. In Prince, she creates a dichotomy in which he represents mob frenzy, and she represents elite manipulation. She interprets chaos as a chance and enforces an authoritarian ambition of calm and calculated control, which functions in a non-human, non-moral approach to strategy. She wants to take the presidency of the town, which makes fascism celebrate the gloriousness of centralized and unchecked power. Krasznahockai (1998) explains that she was motivated by a fantasy of becoming the president seeking "a free hand and the unfettered exercise of power" (p. 37) [86]. This desire reiterates the idea by Mussolini (1932) that "the fascist conception of the state is all-embracing, outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist" (p). 2) [87], foregrounding a logic, according to which all domains are subsumed in the political domain. Mrs. Eszter is a personage who represents that totality of impulse. She hopes to wipe the town of all those individuals that are standing in her path, and she banishes them by labeling them as "drunken hooligans" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 253) [88]. According to Roger Griffin (1991), fascism is a type of revolutionary nationalism when the myth "rebirth has become an integral part of the culture and intellectual tradition" (p. 264) [89]. Mrs. Eszter carries out this regeneration fantasy by wanting to control the town. She reinforces the point that "life was a war where there were winners and losers" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 254) [90], repeating the phrases of Eco in his Urbascism (1995): "life is permanent warfare" (p. 7). Krasznahorkai (1998) makes her strong desire to have power grotesque instead of heroic; her manipulation of the servants at home portends her political manipulation. By doing that, Krasznahorkai (1998) criticizes the lure of power by fascism, demonstrating how the individual imaginations of domination end up spreading into the domination of the masses [91].

One of the most pivotal ingredients of fascism is its demand for absolute authority and the suppression of dissent. For instance, Umberto Eco (1995) argues that "Gramsci was put in prison until his death; the opposition leaders Giacomo Matteotti and the brothers Rosselli were

assassinated; the free press was abolished, the labor unions were dismantled, and political dissenters were confined on remote islands" (p. 5) [92]. These examples make it evident that fascism is radically intolerant of any opposing political ideologies and leaves no space for legitimate disagreement. Mrs. Eszter embodies this logic through her domineering demeanor and threats. As Krasznahorkai (1998) asserts, she, "with her inborn sense of superiority and notorious intolerance of opposition, flattens the resistance of stubborn Mrs. Plauf" (p. 33) [93].

Eco (1995) claims that "for Ur-Fascism, disagreement is treason. Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference" (p. 7) [94]. Krasznahorkai (1998) shows that Mrs. Eszter sees any refusal as an affront to her will. She believes that only she is fit for leadership. She is described as "a figurehead of iron will" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 35) [95], elevated to the leadership of the women's committee and therefore treats any opposition as illegitimate. Mrs. Eszter's utter dismissal of Mrs. Plauf's concerns, deeming even her polite salutations to the policeman as something beneath her, embodies her fascist attitude. Her bullying tactics further clarify her authoritarian approach. Krasznahorkai (1998) narrates her treatment of Mrs. Plauf when she bundles her through the gate and forces her upstairs as, "she simply bundled her through the gate, stormed up the stairs and, bobbing her head out of habit" (p. 33) [96]. Adorno's (2019) analysis of fascist psychology suggests that in such cases, domination of those who are deemed weak and inferior is systematic; fascist, he argues, "persecute weak and helpless minorities" (p. 353) [97] and show no mercy to those outside their favored group. Mrs. Eszter fits this pattern; she persecutes anyone she deems unworthy and responds with violent contempt. In effect, her behavior enacts fascist authoritarianism; she tolerates no dissent, rails against the resistance, and uses threats and force to impose absolute obedience on those around her.

4.4 Colonel Harrer and the Banality of Fascist Evil

Colonel Harrer is portrayed as a corrupt and drunken policeman by Krasznahorkai (1998) [98]. Throughout the novel, fascist language and imagery permeate Harrer's exercise of authority. He is only preoccupied with getting the town rid of misfits. Although Krasznahokai (1998) does not directly lay the word purification on the lips of Harrer, the idea is evident throughout his thoughts and deeds. During a council meeting, Harrer becomes authoritative and calm, requiring his followers to give him blind obedience. The mindset of the fascists was also criticized through psychoanalysis by William Reich (1970), and this also helps to understand the personality of Harrer. According to Reich (1970), fascism is a result of a repressive authoritarian society. He describes fascism as "the expression of the irrational character structure of the average human being whose primary, biological needs and impulses have been

suppressed for thousands of years" (Reich, 1970, p. 2) [99]. In these situations, individuals who were brought up in strict and discipline-oriented families (like Mrs. Eszter) get psychologically predisposed to be submissive to authoritative bodies. It is this orderliness that is shown by Harrer: he is the representative of the combined nature of soldier and teacher who balances the life of the masses and the morality of the individual. Reich (1970) also argues that authority is absorbed by ordinary people since their childhood, hence obedience is a way of finding security and not a way of oppression. He argues: "Rebellion against it, coupled with acceptance and submission, is a basic feature of every middle-class structure" (Reich, 1970, p. 33) [100]. Harrer exemplifies this principle. When townsfolk who once mocked the circus meekly yield to him, he treats their deference as a natural thing. When they fear him, he comforts them like a stern father might, adopting a paternal, disciplinary posture. Harrer understands that the populace is too weakened to imagine autonomy and therefore assumes a paternal ruler, as he fuses emotional dependence with authoritarian control.

This authoritarian approach represents only one side of Colonel Harrer. He is also repeatedly depicted as a drunken, lazy, and disengaged person. Early on, when Harrer appears at Mrs. Eszter's house, "He lay, flat out on the ground, because, as one could see at a glance, his legs, which were incapable of indefinitely supporting his constantly collapsing body" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 46) [101]. In another scene, he is eventually half recovered and waving a brandy bottle, begging Eszter for comfort as if a lovesick youth. Krasznahorkai (1998) shows that he shirks his responsibilities, either passed out drunk or idling in a bar, even when the fate of the town is being decided. These depictions of Harrer align closely with Arendt's (1963) notion of "banality" (p. 134) [102] of fascist bureaucrats, who perform the trapping of authority while remaining intellectually and morally vacant. Through alcohol and negligence, Harrer nonetheless embraces the form of authoritarianism through flamboyant rituals and intimidation – the purely performative aspect of fascism divorced from genuine ethical and political substance.

The novel narrates that during the crisis in Kossuth Square, Harrer fixates on the lone tank. Shamed of the absurdity of dragging a single vehicle for show, he confesses: "I can hardly bear to look at the single tank you saw in the main square, I'm so ashamed of it! I drag it about with me like the old ruffian with the cigar does his whale. I show it frighten people" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 257) [103]. The tank becomes purely a theatrical prop in his hands, something to parade for intimidation rather than to use pragmatically. Mrs. Eszter tells him to fire it, and he fires it, "seven times, and one after another" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 257) [104]. Harrer gains personal joy and power from staging explosions, not from winning any real victory. This is

fascism as spectacle and performance, very much in line with Griffin's (1991) analysis of fascism as "an eclectic blend of aesthetic politics" (p. 85) [105].

4.5 Rabble, Panic, and Power

The Melancholy of Resistance (1998) illustrates fascism's reliance on scapegoating through its omniscient description of the circus 'rabble' as a threat to the town's fragile sense of the civilized order. The novel describes the rabble as rough, superstitious, uncivilized, and easily manipulable by authoritarianism: "no one could really believe that thirty years after the flowering of the Nation, with its high-sounding plans, there should remain so large a rabble of frightening, villainous-looking, good-for nothing, possibly threatening characters thirsting after the crudest and most vulgar of miracles" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 75) [106]. This aligns with fascism's contempt for the weak as outlined in Eco's "Ur-Fascism" (1995) [107]. Within such a structure, the marginalized people are dehumanized as sub-human to justify their exclusion from the moral community. The phrase, "flowering of the nation" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 75) invokes Hungary's failed 1956 and its aftermath of economic stagnation, generating the material conditions for fascist growth. As Robert Griffin (1991) asserts, fascism is "a populist form of ultranationalism" (p. 143) [108], envisaging revolutionary purification after perceived social decay. The rabble gathered in Kossuth Square appears as a vulgar totem of an unfulfilled desire and social decadence. It represents a spectacle of "community decline" (Paxton, 2004, p. 218) [109] which is ripe for a fascist style exclusionary purges often via violence against perceived degeneration.

Krasznahorkai (1998) describes the rabble's "collapse into anarchy" (p. 14) as an "unstoppable stampede into chaos" (p. 85) [110]. Robert Paxton (2004) identifies such a crises as classic fascist breeding ground where it gains currency and momentum by "mobilizing mass resentment during times of crisis and exploiting democratic weakness (Paxton, 2004, p. 20) [111]. Mrs. Eszter chooses to cast it as "political movement" (Krasznahorkai, 1998. p. 82) [112] recasting the whole situation as the justification for a new regime. She often says, "When the place is threatening enough as it is! When are we in a state of anarchy? What an idiotic joke!" (Krasznahorkai, 1998, p. 24) [113] insisting that only strong and centralized authority can guarantee stability. Thus, the rabble's chaotic and uncivilized configuration produces fear and exhaustion, which prepares the ground for an indulgence in fascist tendencies.

5. Conclusion

The Melancholy of Resistance (1998) by László Krasznahorkai is set in a desolate provincial Hungarian town, where the fragile societal order disintegrates with the arrival of a mysterious circus showcasing a colossal stuffed whale. This event is catalytic, as it bursts a nerve of fear,

paranoia, and violence that consumes the towns and releases the hidden tensions, frustration, and resentments that were boiling just under the humdrum of existence. The mass hysteria, panicking, and the manipulation vulnerability deny the disintegrated community any control over its own oppression and the hidden processes of how the authoritarian force can establish itself. This study has shed light on the origins of fascist dynamics by the combination of works of the most prominent authorities on the subject of fascism, including Umberto Eco (1995), Paxton (2004), Griffins (1993), and Arendt, (1962, 1963) in *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998), revealing how mob panic, terror is also manipulated by the fascist forces within society and leads them to unleash various social, political and psychological aspects of authoritarianism. The whale show suggests the way in which the fascist propaganda trains the citizens to comply with the official spectacle all the time. It provides a clue into how the fascist governments perform empty ritual because it is not done out of curiosity but to promote formed obedience and submissiveness. The Prince delivers violent and incendiary speeches to inflame the masses into irrational hysteria in a collective. He is a leader and a fascist demagogue who exercises massive power over people as a spectacle and mass control of psychology. He is fluent in the language of mob violence, which identifies him as a classic fascist demagogue capable of sensationalizing and politicizing group complaints. Mrs. Eszter emerges as the architect of an authoritarian/fascist order and cold political ambition. She seeks to seize the town presidency, enacting fascism's glorification of centralized, unfettered power. She enacts fascist authoritarianism, tolerates no dissent, rails against the resistance, and uses threats and force to impose absolute control on those around her. Colonel Harrer employs fascist language and tactics in his exercise of authority. To sum up, this research contends that fascist tactics such as spectacle-driven propaganda, manipulation of institutions and use of terror operate not only through ideology but also social and psychological mechanisms.

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