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Subsemy: Using Subversion to Create Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Texts

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Subsemy: Using subversion to create multiple meanings in rhetorical texts.

BY
Kane Madison Click

THESIS
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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the use of subversion to create multiple meanings in rhetorical texts. Subversion, an element focused on by Fiske (1986, 1987) and McKerrow (1988) in their early contributions to the rhetorical study of multiple meaning texts, has been an ongoing lacunae in the study of polysemic texts. I wish to provide a correction to this problem by offering the concept of subsemy. By examining the role of strategic ambiguity and irony in the functioning of subversion, the concept of subsemy provides a missing picture of how popular cultural texts, film in particular, can function subversively.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to both to my supporters and dissenters, for without either I would not have been motivated to reach this point in my life.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the close and steady tutelage of Shane Miller, for without whom this thesis would not exist. Not only did he take a keen interest in the development of this project, but also a keen interest in my potential as a student. Further acknowledgements go out to Joe Heumann and Mehdi Semati for their close critical readings of this thesis and their astute criticisms, as well as the entire faculty of the Communication Studies department at Eastern Illinois University for their invariable encouragement.
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Introducing subsemy

Without a doubt, subversion is an important element of society. However, the far-reaching ramifications of subversion have been neglected by rhetorical scholars. Blackstock (1964) defines subversion as "the undermining or detachment of the loyalties of significant social groups — and their transference — to the symbols and institutions of the aggressor" (p. 56). Subversion, as Blackstock defines it, can be attributed as the progenitor of social change. Culture is subversive in that it is propelled only through the creative abilities of its members to "undermine" and detach their loyalties from the "symbols and institutions" of the "aggressor", which in this case refers to the dominant class. The nature of creation, or being creative, is to oppose the norm and thus culture is always subversive because it remains active only by perpetuating its creative abilities (de Lauwe, 1983, p. 362).

It comes as no surprise that our popular culture is littered with works of subversion due to a regular turnover in popular ideologies. By nature, a subversive work must have multiple meanings: those that appeal to a primary audience and those that appeal to a secondary audience. Texts with multiple meanings have received extensive
treatment in the realm of rhetorical studies and rhetorical criticism. Since Fiske’s (1986) conceptualization of polysemy the debate over multiple meanings within a text has seen many different iterations. Although the debate over multiple meaning in texts is an extensive and well-discussed debate, it seems that a critical oversight has been made so far. The oversight I reference is the lack of attention given to the importance and application of subversion to create multiple, even conflicting meanings in rhetorical texts.

The debate over multiple meanings in rhetorical texts spawned from concerns that ideological critics conceptualized television as merely mirroring the dominant ideals of capitalistic society (Fiske, 1986, p. 391). In opposition to this notion, Fiske argued that we view television polysemically. He argued, “the failure of ideological criticism to account for the polysemy of the television text is paralleled by its failure to account for the diversity of Western capitalist societies” (p. 392). Fiske contended that even under the hegemony of capitalism, there are still different subcultures present, subcultures that are part of the consuming force of capitalism. His argument centers around the notion that television, in order to be popular, must be open to allow those
subcultures to generate meaning from the work and form bonds to it. If the text does this, Fiske argues, it will increase its chances of becoming popular, and therefore more monetarily successful (p.392). After this initial contribution to the debate, the works of Condit (1989), Cloud (1992) and Ceccarelli (1998) most directly furthered it. Condit introduced the concept of polyvalence, Cloud elaborated upon ambivalence, and Ceccarelli provided a clarification of polysemy.

Polysemy is the concept that a text has multiple message constructions, each readable to various audiences that might come across the work. Polysemic construction enables various subcultures to locate different meanings that may correspond or contradict their conflicting collective associations (Fiske, 1986; Fiske, 1987). These texts, in order to be popular, and thus successful in a commercial system, must be open in nature. This openness allows the texts to form articulations to the dominant ideologies of the society reading the text, or at least dominant ideologies as structured intratexturally (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

An important factor in the early conceptions of polysemy that seemingly has become more and more overlooked throughout the debate is the fact that these polysemic
texts inherently have a liberating trait amongst marginalized readers of the texts. McKerrow (1989) argued for the necessity of conceptualizing polysemy as an instrument the oppressed use against the dominant class or ideology. McKerrow writes that a "polysemic critique is one which uncovers a subordinate or secondary reading which contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms" (p. 108).

This dismissal of the liberating trait of polysemic texts traces back to Condit's (1989) article that, in part, asserted that audience gratifications might prove to be insufficient in provoking societal change. Condit argues that texts have a more polyvalent nature, that their ability in creating societal change is only as successful as its rhetorical implementation and/or situation. Therefore, texts can only be partially or occasionally polysemic. Condit disagrees with Fiske's notion that audiences' find different meaning within the same text. Instead, Condit proposes that "polyvalence" should be used to "describe the fact that audience routinely evaluate texts differently, assigning different value to different portions of a text and hence to the text itself" (p.108) while still agreeing on the primary meaning of the text.
Condit believes that audiences agree on a single meaning of a text but evaluate those meanings differently, whereas Fiske argued that different audiences could derive different meanings from a text. In other words texts mean the same thing for different audiences, but that audiences evaluate those meanings differently.

The next iteration in the debate was the concept of ambivalence, first introduced by Bhabha (1983) and elaborated upon by Cloud (1992). Cloud (1992) evoked the concept of ambivalence in order to refute the potential openness of texts for the “appropriation by resistant audiences” (p.313). Ambivalence is the seeming ability of a text to contain multiple, even oppositional readings, when in reality those meanings are contained or limited by social binaries. For example, racial construction in texts inherently produces double binds that both the audience and the author are subject to. Because these societal binaries reflect our culture, one-half of the construction is often favored over the other. Presentations of race can evoke both claims of racism and claims of empowerment. However, because societal binaries are often recognized from the dominant point of view traditional stereotypes prevail and one interpretation is favored over the other.
Subsequently, many articles argued that ambivalence nullifies the ability of readers of a text to subvert the dominant constructs and constraints of society (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Hartsock, 1998; Zukic, 2002), a notion initially present in the earlier iterations of polysemy (Fiske, 1986; McKerrow, 1989). It is with this notion of the limiting effects of ambivalence that I begin to take exception, not because ambivalent texts do not restrict or guide meanings, but because the repressing effects of societal binaries are not always in play.

As more scholars began to use polysemy as a basis for their critiques, it began to become evident that they were using it in contrasting manners. For example, McKerrow (1989) viewed polysemy as an instrument the oppressed use to fight a dominant ideology. Solomon, on the other hand saw polysemy as an instrument of the author rather than an instrument of the audience (Solomon, 1993, p.64). Here polysemy was presented as an authorial technique used to make a text popular with dissimilar audiences. To clear up such differences, Ceccarelli (1998) developed a rather definitive conceptualization of what constitutes a polysemic text. Ceccarelli outlines three types of polysemy. The first type is resistive reading. Resistive reading is when the audience exercises power over the
message thus demonstrating that they, the audience, are not ideological drones (pp. 399-400). The second type of polysemy is strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity occurs when the author intentionally creates a message that results in two or more opposed groups of readers finding opposing disparate meanings in the text (p. 404). The final type of polysemy outlined by Ceccarelli is hermeneutic depth, which requires both the analysis of the textual construction as well as the audience reception of the text (p. 407). This type of polysemy is more or less a call from Ceccarelli for critics to begin to adopt critical methods that focus on audience reception of the text. By providing more sufficient hermeneutic depth in their critiques, critics can "recognize both polysemic potential and the actualization of that potential by audiences" (p. 407).

Yet the three pillars of multiple meaning analyses--polysemy, polyvalence and ambivalence do not tell the full story. These perspectives fail to sufficiently recognize subversion's potential in creating multiple meanings in rhetorical texts. Subversion is not immediately recognizable, especially by subscribers of the dominant ideologies, and therefore creates rather substantially divergent readings of the text. In order to correct this oversight I offer the alternative of subsemy.
The concept of subsemy incorporates the mutually reinforcing combination of polysemy and subversion whereby a subsemic text is intentionally created to manipulate societal restraints. Such a text would play off societal restraints in order to produce a text with meanings decipherable by those members of society who are truly oppressed and therefore keen to subtle message cues propelling a message attacking the dominant establishment. For instance, if an author were to construct a subsemic film, the majority of audience members would read the construction of the film as is. However, the film's narrative would bury the alternate meaning within it only resonating with a relatively small minority. A subsemic text is not simply a text with multiple meanings because most audience members would not recognize the multiple ways to read the text. In this way, the design of the text gives it the appearance of a monosemic text in the eyes of the masses. It is this apparent "duping" of the masses that allows the subversive messages to resonate even more loudly with, and produce grander feelings of empowerment, with the select few the subversive message is intended for.

An important contribution to the concept of subsemy is Hasian Jr.'s and Carlson's (2000) notion that history and public memory have an inherently multi-textual
characteristic. This distinction provides a clean palate for the analysis of subsemic texts since it is often times easier to recognize acts of subversion after the current turmoil surrounding a social or political movement has resided. In almost every instance every historical event has more than one point of view. Reviewing historical texts in retrospect makes the presence of subversion more evident due to our heightened understanding of that historical period. Subversive texts, by nature, must significantly feature or privilege the dominant slant on a historical event in prominence. Just as importantly, Hasian and Carlson's idea suggest that with the passage of time audiences will be more likely to recognize these multiple meanings or subversive messages. Subversively, the text works to liberate and/or resonate with those who are aligned with an alternate point of view than the majority by providing them with a common rallying cry. As previously mentioned, texts that look at historical events are prime candidates for the use of subsemy, although obviously all such texts are not subversive. Because of this, subsemy is not meant to account for texts with multiple meanings in general, but rather it accounts for very specific texts produced in a very specific cultural milieu.
As I will further elaborate on in the next section of this work, my notion of subsemy combines three elements. First, a subsemic text utilizes McKerrow's (1989) original notion that upon analysis the text “contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms” (p.108). Furthermore, a subsemic text utilizes strategic ambiguity, a notion that Ceccarelli (1998) elaborates upon in her article and received discussion earlier in this section. Finally, subsemy involves the use of what Burke (1989) refers to as his fourth master trope, the trope of irony/dialectic pairing.

The second chapter of this thesis will first focus on a conceptual outlining of what a subsemic text is, as well as the characteristics of what makes the text subsemic. Thereafter, chapter 3 will observe the subsemic construction of Viva Zapata!. Chapter 4 takes a critical look at the subsemic construction of Vera Cruz. Finally, this work will conclude with a discussion of how to use subsemy to assign blame or to make a statement of apologia, a discussion of the social relevance of subsemy and then further implementations and/or limitations of subsemy.
Subsemy: A theoretical model

As mentioned in the introduction to this work, the concept of subsemy does not apply to all texts with multiple meanings. Whereas polysemy (Fiske, 1986; Fiske, 1987; Ceccarelli, 1998), polyvalence (Condit, 1989), and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1983; Cloud, 1992) are applicable to the general body of texts with multiple meanings, subsemy is only intended for use when analyzing very specific texts that were released in a very specific cultural milieu. An example would be a film released during the McCarthy scandals that featured a narrative that at first glance seems disconnected from the scandals, yet on the subversive level, lauded communism. Obviously, a film that openly supported communism or attacked the House Un-American Activities Committee during this period could or would not be made because of the repercussions the act may have. For that reason filmmakers would work to construct a text that the majority would read literally, with the surface level narrative interpreted as the prime narrative by most viewers. However, the film would also contain portions of the narrative that directed viewers "in the know" to a subversive reading of the narrative.
Since subsemy is designed for the analysis of very specific texts, the concept must also have a very specific model. As mentioned in the previous section of this work, a subsemic text contains three elements. First, a subsemic text contains what McKerrow (1989) writes are "the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 108). Second, the text utilizes Ceccarelli’s (1998) iteration of strategic ambiguity. Third, subsemy involves the use of irony, especially the manipulation of the irony/dialectic pairing as outlined by Burke (1989).

The Seeds of Subversion

McKerrow (1989) serves as an appropriate starting place in the conceptualization of subsemy. An appropriately subsemic text “contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant norms” (P. 108). At the surface level the text “confirms the power of the dominant cultural norms”, while at the subterranean level the text provides a “rejection of authority.”
McKerrow’s (1989) article was an effort to provide a guide to conducting critical rhetoric. Within this work, McKerrow provides eight principles intended to familiarize the critic with the process of criticism. The seventh of his principles is that “fragments contain the potential for polysemic rather than monosemic interpretation” (p.107). It is in this seventh principle that he proposes that a polysemic critique, or a good one by his definition, uncovers the “seeds of subversion or rejection of authority.” This is the heart of subsemey, the starting point for a subsemic critique. This focus on rejection of the dominant harkens back to Fiske’s (1986) article. In his work, Fiske writes that those in the minority, the oppressed, can “take the signifying practices and products of the dominant” and “use them for different social purposes” (P. 406).

Fiske’s (1986) early iteration of polysemey placed emphasis on the liberating aspect of multivariant texts’ ability to allow various subcultures to locate different meanings that may correspond to or contradict their conflicting collective associations. Focus on this characteristic is in part what McKerrow (1989) was arguing for in his article. However, further iterations on polysemey (Ceccarelli, 1998; Hasian & Carlson, 2000; Hasian, 2001;
Tracy, 2001) place little emphasis on how the text works to create subversive messages and focus instead on whether or not the audience(s) works to accept the message construction. At a surface level, this is not necessarily a false conceptualization, at least concerning texts with multiple meanings. However, a critic must not overlook the historical situation of the text’s creation. By doing so a critic can begin to analyze how authors of texts manipulate the societal constraints present during the period of the text’s creation.

Strategic Ambiguity

The second characteristic that makes a text uniquely subsemic is the use of strategic ambiguity in its construction. Strategic ambiguity contradicts notions that an audience(s) works to either accept or reject a message and/or its construction (Ceccarelli, 1998, 404). Strategic ambiguity is an intentional act on the author’s part that results “in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text” (p. 404). It is this focus on authorship and subsequent production of multiple meanings that results in multiple, possibly
conflicting, groups to merge and venerate a text (Fiske, 1987; Lewis, 1991).

The formulation of strategic ambiguity that is most helpful in the conceptualization of subsemy is the Aesopian form (Jamieson, 1990). The Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity is where a “skilled rhetor gives hope to an oppressed audience through the insertion of a hidden, subversive subtext” (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 405). An important elaboration upon the Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity is that it may not only be attempts from an author who sympathizes with the oppressed to resonate with the oppressed, but it could also serve as a checks and balances of sorts by the dominant regime. This way the majority can still appeal to the majority while simultaneously “placating the marginal just enough to keep them from openly rebelling against the discourse and the system it supports” (p.405). Another way Aesopian strategic ambiguity can be implemented, as Marxist skeptics would attest, is to simply appeal to the widest audience possible, thereby avoiding offense and thus making the highest possible profits.

Authorial intent is important in the implementation of strategic ambiguity. However, determining what is the “true” intent of the author, as intent is never a definite
matter, should not shackle the critic. Therefore, whether
the use of ambiguity by the oppressed for the oppressed or
by the dominant to placate the oppressed is not relevant in
the determining of subsemy. Rather it is the awareness of
the reader to the existence of both applications of
ambiguity that is the key when analyzing subversion.

The Use of Irony

Scholars agree that there are a couple of different
ways to use irony. The first way to utilize irony is to
accentuate themes for supporting readers (Booth, 1974;
Kaufer, 1977; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This use
of the inclusive form of irony is to raise solidarity
amongst agreeing parties (Myers, p. 179-180). The second
type of implementation is to assault the opposing
viewpoints of the author or readers (Booth, 1974; Kaufer,
1977; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This exclusive
function elevates the creator of the irony’s point of view
above that of his/her opposition (Myers, p. 179-180). This
type of irony is carried out through put-downs and sarcasm
for the specific purpose of belittling one’s opponent.

The two uses, however, are not isolated from one
another. Instead, the use of the two can build kinship
amongst agreeing readers while isolating readers from the opposing viewpoint (Booth, 1974, p. 28). Furthermore, by implementing both uses of irony authors can separate readers into differing parties, friends versus foes for example (Kaufer, 1977, p. 98). The power of irony to create dialectics is undeniable. Whether irony distinguishes friend from foe, dominance versus victims, or those who "get it" opposed to those who do not 'get it."

Burke (1989) writes that an appropriate literal substitution when working with irony is dialectic. He writes that dialectic "aims to give us a representation by the use of mutually related or interacting perspectives" (p. 247). In the strictest of literal senses, this is similar to the workings of irony. To symbolize this interaction, the perspectives receive symbolic substitutions to disguise the original interaction, therefore ultimately creating a work of subversion. These sub-perspectives, however, are neither one hundred percent situated in two different points of view, but rather positions in relation with one another to paint a picture (p. 255).

A prominent form of irony used in the creation of subversive works is "romantic irony." With romantic irony the "artist considered himself outside of and superior to
the role he was rejecting” (Burke, 1989, p. 257). With subversion, the author is providing a critique of whatever social structure the majority accepts. This, in turn, immediately positions the author’s standards as superior to those to whom the work of subversion is aimed.

The final notion of Burke’s (1989) that is important in conceptualizing irony’s role in subversion is the idea that “although all the characters in a dramatic or dialectic development are necessary qualifiers of the definition, there is usually some one character that enjoys the role of primus inter pares” (p. 258). In works of irony, usually a single character serves as the point of summarization. Whereas all characters provide pieces of the mosaic that is irony, there is one character that represents the “end or logic of the development as a whole” (p. 259).

For subsemy, the use of irony in creating subversion is of utmost importance. The rhetor must first recognize the dialectic pairing used to create a linkage between the event in question and the event it is utilized to represent. Second, there needs to be a distinction made in how and why the author views the position compared to his or her desired standards in order to isolate and assign purpose to the subversion taking place. Finally, common
themes of representation must be isolated in the work in order for the author to continually make references to the subversion taking place in the text.

Discussion

A subsemic critique combines the three elements previously mentioned to demonstrate how to utilize subversion to create multiple meanings in rhetorical texts that will resonate with members of different sub-cultures. The process starts with McKerrow's (1989) seventh principle of criticism, that a text contains "'seeds of subversion or rejection of authority" (p. 107). It is this opening process in which the critic can begin to catalog how the author(s) of the text take what Fiske (1986) describes as the "signifying practices and products of the dominant" and "use them for different social purposes" (P. 406).

The next step a critic must accomplish when analyzing the subsemic nature of the text is how strategic ambiguity is implemented to create subversion. Jamieson's (1990) Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity is the most appropriate when dealing with subsemic texts. It is with the Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity that a "skilled rhetor gives hope to an oppressed audience through the
insertion of a hidden, subversive subtext" (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 405). This form of strategic ambiguity serves dual purposes. The ambiguity can be attempts from an author who sympathizes with the oppressed to resonate with the oppressed and a tool from the dominant regime to placate the minority. The presence of strategic ambiguity is far more determinable after accomplishing the first step of cataloguing the seeds of subversion.

The final characteristic of a subsemic critique is the use of irony within the text. After completing the first steps of the subsemic critique the dialectic pairing of the event in question and the event meant to be represented has been outlined. The second characteristic, strategic ambiguity works towards defining how the text’s author views the position of the work in question and how he/she isolates and assigns purpose to the subversion that is occurring. Irony, the final characteristic of subsemy employs a standard of representation found within the text to continually make reference to, and utilize to the author’s gain, in order to strengthen the subversion of the text. The three components of subsemy build of one another, each taking the critique a step farther and making the critic’s argument sounder in the result.
Think of subversion as a virus, spreading exponentially. At first, there are only a few aware of its existence. However, as those few contact more hosts the virus spreads. Moreover, as that extended group contacts more hosts it spreads even further. Eventually, the minority that was infected becomes the majority. This majority adapts to the virus, evolves to the point that the virus is no longer recognizable. Then, before long, a new virus emerges and threatens society. This is how the cycle of dominance and subversion works. Of course, just as a virus affects not everyone, subversion does not always succeed.

It is clear that subversion is no side effect of society but rather the method in which society regenerates itself. It is with this in mind that I felt there needed to be another alternative in the analysis of texts with multiple meanings that highlights a subversive struggle taking place while simultaneously outlining why and how it was taking place. Through recognition of such not only do we, as a collective, gain a better understanding of our own history, but also expand our potential to appropriately analyze texts with multiple meanings. Rather than having the meaning of the works manipulated by social constraints, the authors of subsemic texts manipulate the social
constraints to create a text that challenges the dominance regime. It is here that I believe lays the true significance of subsemy.

A subsemic work combines messages that speak to the oppressed with appropriate usage of strategic ambiguity and irony. In the next two sections, I will provide critiques of texts that will outline the use of these aforementioned concepts in tandem to complete a subsemic critique of texts. The two texts chosen Viva Zapata! and Vera Cruz were selected for very specific reasons. There have been many films featuring the Mexican revolutions and/or the plight and struggles of Mexicans. These pictures are spread out rather evenly throughout the medium’s history. Yet, during the proverbial “sweet spot” of the blacklisting of Hollywood, 1947 to 1954, there were three releases that featured the plight of Mexicans. Two of these films have already been mentioned, Viva Zapata! and Vera Cruz. The third is Salt of the Earth, a 1954 film from director Herbert Biberman, producer Paul Jarrico and screenwriter Michael Wilson, all victims of the blacklisting of Hollywood (Sefcovic, 2002). Unlike those first two films mentioned, Salt of the Earth did not receive wide distribution, mostly because of its rather straightforward Communist messages and the filmmaker’s ties to the
blacklist. The other two films, as the coming analyses will show, also had filmmakers with ties to the blacklist and contained Communistic messages. How then do those other two films gain wide release while *Salt of the Earth* does not? *Salt of the Earth*'s messages are straightforward, while *Viva Zapata!*'s and *Vera Cruz*'s controversial messages rely on subsem. The following two analyses will outline those two films' subsemic construction.
"Ideas are harder to kill than snakes": Subsemy in Kazan’s *Viva Zapata!*

Without a doubt, subversion is an important element of society. However, the far-reaching ramifications of subversion have been neglected by rhetorical scholars. Blackstock (1964) defines subversion as “the undermining or detachment of the loyalties of significant social groups – and their transference – to the symbols and institutions of the aggressor” (p. 56). Subversion, as Blackstock defines it, can be attributed as the progenitor of social change. Culture is subversive in that it is propelled only through the creative abilities of its members to “undermine” and detach their loyalties from the “symbols and institutions” of the “aggressor”, which in this case refers to the dominant class. The nature of creation, or being creative, is to oppose the norm and thus culture is always subversive because it remains active only by perpetuating its creative abilities (de Lauwe, 1983, p. 362).

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**Polysemy, polyvalence, and ambivalence**

The three most recognized and established concepts concerning rhetorical texts with multiple meanings are polysemy, polyvalence and ambivalence. The debate over multiple meanings in rhetorical texts spawned from concerns that ideological critics conceptualized television as merely mirroring the dominant ideals of capitalistic society (Fiske, 1986, p. 391). In opposition to this notion, Fiske argued that we view television polysemically. He argued, “the failure of ideological criticism to account
for the polysemy of the television text is paralleled by its failure to account for the diversity of Western capitalist societies" (p. 392). Fiske contended that even under the hegemony of capitalism, there are still different subcultures present, subcultures that are part of the consuming force of capitalism. His argument centers around the notion that television, in order to be popular, must be open to allow those subcultures to generate meaning from the work and form bonds to it. If the text does this, Fiske argues, it will increase its chances of becoming popular, and therefore more monetarily successful (p.392). After this initial contribution to the debate, the works of Condit (1989), Cloud (1992) and Ceccarelli (1998) most directly furthered it. Condit introduced the concept of polyvalence, Cloud elaborated upon ambivalence, and Ceccarelli provided a clarification of polysemy.

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This dismissal of the liberating trait of polysemic texts traces back to Condit’s (1989) article that, in part, asserted that audience gratifications might prove to be insufficient in provoking societal change. Condit argues that texts have a more polyvalent nature, that their ability in creating societal change is only as successful as its rhetorical implementation and/or situation. Therefore, texts can only be partially or occasionally
polysemic. Condit disagrees with Fiske’s notion that audiences’ find different meaning within the same text. Instead, Condit proposes that “polyvalence” should be used to “describe the fact that audience routinely evaluate texts differently, assigning different value to different portions of a text and hence to the text itself” (p.108) while still agreeing on the primary meaning of the text. Condit believes that audiences agree on a single meaning of a text but evaluate those meanings differently, whereas Fiske argued that different audiences could derive different meanings from a text. In other words texts mean the same thing for different audiences, but that audiences evaluate those meanings differently.

The next iteration in the debate was the concept of ambivalence, first introduced by Bhabha (1983) and elaborated upon by Cloud (1992). Cloud (1992) evoked the concept of ambivalence in order to refute the potential openness of texts for the “appropriation by resistant audiences” (p.313). Ambivalence is the seeming ability of a text to contain multiple, even oppositional readings, when in reality those meanings are contained or limited by social binaries. For example, racial construction in texts inherently produces double binds that both the audience and the author are subject to. Because these societal binaries
reflect our culture, one-half of the construction is often favored over the other. Presentations of race can evoke both claims of racism and claims of empowerment. However, because societal binaries are often recognized from the dominant point of view traditional stereotypes prevail and one interpretation is favored over the other.

Subsequently, many articles argued that ambivalence nullifies the ability of readers of a text to subvert the dominant constructs and constraints of society (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Hartsock, 1998; Zukic, 2002), a notion initially present in the earlier iterations of polysemy (Fiske, 1986; McKerrow, 1989). It is with this notion of the limiting effects of ambivalence that I begin to take exception, not because ambivalent texts do not restrict or guide meanings, but because the repressing effects of societal binaries are not always in play.

As more scholars began to use polysemy as a basis for their critiques, it began to become evident that they were using it in contrasting manners. For example, McKerrow (1989) viewed polysemy as an instrument the oppressed use to fight a dominant ideology. Solomon, on the other hand saw polysemy as an instrument of the author rather than an instrument of the audience (Solomon, 1993, p.64). Here polysemy was presented as an authorial technique used to
make a text popular with dissimilar audiences. To clear up such differences, Ceccarelli (1998) developed a rather definitive conceptualization of what constitutes a polysemic text. Ceccarelli outlines three types of polysemy. The first type is resistive reading. Resistive reading is when the audience exercises power over the message thus demonstrating that they, the audience, are not ideological drones (pp. 399-400). The second type of polysemy is strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity occurs when the author intentionally creates a message that results in two or more opposed groups of readers finding opposing disparate meanings in the text (p. 404). The final type of polysemy outlined by Ceccarelli is hermeneutic depth, which requires both the analysis of the textual construction as well as the audience reception of the text (p. 407). This type of polysemy is more or less a call from Ceccarelli for critics to begin to adopt critical methods that focus on audience reception of the text. By providing more sufficient hermeneutic depth in their critiques, critics can “recognize both polysemic potential and the actualization of that potential by audiences” (p. 407).

Yet the three pillars of multiple meaning analyses—polysemy, polyvalence and ambivalence do not tell the full story. These perspectives fail to sufficiently recognize
subversion's potential in creating multiple meanings in rhetorical texts. Subversion is not immediately recognizable, especially by subscribers of the dominant ideologies, and therefore creates rather substantially divergent readings of the text. In order to correct this oversight I offer the alternative of subsemy.

Subsemy: An introduction

The concept of subsemy incorporates the mutually reinforcing combination of polysemy and subversion whereby a subsemic text is intentionally created to manipulate societal restraints. Such a text would play off societal restraints in order to produce a text with meanings decipherable by those members of society who are truly oppressed and therefore keen to subtle message cues propelling a message attacking the dominant establishment. For instance, if an author were to construct a subsemic film, the majority of audience members would read the construction of the film as is. However, the film's narrative would bury the alternate meaning within it only resonating with a relatively small minority. A subsemic text is not simply a text with multiple meanings because most audience members would not recognize the multiple ways
to read the text. In this way, the design of the text gives it the appearance of a monosemic text in the eyes of the masses. It is this apparent "duping" of the masses that allows the subversive messages to resonate even more loudly with, and produce grander feelings of empowerment, with the select few the subversive message is intended for.

An important contribution to the concept of subsemyst is Hasian Jr.'s and Carlson's (2000) notion that history and public memory have an inherently multi-textual characteristic. This distinction provides a clean palate for the analysis of subsemic texts since it is often times easier to recognize acts of subversion after the current turmoil surrounding a social or political movement has resided. In almost every instance every historical event has more than one point of view. Reviewing historical texts in retrospect makes the presence of subversion more evident due to our heightened understanding of that historical period. Subversive texts, by nature, must significantly feature or privilege the dominant slant on a historical event in prominence. Just as importantly, Hasian and Carlson's idea suggest that with the passage of time audiences will be more likely to recognize these multiple meanings or subversive messages. Subversively, the text works to liberate and/or resonate with those who are
aligned with an alternate point of view than the majority by providing them with a common rallying cry. As previously mentioned, texts that look at historical events are prime candidates for the use of subsemy, although obviously all such texts are not subversive. Because of this, subsemy is not meant to account for texts with multiple meanings in general, but rather it accounts for very specific texts produced in a very specific cultural milieu.

As I will further elaborate on in this work, my notion of subsemy combines three elements. First, a subsemic text utilizes McKerrow's (1989) original notion that upon analysis the text "contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms" (p.108). Furthermore, a subsemic text utilizes strategic ambiguity, a notion that Ceccarelli (1998) elaborates upon in her article and received discussion earlier in this section. Finally, subsemy involves the use of what Burke (1989) refers to as his fourth master trope, the trope of irony/dialectic pairing.

The seeds of subversion. McKerrow (1989) serves as an appropriate starting place in the conceptualization of subsemy. An appropriately subsemic text "contains the seeds
of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant norms" (P. 108). At the surface level the text "confirms the power of the dominant cultural norms", while at the subterranean level the text provides a "rejection of authority."

McKerrow's (1989) article was an effort to provide a guide to conducting critical rhetoric. Within this work, McKerrow provides eight principles intended to familiarize the critic with the process of criticism. The seventh of his principles is that "fragments contain the potential for polysemic rather than monosemic interpretation" (p.107). It is in this seventh principle that he proposes that a polysemic critique, or a good one by his definition, uncovers the "seeds of subversion or rejection of authority." This is the heart of subsemy, the starting point for a subsemic critique. This focus on rejection of the dominant harkens back to Fiske's (1986) article. In his work, Fiske writes that those in the minority, the oppressed, can "take the signifying practices and products of the dominant" and "use them for different social purposes" (P. 406).

Fiske's (1986) early iteration of polysemy placed emphasis on the liberating aspect of multivariant texts'
ability to allow various subcultures to locate different meanings that may correspond to or contradict their conflicting collective associations. Focus on this characteristic is in part what McKerrow (1989) was arguing for in his article. However, further iterations on polysemy (Ceccarelli, 1998; Hasian & Carlson, 2000; Hasian, 2001; Tracy, 2001) place little emphasis on how the text works to create subversive messages and focus instead on whether or not the audience(s) works to accept the message construction. At a surface level, this is not necessarily a false conceptualization, at least concerning texts with multiple meanings. However, a critic must not overlook the historical situation of the text’s creation. By doing so a critic can begin to analyze how authors of texts manipulate the societal constraints present during the period of the text’s creation.

Strategic Ambiguity. The second characteristic that makes a text uniquely subsemic is the use of strategic ambiguity in its construction. Strategic ambiguity contradicts notions that an audience(s) works to either accept or reject a message and/or its construction (Ceccarelli, 1998, 404). Strategic ambiguity is an intentional act on the author’s part that results "in two
or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text" (p. 404). It is this focus on authorship and subsequent production of multiple meanings that results in multiple, possibly conflicting, groups to merge and venerate a text (Fiske, 1987; Lewis, 1991).

The formulation of strategic ambiguity that is most helpful in the conceptualization of subsemy is the Aesopian form (Jamieson, 1990). The Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity is where a "skilled rhetor gives hope to an oppressed audience through the insertion of a hidden, subversive subtext" (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 405). An important elaboration upon the Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity is that it may not only be attempts from an author who sympathizes with the oppressed to resonate with the oppressed, but it could also serve as a checks and balances of sorts by the dominant regime. This way the majority can still appeal to the majority while simultaneously "placating the marginal just enough to keep them from openly rebelling against the discourse and the system it supports" (p.405). Another way Aesopian strategic ambiguity can be implemented, as Marxist skeptics would attest, is to simply appeal to the widest audience possible, thereby avoiding offense and thus making the highest possible profits.
Authorial intent is important in the implementation of strategic ambiguity. However, determining what is the "true" intent of the author, as intent is never a definite matter, should not shackle the critic. Therefore, whether the use of ambiguity by the oppressed for the oppressed or by the dominant to placate the oppressed is not relevant in the determining of subsemy. Rather it is the awareness of the reader to the existence of both applications of ambiguity that is the key when analyzing subversion.

The use of irony. Scholars agree that there are a couple of different ways to use irony. The first way to utilize irony is to accentuate themes for supporting readers (Booth, 1974; Kaufer, 1977; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This use of the inclusive form of irony is to raise solidarity amongst agreeing parties (Myers, p. 179-180). The second type of implementation is to assault the opposing viewpoints of the author or readers (Booth, 1974; Kaufer, 1977; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This exclusive function elevates the creator of the irony's point of view above that of his/her opposition (Myers, p. 179-180). This type of irony is carried out through put-downs and sarcasm for the specific purpose of belittling one's opponent.
The two uses, however, are not isolated from one another. Instead, the use of the two can build kinship amongst agreeing readers while isolating readers from the opposing viewpoint (Booth, 1974, p. 28). Furthermore, by implementing both uses of irony authors can separate readers into differing parties, friends versus foes for example (Kaufer, 1977, p. 98). The power of irony to create dialectics is undeniable. Whether irony distinguishes friend from foe, dominance versus victims, or those who “get it” opposed to those who do not ‘get it.”

Burke (1989) writes that an appropriate literal substitution when working with irony is dialectic. He writes that dialectic “aims to give us a representation by the use of mutually related or interacting perspectives” (p. 247). In the strictest of literal senses, this is similar to the workings of irony. To symbolize this interaction, the perspectives receive symbolic substitutions to disguise the original interaction, therefore ultimately creating a work of subversion. These sub-perspectives, however, are neither one hundred percent situated in two different points of view, but rather positions in relation with one another to paint a picture (p. 255).
A prominent form of irony used in the creation of subversive works is "romantic irony." With romantic irony the "artist considered himself outside of and superior to the role he was rejecting" (Burke, 1989, p. 257). With subversion, the author is providing a critique of whatever social structure the majority accepts. This, in turn, immediately positions the author's standards as superior to those to whom the work of subversion is aimed.

The final notion of Burke's (1989) that is important in conceptualizing irony's role in subversion is the idea that "although all the characters in a dramatic or dialectic development are necessary qualifiers of the definition, there is usually some one character that enjoys the role of primus inter pares" (p. 258). In works of irony, usually a single character serves as the point of summarization. Whereas all characters provide pieces of the mosaic that is irony, there is one character that represents the "end or logic of the development as a whole" (p. 259).

For subsemy, the use of irony in creating subversion is of utmost importance. The rhetor must first recognize the dialectic pairing used to create a linkage between the event in question and the event it is utilized to represent. Second, there needs to be a distinction made in
how and why the author views the position compared to his or her desired standards in order to isolate and assign purpose to the subversion taking place. Finally, common themes of representation must be isolated in the work in order for the author to continually make references to the subversion taking place in the text.

Viva Zapata!, Subversion and Multiple Meanings

As mentioned in the introduction to this work, the concept of subsemy does not apply to all texts with multiple meanings. Whereas polysemy (Fiske, 1986; Fiske, 1987; Ceccarelli, 1998), polyvalence (Condit, 1989), and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1983; Cloud, 1992) are applicable to the general body of texts with multiple meanings, subsemy is intended for analyzing specific texts released in a very specific cultural milieu. An example of such a film is Viva Zapata!, a film released during theHUAC scandals in Hollywood that featured a narrative seemingly disconnected from the scandals. However, I believe the film, on a subversive level, lauds certain Communist ideals, denounces others, and more or less provides a scathing commentary on the Hollywood blacklisting. Obviously a film that openly supported communism or attacked McCarthy and/or the House
Un-American Activities Committee during this period either could not or would not get made in fear of the repercussions the act may have. For that reason, the film’s creative forces, Elia Kazan and John Steinbeck, had to construct a text that would be read literally by the majority, with the surface level narrative interpreted as the prime narrative. However, the film also contains a subversive meaning available to audience members who come into the reading experience aware of particular narrative structures that make the subversion evident to them.

*Viva Zapata!* was released in 1952, the same year that Kazan first testified as a “friendly” witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) (Bently, 1971, p. 484). The importance of those trials is paramount to Hollywood culture of the 50’s, having influenced the types of films that would get made, i.e. not made by people regarded as “Communists”. Kazan perhaps gave the feature testimony of the trials when he spoke on his membership in the Communist party from the summer of 1934 to the spring of 1936 (Navasky, 1991, p. 202). When he first appeared in January of 1952 Kazan answered all questions except for one; naming names (Goodman, 1968) Later, in April of 1952, Kazan named eight members of his Group Theatre unit as members of the Communist Party. One person he did not name
as a Communist that was part of the Group Theatre was Marlon Brando, the star of *Viva Zapata*!

Kazan had a pronounced history of tackling problems of conscious, responsibility and personal honor in films such as *Gentleman’s Agreement, Pinky*, and of course *Viva Zapata*! It was because of his artistic history that Kazan’s presence as key testifier in the 1952 trials was so astonishing and infuriating to those in Hollywood (Navasky, 1991, p. 201). Kazan had, in fact, done nothing that dozens of other witnesses had not already done, but it was his history that drew the fervor of Hollywood insiders.

*Viva Zapata!* was in production before Kazan gave his 1952 testimony, but the Hollywood HUAC trials had begun in 1947. As a director who made his trade tackling issues of social concern, Kazan surely would be attracted to making a film dealing with the injustice of the Hollywood blacklisting. I believe that *Viva Zapata!* is such a work, one that speaks out against the Hollywood blacklisting. However, considering the mass paranoia of a Communist threat in America, and more specifically Hollywood, the film’s makers could not simply make a film overtly criticizing HUAC. Instead, the authors needed to construct a text that the majority of readers would view simply as the narrative presented, but, on the subversive level,
contained an alternate meaning. This is the case of subsemy, and the following analysis of Viva Zapata! illustrates subsemy at work.

Viva Zapata!: Plot Synopsis. Viva Zapata! was written for screen by John Steinbeck. It was produced by 20th Century-Fox under Daryl Zanuck, and directed by Elia Kazan. The film is a rough biopic of Emiliano Zapata, his rise as a symbol of hope for the indigenous peoples of Mexico, and his ultimate and untimely demise.

In the film, Zapata and a group of Native Mexican’s meet with then president Porfilio Diaz to ask him to settle a land dispute. Zapata questions the president’s rulings and as a result is marked as a disturber of the peace. The film then follow’s Zapata’s early victories against expanding land barons. Eventually the leader of the ongoing revolution, Francisco Madero, sends an emissary in the form of a fictional character named Fernando. Fernando, played by Joseph Wiseman, is always clad in black with slicked back hair. The fictional character of Fernando is opportunistic, nihilistic and emotionless.

Zapata is eventually named General of the South forces by Madero, with Pancho Villa being named General of the North. In due time, Diaz is superseded as the president of
Mexico by Madero. Like most stories of revolution, corruption soon follows Madero into office, not by the man himself, but by the head of his military General Huerta. Huerta, vying for more power, leads his forces in a successful assassination of Madero. In order to complete the coup, Huerta sends his forces against those of Zapata and Villa. Zapata’s sneak attack against Huerta is botched and his forces are left severely weakened as the result. After Zapata’s forces are replenished, he and Villa combine their power and manage to overthrow Huerta.

Villa, appointed president, meets with Zapata soon after the victory to let him know that he is retiring to his ranch and appointing Zapata as the president of Mexico. It does not take Zapata long before Zapata grows bored as president and leaves the post to the dismay of his now advisor Fernando. Zapata retires with his wife to the hills of Mexico, living the life of a peasant, still the freedom fighter for the indigenous people of Mexico.

The ruling party that follows Zapata in office is extremely frightened of Zapata and his power over the working class people. Fernando, Zapata’s former aide, suggests that Zapata should be assassinated, therefore eliminating the threat of the working class. Zapata’s assassination was a pure and simple ambush. He was led into
the town square, presented his long lost horse, and then shot down by gunmen atop the buildings. The impact of his death was less severe than was planned by Fernando. As Zapata's body was thrown before his people, they were not aghast, but rather in disbelief. The Mexican Indians thought they were being fooled and the corpse a fake, with the real Zapata instead retreating to the mountains, one day returning to aid the people again should they need him.

Of course this is the literal narrative of the film. However, Viva Zapata! contains a very strong figurative meaning as well. The combination of the film's narrative as well as the history and sensibilities of the film's creators creates a strong subversive message. The subversive message in Viva Zapata!, as my critique will illustrate, is that a man/woman must stick to his/her convictions regardless of societal expectations. The following analysis aims to show how the three elements of subsemy work to unmask the text's subversive message to outline the multiple meanings the text possesses for its various audiences.

*Seeds of subversion in Viva Zapata!* Perhaps the most obvious rejection of authority can be found in the way Viva Zapata! rejects historical accuracy. This act is rather
common in film so its purpose could differ. The act could be just a simple length-saving or narrative driving maneuver. However, if taken into consideration with the filmmakers, the historical period of the film’s release and the type of historical rejection, this maneuver may suggest much more is at stake than originally thought. On numerous occasions Viva Zapata!, a biopic of Emiliano Zapata’s life, breaks from historical accuracy to introduce concepts not present in the man’s life.

The first instance of artistic license working to distort history is with the fictional relationships developed in the film. One such relationship is the figurative relationship between Emiliano Zapata and Pablo Gomez. Pablo Gomez is loosely based upon Pablo Torres Burgos, a Zapatista commander sent by Zapata to test Madero’s sincerity, much like Pablo Gomez did in the film (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 349). In the film Zapata kills Pablo Gomez for accidentally giving away Zapata’s secret ambush against Huerta. In real life, Zapata took no such action against Pablo Torres Burgos (Gomez’s real-life basis) (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 349).

The second fictional relationship in the film that is of great importance is that between Zapata and his wife Josefa’s father Senor Espejo. Espejo had, in fact, died in
1909 before Josefa had married but the film kept him alive (Womack, 1969, p. 420). The third and most important fictional relationship in the film is Zapata and Fernando's, Fernando's existence being entirely illusory.

The three fictional relationships are of much more importance than distortions of historical events. Each of the relationships serves as metaphors for the HUAC scandals and blacklisting of Hollywood, driving the subversive message that a man's ideology is paramount regardless of popular opinion. Pablo tells a story of two friends who had such a close bond that they did not even need to speak to prompt action from one another. However, the friendship turns sour after Pablo inadvertently leaks the secret of an ambush upon Huerta, which ends in the death of 240 soldiers. Public opinion forces Zapata to execute his once close friend because of his treacherous action and the lives it cost. The act pains Zapata tremendously, but because of him needing the public’s consent in order to continue leading the revolution, he executes his friend, a act he would regret later in the film. It is this break from his personal ideology that troubles Zapata later and causes him to leave the office of president. The execution of Pablo brings to him the realization that one should not violate his/her ideologies to appease the public, even
though the public’s ideologies are always changing. This lessen relates closely to the actions of the “friendly” witnesses. Even though there was a time that Communist party members were not ostracized in American, public opinion had changed and the affiliation became forbidden. The “friendly” witnesses forsake their ideology to appease the public, an action, much like Zapata, that many would later regret.

The relationship between Zapata and Senor Espejo is significantly distorted as well. Espejo is kept alive in the film version of events and opposes the union between Zapata and his daughter. He only relents once Zapata is named General of the South forces. Throughout the marriage, however, Espejo continues to make note of Zapata’s failure to secure affluence and influence. Zapata’s rejection of his father-in-laws attempts to have Zapata “legitimize” himself serves as a reminder of the film’s subversive message. Zapata could listen to Espejo and take what is commonly owed a General, wealth and land. However, Zapata fights for the “greater good,” not the good of himself, even if it means his wife and family must live in relative squalor to do so. This relationship illustrates the actions and motivation of the “non-friendly” witnesses during the House Un-American Activities Committee trials. They
disregard popular opinion, represented by Espejo, and stay loyal to their personal beliefs even though they must give up a degree of wealth and livelihood that would support their family.

The relationship between Zapata and Madero’s emissary Fernando is the most important of the fictional relationships. Fernando’s defining traits are that he is opportunistic, nihilistic and quick to betray relationships if it serves to promote oneself. Fernando attempts to betray Madero in favor of Zapata, who appears to be primed for power, and rides the proverbial hot hand right into office alongside Zapata. However, when Zapata gives up the presidency, Fernando refuses to leave with him. Instead he attaches himself to the next person primed for power, the unnamed General who would later murder Zapata. This fictional relationship again serves metaphorically for the situation of the “friendly” witnesses called to trial before HUAC. Fernando is a scathing indictment of the friendly witnesses, abandoning their ideologies and personal ties to continue their own career and prosper from the process.

These relationships set the table for the subversion contained in Viva Zapata!. They provide metaphors for the relationships being severed in Hollywood as the result of
HUAC's Hollywood blacklisting and serve as a starting point for the creation of multiple meanings within the text, one for the majority and one for the minority.

The film has a piece of dialogue that best sets the stage for the subversion and challenge of authority that is contained in the film. When attempting to decide how to deal with Zapata, Fernando is trying to convince an elderly general that he should just go in and assassinate him. The elderly general comments "this is not a man...it's an idea and it's spreading..." to which Fernando replies "it's Zapata! Cut off the head of the snake and the body will die!" The elderly general then replies "ideas are harder to kill than snakes. How do you kill an idea?" The scene illustrates the subversive actions of the filmmakers and provides rationale for their subversive message. Even though HUAC singled out individual members of the socialist party in America, they could not eliminate communism, or any ideology for that matter, as the ideology is non-tangible and will survive regardless of the actions of HUAC, or the "friendly" witnesses.

Strategic Ambiguity in Viva Zapata!. Steinbeck and Kazan constructed Viva Zapata! strategically ambiguous on many levels. Most notably of course is the prime narrative
and its focus on betrayal and corruption. There are numerous instances of a character becoming empowered and subsequently corrupt in their attempt to appease the public, ultimately leading to acts of betrayal. Once Madero ascends to the presidency he betrays Zapata. Huerta betrays Madero. Zapata betrays Pedro. Eufemio Zapata betrays his brother Emiliano Zapata. Fernando betrays Zapata. All of the above are instances in which a “common” person ascends to a position of prominence only to betray those that helped him get there. These actions again are very similar to the “friendly” witnesses during the HUAC trials, but can be interpreted differently by audience members who support anti-communist ideals and those who do not. Readers who supported anti-communist ideals might see the betrayals of the characters once they gain prominence as merely “bad eggs” being dealt with before they can further harm society. However, minority audience members who had Communist sympathies may read these narrative events as if they too had Communist sympathies, a reading that the first portion of analysis would suggest more accurately reflects the concerns of the filmmakers. These betrayals provide an indictment of the “friendly” witnesses, selling out their friends, and themselves, in order to appease popular opinion.
There are a couple pieces of dialogue in the film strategically constructed in an ambiguous manner. Madero first gains Zapata’s attention as a liberating force by sending a message through Fernando. In the letter Madero writes:

"The true meaning of democracy has long been forgotten in Mexico. Elections are a farce. The people have no voice in the government. The control of the country is in the hands of one man and those he has appointed to carry out his orders."

Audience members in the majority may interpret this quote as vindication for the U.S.’s attempts at spreading democracy. Yet, minority audience members who had Communist sympathies may interpret this quote differently, with the country lacking true democracy actually being America, as evidenced by the Hollywood blacklisting of those who have ideologies counter to those in power.

Later in the film, when Zapata is leaving the presidency behind, he has a confrontation with Fernando. The argument ends with Zapata saying to Fernando "now I know you. No wife, no woman, no home, no field. You do not gamble, drink, no friends, no love. . .You only destroy. . .that is your love. . ." This confrontation takes on a
strategically ambiguous nature because Fernando himself is beginning to emerge as a strategically ambiguous character, with proponents of anti-Communist ideals viewing him as a communist and those who do not as a metaphor for the "friendly" witnesses. The exchange reinforces popular opinions of Communists, however minority readers would interpret the exchange differently. The exchange represents the filmmaker's views of "friendly" witnesses, willing to forsake what they believe in and those they hold dear to stay in prominence.

The final pertinent piece of strategically ambiguous dialogue in the film is during the film's final scene where the local townspeople are disputing over whether or not it is actually Zapata's body laid before them. An old mate of Zapata named Lazaro is attempting to convince the townspeople that it is not him first commenting "who do they think they're fooling? Shot up that way! Could be anybody!" Lazaro, during the same soliloquy says "he's in the mountains. You couldn't find him now. But if we ever need him again — he'll be back." Immediately a the majority audience would recognize this as proof that the people will always have protection when they need it, something they believed HUAC was accomplishing, protecting them from Communism. However, the dialogue is constructed
strategically ambiguous and can be interpreted by minority readers in a different way. This dialogue can represent ideology. Even though popular opinion and HUAC is attempting to kill off the Communist ideology, it is a concept and intangible, therefore incapable of ever truly dying.

Ironic in Viva Zapata! A subsemic work should be rife with irony and Viva Zapata! is no exception. It is through the use of irony that subversion begins to complete its purpose, and a text fully takes on multiple meanings.

In the beginning scene of the film, Zapata and a group of indigenous farmers have an audience with the President of Mexico Portfilio Diaz. The group explains to the President that their land has been stolen from them. In turn the President suggests that they find the boundary stones of their land and retake it legally. The land though is heavily guarded, to which Zapata replies “We make our tortillas out of corn, not patience. And patience will not cross an armed and guarded fence. To do as you suggest, to verify those boundaries, we need your authority to cross an armed and guarded fence.” Because of this Diaz circles Zapata’s name on a list of citizens, an act that places the person encircled under close watch by the government. Later
in the film, when Zapata is president, he meets with a group of indigenous farmers, one of which speaks up against Zapata and in turn gets his name circled the same way Zapata once did. This act causes Zapata to reconsider his place in office and betrayal of his ideals. The irony of the event causes Zapata to realize the folly of abandoning his personal ideologies as he ascends power and therefore must act in accordance to popular opinion. Again this is an act that provides scathing commentary of the "friendly" witnesses, who throw away their personal ideologies to appease popular opinion.

Later in the film, when discussing the eventual meeting with Madero through Fernando, Emiliano Zapata’s brother Eufemio asks Fernando “how can this Madero stay up in the United States? Why don’t they lock him up?” Fernando quickly and decisively answers “up there they protect political refugees.” Fernando’s statement is a far and ironic cry from the political situation of the 1950’s during which the film was released. By the early 1950’s, when this film was released, the Cold War had officially begun and all politics outside democracy were renounced. Once the Cold War began, there was only one correct economical ideal, and that was the American way. This piece of irony breaks from directly supporting the subversive
message to providing additional rationale for the views of the filmmakers: that a place that has always prided itself on allowing freedom, America, is now trying desperately to limit ideological freedom.

Another instance that would prove ironic, revolves around a question asked of Zapata early in the film by his employer Don Nacio. Don Nacio remarks "are you responsible for everybody? You can’t be the conscience of the whole world." Zapata almost seems confused by the query, immediately understanding the burden of which he has undertaken. Later in the film, before his untimely demise, Zapata comments that he doesn’t "want to be the conscious of the world! I don’t want to be the conscious of anybody!"

For a long period of time Zapata was working solely to appease the public, to serve as their conscience and protect them. What seemed to burden Zapata throughout the film is the fickleness of popular opinion and its ever-changing nature. Eventually he decides to stay true to his ideals, and act in accordance to what he believes right. This irony once again illustrates the filmmaker’s subversive message that one must stay true to his/her ideals regardless of pressure from the majority.

A final piece of irony in Viva Zapata! are the remarks of the "old general" who, along with Fernando, led the
assassination against Zapata. When Fernando makes the bold statement "and that's the end of that," the general remarks "I don't know... sometimes a dead man can be a terrible enemy." This serves more or less as a summation of the creators' views on the HUAC trials, and a commemoration of the "unfriendly" witnesses. Even though they were blacklisted by HUAC, the act makes them more or less a modern day martyr whose demise strengthens the cries of the minority.

Discussion

Despite the subversive undertones, Viva Zapata! received five nominations for the 1952 Academy Awards. The film was nominated for best actor, supporting actor, screenplay, musical score and black-and-white art and set decoration. The only award won, however, was by Anthony Quinn for best supporting actor.

Even though the film had received fairly decent recognition, Steinbeck, on March 1, 1963 wrote Kazan with the proposition of re-releasing the film with better studio support (Steinbeck, 1993). Steinbeck felt the film "never got off the ground" because the "studio was scared of it—at least unsure—and that communicated" (p. 353). Steinbeck
even made a proposal to Kazan in which the two would rework
the film to be less biography and more a story of revolt.
Furthermore, Steinbeck suggested that the reworking of the
film would "point up the parallel with Cuba" (p. 354). Even
though the film never explicitly makes any reference to
communism, and the character Fernando is never aligned in
the film with communism. The film, however, echoed recent
history too closely for Fox to rework and rerelease the
film (p. 354).

The film is an excellent example of a text created to
contain a subversive message by an author sympathetic to
the minority viewpoint. Although this film has only two
meanings, which are in opposition, it is not to say that
all subversive texts have only two meanings, or that they
have to be in opposition. In fact, the case could be made
that the film has three meanings. One meaning is purely a
biopic of Zapata, another which focused on political
corruption and betrayal, and the third being the subversive
message of condemning HUAC, McCarthy, and those who
supported or enabled them. For the most part, however, the
film features messages that are in conflict with one
another. The prime narrative of Viva Zapata! appeases and
entertains the majority and the subversive narrative
contradicts the political sensibilities of the time. The
extreme bi-polar nature of the dual meanings causes the subversive message to resonate that much more strongly. Because of the strength of subversion, the film serves as a rallying point for those minority readers with Communist sympathies not only by giving them the satisfaction of being able to recognize and agree with a subversive message, but one that they themselves already embrace.

Viva Zapata! has a subversive message, one that deals heavily with the Hollywood blacklisting and the actions of the various types of witnesses. The truly ironic act, however, was the recanting of Kazan after the production of the film. This action seemingly went against the messages the director worked so hard to have his films convey, with Viva Zapata! being no exception. His actions could also have a positive turn as well, something previous critics of Kazan have not considered. Possibly if the director did not recant his film would have received the same fate as Salt of the Earth did two years later, no distribution (Sefcovic, 2002). 20th Century Fox was, as previously mentioned, scared of the picture. His actions allowed the film to receive release, and the subversive message to receive transmission. The text has a strong subsemic contraction, which was made even stronger through Kazan’s
actions because it directly affiliated the film with the HUAC trials and Hollywood blacklisting.

Ultimately, tense social/political situations such as the Communist blacklisting spawn their own undoing. A historical event such as the HUAC trials, for instance, creates more dissenters every time they tag another person as a Communist, ultimately polarizing the population. Inevitably this polarization creates a majority and a minority, with the minority needing to use subversion to get their voices heard. Because subversion is recognized by readers who are keen to the sympathies of minority points of view it is not immediately persuasive to majority audience members. However, a subsemic text becomes persuasive in an alternative manner. Because subversion creates a sense of collective identity amongst the minority readers, it also makes them more comfortable with their minority voice. The more the minority reader is comfortable with his/her voice the more they transmit their beliefs. Therefore, it is through the subsemic texts that messages are transmitted to the majority, with each reading providing an opportunity for people to find their voice and transmit their viewpoints on the situation. Then, over time, what was once the minority slowly becomes the majority and the culture defining cycle begins again.
"And some came alone": Subsem'y in Aldrich's *Vera Cruz*

Without a doubt, subversion is an important element of society. However, the far-reaching ramifications of subversion have been neglected by rhetorical scholars. Blackstock (1964) defines subversion as "the undermining or detachment of the loyalties of significant social groups — and their transference — to the symbols and institutions of the aggressor" (p. 56). Subversion, as Blackstock defines it, can be attributed as the progenitor of social change. Culture is subversive in that it is propelled only through the creative abilities of its members to "undermine" and detach their loyalties from the "symbols and institutions" of the "aggressor", which in this case refers to the dominant class. The nature of creation, or being creative, is to oppose the norm and thus culture is always subversive because it remains active only by perpetuating its creative abilities (de Lauwe, 1983, p. 362).

It comes as no surprise that our popular culture is littered with works of subversion due to a regular turnover in popular ideologies. By nature, a subversive work must have multiple meanings: those that appeal to a primary audience and those that appeal to a secondary audience. Texts with multiple meanings have received extensive
treatment in the realm of rhetorical studies and rhetorical criticism. Since Fiske’s (1986) conceptualization of polysemy the debate over multiple meanings within a text has seen many different iterations. Although the debate over multiple meaning in texts is an extensive and well-discussed debate, it seems that a critical oversight has been made so far. The oversight I reference is the lack of attention given to the importance and application of subversion to create multiple, even conflicting meanings in rhetorical texts.

*Polysemy, polyvalence, and ambivalence*

The three most recognized and established concepts concerning rhetorical texts with multiple meanings are polysemy, polyvalence and ambivalence. The debate over multiple meanings in rhetorical texts spawned from concerns that ideological critics conceptualized television as merely mirroring the dominant ideals of capitalistic society (Fiske, 1986, p. 391). In opposition to this notion, Fiske argued that we view television polysemically. He argued, “the failure of ideological criticism to account for the polysemy of the television text is paralleled by its failure to account for the diversity of Western
capitalist societies" (p. 392). Fiske contended that even under the hegemony of capitalism, there are still different subcultures present, subcultures that are part of the consuming force of capitalism. His argument centers around the notion that television, in order to be popular, must be open to allow those subcultures to generate meaning from the work and form bonds to it. If the text does this, Fiske argues, it will increase its chances of becoming popular, and therefore more monetarily successful (p.392). After this initial contribution to the debate, the works of Condit (1989), Cloud (1992) and Ceccarelli (1998) most directly furthered it. Condit introduced the concept of polyvalence, Cloud elaborated upon ambivalence, and Ceccarelli provided a clarification of polysemy.

Polysemy is the concept that a text has multiple message constructions, each readable to various audiences that might come across the work. Polysemic construction enables various subcultures to locate different meanings that may correspond or contradict their conflicting collective associations (Fiske, 1986; Fiske, 1987). These texts, in order to be popular, and thus successful in a commercial system, must be open in nature. This openness allows the texts to form articulations to the dominant ideologies of the society reading the text, or at least
dominant ideologies as structured intratexturally (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

An important factor in the early conceptions of polysemy that seemingly has become more and more overlooked throughout the debate is the fact that these polysemic texts inherently have a liberating trait amongst marginalized readers of the texts. McKerrow (1989) argued for the necessity of conceptualizing polysemy as an instrument the oppressed use against the dominant class or ideology. McKerrow writes that a "polysemic critique is one which uncovers a subordinate or secondary reading which contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms" (p. 108).

This dismissal of the liberating trait of polysemic texts traces back to Condit's (1989) article that, in part, asserted that audience gratifications might prove to be insufficient in provoking societal change. Condit argues that texts have a more polyvalent nature, that their ability in creating societal change is only as successful as its rhetorical implementation and/or situation. Therefore, texts can only be partially or occasionally polysemic. Condit disagrees with Fiske's notion that audiences' find different meaning within the same text.
Instead, Condit proposes that "polyvalence" should be used to "describe the fact that audience routinely evaluate texts differently, assigning different value to different portions of a text and hence to the text itself" (p.108) while still agreeing on the primary meaning of the text. Condit believes that audiences agree on a single meaning of a text but evaluate those meanings differently, whereas Fiske argued that different audiences could derive different meanings from a text. In other words texts mean the same thing for different audiences, but that audiences evaluate those meanings differently.

The next iteration in the debate was the concept of ambivalence, first introduced by Bhabha (1983) and elaborated upon by Cloud (1992). Cloud (1992) evoked the concept of ambivalence in order to refute the potential openness of texts for the "appropriation by resistant audiences" (p.313). Ambivalence is the seeming ability of a text to contain multiple, even oppositional readings, when in reality those meanings are contained or limited by social binaries. For example, racial construction in texts inherently produces double binds that both the audience and the author are subject to. Because these societal binaries reflect our culture, one-half of the construction is often favored over the other. Presentations of race can evoke
both claims of racism and claims of empowerment. However, because societal binaries are often recognized from the dominant point of view traditional stereotypes prevail and one interpretation is favored over the other.

Subsequently, many articles argued that ambivalence nullifies the ability of readers of a text to subvert the dominant constructs and constraints of society (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Hartsock, 1998; Zukic, 2002), a notion initially present in the earlier iterations of polysemy (Fiske, 1986; McKerrow, 1989). It is with this notion of the limiting effects of ambivalence that I begin to take exception, not because ambivalent texts do not restrict or guide meanings, but because the repressing effects of societal binaries are not always in play.

As more scholars began to use polysemy as a basis for their critiques, it began to become evident that they were using it in contrasting manners. For example, McKerrow (1989) viewed polysemy as an instrument the oppressed use to fight a dominant ideology. Solomon, on the other hand saw polysemy as an instrument of the author rather than an instrument of the audience (Solomon, 1993, p.64). Here polysemy was presented as an authorial technique used to make a text popular with dissimilar audiences. To clear up such differences, Ceccarelli (1998) developed a rather
defined conceptualization of what constitutes a polysemic text. Ceccarelli outlines three types of polysemy. The first type is resistive reading. Resistive reading is when the audience exercises power over the message thus demonstrating that they, the audience, are not ideological drones (pp. 399-400). The second type of polysemy is strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity occurs when the author intentionally creates a message that results in two or more opposed groups of readers finding opposing disparate meanings in the text (p. 404). The final type of polysemy outlined by Ceccarelli is hermeneutic depth, which requires both the analysis of the textual construction as well as the audience reception of the text (p. 407). This type of polysemy is more or less a call from Ceccarelli for critics to begin to adopt critical methods that focus on audience reception of the text. By providing more sufficient hermeneutic depth in their critiques, critics can "recognize both polysemic potential and the actualization of that potential by audiences" (p. 407).

Yet the three pillars of multiple meaning analyses—polysemy, polyvalence and ambivalence do not tell the full story. These perspectives fail to sufficiently recognize subversion's potential in creating multiple meanings in rhetorical texts. Subversion is not immediately
recognizable, especially by subscribers of the dominant ideologies, and therefore creates rather substantially divergent readings of the text. In order to correct this oversight I offer the alternative of subsemy.

*Subsemy: An introduction*

The concept of subsemy incorporates the mutually reinforcing combination of polysemy and subversion whereby a subsemic text is intentionally created to manipulate societal restraints. Such a text would play off societal restraints in order to produce a text with meanings decipherable by those members of society who are truly oppressed and therefore keen to subtle message cues propelling a message attacking the dominant establishment. For instance, if an author were to construct a subsemic film, the majority of audience members would read the construction of the film as is. However, the film's narrative would bury the alternate meaning within it only resonating with a relatively small minority. A subsemic text is not simply a text with multiple meanings because most audience members would not recognize the multiple ways to read the text. In this way, the design of the text gives it the appearance of a monosemic text in the eyes of the
masses. It is this apparent "duping" of the masses that allows the subversive messages to resonate even more loudly with, and produce grander feelings of empowerment, with the select few the subversive message is intended for.

An important contribution to the concept of subsemy is Hasian Jr.'s and Carlson's (2000) notion that history and public memory have an inherently multi-textual characteristic. This distinction provides a clean palate for the analysis of subsemic texts since it is often times easier to recognize acts of subversion after the current turmoil surrounding a social or political movement has resided. In almost every instance every historical event has more than one point of view. Reviewing historical texts in retrospect makes the presence of subversion more evident due to our heightened understanding of that historical period. Subversive texts, by nature, must significantly feature or privilege the dominant slant on a historical event in prominence. Just as importantly, Hasian and Carlson's idea suggest that with the passage of time audiences will be more likely to recognize these multiple meanings or subversive messages. Subversively, the text works to liberate and/or resonate with those who are aligned with an alternate point of view than the majority by providing them with a common rallying cry. As previously
mentioned, texts that look at historical events are prime candidates for the use of subsemy, although obviously all such texts are not subversive. Because of this, subsemy is not meant to account for texts with multiple meanings in general, but rather it accounts for very specific texts produced in a very specific cultural milieu.

As I will further elaborate on in this work, my notion of subsemy combines three elements. First, a subsemic text utilizes McKerrow's (1989) original notion that upon analysis the text "contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms" (p.108). Furthermore, a subsemic text utilizes strategic ambiguity, a notion that Ceccarelli (1998) elaborates upon in her article and received discussion earlier in this section. Finally, subsemy involves the use of what Burke (1989) refers to as his fourth master trope, the trope of irony/dialectic pairing.

The seeds of subversion. McKerrow (1989) serves as an appropriate starting place in the conceptualization of subsemy. An appropriately subsemic text "contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of
the dominant norms” (P. 108). At the surface level the text “confirms the power of the dominant cultural norms”, while at the subterranean level the text provides a “rejection of authority.”

McKerrow’s (1989) article was an effort to provide a guide to conducting critical rhetoric. Within this work, McKerrow provides eight principles intended to familiarize the critic with the process of criticism. The seventh of his principles is that “fragments contain the potential for polysemic rather than monosemic interpretation” (p.107). It is in this seventh principle that he proposes that a polysemic critique, or a good one by his definition, uncovers the “seeds of subversion or rejection of authority.” This is the heart of subsemey, the starting point for a subsemic critique. This focus on rejection of the dominant harkens back to Fiske’s (1986) article. In his work, Fiske writes that those in the minority, the oppressed, can “take the signifying practices and products of the dominant” and “use them for different social purposes” (P. 406).

Fiske’s (1986) early iteration of polysemey placed emphasis on the liberating aspect of multivariant texts’ ability to allow various subcultures to locate different meanings that may correspond to or contradict their
conflicting collective associations. Focus on this characteristic is in part what McKerrow (1989) was arguing for in his article. However, further iterations on polysemy (Ceccarelli, 1998; Hasian & Carlson, 2000; Hasian, 2001; Tracy, 2001) place little emphasis on how the text works to create subversive messages and focus instead on whether or not the audience(s) works to accept the message construction. At a surface level, this is not necessarily a false conceptualization, at least concerning texts with multiple meanings. However, a critic must not overlook the historical situation of the text’s creation. By doing so a critic can begin to analyze how authors of texts manipulate the societal constraints present during the period of the text’s creation.

Strategic Ambiguity. The second characteristic that makes a text uniquely subsemic is the use of strategic ambiguity in its construction. Strategic ambiguity contradicts notions that an audience(s) works to either accept or reject a message and/or its construction (Ceccarelli, 1998, 404). Strategic ambiguity is an intentional act on the author’s part that results “in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text” (p. 404). It is this focus on
authorship and subsequent production of multiple meanings that results in multiple, possibly conflicting, groups to merge and venerate a text (Fiske, 1987; Lewis, 1991).

The formulation of strategic ambiguity that is most helpful in the conceptualization of subsemy is the Aesopian form (Jamieson, 1990). The Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity is where a “skilled rhetor gives hope to an oppressed audience through the insertion of a hidden, subversive subtext” (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 405). An important elaboration upon the Aesopian form of strategic ambiguity is that it may not only be attempts from an author who sympathizes with the oppressed to resonate with the oppressed, but it could also serve as a checks and balances of sorts by the dominant regime. This way the majority can still appeal to the majority while simultaneously “placating the marginal just enough to keep them from openly rebelling against the discourse and the system it supports” (p.405). Another way Aesopian strategic ambiguity can be implemented, as Marxist skeptics would attest, is to simply appeal to the widest audience possible, thereby avoiding offense and thus making the highest possible profits.

Authorial intent is important in the implementation of strategic ambiguity. However, determining what is the
“true” intent of the author, as intent is never a definite matter, should not shackle the critic. Therefore, whether the use of ambiguity by the oppressed for the oppressed or by the dominant to placate the oppressed is not relevant in the determining of subsemy. Rather it is the awareness of the reader to the existence of both applications of ambiguity that is the key when analyzing subversion.

The use of irony. Scholars agree that there are a couple of different ways to use irony. The first way to utilize irony is to accentuate themes for supporting readers (Booth, 1974; Kaufer, 1977; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This use of the inclusive form of irony is to raise solidarity amongst agreeing parties (Myers, p. 179-180). The second type of implementation is to assault the opposing viewpoints of the author or readers (Booth, 1974; Kaufer, 1977; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This exclusive function elevates the creator of the irony’s point of view above that of his/her opposition (Myers, p. 179-180). This type of irony is carried out through put-downs and sarcasm for the specific purpose of belittling one’s opponent.

The two uses, however, are not isolated from one another. Instead, the use of the two can build kinship
amongst agreeing readers while isolating readers from the opposing viewpoint (Booth, 1974, p. 28). Furthermore, by implementing both uses of irony authors can separate readers into differing parties, friends versus foes for example (Kaufer, 1977, p. 98). The power of irony to create dialectics is undeniable. Whether irony distinguishes friend from foe, dominance versus victims, or those who “get it” opposed to those who do not ‘get it.”

Burke (1989) writes that an appropriate literal substitution when working with irony is dialectic. He writes that dialectic “aims to give us a representation by the use of mutually related or interacting perspectives” (p. 247). In the strictest of literal senses, this is similar to the workings of irony. To symbolize this interaction, the perspectives receive symbolic substitutions to disguise the original interaction, therefore ultimately creating a work of subversion. These sub-perspectives, however, are neither one hundred percent situated in two different points of view, but rather positions in relation with one another to paint a picture (p. 255).

A prominent form of irony used in the creation of subversive works is “romantic irony.” With romantic irony the “artist considered himself outside of and superior to
the role he was rejecting" (Burke, 1989, p. 257). With subversion, the author is providing a critique of whatever social structure the majority accepts. This, in turn, immediately positions the author’s standards as superior to those to whom the work of subversion is aimed.

The final notion of Burke’s (1989) that is important in conceptualizing irony’s role in subversion is the idea that “although all the characters in a dramatic or dialectic development are necessary qualifiers of the definition, there is usually some one character that enjoys the role of primus inter pares” (p. 258). In works of irony, usually a single character serves as the point of summarization. Whereas all characters provide pieces of the mosaic that is irony, there is one character that represents the “end or logic of the development as a whole” (p. 259).

For subsemy, the use of irony in creating subversion is of utmost importance. The rhetor must first recognize the dialectic pairing used to create a linkage between the event in question and the event it is utilized to represent. Second, there needs to be a distinction made in how and why the author views the position compared to his or her desired standards in order to isolate and assign purpose to the subversion taking place. Finally, common
themes of representation must be isolated in the work in order for the author to continually make references to the subversion taking place in the text.

Vera Cruz, Subversion and Multiple Meanings

As mentioned in the introduction to this work, the concept of subsemy does not apply to all texts with multiple meanings. Whereas polysemy (Fiske, 1986; Fiske, 1987; Ceccarelli, 1998), polyvalence (Condit, 1989), and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1983; Cloud, 1992) are applicable to the general body of texts with multiple meanings, subsemy rather is only intended for use when analyzing very specific texts that were released in a very specific cultural milieu. An example of such would be Vera Cruz, a film released during the HUAC trials in Hollywood that featured a narrative that was seemingly disconnected from those said scandals. However, I believe the film contains strong subversive messages with ties to those the blacklisting of Hollywood. Obviously a film that openly supported communism or attacked McCarthy and/or the House Un-American Activities Committee during this period either could not or would not get made in fear of the repercussions the act may have. For that reason, the film’s
creative forces, director Robert Aldrich, the Harold Hecht/Burt Lancaster production team and the writing duo of Roland Kibbee and James R. Webb, had to construct a text that would be read literally by the majority, with the surface level narrative interpreted as the prime narrative. However, I argue that the film also contains a subversive meaning level available to audience members who come into the reading experience aware of particular narrative structures that make the subversion evident to them.

Vera Cruz was released in 1954, after the six year interrogation of Hollywood by the HUAC committee between 1947 and 1953. The film’s primary star, Gary Cooper, was one of the first “friendly” witnesses in the HUAC trials of 1947. His appearance on trial, however, can be attributed mainly as a showmanship tactic by the committee, with the actor really having nothing much to substantially contribute to the hearing besides having his likeness attributed to what the “correct” side for people to side with, the committee (Goodman, 1968). Cooper showed up to the trial in a double-breasted suit, silk tie, and bright white shirt, and drew sighs from the spectators (p. 220). Cooper’s testimony was so genign as to almost appear inept when asked about his experiences with communism. Cooper replied “I turned down quite a few scripts because I
thought they were tinged with Communistic ideas" but that he could not "give you a title of those scripts he turned down" because "most of the scripts I read at night" (Bentley, 1971, p. 148). As far as Cooper’s actual views on Communism, he mentions he dislikes it simply "because it isn’t on the level" (p. 153). Despite his rather pointless testimony, disdain for Cooper was high amongst those blacklisted. Allen Boretz, a blacklisted writer, describes Cooper as a shit-kicker, the type of actor who is ill at ease with acting and is much more a salesman than actor (McGilligan & Buhle, 1997, p. 121). Jeff Corey, a blacklisted actor, describes Cooper simply as a primitive in regards to his acting prowess (p. 198).

**Vera Cruz** was a Hecht-Lancaster production. The company was formed by agent Harold Hecht and his number one client Burt Lancaster. Hecht himself was a former member of the Communist party during the 1930s and was, by some accounts, one of the worst witnesses from the Communist point of view. Mickey Knox, a blacklisted writer, describes Hecht’s testimony as:

> Gentlemen, I think what you are doing is absolutely right and good for the country. Any help I can be, I’m glad to do. I’m opposed to all
subversive elements. I’m yours to be used, et

Hecht then went on to name names of all the people he knew from the Works Progress Administration days.

Burt Lancaster, Hecht’s production partner, was himself an extremely left-loving liberal (McGilligan & Buhle, 1997). It is perplexing then as to why he would continue to work with Hecht who would seemingly be adverse to Lancaster’s sympathies. However, Lancaster is described by Mickey Knox, a blacklisted writer and friend of Lancaster, as extremely loyal. Hecht was Lancaster’s first agent and even though he did not approve of Hecht’s actions, he remained loyal to the man that helped him start up his career.

The director, Robert Aldrich, was himself sympathetic to those blacklisted. Previous to making Vera Cruz, Aldrich hired blacklisted writer Hugo Butler to write World for Ransom (McGilligan & Buhle, 1997, p. 169). While filming Vera Cruz in Mexico, Aldrich again looked up the blacklisted husband and wife writing team of Hugo and Jean Butler to pen Autumn Leaves (p. 170).

Additionally, one of the film’s writers Roland Kibbee, was also a friendly witness (McGilligan & Buhle, 1997). Immediately after the infamous Hollywood Ten were
blacklisted, Kibbee was an outspoken member of the movie business against the actions of HUAC. However, like many "friendly" witnesses Kibbee turned once he himself felt the pressure of being called to trial by HUAC and himself named 18 names (Navasky, 1991).

It is this mixture of individuals, all with a creative hand in the production of Vera Cruz, that I believe gives the film a subversive slant that deals with issues arises from the HUAC trials. Considering the mass paranoia of a Communist threat in America, and more specifically Hollywood, the film’s makers could not simply make a film overtly criticizing the blacklisting. Instead, the authors needed to construct a text that the majority of readers would view simply as the narrative presented, but, on the subversive level, contained an alternate meaning. This is the case of subsemy, and the following analysis of Viva Zapata! illustrates subsemy at work.

Vera Cruz: Plot Synopsis. Vera Cruz is set roughly during the Mexican revolution of 1866 against foreign ruler Maximilian, right after the American civil war. It was not uncommon at this time for Americans to go down to Mexico in the hopes of profiting from the struggle. The film begins with Gary Cooper’s character, Ben Trane, stopping to buy a
new horse after his comes up lame. The "cowboy" he purchases his new horse from is from the film's other lead, Joe Erin, played by Burt Lancaster. It is at this point in the film that one can immediately decipher the differences between the two men. Ben is played as a straight-laced, moralistic man who just happened to be broke after fighting on the losing side of the American civil war. In contrast, Joe is a loose and amoral man, always dressed in black and almost always bearing a sadistic smile.

Shortly after the deal, Maximilian's men come hunting for Joe, and by association Ben, for stealing their horses. The two manage to escape, but in the process Ben double-crosses Joe and steals his horse, chastising Joe for being a horse thief. It is once Ben returns back to town that he realizes the errors of his ways. The local men believe that since Ben has Joe's horse that Ben must have murdered Joe and stolen his horse. In a frenzy, the men plan to murder Ben to make atones for their friend's murder. Joe, however, shows up in the nick of time to save Ben, and in the process they become friends and partners in their attempt to get rich through the Mexican revolution.

It is in the town that the men receive their first business proposition, to fight on the side of Emperor Maximilian for $50,000. Immediately as they are presented
this offer they are presented a counter-offer from the head of the Mexican forces General Aguilar. Aguilar, however, cannot offer the same amount of money to the men, only the salvation that they will actually be fighting for a "cause." Ben and Joe, however, turn the General down and accept the offer of the Emperor.

When they go to the Emperor's grand hall to both meet the man financing their services and learn of their mission, they meet the beautiful Countess Marie Duvarre. The two men both make it their mission to win the hand of the Countess. As it would turn out, guarding the Countess as she travels to the ports of Vera Cruz to begin a vacation to Paris is their mission was the men's mission. As they set out on their mission, the revolutionaries who are tailing the Countess's caravan make note of how large the entourage is for one measly coach. It is about this same time that both Ben and Joe notice the same oddity. It is this suspicion that leads Joe to search the Countess's coach. He finds three million dollars in gold stashed in the floor of the coach. Just as Joe discovers the gold, Ben catches him doing so, as he catches Joe, the Countess catches both of them. The three forge a deal to split the money when they reach Vera Cruz. As it turns out, the
Countess and the coach were but a ruse by Maximilian to get the money out of the country.

While on their journey, the caravan is ambushed by General Aguilar’s soldiers who are also out for the money in order to purchase guns and supplies to help fight their foreign oppression. It is during the siege that the caravan is saved by a young Mexican woman by the name of Nina, a pickpocket first met by Joe and Ben when they were first hired by Maximilian’s forces. As it would turn out, Nina is also out for the money in order to help Aguilar’s forces and return the money back to which it belongs, the native Mexicans.

In the process of Joe attempting to seduce the Countess for information on how to get all the money and Nina attempting to seduce Ben in an attempt to get all the money, the entourage originally accompanying all of them switch the money to a different coach and double-crosses the whole lot of them. It is once the true colors of Maximilian’s forces are shown that Ben becomes convinced he is fighting for the wrong side and switches his allegiance back to General Aguilar. . .and Nina. Joe, however, never gives up the fight for what he views the correct side, himself.
In the film's climax, Aguilar's men, with the help of Joe and Ben, storm the camps of Maximilian's forces in an attempt to claim the money. Ben's motives are true, while Joe's motives are to take the money, double-cross both sides and stow away on the Countess's ship to Paris. The film's finale features a quick-draw contest between Ben and Joe for the money, with Ben killing his once close friend. Of course this is the literal narrative of the film. However, Vera Cruz contains a very strong figurative meaning as well. It is in the figurative reading of Vera Cruz that the subversive meaning of the film emerges. The combination of the film's narrative as well as the history and sensibilities of the film's creator creates a strong subversive message. The subversive message in Vera Cruz!, as my critique will illustrate, is that the "friendly" witnesses of the HUAC trials were self-serving and malicious. However, the subversion also suggests that not all "friendly" witnesses were self-serving, but had legit reasons for their actions. The following analysis aims to show how the three elements of subsemy work to unmask the text's subversive message to outline the multiple meanings the text possess for its various audiences.
Seeds of Subversion in Vera Cruz. With Vera Cruz there is an obvious rejection of authority through the ambiguous portrayal of the historic events that the film is set during: the 1866 Mexican revolution against Emperor Maximilian. However, the film never makes explicit reference that it is the 1866 revolution, but rather it is some sort of conflict that is taking place after the American civil war. Distorting historic events is rather common in film so its purpose could differ. The act could be just a simple length-saving or narrative driving maneuver. However, if taken into consideration with the filmmakers, the historical period of the film’s release and the type of historical rejection, this maneuver may suggest much more is at stake than originally thought. Since the filmmakers keep the specifics of the historic events ambiguous they can also easily add or subtract to history in order to make not only the film’s plot flow more easily, but also include elements that might support whatever agenda(s) the filmmakers may have.

The film opens with a scroll to bring the audience up to speed on the scenario in which the characters find themselves in. As aforementioned, it is the native Mexicans revolting against the foreign Emperor Maximilian. Furthermore, the scroll mentions that during this time
there were a number of Americans, soldiers, thieves and adventurers who migrated to Mexico in search of financial gain through the aggression. The film presents this fact as if it were more commonplace than a few isolated occurrences. The film also features Generals in Maximilian's army just simply approaching bands of Americans in a town and offering them large sums of money to fight for them, a clearly fictional twist.

This historical setup, though, is put in place in order for the readers of the text to witness these Americans having to choose sides for whom they will lend their strength to. The two sides are presented rather concretely, either the mercenaries can fight for the money (Maximilian) or they can fight for a cause (Aguilar). There is little discussion amongst the men on which side to align themselves with, with money and Maximilian winning them over. The act of giving your services to the highest bidder, regardless of personal ideology, is an act reminiscent of the "friendly" witnesses. Regardless of their personal ideologies, the "friendly" witnesses offered up the names of their former comrades because they were given the opportunity to continue their careers if they did.
This alignment itself also leads the reader to believe that there is more at stake in the text than the prime narrative. Typically a film’s leads would side with the honorable affiliation, not the lucrative and easy way out. However, in Vera Cruz the two leads, Joe and Ben, choose the money, and even kill two men who oppose their utilitarian decision. These untypical actions suggest there is more at stake with the picture than the narrative presents. With many of the filmmaker’s having a relation with the HUAC hearings and Hollywood blacklisting, the actions of the leads closely mimic the actions of the “friendly” witnesses, choosing their careers (money) over a cause. However, Ben later “comes to” and chooses to do what he feels is right for the Native Mexicans. These actions suggest the filmmakers’ are attempting to provide rationale for the actions of certain “friendly” witnesses, namely the “friendly” witnesses like them.

The largest evidence of the presence of subversion lies in the presentation of the two main characters, Burt Lancaster’s Joe Erin and Gary Cooper’s Ben Trane. Ben is presented in a straight-laced and clean matter, wearing light colors and a neatly-worn necktie, reminiscent of his manner of dress when he was on trial during the first HUAC proceedings. Joe, on the other hand, is presented in black
clothing from head to toe. His mannerisms are adverse to Ben’s in that he is both crass and unkempt. Joe’s most noticeable feature though is his uneasy, ever-present, sadistic smile. These differences suggest that although the two men are in similar situations that they can still act in different ways, analogous to the individuals who were called to trial by House Committee and their actions when on trial. Ben’s straight-laced appearance and manner’s, as well as his turn-a-bout at the end of the film suggest that he represents the “friendly” witnesses who really were doing it for the “greater good”; to protect the public from conniving Communists who are more concerned with helping themselves than helping society. Joe represents the opportunistic, evil “friendly” witness, out only for himself and financial gain parallel to most of the witnesses who named names to save themselves and their careers.

It is this difference in appearance and mannerisms between the two men that suggest there is more at work within the narrative, especially when coupled with the distorted historical events and unusual behavior of the film’s leads, which suggests there are large seeds of subversion planted within Vera Cruz.
Strategic Ambiguity in Vera Cruz. Vera Cruz's dialogue is constructed in a strategically ambiguous manner. The first piece of interest is when General Aguilar, who is tailing the Countess' caravan, remarks that it is a "pretty large convoy to protect a woman." To the common reader of the film, this is piece of dialogue does little more than to bring attention to a fact that the reader may have not noticed. However, on a subversive level the dialogue suggests much more is at work. The convoy surrounding the countess is much like the many "friendly" witnesses who recanted before HUAC. It may seem like a large ordeal to protect something that seemingly is not in any harm's way, like the well being of America from filmmakers with Communist ideals. However, the countess is not really what is of importance, but it is the money contained in the floor of the coach. This scene strategically works to position "friendly" witnesses as money hungry and concerned with only personal gains.

The next piece of dialogue that is strategically ambiguous is Joe Erin's real thoughts on Ben Trane, saying that "I don't trust him. He likes people, and you can never count on a man like that." These comments, at least from the common reader's perspective, suggest little more than a signaling of a split between the two friends over material
goods. Again, with Joe representing the self-serving, name-naming Communist, this remark can be interpreted to further subversive notions that the two represent the two types of "friendly" witnesses. It is because Joe only believes in himself that the three million dollars can only be split one way: his way. The notion of taking the money and splitting it multiple ways does not sit right with him, because his comrades cannot be trusted. It is this type of paranoia that may have led many of the "friendly" witnesses to name names, to give themselves a monetary leg-up on their Hollywood competition. Ben, on the other hand, "likes people," and therefore his actions are for the good of the "common man," sentiments that echo Cooper's own testimony. The film begins to start to build messages of apologia in its subversive statements, adding more depth to the message and vindicating the film's authors.

The last piece of significant strategically ambiguous dialogue in Vera Cruz is a conversation between General Aguilar and Ben Trane at the revolutionaries' camp before their final battle against Maximilian's forces for the money. Aguilar asks Ben "Money, is that worth risking your life for?" Ben responds "Comes closer than anything I ever know." To which Aguilar retorts "a man's gotta have more
than that, need something to believe in." Ben has the final word in the conversation by saying "I've got that too."
The conversation marks the complete turn in Ben's reason to obtain the money, from personal use to donating back to the Native Mexicans, at least to the majority reader. He is masking his real intentions from the General so he does not appear "soft" or sympathetic, when in actuality he is. To the minority reader this interaction further illustrates Ben's position in the conflict, as well as serving metaphorically for Cooper's own reasons for his actions, as well as those few "friendly" witnesses who were doing it for a "greater good." The testimony these witnesses may give HUAC seemingly make it appear as if they are brainlessly recanting, but in actuality they may have a greater common good in mind. As Cooper's testimony may have suggested, he was not concerned with sparing himself or pointing fingers, but more concerned with raising awareness of HUAC whose primary goal was isolating and punishing Communists who are detrimental to society.

Irony in Vera Cruz. An appropriate subsemic work must be rife with irony and Vera Cruz is no exception. It is through the recognition of irony that subversion begins to
complete its purpose, and a text fully takes on multiple meanings.

The first instance of subversive irony in Vera Cruz is when both Joe and Ben are being chased by Maximilian’s forces during the beginning of the film in an attempt to reclaim their stolen horses. Ben quips that he does not want to run from the soldiers because he has no “quarrel with them.” However, after some fancy shooting and some clever maneuvers he manages to hold off the soldiers, eliciting Joe’s comment that it was some “pretty fancy shooting for a man with no quarrel.” Ironically, Gary Cooper claimed to have no real beef with the Communists, or Communism for that matter, saying simply that “it isn’t on the level” (Bentley, 1971, p. 153). However, Cooper’s character illustrates the “friendly” witness who is doing it for a “greater good,” diverting the enemy attacks from the people, whether they are from opportunistic communists or from the HUAC committee itself.

Another piece of irony in Vera Cruz is that both the men originally try to vie for the affection of the Countess. In the film the Countess subversively represents the “greater good.” However, it is soon discovered that the Countess’s trip is a guise to hide the money her carriage secretly holds, and the two men become more attracted in
the money than the Countess. Joe ends up winning the Countess over, with plans of using her to get to the money. Joe, the symbol for self-serving “friendly” witnesses, makes his true intentions shine and serves as the common point of representation for intentions of those self-serving “friendly” witnesses. However, once Ben realizes Joe’s true intentions he becomes suddenly less interested in the money and more interested in protecting the Countess from Joe. These actions again provide rationale for those few “friendly” witnesses who were really giving their testimony for the “greater good.”

A final piece of irony in Vera Cruz takes place during the final scene in the film. When the dust clears during the final battle it comes down to a draw between Joe and Ben for all three million dollars. Of course Joe wants the three million all for himself, while Ben wants the money to give back to the native Mexican soldiers to help them win their struggle against Maximilian. Ben wins the face off and ends up killing Joe, his former friend, in the process. Even though he had to kill Joe for the “greater good” he feels extremely bad for doing so. These actions are very similar to Gary Cooper’s own testimony and reasons for becoming a “friendly” witness. Even though Cooper, and
those few other "friendly" witnesses had to turn against former friends, he had to do it for the "greater good."

Discussion

A film like Vera Cruz works subversively on a couple different levels. First it works to just simply give those in the minority, say Communist film viewers, a voice of representation. The mere ability of certain viewers to be able to recognize that a film has a subversive undertone that outlines the blacklisting of Hollywood helps give voice to those viewers and strengthen the bonds between them. The film does not speak out against the Communist ideal, but rather the actions of some "friendly" witnesses who were merely opportunists. The film does attempt to provide a rationale for those "friendly" witnesses who played by HUAC's rules, but may not have been sympathetic to their cause. Secondly, the film may also transmit an alternative message on the subversive level that is different than the messages of the main narrative. The subversive message in Vera Cruz is an outlining of events from the filmmaker's that may have readers view those events, the Hollywood blacklisting, in a different manner. This message takes on a more apologetic nature than an
offensive, attack the majority point of view. While the message most likely would not immediately convince the readers opposed to Communist blacklisting that the actions of some “friendly” witnesses were not in good faith, it would at least have them question their own beliefs with some readers possibly changing their points of view.

Vera Cruz is an excellent example of a subversive message created not from a minority to alert other members of the minority, but rather a joint act of the majority and minority to create a subversive message in an attempt to pacify the minority. In this sense, Vera Cruz serves as a perfect example of Aesopian strategic ambiguity at work. Not all works of subversion are attempts from an author who sympathizes with the oppressed to resonate with the oppressed (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 405). Instead, the Aesopian form could also serve as a checks and balances of sorts by the dominant regime where the majority can still appeal to the majority while simultaneously “placating the marginal just enough to keep them from openly rebelling against the discourse and the system it supports” (p.405). The subversive messages of the film could be interpreted two different ways. The aforementioned way in which it is a work from “friendly” witnesses explaining their point of view in an attempt to appeal, and apologize to Communist
sympathizers. An alternate reading would suggest that it is the work from "friendly" witnesses who are ashamed by their actions and using the work to express their own points of view. These multiple points of view prove that subsemic is at work in the text, using the rather unrecognizable and ambiguous nature of subversion to create multiple meanings.

Ultimately though, tense social/political situations such as the Communist blacklisting spawn their own undoing. A historical event such as the Red Scare, for instance, creates more dissenters every time they tag another person as a Communist, ultimately polarizing the population. Inevitably this polarization creates a majority and a minority, with the minority needing to use subversion to get their voices heard. Because subversion is recognized by readers who are familiar with specifically coded messages, it is not immediately persuasive to majority audience members. However, a subsemic text's becomes persuasive in an alternative manner. Because subversion creates a sense of collective identity amongst the minority readers, it also makes them more comfortable with their minority voice. The more the minority reader is comfortable with his/her voice the more they transmit their beliefs. Therefore, it is through the subsemically constructed texts that messages are transmitted to the majority with each reading providing
an opportunity for people to find their voice and transmit their viewpoints on the situation. Then, over time, what was once the minority slowly becomes the majority and the culture defining cycle begins again.
A final discussion on subsemy

The concept of subsemy is necessary to expand our understanding of texts with multiple meanings. Subsemy pays closer attention to the manner in which these texts are constructed in order to help determine their target audience and the impact they may have upon society. The concept places a huge focus on how a multiple meaning is created, whether it is through the use of strategic ambiguity or irony. By focusing on, and hopefully determining how a text is created to have multiple meanings, the question of how becomes answered in the process. Once how is answered, the question of why becomes more easy to determine, especially if the critic is lacking author testimony.

Although the issue of intent will never be one hundred percent solved, subsemy provides the field of rhetoric another step in the direction of making it a slightly more definitive manner. If a text contains messages that contradict the social/political/economic norms of the time during which it was created, odds are that the author intended to include those messages, as such strong statements most likely would not occur by accident.
Perhaps the concept of subsemy’s largest contribution to the field of rhetoric is that it provides the rhetor with the opportunity to create subversive texts for different reasons. The analysis of *Viva Zapata!* illustrates a subsemic text created by authors with Communist sympathies for an audience with Communist sympathies in order to critique the actions of the dominant majority. *Vera Cruz*, on the other hand, is a subsemic text created by authors from both the majority and minority viewpoints for audiences with Communist sympathies in order to provide apologia for their actions. Both ways of using subversion are unique and subsemy allows the critic to analyze each use adequately.

Subsemy also has a lot to tell us about the society we live in. The mere fact that texts have multiple meanings has much to say about the segmentation of our society. In our American society, there are clear distinction between classes, races and even religions, with each possibly taking away a different meaning from a polysemic/polyvalent/ambivalent text. The fact that authors need to use subversion to get their message transmitted to readers speaks volumes about our society’s political and economic state the same way a polysemic/polyvalent/ambivalent critique illustrates
divisions in class, race and religion. It is the resistive nature of a subsemic text that fights this oppressive scenario and empowers not only the author, but the readers of the text as well. Subsemy provides a challenge to domination, and in doing so offers a representation of the liberating effects the text may have on society.

There are a few minor shortcomings with this initial work on subsemy. Future iterations of subsemy can help outline how the two types of irony, accentuate and assault, work together to build kinship amongst agreeing readers while assigning blame to dissenters (Booth, 1974, p. 28). The two texts analyzed in this work provide good examples of accentuation and assault independently but not in symbiosis. Vera Cruz provides a stellar example of irony being used intra-texturally to accentuate themes for supporting readers while Viva Zapata! provides an excellent case of irony being used to assault the opposing viewpoints to the author or readers (Booth, 1974; Kaufer, 1977; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Hopefully future subsemic critiques involve texts that can illustrate these two types of irony and how they either build friendships or divide readers into differing parties (Kaufer, 1977, p. 98).
An additional issue that needs to be addressed is the issue of impact. By containing resistive messages, although subversive, these texts lend themselves to resistive readings. What makes these resistive readings meaningful is that they give confidence to readers of the text. Since it takes readers who are already “in the know” to recognize the subversion taking place, the texts more or less are “preaching to the choir.” However, the readers who are in the minority will become more comfortable with their voice when they recognize that there are other people who share their views, as the authors of the subversive texts do. It is the confidence in their own voice that comes through recognizing that they are not alone in their views that is the truly empowering ability of a subsemic text. Audience testimony would serve to clear up issue, something this critic did not have when completing this work. In order for the work to have what Ceccarelli (1998) defined as sufficient hermeneutic depth, it is necessary for future works on subsemy to make use of audience interpretation as well as critic interpretation.

One final issue to address is persuasion. The persuasion that results from a subsemic text does not involve persuading someone’s views as much as it does the strength of their views. Those who recognize the subversion
at work are keen to specific visual and audio cues and, as a result, are most likely sympathetic to the views expressed through the subversive works. Readers of the texts that are in the majority would not be as keen to the cues and therefore would not recognize the subversion and not be effected by the persuasive ploys. With those points in mind, there is no major change in the actual views of the text’s readers. Instead, the audience members that are “in the know” do not have their views changed but either strengthened or weakened. In the case of Viva Zapata!, a film from the minority to empower the minority, a reader’s views would be strengthened and their actuation would be more eminent. On the other hand, in the case of Vera Cruz, a film from the majority and minority viewpoints to placate the minority, a reader’s views would be possibly weakened and their actuation would be less eminent. The persuasive powers of subsemy lie in the extent to which consenters views are swayed, and, in turn, their likelihood of actuating their views. The actuation of consenting readers is where the persuasion of the majority members of the audience lies.

If future critiques of subsemy chose texts and supporting materials that can clear up the issues just presented with the three components of subsemy the concept
will become much stronger as a result. And, as this work proposes, a stronger concept of subsemy will help not only assist in the critiques of texts with multiple meanings, but also strengthen the field of rhetorical criticism.
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