‘MEDIATED’ MYSTIFICATION: TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF THE DIPLOMATIC MYSTIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to advance a typology of the diplomatic mystique, which elaborates upon the function of mystification in three separate diplomatic realms – the public, the professional, and the private. At the public level, mystification nurtures the representative authority of the diplomat and is part of a multifaceted tacit agreement with the public. Professionally, mystification is both an inadvertent product of technical requirements, as well as a more fundamental example of how diplomats construct a sociability driven by the normative ideal of mediating estrangement. Finally, private mystifications are employed by the estranged Self of the diplomat to manage a liminal disposition particular to the social practice of diplomacy. While utilizing the typology to advance a differentiation that can push back against the collapse of all levels of mystification into one, I equally pay attention to the co-constitution of the three levels. To do so, I employ popular representations of diplomacy, specifically the recent Netflix hit *The Diplomat,* as a heuristic device through which to analyze the impossibility of perfectly fragmenting the three levels. Analytically speaking, disentangling the 'whole' of the diplomatic mystique can clarify not only diplomacy's operationality, yet also its normative stakes. However, disentanglement should not entail demystification, especially if the latter is understood as the removal of absurdity and contradiction from diplomatic practice.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Anton Bronfman, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Mediated Mystification: towards a typology of the diplomatic mystique" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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Vienna, 20 May 2025

Anton Bronfman

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INTRODUCTION: SERIOUS ISSUES FOR SERIOUS PEOPLE

> "How unfortunate that the term 'diplomatic' should stand as a euphemism for passivity and evasion in the popular lexicon today..." (Banai, 2010, 62)
>
> "Perhaps you're just a decent person in a time when decency has lost its hold on the public imagination" (Cahn, 2023g, 30:15)

In autumn 2021, after an attempted crossing of the English Channel resulted in the deaths of twenty-seven people, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson took to Twitter to publish an open letter to French President Emannuel Macron (Johnson, 2021). The typically populist stunt, which addressed the president in a highly personal manner and emphasized the grave danger facing the two nations, called for a further militarization of the borders to tackle criminal gang activity and to "allow all illegal migrants who cross the Channel to be returned" (ibid, 2). Johnson's use of Twitter infuriated Macron, who retorted in a press conference:

> "I am surprised when things are not done seriously. We don't communicate between leaders on these issues via tweets or published letters. We are not whistleblowers, come on. *The ministers will work seriously to settle a serious issue with serious people*" (The Guardian, 2021, emphasis added)

What might explain Macron's scathing rebuke of Johnson's use of social media? Is it simply a question of practicality - perhaps the French President was concerned that Johnson's open letter would undermine bilateral talks? Is it more symbolic, with Macron becoming infuriated by the pretense of "false transparency" that the British PM attempted to convey, a pretense that risked eroding trust between diplomatic representatives (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 647)? Or is it neither, and Macron simply rejected the notion of involving the public, even if performatively, in diplomatic proceedings? In each case, my contention is that one is confronted with a fundamental element of the practice of diplomacy – the diplomatic mystique.

By diplomatic mystique, I am referring to the processes of mystification - of making mysterious or obscure (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) – that function as diplomacy's "social conditions of possibility" (Bourdieu, 2004, 37). Mystification is predominantly a matter of boundary work - the "symbolic and material deliminations" that structure diplomatic relations, as well as demarcate hierarchies within the profession (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 653). To engage with the diplomatic mystique, then, is to more broadly engage with what it means to be a diplomat and to practice diplomacy. However, mystification is not a uniform process, unfolding homogenously across different spheres of diplomatic life. Neither is it always a violent process that marginalizes and excludes, instead engendering commonality and opening up space for reflexivity. If we are to understand diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement (Der Derian, 1987), where estrangement – as an ontological condition – emerges from "necessarily ambiguous identities" (Sharp, 1999, 33), then ridding diplomacy of all ambiguity (and thus mystique) would ultimately lead to the loss of its functional and normative imperative.

To home in on these nuances, this thesis seeks to advance a typology of the diplomatic mystique, which elaborates upon the function of mystification in three separate diplomatic realms – the public, the professional, and the private. This typology is partly inspired by Iver Neumann's (2005) private-personal-public divide, which sought to capture how the diplomat represents their state in both a public and personal capacity, with their 'private' remaining at the margins. While utilizing the typology to advance a differentiation that can push back against the collapse of all vectors of mystification into one, I equally pay attention to the co-constitution and intertwinement of each level from which a 'whole' of the diplomatic mystique emerges. To do so, I employ popular representations of diplomacy, specifically the recent Netflix hit *The Diplomat,* as a heuristic device to further think through diplomatic mystifications.

In terms of the typology, the public level refers to how the diplomatic mystique relates to sovereign representative authority, as well as how mystification functions as a byproduct of the

delegation of representative capacities to the diplomat. The professional level points to the diplomatic mystique in the realm of diplomatic sociability, where mystification is both a technical requirement and a precondition for encountering and communicating with the estranged Other. Finally, the private level is concerned with diplomatic subjectivity, specifically with how diplomats perceive their own profession and how mystification works to sustain epistemic frameworks that help navigate the diplomat's liminal disposition. At each level, I scrutinize both the operational and aesthetic work done by the diplomatic mystique.

By now, it has become well-established that popular culture matters for the study of diplomacy, whether as a site of 'folk' diplomatic knowledge (Neumann, 2001; Adler-Nissen, 2024), as a source of scripts for diplomatic encounters (Neumann and Nexon, 2006), or as a medium for public diplomacy (Fruhstuck, 2010). Paradoxically, it is precisely due to the aura of mystique that permeates the diplomatic profession that individuals, in order to construct an "everyday common sense" about diplomacy (Weldes and Rowley, 2015, 19), may draw on popular representations that 're-present' (Neumann, 2001, 603-604) this mystique. Diplomats have increasingly endeavored to communicate the nature of their profession to the public (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022), yet they, of course, cannot control the representations that proliferate in popular culture. As detailed by diplomats themselves, popular culture is one of the sites of diplomatic mystification, insofar as popular representations contribute to the imaginary of a "mysterious land of 'Diplomatia'", where diplomacy is often portrayed as an exotic profession (Lundwall, 2021, 3-20).

This thesis thus answers two research questions: 'What is the role of mystification for diplomacy as an institution of international politics?' and 'How does *The Diplomat* engage with the diplomatic mystique in its representation of contemporary diplomatic practice?'. The next sections are structured as follows. First, I analyze the three respective levels of mystification, scrutinizing the constitution, instrumentalization and contestation of the

diplomatic mystique, as well as how it relates to the representative authority, sociability, and subjectivity of the diplomat. Second, I discuss my approach to methodology, developing the relationship between diplomacy and popular culture, where the latter can be understood as counter re-presentations rooted in the openness of interpretation. Third, I move onto *The Diplomat*, inquiring into how 'figurations' of the diplomatic profession (Towns, 2020) in the show complicate the fragmentation of the diplomatic mystique, helping us think through the possible reasons for this fragmentation in the first place. Finally, I conclude with a few thoughts on the issue of 'demystifying' diplomacy.

MYSTIFICATIONS: PUBLIC, PROFESSIONAL, PRIVATE

"The whole thing is built on sand"[1] - the public level

At the foundation of diplomacy are a series of fictions (Constantinou, 1996, 103-110), none of which is more consequential than the fiction of a coherent state ontology, which permits a sovereign subject to be personified by a national representative (Ku, 2022). This fiction has become ubiquitous, reinforced and naturalized in the process of representation - one may raise their eyebrows at the claim that this organizing principle of world politics is in any shape or form vulnerable. Returning to Macron, when the French President attends a NATO summit, we accept and to some extent even actively subscribe to the assumption that France is present and acting at the event. This conception of state agency, as argued by Anthony Lang (as cited in Steele, 2008, 19), can be traced back to Morgenthau, who posited that the state comes into existence in such moments of diplomatic action. Of course, summits attended by heads of states are only a small fraction of the diplomacy transpiring on a daily basis across the globe. Representative authority is delegated and distributed across the diplomatic spectrum, and it is here that the diplomatic mystique comes into play to order a particular relationship between the public and those who they supposedly authorize to speak on their behalf.

Diplomats have little sway over the mode of production of identities, but they are in charge of their mode of expression (Bourdieu, 2004, 38), or rather their mode of representation. In that regard, they can be said to embody and express a 'general will' of the collective they represent, be that a state or some other group (ibid, 41). However, the exact mechanisms through which this will is constituted remain a mystery. Collective construction of a general will is, by all intents and purposes, especially difficult in the context of an atomized liberal society, yet it is also symbolically impossible without the presence of the spokesperson, in our case the

[1] Sharp, 1999, 53

diplomat. Representation of a collective will does not entail a mere summation of individual opinions and identities, what Bourdieu (2004, 39) refers to as the logic of aggregation. The collective exists beyond and transcends its individuals, and it must be spoken for in its stead to, as mentioned, come into existence (ibid, 42). Even though this predicament applies to almost any form of collective expression, the diplomat stands out in their role as the representative authority of a group. While contemporary diplomacy may be increasingly premised on interactions with the public (Clerc, 2023, 551), the diplomat is nonetheless isolated from the social conditions that engender their representative authority. They cannot be rid of this authority in the same manner as other spokespersons, primarily because they do not derive it from the group as such. Rather, this authority is delegated by the sovereign.

On the one hand, such a set-up relies on a "'natural' alignment of interests between the delegate and the spoken-for" that creates fertile ground for symbolic violence (Hoffmann, 2024, 46). Even though the diplomat is primarily tied to the sovereign, the latter functions as the ultimate personification of the collective (Ku, 2022, 631), and thus the diplomat emerges as a "quasi-magical substitute for the group", capable of representing it as a coherent whole with a clear set of interests (Bourdieu, 2004, 41). In the process, global politics is constructed as a separate domain reserved for those who represent, while the everyday production of the identities that are represented is obscured (Davies and Niemann, 2002). The diplomatic mystique thus creates a boundary between the 'international' of the diplomats and the 'everyday' of individuals (Acuto, 2014), guised under the "promise of empowerment [that] is inherent in the social process of delegation" (Hoffmann, 2024, 29).

On the other, as mentioned prior, it is important to distinguish between the mode of constructing identities and the mode of their representation. In his critique of the "mystery of the ministry", Bourdieu (2004, 43) does not reject the fabrication of a general will as such, but rather urges this fabrication to be "genuinely collective". The delegation of representative

authority is crucial in a world of interacting collectives, and the mystique of the ability to speak for the group is not necessarily a source of trouble, especially when paired with a "collective mode of construction of choices" that both resists the dehumanizing logic of aggregation and does not fall into the trap of perpetual protest (ibid, 43). In other words, there is nothing inherently 'bad' about delegating a mystical capacity to embody a general will, as long as the process of its construction is collective, whether one subscribes to more pluralistic or agonistic notions of public deliberation (for a discussion of this distinction see Marchart, 2007, 35-48).

Mystification, as a means by which to sustain the fiction of a sovereign entity that can be represented, thus emerges as an ambiguous force on the public level. Equally ambiguous is the impact of the increasing 'infringement' of the public into the diplomatic realm, a process Noe Cornago (2013) refers to as the pluralization of diplomacy. At first glance, pluralization may suggest a weakening of the mystical aura surrounding diplomatic work, granted that the exceptional status of the diplomat is challenged. However, while claims to representation now exceed sovereign authorities (e.g. NGOs, celebrities, indigenous populations), these actors continue to draw on conventional aesthetic devices in their conduct, thus socializing themselves into the diplomatic mystique (ibid, 61; Garsten and Sorbom, 2023, 102). As a sort of synthesis of these counter-acting forces, we can observe state diplomats allowing other actors to speak in their place, transferring the symbolic power contained in their subject position for the purpose of representing collectives beyond the state (Hoffmann, 2024, 46) (think Greta Thunberg at UN Climate Action summits, for example). Thus, the contestation of previously monopolized discourses creates opportunities for "reconsidering traditional notions of hierarchy" (Neumann as cited in Cornago, 2013, 67) without abandoning an element of mystique that permeates representative authority.

There is further ambiguity in how the public embraces the boundary work of mystification. Consider, for example, two recent 'cracks' in the diplomatic mystique – 'Cablegate' and

'Signalgate'. In both cases, the popular reaction was one of indignation at the level of unprofessionalism on display. Along with potentially criminal spying activity, the details revealed by Wikileaks infuriated many who accused diplomats of spending more time on frivolous gossip than on engaging in what was *imagined* as the crux of diplomatic practice (Towns, 2020, 588). The case of 'Signalgate', involving American national security leaders discussing military strikes on Yemen in a Signal group chat (to which they accidentally added the editor-in-chief of The Atlantic), evoked similar accusations of gross unprofessionalism, especially due to the classified information shared (see Este, 2025). I would argue, however, that both cases go beyond (important) questions of secrecy and confidentiality. The representative authority delegated by the collective to the diplomat (through the sovereign) partly hinges on the diplomatic mystique prevailing, which justifies the lack of public insight into how exactly mechanisms of representation, and the fictions that sustain them, function. When this mystique is shattered, replaced by an imaginary that is overbearingly mundane and even comical, this tacit agreement between the public and the sovereign breaks[2]. The point is not that the public should remain out of the loop or that diplomats should be shielded from any oversight, but rather that mystification may sometimes be an expectation that orders the relationship between the public and the representative. This expectation is also rooted in the role of the public as a verifier of diplomatic professionalism, for example through congressional hearings in the U.S.

Moreover, it would be misguided to treat the public as a mere spectator of sovereign representative authority, or to treat this spectating as devoid of any agency. Minseon Ku (2022) expounds on how diplomatic summitry, in order for it to be legible as diplomatic, relies on a general acceptance of sovereign performances by the public. While the public is widely

[2] One might also emphasize the means of communication in these two scandals, and how they contrast to popular myths such as the red telephone line between the US and Soviet Union - a myth reproduced in *The Diplomat* (Cahn, 2023b, 21:40).

socialized into accepting this set-up, such a reliance affords the spectator an active role. Diplomatic summits partly derive their mystique from an extraordinarily ritualized character (see Koschut 2023, 5), and their purpose is as much external as it is internal (as will be discussed in the next sections). However, the 'audience', rather than standing outside of the ritual, is absorbed into its performance, becoming one of the performers (Shimazu, 2013). The public is thus involved in the construction of the mystique that demarcates representative authority, and can even withdraw from its role (Ku, 2022). The collective is also able to instrumentalize this mystique to internationalize its opinions, for example through mock summits transpiring alongside the 'real' thing (ibid). Admittedly, some may also reject the mystique through counter-performances at summits (e.g. anti-Global North and anti-globalization protests at the G7), where the sovereign performance is deemed undesirable or harmful[3].

Thus, at the public level, mystification is a byproduct of the delegation of symbolic power to the diplomat, but its role does not have to be one of violence and exclusion. Within the mode of fabrication that is necessarily entailed in any representative authority, one must further distinguish between modes of production and modes of expression of collective identities. Mystification in the latter can serve as an important ordering principle for the relationship between the public and the sovereign, without necessarily undermining either. This distinction can also aid us in making better sense of scholarly concerns with sustainable diplomacy. For example, Huss Banai (2010) calls for greater attention to 'public imagination' within diplomatic practice. Public imagination entails the plethora of normative frameworks through which individuals interpret ideas such as the state, sovereignty, diplomacy, etc (ibid). In contrast, sovereign imagination refers to the meanings that the state attempts to fix and

[3] Davies and Niemann (2002, 566) importantly point out that such counter-performances, and the sovereign anxieties they generate through their contestation, are often met with state violence.

manipulate through its "enduring disciplinary power" in order to demarcate its practices as 'legitimate' (ibid, 50). For Banai (ibid, 52), the diplomat's job is to combine knowledge of both in their practice, and yet it is often the latter that is privileged and engaged with, creating a "self-contained" system. Indeed, ignoring public imagination would entail obscuring how the audiences of sovereign performances come to understand their delegation of representative authority. However, my contention is that the boundary work of mystification does not necessitate forgoing contingent meanings proliferating within public imagination. Rather, mystification serves as a tool to enhance the feasibility of representation that remains faithful to these contingencies. And crucially, this does not have to leave the public - i.e. the active spectators of the diplomatic mystique - helpless and alienated.

"We are a cautious institution"[4] - the professional level

Let us once again return to diplomatic summits. As mentioned, their mystique is partly sustained by the symbolic power exerted through representative authority. However, their content and form matter too. These performances are not only notable in their highly ritualized and grand aesthetic, but also in their lack of 'substantive' diplomacy on display. We get little, if any, insight into the process of negotiations, and instead are confronted with the act of representation in its most performative sense (Koschut, 2023; Kuus, 2023, 185). Of course, secrecy, confidentiality, and security measures all determine how the ritual plays out. These are practical considerations of the diplomatic mystique, which ensure that diplomats feel 'comfortable' in their work (Adler-Nissen, 2022, 647). But secrecy can also "elicit awe" (Luhrmann as cited in Garsten and Sorbom, 2023, 105). In other words, these "absurd performances" of mediating estrangement (Constantinou, 2000, 213) possess a vital symbolic value for the sociability - the social mask put on during the act of representation (Kuus, 2023,

[4] Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 646

191) - of the diplomat. Regardless of whether the purpose is practical or symbolic (or both), it is diplomats who claim 'authorship' over these rituals, designating them as indispensable specifically for their practice.

The rather pragmatic demand for secrecy in diplomatic conduct has often been conflated with a proclivity for nefarious activity. For example, Harold Nicholson (as cited in Constantinou, 2013, 150-151), who is thought to be one of the more authoritative figures within diplomatic circles, suggests that the questionable reputation of 20th century diplomats originated in Renaissance Italy, where the confidentiality surrounding diplomatic conduct was also instrumentalized for espionage, bribery and financing rebellions. Many have pointed out, however, that such a story on the one hand seems to be rooted in "too sweeping...a reading of Machiavelli's prescriptions" (Banai, 2015, 223), and on the other fails to identify how secretive diplomatic proceedings at the time also went hand in hand with a more 'humanist' diplomatic practice (Constantinou, 2013). In other words, the mystique of the rather banal demand for secrecy has commonly been extrapolated onto all diplomatic activity. In Nicholson's case, this allows him to reconstruct a historical account of diplomacy that veers towards consistent progress (Neumann, 2017, 80).

Similarly, Iver Neumann (2006, 877-878) demonstrates how diplomatic secrecy has often been attributed to monarchs' conviction of being accountable only to God, even though these monarchs equally participated in petty rituals and communicated with the public in their pursuit of a 'sublime' aesthetic. Neumann points to how past knowledge served to legitimize particular technical requirements, which were then routinised into practice, along with the mystique they sustain. In his study of the Norwegian MFA, Neumann (2007) further illustrates that what may seem as mysterious to the outsider is often a product of a rather mundane rationale. The apparent strangeness, aloofness and distance of the Norwegian diplomat is tied to a bureaucratic sensibility that deems *how* something is said is to be of greater importance than

what is said (ibid, 194). Hence, bland and repetitive forms of diplomatic communication are not perceived as problematic, as long as they: a) reflect the input of the entire ministry and b) fix the meaning of what is deemed operationally important (ibid, 190). This inertia and impassivity may seem bizarre and mysterious to those on the outside, despite being of great importance to the diplomats on the inside (ibid, 196). Put differently, mystification of diplomatic conduct can often be inadvertent, rather than fueled by malign intentions.

Predominantly, the mystifications surrounding diplomatic negotiations concerns the creation of a "space for safe, confidential and tactful deliberation" (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 654). This also explains why digitalization of diplomacy does not lead to the wavering of the mystique. Diplomats have to feel comfortable, confident that their colleagues are not simultaneously posting on social media or recording their meetings (ibid). The alternative would be the gradual convergence of private negotiations with a representative's approach to public diplomacy – an alternative that was partly experienced by some diplomats during the era of Zoom diplomacy in the COVID pandemic (Kuus, 2023, 189). Thus, an aura of mystery can be almost playful, in the sense that it is absorbed into the performances diplomats enact in their quest for fruitful and productive communication (ibid). Diplomatic summits are too public and too mediated in this regard. As former British diplomat Tom Fletcher (as cited in Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 651) remarked, protocol and pomposity are more of a hinderance than facilitator of diplomatic sociability. Hence much of what transpires at official events is discussed in depth prior to the proceedings, which serve a different purpose (Kuus, 2023, 185) [5]. Paradoxically then, one mystification may hinder the other. This, however, is not a universal sentiment, and others point to how pomposity may actually create opportunities for discrete

[5] Furthermore, when the predictability of the ritual is interrupted, as often happened with Donald Trump at NATO summits, even diplomats cannot resist carrying out more sensitive conversations in a mediated environment (Guardian News, 2019)

pull asides and other encounters in fringe spaces (Kuus, 2023, 188), which satisfy the mystique ingrained in diplomatic sociability - some mystifications may amplify others.

There is another vital element to this mystifying pomposity, primarily in how it engenders commonality. Abstractly speaking, encountering the Other always entails an element of mystique that is situated in otherness (Constantinou, 1996, 112-113). This point may seem tautological, yet its implications are multifaceted and are often overlooked even in the non-teleological accounts of diplomacy's evolution. For example, in her comment on Der Derian's seminal work on the genealogy of Western estrangement, Merje Kuus (2017) rightfully points out that Der Derian's understanding of estrangement eschews its more productive and creative elements. Der Derian (1987, 45) presents mediation as a necessary tool to ward off the "destructive forces" of a world inhabited by perpetually estranged entities. Kuus (2017, 88) nuances this account, arguing that beneath the hubris and instrumentality of high-level negotiations is a fundamental need for "a reflexive and potentially transformational engagement with difference". Estrangement, along with the mystique of the Other, should be embraced as a symbol of our co-constitution - "our freedom requires that of the Other" (ibid). Thus, estrangement is not an obstacle to international governance, which is overcome through successful mediation, but rather a condition for its possibility in the first place. As mentioned prior, without an ambiguity in our respective identities, or put differently, without an element of mystique that prompts one to try and "experience the other" (Sofer, 1997, 184), diplomacy loses its functional and normative imperative – we are left with absolute sameness.

How does this relate to absurd diplomatic performances, that are equally mystified by what is shown as they are by what is obscured? Kuus' critique emphasizes how diplomacy is driven by the normative ideal of engaging across otherness. In that regard, these mystified performances sustain the possibility of this ideal, creating an impression of successful mediation as they help stabilize, momentarily so, the identities which diplomats represent. Of

course, stabilization is “never really completed” (otherwise diplomacy would once again become obsolete) (Sharp, 1999, 48), yet the experience of commonality-in-difference engendered by these rituals acts as a testament to the possibility of mediation. And while this mediation is exclusive to diplomats, who draw boundaries around rituals to resist interference from outsiders (Koschut, 2023), it is precisely in this exclusivity that diplomats may locate the desirability of such boundaries, insofar as it contains a promise of transgression and the spill over of successful mediation beyond the diplomatic collective.

Furthermore, the boundary-making of rituals is particularly important for focusing participants’ attention on how things “ought to be”, especially when this is “in tension with how [things] are (Kurowska, 2024, 446). An example of a tension specific to the practice of diplomacy is the fiction of mutuality amongst diplomatic actors, who “come from vastly different power positions” but must maintain “the face of equality” (Kuus, 2023, 180) in order to uphold the ideal of mediation. True, mystifying the unequal power dynamics permeating the relationships between various actors can be a violent tactic. Yet if we relax the assumption that desire for domination drives diplomatic sociability (ibid), then these rituals emerge as fruitful avenues to explore experiences of commonality. This also relates to Constantinou’s (2000, 224) call to “expose the assumptions, intricacies, and absurdities of modern diplomacy.” Crucially, Constantinou’s aim is not to discredit these performances or their role in contemporary diplomatic conduct. Rather, this commitment to ‘expose’ can counteract claims to neutrality and scientificity in Western diplomacy (ibid, 216), thereby preventing the Orientalization of other diplomatic knowledge and illuminating how absurdity is common to all diplomacies.

Thus, at the professional level, mystification in diplomatic practice serves a double role. The boundaries drawn by the mystique demarcate the approach to communication and negotiation that diplomats feel comfortable enacting, and one they feel is most effective for their practice. Subverting the ethos of confidentiality, for example through an overly zealous use of social

media, can undermine the whole enterprise, and there seems to be a widespread recognition of the prudence required to navigate an increasingly mediated and digitalized field (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 648). The performances left to the public become devoid of more concrete diplomatic interactions (traditionally understood), yet the symbolic value of these rituals should not be underestimated, as they create a shared mystique that facilitates the pursuit of diplomacy's normative ideal of mediation. Mystification, at the level of diplomatic sociability, may be an inadvertent result of a technical requirement, but its impact extends to how the predicament of "living separately and wanting to do so, while having to conduct relations with others" (Sharp, 1999, 51) is approached.

"The job has a morally repugnant component"[6] - the private level

So far, I have outlined the construction and functioning of public and professional mystifications which, amongst other things, determine how diplomats approach the practice of representation. It has been extensively argued that when diplomats engage in representation (including negotiations), they do so while distancing, to the extent that is possible, their own Self from the interaction (Neumann, 2005; Kuus, 2023). Much of diplomacy is personal and relational, but very little of it is genuinely private - to put it in slightly dramatic terms, diplomats are estranged from themselves. Within this diplomatic subjectivity, there are several mystifications at play which mediate the diplomat's peculiar liminality[7]. We thus move our attention away from the mystique of diplomatic performances and its importance for the wielding of representative authority on the public level and the normative justification of diplomatic practice on the professional level, towards the role of this mystique for the representatives themselves, as humans navigating a particular liminal subject position within a specific social practice. My contention is that the boundary work of mystification sustains

[6] (Cahn, 2024, 37:20)
[7] On the issue of diplomatic liminality see Scott-Smith, 2017.

epistemic frameworks that allow diplomats to navigate their liminal disposition. While to some extent unconscious, the consistent renegotiation of the imaginary of the ideal diplomat by diplomats themselves suggests an element of reflexivity in this process (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022).

To begin with, a lack of a coherent 'private' in itself sustains a mystified figure. Sasson Sofer (1997) attempts to capture the diplomat's liminality through the metaphor of the stranger. To accomplish their mission, the diplomat must become estranged not only from the world around them, in order to be able to interpret and represent that world back to their own state, but also from themselves (ibid, 183). As a stranger, they possess an enchanting attraction which simultaneously excites and threatens, wandering across the globe and yet never being able to embrace their 'true' Self (ibid, 180). Indeed, diplomats perceive their own role in terms of mediators and messengers, "even when they are deeply implicated in global governance projects" (Adler-Nissen, 2015, 304). In that sense, "observing objectively and reporting accurately"[8] seems to remain as the hallmark of the profession, and thus the figure of the diplomat as a private-less stranger persists (Sofer, 1997, 179). Sofer's metaphor not only captures the diplomat's liminal disposition, yet also elucidates that many diplomats do not think in simplistic terms of diplomacy as statecraft (unlike classical works on diplomacy) (see Constantinou, 2013). The diplomat attempts a transcendental "standing outside of oneself" in their encounter with the "inherent paradox" of diplomacy (Sofer, 1997, 184-185), i.e. pursuing the ideal of engaging across difference, while sustaining this difference in order not to lose diplomacy's functional and normative imperative. This double estrangement (from the diplomatic ideal and from their Self) thus sustains the diplomat's liminality, yet the diplomat is human after all – they do not possess two minds (Keys, 2020). It is in this liminality that they

[8] As Kate Wyler in *The Diplomat* coins it, her job is to "analyze information [and] provide objective counsel" (Cahn, 2023b, 49:00)

may *individually* draw on *collective* epistemic frameworks to make sense of the world around them.

On the one hand, diplomats embrace and appropriate the mystique that stems from diplomacy's ubiquity and timelessness (Sharp, 1999, 40-44). On the other, they recognize that this must also square with a rather banal justification of taxpayer's money (ibid). Although some take diplomacy's exceptionality for granted, others employ it as a "defensive self-confidence", where a sense of exceptionality facilitates acting with certainty despite a profoundly ambiguous terrain (ibid, 41). In either case, there is an active resistance to identification solely with the "bureaucratic script" of the diplomat, instead synthesizing a script based on juggling between being reactive and pro-active (Neumann, 2005, 90). Partly, this can be read as a response to the mounting criticism and cynicism towards the profession, with Paul Sharp (1999, 41) noting that:

> "To interested academics and legislative committees on foreign affairs, [diplomats] profess to accept the need to justify continually their raison d'être, and they tend to do so in terms from which the aura of a "professional mystique," as one officer expressed it at a recent conference, has been stripped. They are merely civil servants whose work happens to cross international boundaries. In discussing their work, diplomats make a seamless transition (some unconsciously) from a defense in terms of its ordinary character to a defense in terms of its special character and the special qualities that it demands of them."

The boundary work of mystification is key in order to maintain this special character, granted that at stake is what Kurowska (2024) refers to as 'epistemic security' - a claim to expertise that functions as a form of collective empowerment, easing the psychological burden on the individual. Rituals and other diplomatic performances are vital in this regard, insofar as they engender a "collective enchantment" that helps navigate an ambiguous subject position (generated by the double estrangement) and form the basis of a "solidarity and integrative harmony" (ibid, 446-448), helping to insulate the epistemic frameworks appropriated by the diplomat. For Kurowska, this may be a strategy to cultivate guardianship over expertise, yet

actors are not always reflexive of the reasons for this endeavor. This, of course, does not prevent the individual from benefiting from an active effort to "consolidate self-identity, even though the fictions of such self-identity may be known" (ibid, 454).

Adler-Nissen and Eggeling (2022), however, complicate the extent to which this consolidation is a collective effort, pointing to the discrepancies within individual efforts to make sense of a rapidly changing diplomatic field. Some diplomats embrace digitalization and shifting professional standards; others perceive themselves as guardians of traditional knowledge. Hence the authors assert that many scholarly accounts that emphasize the changing nature of the profession do not necessarily resonate with diplomats in Brussels, for example (ibid, 650). Digital media may be seen as merely a distraction from "classic diplomacy", which has existed for "thousands of years" and the essence of which has not changed and will not change (ibid, 647). Such a discourse draws boundaries between a 'career diplomat', for whom the diplomatic mystique is reserved and reified despite a changing diplomatic landscape (in fact resisting the digital hype is part of diplomacy's mystified timelessness), and 'guerrilla diplomats', who either anxiously or enthusiastically embrace the digital world (ibid, 655).

Tasks and commitments that do not fall into the imaginary of the ideal diplomat are often relegated to other actors (ibid) - a common theme in the diplomatic profession since the turn of the century, when the outsourcing of diplomatic activities became a more prevalent topic of conversation (Sharp 1999, 42). Yet it is precisely this clinging on to the imaginary by 'career diplomats' that often offers those lower in the hierarchy a chance to stand out and wield influence (sometimes through something as trivial as a social media post) (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 655). This echoes Neumann's (2006, 888) argument that resistance to change within diplomatic circles may undermine diplomats' claim to sublimity, even if "the mystique of diplomacy is still at work, particularly when diplomats seem to succeed in averting terrible situations". Ultimately, the diplomatic mystique at the private level is not entirely insulated

from popular aesthetics, and the diplomat individually decides how they embrace and interpret the emergence of new epistemic frameworks (e.g. ‘guerilla diplomat’).

The final vector of mystification is thus an important guiding principle for diplomatic subjectivity. Some diplomats actively resist challenges to this vector, for example when their capitals encourage digital outreach, which clashes with their imaginary of the ideal diplomat (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 659). Claims to expertise and authority, however, can be as isolating as they are reassuring of a particular identification (Sharp, 1999, 40). The diplomatic mystique permeates the diplomat’s peculiar liminality and is to some extent a product of the task of both representing their world to the Other and the Other back to their world. The boundary drawing of mystifications creates internal hierarchies, but also potentially intrusive expectations (especially for non-Western diplomats) of how one might receive rite of passage into an elite diplomatic club (Huju, 2023). One could perhaps argue that these mystifications are primarily a matter of self-interest in a profession where the Self (and the private) is marginalized. However, it remains unclear to what extent the maintenance of an aura of exceptionality, and a close identification with tradition (however defined), is a conscious attempt at sustaining the diplomatic mystique. As remarked by Foucault (as cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, 187), “people know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does”.

METHODOLOGY: INDETERMINACY AND COUNTER RE-PRESENTATIONS

As briefly touched upon in the prior sections, the relationship between popular culture and the diplomatic mystique is multifaceted. On a rudimentary level, it is a site where the mystique is articulated through 'folk' understandings of diplomacy[9]. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to destabilizing the assumption that this site has no bearing on diplomatic practice (Neumann and Nexon, 2006; Clerc, 2023). Similarly, I have attempted to demonstrate that the diplomatic mystique is neither isolated from the public, nor is it immune from the reach of popular aesthetics:

> "Geopoliticians have to draw upon discourses already granted hegemonic social acceptance. These discourses are reproduced within culture… if geopolitics were to be consistently created independently of the negotiated reality of its readership, it would face an insurmountable *crisis of representation*" (Sharp as cited in Grayson, 2017, 46, emphasis added)

One process of representation, the diplomatic one, is implicated in the other, the popular one. Or put differently, even though the sovereign can claim exclusive representative authority over the collective, which it delegates to the diplomat, the collective retains the ability to re-present the sovereign – i.e. Banai's (2010) 'public imagination'. Translating this relationship onto the diplomatic mystique, what is obfuscated by the mystifications of representational practices must level with counter re-presentations that attempt to make sense of this obfuscation, and individuals may draw on these sites of knowledge to construct their own interpretations. That being said, counter re-presentations are a form of mystification in their own right, insofar as they equally draw boundaries around idealized understandings of the profession, while reproducing the fictions sustaining diplomatic practice. In other words, there is nothing more

[9] Heeding Adler-Nissen's (2024) argument, it is important to emphasize that I use the term folk here without presupposing a hierarchy between this type of knowledge and other more expert/authoritative/valid knowledges.

'authentic' about the discourses they operate with. In fact, counter re-presentations may actively compete with sovereign representations, each claiming to expose or undermine the other[10]. They may also form a symbiotic relationship, where one draws on the other as a source of legitimacy and authority, as alluded to in the quote above (see also Neumann, 2016, 115).

Counter re-presentations are not exclusive to popular culture and can, for example, be observed in the performances of mock diplomatic summits discussed earlier. What distinguishes popular culture as a site of counter re-presentations, however, is the indeterminacy of its meaning (Holden, 2006), i.e. the "multiplicity of knowledges and subjectivities" opened up through attempts at interpretation (Ciuta, 2024, 1). Mock summits, for example, rely on an intersubjectively shared interpretation, insofar as they are collectively enacted counter re-presentations that have to be consistently legible to its participants, limiting its imaginative capacity. Artistic representations, on the other hand, remain coated in interpretative ambiguity and can be made legible in a multitude of ways. Ultimately, this means that claiming authoritative interpretation over any popular culture artefact is futile, as are the goals of "revealing its hidden ideological content" (ibid, 7) or establishing a critical/uncritical binary (Holden, 2006). But, when employed as heuristic devices, the multiplicity of meaning evoked by these artefacts can open up fruitful avenues for thinking through IR 'knowledge' itself, such as the typology expounded upon in the previous section.

Furthermore, as I have argued throughout, ambiguity in representational practice is equally familiar to diplomacy, where it is embraced in both diplomatic subjectivity and sociability. Neither sovereign nor popular representations are pivoted around fixed subjects (as much as there might be an illusion of this), and one must heed the contingency rooted in attempts to construct and capture these subjects. For this task, the notion of 'figuration' is particularly

[10] I would like to thank Xymena Kurowska for pointing this out.

instructive. In her work on the feminization of diplomacy, Towns (2020) draws on this notion in order to convey the ambivalence located in representational practices. This is especially true in the case of diplomacy, where a traditionally male-dominated profession has on the one hand been contrasted to the superior masculine realm of 'hard power', and on the other has seen an influx of women entering the field and instrumentalizing their femininity to present themselves as possessing sharper diplomatic skills (ibid)[11]. Figuration, a concept inspired by feminist post-humanism, captures the "shifting schemes of representation" and the plurality of meanings they possess, ultimately allowing one to approach the archetype of the diplomat as a moving subject (ibid, 581).

Isolating and unpacking diplomatic figurations in popular representations can thus give a better sense of what kind of story is re-presented, and the role of the diplomatic mystique in its performative enactments. I identify several such figurations in *The Diplomat*, not because they are an "obvious site to study" (which rarely exist when looking at popular culture as a particular discourse) (Neumann, 2001, 606), but rather because they help trace the contours of this specific representation of diplomatic practice, where the fluidity of figurations helps demonstrate the co-constitution of the three different levels of mystification. My rationale for selecting *The Diplomat* is thus twofold: first, to dive deeper into a highly mainstream articulation of the diplomatic mystique, considering that this mystique is entangled with 'social imaginaries' (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 642) of the diplomatic profession; second, to complicate the differentiation presented above by thinking through the co-constitution and contingency of all three levels.

[11] One could arguably write a separate piece on how the feminization of diplomacy in public discourse functions as a response to the anxieties generated by the profession's mystique.

THE DIPLOMAT

Summary

The analysis in this section is based on the first season of the Netflix show, which follows the story of Kate Wyler, a frank and relentless career diplomat with substantial experience in conflict zones, who is selected as the next American Ambassador to the United Kingdom. While Kate perceives the job as mostly ceremonial, her husband, Hal Wyler (an infamous name in the diplomatic world), contends that she will be thrown into the midst of preventing a military escalation between the UK and Iran, with the latter suspected of orchestrating a deadly attack on a British Navy ship. We soon discover that Hal has secretly set up Kate on a shortlist to replace the Vice President of the U.S, and the London posting is intended as a test of Kate's suitability - her Deputy Chief of Mission, Stuart Hayford, is instructed by the White House to assess her qualities. After finding this out, Kate initially opposes the plan, not least because of her determination to escape her crumbling marriage with Hal, who is seemingly incapable of playing back-up to Kate despite his professed willingness to do so. However, she becomes increasingly accustomed to the idea, once again demonstrating her exceptional qualities by intricately navigating a diplomatic crisis.

This crisis unfolds in several stages. First, it becomes clear that Iran was not responsible for the attack on the British ship. Then, the attention turns to Russia, as Iranian intelligence provides the name of a Russian mercenary, Roman Lenkov, supposedly responsible for the attack, yet Russian authorities similarly deny any involvement in the events, giving up Lenkov's whereabouts as a sign of goodwill. Throughout this ordeal, Kate has to wrestle with an unapologetically misogynist British PM, Nicol Trowbridge, for whom – due to his explicitly masculine lust for war and domestic political agenda – a military response is favorable. Kate also has to precariously balance her relationship with the British foreign secretary, Austin

Dennison, as the pair grow increasingly close and develop feelings for one another. Just as we come to assume that the diplomatic crisis has concluded, with French authorities granting permission for British Special Forces to arrest Lenkov at his home in the South of France, Kate find outs that the arrest is a ploy for a British extra-judicial assassination of Lenkov, which neither her or the foreign secretary were aware of, suggesting Trowbridge's ulterior motives and a wider conspiracy at play.

Despite an exaggerated depiction of ambassadorial life, one molded to the demands of thriller television, the reception of the series was largely positive, as was the reaction within diplomatic circles. While admitting the show's hyperbole, diplomats were praiseworthy of the details it did get right, especially in the context of everyday embassy life and high-level negotiations, with some hoping that such an exciting portrayal could attract future recruits (Jackson, 2023; Landler, 2023). Equally, the show was praised for its account of the sexism faced within the masculinized realm of diplomacy, as well as how creator Deborah Cahn attempted to mediate popular tropes surrounding women in leadership positions (Bordo, 2023; Anderson, 2023). In the spirit of its diplomatic theme, dialogue is central to the show, and we get extensive insights into how diplomats communicate in their private, professional and public spheres in this fictitious universe. This dialogue can sometimes come off as caricatured, primarily because it seems as though the show is keen on superficially spelling out contextual information about 'international politics'.

Echoing Constantinou's (2000) embrace of the 'grotesque' for the study of diplomacy, hyperbole and exaggeration can equally function as a provocation that encourages reflection. *The Diplomat*'s accuracy of depiction or plausibility of narrative is of much less importance than the analytical possibilities engendered by its fictitious lens, which transgresses the boundaries of the 'normal' and thus allows one to "defamiliarize events, exploit similarities,

and mix stories that review and criticize normal practice" (ibid, 223). As mentioned, I use the show as a heuristic device through which to analyze the co-constitution of the different vectors of mystification which permit the 'whole' of the diplomatic mystique to emerge. Specifically, I scrutinize the role of the diplomat's estranged Self; the tension between professional demands and the conditions that sustain the workings of mystification at the public and private level; and the different representative registers that complicate the diplomatic mystique at all three levels.

How the diplomat learned (not) to stop worrying and estrange the Self

Returning to the quote from Paul Sharp (1999, 41) cited above, which illuminates how diplomats switch between different modes of justifying their profession, Sharp's discussion implies that a diplomat's self-understanding will necessarily mediate other vectors of mystification. In that regard, the estranged Self becomes holistic within the diplomatic mystique, shaping the professional and public level while also simultaneously being shaped by them. This is a mutual reliance, and diplomats order their relationship to their profession and its public presentation (and justification) through a particular calibration of the Self (which their profession and the public demands of them). But what if the Self is not estranged? What if the diplomat refuses to fragment and differentiate between these three levels?

Kate Wyler is arguably the embodiment of this predicament. Her frankness is not only intriguing due to the gendered anxieties it evokes within a masculinized realm (Towns, 2020) - it can also be perceived as profoundly 'undiplomatic'. From the get-go, we are confronted with the fact that Kate is not involved in mediation for mediation's sake. Her devotion to her work is not attached to an ideal of diplomacy, but rather to the normative convictions she brings to her diplomatic practice. Hence, for Kate, the role of ambassador in Kabul – a place where she has developed close personal bonds and invested her life's work – cannot compare to the

London posting, despite the diplomatic stakes being considerably higher. She feels little attachment to collective rituals, and we get a strong impression that her sense of the Self is rooted in the substance of her work (and the individuals it impacts), rather than the social practice of diplomacy as such.

This is not to say that Kate does not engage in boundary-making or is not guided by a sense of professional exceptionalism. Yet she struggles to delegate tasks (Stuart has to painstakingly convince her to let him make calls for her), to engage in rituals that are designed to socialize the estranged Self into the diplomatic mystique (e.g. she has no time for the symbolic capital of dress (Kuus, 2015)), or to subscribe to protocol if it is counter-productive to her understanding of the profession (even though it may be essential for diplomatic sociability, such as her manner of communication with the British foreign secretary). As Kate puts it herself: "I suck at a garden party – but *real* negotiations?" (Cahn, 2023e, 07:30, emphasis added). Her proactivity somewhat resonates with Neumann's (2005,90) script of the "actively awaiting" diplomat, for whom the here and now is paramount. However, Kate does not hesitate to overfulfil this script, which often clashes with the expectations of her colleagues. In that regard, the figuration of 'Kate the diplomat' is not determined by any script within the diplomatic profession, but rather by her *Self*.

While Hal displays equally undiplomatic traits, such as his zeal for the spotlight which has alienated many within the diplomatic profession over the years, his boundary drawing differs from Kate's. Undoubtedly, he is mystifying in the obvious sense – he is kidnapped during missions and has no qualms about negotiating with dictators or terrorists. But his ability to draw on the 'hero script' is not tied to the space created by the diplomat's estranged Self, separate from their 'private' (Neumann, 2005) - instead, Hal internalizes the script as his own Self. In his self-understanding, the legitimacy of his practice is not derived from diplomatic

sociability, nor is it linked to what is publicly expected (or even demanded) of him. Hal is baffled when Kate scolds him for indirectly contacting Iran - a stunt that could have landed him in prison - because, in his words, "it fucking paid off" (Cahn, 2023b, 40:45). By transgressing the boundaries of mystification, Hal's public-personal-private (Neumann, 2005, 92) collapse into one, and we lose sight of where one level traverses into the others, a similar predicament to Kate's. Their marriage works as a metaphor for this symbiosis, or rather as an example of a diplomatic counter where one cannot draw neat boundaries around the public, professional and private (i.e. both fail to compartmentalize their work and their relationship so as to deny any tension between the two (see ibid, 78)).

Unpacking Kate's diplomatic practice further, at times, her refusal to estrange (or compartmentalize) the Self greatly facilitates her work. The boundaries of her imaginary of the ideal diplomat are porous, therefore she has no issue switching between modes of the 'career' or the 'guerilla' diplomat, embracing digital technologies "to engage individually, informally and playfully with people outside the embassy walls" (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022, 651) (e.g. to gauge likely perpetrators of the attack or to send out hidden messages to Iranian ministers). We also see Kate use her lack of estrangement creatively when negotiating with the British PM, with the figuration of 'Kate' structuring the possibilities entailed in the figuration of 'Kate the diplomat'. After Hal tries to manipulate Kate by uncharacteristically distancing himself, in an attempt to prove to her that she does not want her husband to be completely "in the back seat" (Cahn, 2023e, 47:30), Kate gets the idea to give the British PM "what he wanted so he could stop wanting it so badly" (Cahn, 2023f, 01:55), i.e. a list of Russian targets the U.S military would be 'comfortable' bombing.

Kate not only feels "responsible for managing relations", yet also for the "content of these relations" (Adler-Nissen, 2015, 306). She also embraces the 'governing' element of her work

(a term used by the White House chief of staff to describe Kate (Cahn, 2023c, 11:40)), rather than perceive herself as a mere messenger. Simply reproducing the conditions (and fictions) that sustain the social practice of diplomacy is not enough for her, making her a reliable and respected figure amongst her peers, who seem to be used to a different kind of diplomat. This, however, is as much a facilitator of as it is a hinderance to her work. As the series demonstrates rather explicitly, 'non-estranged' diplomats may be admirable, yet they are not the most efficient professionals judging by the standards of the institution itself. Kate struggles to recalibrate and move on from her past work, hesitates to acknowledge her outstanding qualities, and ultimately strives to practice diplomacy in a manner often incompatible with the practices of her colleagues. She is a conspicuous outsider in an institution relying on a particular calibration of the Self, which is then reinforced through diplomatic sociability. Unsurprisingly then, the first instinct of those around her is to get her out of the diplomatic realm and into politics.

An exemplary professional, but not very professional

Evidently, the criteria by which both Kate and Hal determine the success of their work are not always in tune with the internal expectations of their profession. On the face of it, Kate is willing and even insistent on following the protocol at the foundation of diplomatic sociability – as she puts it, this is a matter of "fundamental respect for institutional norms" (Cahn, 2023a, 21:00). Yet it becomes increasingly apparent that Kate's understanding of these norms differs greatly from her colleagues. For example, confidentiality and secrecy are both indispensable for Kate's diplomatic practice, yet she does not see them as a question of 'comfort' or 'tact' (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022), but rather as a means to the ends of "global stability" (Cahn, 2023b, 44:05). Thus, she is more than willing to be used as a CIA asset, despite widespread opposition from her British and American colleagues. This is perhaps best epitomized in the

scene with the Iranian Ambassador to the UK, who quite literally suffers a heart attack after being ambushed by Kate in her attempts to prevent a military confrontation between the UK and Iran. Her drastic and unpredictable maneuvers, while coated in an aura of secrecy, do not fit into the mode of confidentiality designed to uphold professional mystifications. In fact, Kate is quite clear about her skepticism of diplomatic sociability:

> "What we're really doing when we negotiate with [Iran], or with anyone, is looking for one or two friends we can call when the world is truly fucked. It is a flimsy web of relationships, but sometimes it holds." (Cahn, 2023c, 31:10)

Rather than professional mystifications obscuring the precarity of diplomatic fictions, Kate regards these mystifications as precarious in their own right. Such a sentiment contrasts starkly to the corridors of Brussels, where talks of a classic diplomacy that has persevered for thousands of years conveys a sense of indefeasibility of the profession (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 2022). Regardless of whether Kate actually believes that her actions are guided by the principle of global stability (although her sharp reaction to Stuart suggesting otherwise is telling (Cahn, 2023b, 33:45)), it is unsurprising that she often resorts to actions similar to Hal's, granted that his ideal of diplomatic conduct is equally estranged from the boundaries drawn by professional mystification (even if the manner of this estrangement differs).

One might say, then, that the institutional norms Kate refers to have less to do with how the profession is constructed amongst diplomats themselves, and are instead related to an understanding of the institution demarcated at the public level, where diplomacy's status as the "engine room of international politics" is fostered (Cohen as cited in Sharp, 1999, 33). In fact, Kate is a rather effective 'keeper' of the public mystique, as remarked by Austin's sister: "you know every multilateral treaty by clause, and yet you don't know what The Daily Mail said about my brother" (Cahn, 2023f, 22:00). Engaging in 'frivolous' gossip is not Kate's repertoire, despite its primacy for diplomatic sociability - during the Wikileaks fiasco, many diplomats

vehemently pushed back against accusations of negligence after sections of the public dismissed the role of such sociability for the profession (Towns, 2020, 588). In that regard, the figuration of 'Kate the diplomat' resonates with the social imaginaries of diplomacy articulated within public imagination.

The incongruity between Kate's practice and what is professionally expected of her emphasizes that professional mystifications are a collective project. *The Diplomat* aptly captures how the absurdity of rituals may be known to its participants, yet these performances are nonetheless upheld through the reflexive work of diplomats – when Kate suggests that Stuart spends too much time worrying about her marriage and clothes, he simply responds: "Because I'm good at it" (Cahn, 2023d, 25:45). A similar sentiment is conveyed by Kuus (2023, 186), who discusses the reactions she encountered from diplomats during her research on the symbolic capital of dress. The playful element of sociability embedded in the diplomatic mystique is appreciated for facilitating diplomatic interactions. But, such an appreciation partly stems from hiding the Self away, which one can return to once the performance (e.g. ritual) is over – a 'luxury' not available to Kate, whose private and professional are irrevocably fused. As argued, the estranged Self is not an unreflexive figure, as sustaining mystifications at the professional level requires a conscious subscription to the collective project of protocol and norms. Kate bears the brunt of undermining these collective efforts, for example by misreading Austin's demeanor as somehow reserved and confident, when he was in fact signaling to her, within the mode of playful professional sociability that Kate rejects, that he was losing control of the situation. Furious, Kate accuses him: "If the house is on fire, you gotta tell me!" (Cahn, 2023c, 25:55).

Thus, while Kate is able to sustain the boundaries drawn by her diplomatic subjectivity, and while such boundaries might even coincide with those demarcated at the public level, she

ultimately clashes with the demands of diplomatic sociability, where rituals and protocol emerge as essential for the diplomatic collective. Professional mystifications are not merely sustained by an aura of secrecy, but also by the accompanying playful performances that establish the rules of the diplomatic game. Often, Kate is able to transgress these rules, yet when she steps out of the social practice of diplomacy, for example in her emergency meeting at the White House on the matter of Lenkov's arrest, she confronts quite forcefully the expectations arising from outside the diplomatic collective, with "the politician[s] wanting the self-effacing script" from the diplomat (Neumann, 2005, 89).

Flexible representation (with a twist)

As touched upon, the 'general will' that Kate perceives herself as representing is that of global stability. Yet it remains unclear as to whom exactly this general will belongs, and thus on behalf of whom Kate conducts her representation. On the one hand, Kate represents this will in all her work, whether it is high-level negotiations with the British PM or her relationship with embassy colleagues. On the other, she often clashes with her counterparts in the pursuit of this will. Kate's character reinforces Neumann's (2005, 85) claim that diplomats may even be representing "humanity as such", along with their ministry or their state, while conducting negotiations. Kate switches between these representative registers, transgressing boundaries at the public, professional, and private level that dictate how a diplomat should approach the practice of representation. And crucially, we get a sense that Kate is cognizant of this switching.

This is made most explicit in her pull aside discussion with Austin as they attempt to convince the British PM against a military response to Russia, during which Austin confides in Kate: "At times I have to serve as the PM's voice box, but I, as me, am asking you, as you, for your help" (Cahn, 2023e, 27:20). Here, we return to the issue of the diplomat's representative authority, with Austin's character elucidating that, through their function as a spokesperson of

the spokesperson of the general will, the diplomat becomes not only estranged from their Self, yet also from the collective they are tasked with representing. More noteworthy, however, is Kate's response to Austin. She performatively pretends, in robot-like fashion, to switch on and off – seemingly a sign of her changing representative register – after which she responds: "How can I be of service?" (Cahn, 2023e, 27:30).

We thus are confronted with a rather nuanced picture. Kate is unwilling to estrange her Self, centering it in most of her diplomatic interactions. Nevertheless, like Austin, she distinguishes between different modes of representation and can therefore represent on behalf of the US president, or even on behalf of herself. We witness a collapse of all three levels of mystification, insofar as Kate's representative authority (and the will she embodies) is imbricated in both what Austin professionally demands of her, as well as her perception of the subject position of the diplomat (i.e. there is a distinct Self that she can bring to her practice). This collapse is further demonstrated in how the series employs dialogues that reflect on recent American (diplomatic) history, specifically how the wars in the Middle East, followed by a period of isolationism, have weakened America's reputation amongst its allies. Despite professional mystifications functioning as a self-contained system authorized by diplomats themselves, *The Diplomat* suggests that diplomatic sociability (and subjectivity) is not immune from 'the past' of a representative authority - the "infinitely ravenous American" Kate refers to is ultimately a part of the 'general will' she embodies (Cahn, 2023c, 31:30).

Crucially, despite being wholeheartedly invested into the ideal of global stability, Kate approaches the practice of representation (and negotiation) as one would expect of a diplomat – with "a certain degree of flexibility and adaptation of national positions" (Adler-Nissen, 2015, 288). The previous example of 'reverse psychology' used on the PM is a testament to the kind of "intuitive flair or social skills" at Kate's disposal, while the outcome of those negotiations

underscores how the ‘national interest’ is constructed through the process of negotiation and representation, rather than given a priori (ibid). After a secret meeting with one of the PM’s unofficial aides (who holds substantial influence over him), Kate comes up with an unorthodox plan involving British retaliation against Russian mercenary troops in Libya. This meeting was necessary due to the non-negotiability of the PM’s private goal of stymying Scottish independence, which de facto became the ‘general will’ he embodied in his negotiations with Kate. Key in this secret meeting, however, was once again a switch in representative register, with Kate proposing to the aide: “Would that be so bad, to end it right now, just you and me?” (Cahn, 2023f, 33:45). Switching between representative registers seems to be in line with the flexibility diplomats ascribe to themselves, yet Kate’s ability to do so is intrinsically tied to her undermining her professional (by sabotaging the Secretary of State to push the plan through) and private (by going behind Austin’s back despite desperately wanting to keep him in the loop) commitments.

Representative authority, just like diplomatic sociability and subjectivity, is thus bound up in the co-constitution of all three levels of the diplomatic mystique. To some extent, as *The Diplomat* hints at, each level acts as the means by which diplomats mediate their estrangement from the other two, thereby managing the fragmentation of mystification into three separate vectors. Kate’s character not only demonstrates the struggle of upholding this fragmentation, but also the possibilities opened up if it is eschewed. That being said, the show also reminds us of the potential reasons for neat differentiations within diplomatic life, not least as a means to manage the precarity of an institution with overwhelmingly high stakes. “Horse-trading” might be the simplistic terms used by the show’s characters to describe diplomacy (Cahn, 2023c, 06:55), yet what *The Diplomat* conveys is a profoundly human story of how mediation is made possible.

CONCLUSION: WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE 'DEMYSTIFYING'?

In his contribution to the edited volume on 'sustainable diplomacy', Huss Banai (2010, 63) concludes that the "diplomat's function...is to relentlessly demystify and debunk seemingly monolithic representations of self and other". This thesis has sought to demonstrate that such a goal is unviable without first problematizing how the messy 'whole' of the diplomatic mystique emerges. In other words, it sought to provide a word of caution – if we are to demystify, we must first understand mystification. Advancing a typology of the diplomatic mystique, I have differentiated between three different vectors of mystification which make possible the practice of representation in its contemporary form. At the public level, mystification nurtures the representative authority of the diplomat and is part of a multifaceted tacit agreement with the public, whose agency should not be overlooked. Professionally, mystification is both an inadvertent product of technical requirements, as well as a more fundamental example of how diplomats construct a sociability driven by the normative ideal of mediating estrangement. Finally, private mystifications are employed by the estranged Self of the diplomat to manage a liminal disposition particular to the social practice of diplomacy. While mystifications in diplomacy make possible the representation of the collective and nurture the promise of an engagement across otherness, Banai is right to draw our attention to the violent practices of sovereign disciplinary power that may skew such endeavors. Diplomacy does not belong to the realm of the sovereign, yet neither is it best understood as an exclusive remit of the public. Rather, it is a manifestation of a human condition, where the ideal of co-existing in difference transcends neat categories.

As with all differentiations, the typology elaborated risks obscuring as much as it reveals. The three separate levels of mystification possess their own logic and are instrumentalized differently, yet one cannot escape their co-constitution. I have suggested that popular culture,

as a heuristic device and a site of knowledge about the diplomatic mystique, provides a fruitful avenue for thinking through the impossibility of neat fragmentation. *The Diplomat* is not only a thriller about diplomacy in world politics, but also a counter re-presentation of the practice of representation, which can provoke reflection on the possible reasons for, as well as the limits of, upholding fragmentation. The 'whole' of the diplomatic mystique is ultimately a product of the convoluted entanglement of the diplomat's public, professional and private. Analytically speaking, disentanglement can clarify not only diplomacy's operationality, yet also its normative stakes. However, disentanglement should not entail demystification, especially if the latter is understood as the removal of absurdity and contradiction from diplomatic practice. Rather, this absurdity and contradiction should be embraced in the attempts to uphold a series of precarious fictions that, even if momentarily, demonstrate that estrangement can be mediated.

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