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"Don't we all want a better world? – The (un)convincing rhetoric of the World Economic Forum's vision to *reset* our economy and society"

verfasst von / submitted by

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For my son, Benjamin, who changed everything

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
BLM	Black Lives Matter
BMGF	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
FFF	Fridays For Future
GFC	Global Financial Crisis – Financial crisis of 2007 - 2008
HRH	His Royal Highness Prince of Wales
IMF	International Monetary Fond
LVMH	Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WWII	World War II

1   Introduction

To solve the world's most pressing challenges, some of the most influential corporate and governmental leaders gather annually in a small mountain village in Switzerland. Hosted by the global non-governmental organisation the World Economic Forum (WEF or Forum), these meetings in Davos-Kloster aim at "improving the state of the world" ("Our Impact"). In line with this objective, the 2021 Davos Agenda was dedicated to the 'Great Reset', an initiative to transform neoliberal capitalism into 'stakeholder capitalism'. This new economic system is positioned as a remedy to current global problems such as climate change, wealth and socio-economic inequalities, various forms of discrimination and political instability. At the core of 'stakeholder capitalism' are corporations that contribute to the social good, and instead of considering just shareholders in decision-making processes, everyone involved in the economy and society would get to participate (K. Schwab, "What Kind").

Eight months prior to Davos 2021, the Forum introduced the Great Reset to the public whilst the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the global stage. This timing was no coincidence, as the WEF sees the disruption of everyday life resulting from the pandemic as an opportunity to alter the world's "current trajectory" (Royal Family 00:00:35-00:00:36). With this perspective, the Great Reset is part of a larger discourse about the pandemic's economic, social and political impacts. The WEF is one voice amongst many who acknowledge the need for radical change in light of the myriad global problems humanity faces. However, even though there seems to be a collective awareness of the necessity to address long-standing issues already apparent before the pandemic, the transnational élite club's[1] plan has received harsh criticism. Numerous discussions about what the Great Reset means for society and whom it will benefit have ensued following its publication[2].

It is not surprising that some people may be wary of the WEF's call for a Great Reset and doubt its intention and potential for change. Klaus Schwab, the Forums founder and CEO, established the organisation based on the stakeholder model and has been advocating for stakeholder capitalism since its founding in the 1970s (Pigman 9). Simultaneously, the WEF has also had to account for criticism of its neoliberal practices (cf. Pigman 124). Several academics, critics and social activists have argued that the organisation facilities the spread of

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[1] Despite possible negative connotations in everyday use, the term 'transnational élite club' is established in academia to describe "informal and weakly institutionalised non-state actors" (Graz 335).
[2] See, for example Beck 2020, Boutilier 2020, Brand 2021, Coyne 2020, Goodman and Carmichael 2020, Haskins 2020, Hoar 2020, Ingraham 2021, Jasper 2020, Jasper 2021, Klein 2020, Newman 2021, Shapiro 2020, Slobodian 2020, Tucker 2020, Wherry 2020.

neoliberal capitalism by providing a platform for corporations and state leaders to network and make deals favourable to them (cf. Harvey 36, Graz 332, Klein 2020). Many of the individuals that concentrate most of the world's wealth and are thus main contributors to today's wealth inequality are WEF partners (cf. Szolucha 4, "Partners"). Hence, they add to and benefit from the Forum's work.

The WEF's influential and crucial role within neoliberal capitalism, on the one hand, and its call to radically transform the very system it contributes to and profits from, on the other hand, invites curiosity and reservations about the plan's underlying motivation. For this reason, the Great Reset, amongst other discussions surrounding a post-corona future, is especially worth investigating. This thesis aims to gain greater insight into what the Great Reset promotes and why, judging from the adverse reactions, the initiators have been unsuccessful in convincing the public of its plan. Since the attempt to persuade through language is a definition of rhetoric, this initially observed dissuasion lends itself to approaching the topic at hand through rhetorical criticism. As Edwin Black notes, "the subject matter of rhetorical criticism is persuasive discourse" (14) which is "… discourse[], spoken or written, which aim[s] to influence [people]" (15).

Based on this investigative method, this thesis seeks to answer three central questions:
1) What rhetorical strategies are employed to promote the Great Reset?
2) What do these strategies reveal about the plan's promise to fundamentally alter our social and economic systems?
3) Why is stakeholder capitalism proposed under the Great Reset promoted as the only possible solution?

This thesis will answer these questions by undertaking a critical analysis of texts that advocate for the Great Reset, relying on a framework of three perspectives of rhetorical criticism. These are rhetorical situational analysis, rhetorical frame analysis, and rhetorical argumentation analysis. Two concepts from change management and leadership - creating a sense of urgency and strategic ambiguity – further help conceptualise salient textual features. The effects of the first-person plural pronoun and the problem of speaking for others also aid the interpretation of the textual evidence. Additionally, since the Great Reset promises to change the world for the better by "reset[ing] … our economic and social foundations" (K. Schwab, "great reset"), this thesis's research questions and its central argument must be understood within the context of the current economic system of neoliberal capitalism.

Investigating the Great Reset's promotion, its potential for 'radical change' and its positioning as the 'only alternative' unveils that the proposal greatly resembles the current

predominant economic system. The texts under scrutiny indicate that the plan operates under the prevalent assumptions of free-market neoliberalism. Moreover, despite the call for urgent change, the WEF fails to acknowledge and take responsibility for its leading role in neoliberal practices, which it simultaneously identifies as the root causes of current problems. As the WEF is an organisation designed to benefit and advance the interests of their corporate partners, it seems highly unlikely that it would propose a transformation that would sincerely challenge the existing power structures within the current neoliberal capitalist system. Therefore, this thesis argues that the Great Reset is upheld as 'radical change' or 'paradigm shift' to detract from the emergence of other alternatives to the current economic system. With this pretence, the WEF seeks to maintain current neoliberal practices and positions of power, despite a growing awareness of the need to alter current systems, not least owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As this research undertakes a rhetorical analysis, eight texts[3] displaying a clear rhetorical function were selected from a wide range of material promoting and explaining the Great Reset. These publications include Klaus Schwab's and Thierry Malleret's book *COVID-19: The Great Reset*, which identifies general dynamics that affect current and future changes and warns about developments society will be confronted with, such as the rise of AI (Schwab and Malleret 2020). A 'Great Reset' website features articles, videos and podcasts discussing and highlighting different developments in the direction of the 'reset' (The Great Reset). It also contains recordings of the Davos 2021 sessions, which have been published on the WEF's YouTube channel as well. A further source of Great Reset texts is a special edition of TIME from October 2020, encompassing 24 articles relating to various aspects of the new economy and society envisaged by the WEF and its supporters.

Three criteria guided the selection of texts for this thesis. First, the chosen artefacts most notably contain the "five basic moves" (Hart et al. 9) of a rhetorical message: using symbols (i.e., language) rather than force to instigate change, portraying the rhetor as a companion in bringing about the communicated change, demonstrating the necessity of change, limiting the possibilities for the solution to a presented problem, and stating the implied course of action only indirectly (Hart et al. 9). Second, to allow for an in-depth investigation and presentation of the textual evidence within the space of this thesis, the number of sources had to be limited to include the most representative texts. Third, the primary sources include material published in the reset's initial launch period, which sparked public debates about the Great Reset. Since

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[3] Text refers both to written text and visuals.

an integral part of a rhetorical analysis is the audience's reception, these texts and their commentary are well-suited for this thesis's theoretical approach.

Following this rationale, the corpus of primary sources consists of four articles and four video clips. Two essays were written by Klaus Schwab. One of them was published on the Forum's website, and the other is part of the special edition of TIME (online publication), dedicated to the Great Reset. The other two essays, one by Mariana Mazzucato, professor of economics at the University College London, and the second by SOMPO Holding, a Japanese insurance company, were also published in this feature of TIME. Of the four videos, three were published on the WEF's YouTube channel, two in June 2020 and one discussing the Great Reset as the theme for the Davos Agenda in January 2021. The fourth video was also released in June 2020 and can be found on the UK Royal Family's YouTube channel. Klaus Schwab's WEF essay, one video by the Forum and the other by the Royal Family are the original three publications that announced the Great Reset.

The remaining five sources were chosen because they discuss several aspects of the overall objectives of the Great Reset. SOMPO Holdings presents a specific example of a company embracing this plan. Klaus Schwab's TIME article is similarly focused on exemplifying the change he imagines. Also, Mazzucato discusses a wide range of policies that would lead to the social and economic change that aligns with the Great Reset vision. The third video highlights the key ideas by featuring various public figures discussing the Great Reset. The fourth and chronologically last video is especially noteworthy. It was published on January 25, 2021, in preparation for Davos 2021. It also acknowledges and addresses the criticism the initiative had received in the meantime. Together, these primary sources present a solid foundation for understanding what the Great Reset is (and is not) and answering this thesis's central research questions.

This study bridges rhetorical criticism and Cultural Studies through understanding rhetoric as epistemic. It draws on Sonja Foss's and Ann Gill's (1987) proposal of employing Michel Foucault's discursive formation as a middle-level theory of epistemic rhetoric. This model is based on understanding discursive practices and rhetoric to be the same. Foucault's 'discursive practices' involve written and spoken language and non-discursive acts. Likewise, many modern definitions of rhetoric also focus on linguistic and non-linguistic symbols (Foss and Gill 387-8). Since discursive practices produce knowledge, and rhetoric is synonymous with discursive practices, it follows that also rhetoric creates knowledge (Foss and Gill 398). Foss and Gill further explain that seeing rhetoric as an element within discursive formations also means that a rhetorical analysis cannot be confined to components such as "speakers,

strategies, and effects" but must consider the context in which rhetorical practices take place (Foss and Gill 398).

The backdrop against which the rhetorical discourse of the Great Rest needs to be studied is neoliberal capitalism. It is also at this point that two different meanings of power converge. In neoliberal capitalism, power is concentrated within a 'neoliberal class' that extends globally across individuals within corporations, finance, trade, and technology (Harvey 36). Its power relates to political influence and economic wealth (cf. Harvey 2007, Duménil and Lévy 2011). As the WEF and its partners belong to this neoliberal class, they also exert a certain amount of power in the global social order. However, from a discursive perspective power means the production of discourse and knowledge. According to Foucault, power is productive and relational (199). It is not held by anyone specifically but exists everywhere within society (Foucault 119). Nevertheless, the discursive formation of the Great Reset reveals that the production of knowledge and discursive practices can be entangled with economic motivations and is shaped by neoliberal institutions, such as the WEF.

Given the research object and the method of inquiry, this thesis makes three pertinent scholarly contributions. First, combining the notion of discursive power and 'neoliberal class power' can enlarge the usual conceptualisation of power from a Cultural Studies perspective. Second, this thesis's eclectic approach to rhetorical criticism and viewing rhetoric as epistemic shows how different critical methods can complement each other and what role rhetorical strategies play in creating knowledge. Third, the issues the Great Reset addresses could not be more significant at this moment in time. There is no denying that the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, and society's response to it, will have long-lasting consequences, for better or for worse. As presented by the WEF, the Great Reset attempts to shape the inevitable changes in the direction of the former. Thus, those who have a stake in the post-covid world (which, hopefully, includes all of us) ought to pay attention to this proposal of solving the world's problems put forward by the economic and political elite.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 contextualises the Great Reset by reviewing existing academic research and outlines the concepts required for understanding the findings from the rhetorical analysis. Chapter 3 is dedicated to this thesis's theoretical approach. It explicates the relationship between rhetoric and the production of knowledge and outlines the individual rhetorical perspectives that form the analytical framework. Chapters 4 and 5 present and discuss the discoveries from the textual analysis. Chapter 4 is divided into two parts: the first analyses the problem, and the second the solution as identified by the rhetors. These findings are evaluated and interpreted in Chapter 5, which is also organised into two

parts. The first section considers the unsuccessful rhetorical strategies, and the second section explains why the "radical change" the Great Reset proposes does not seem so "radical" after all. The conclusion reiterates the scholarly contributions and importance of this thesis, recognises its limitations, and, building from that, lays out where the attention of future scholarship is needed.

2   Contextualising the Great Reset

When the idea for this thesis began to take shape, the Great Reset had not yet received much attention from academics. By early April 2021, three notable peer-reviewed articles thoroughly discussing this initiative had been published. The state of this body of research had not significantly changed at the time of writing this thesis. Even though scholars may not have paid much attention to the Great Reset, examining this initiative in more detail is a worthwhile academic endeavour, given the present context laid out in the introduction. The following review highlights current research gaps and helps place this work within the existing academic corpus.

Wesley Marshall and Eugenia Correa (2020) included the Great Reset in their larger argument that the COVID-19 pandemic has been an opportunity for Latin American countries to advance global neoliberalist agendas. The authors position the Great Reset as an example of Naomi Klein's 'Shock Doctrine'. Klein, a renowned journalist and author, coined this concept in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. She demonstrates that since the beginning of capitalism, Milton Friedman's capitalist ideas have gained a foothold through using emergencies of any kind. Especially recent crises, such as 9/11 or natural disasters, have allowed politicians to advance policies and practices that strengthen neoliberal free-market capitalism (2007). Marshall and Correa further detect that the language of the Great Reset goes back to a speech given in 2014 by the then Managing Director of the IMF, Christine Lagarde (307). She discusses a 'reset', focusing on monetary policies that benefit central banks and stock markets (Marshall and Correa 306-7).

In an article for *The Intercept*, Klein indirectly responds to Marshall and Correa's claim and other news commentators who have made similar arguments. She vehemently opposes the utilisation of her theory to explain the Great Reset ("Conspiracy Smoothie" par. 11). In her view, focusing on this plan as an example of 'Disaster Capitalism' (another name for 'Shock Doctrine') obscures the actual and more concerning legislatures advancing neoliberal economic practices that have been passed during the collective shock caused by the pandemic. Nevertheless, she acknowledges the unlikelihood of the proposed plan to produce the

substantial change required to address global problems ("Conspiracy Smoothie" par. 12). Klein's defence is intriguing because it is not clear on what basis she denies that the Great Reset could be considered a form of 'Disaster Capitalism'. In fact, at the beginning of her article, she admits to having found it difficult to investigate the WEF's plan and even frames her article with the words "… [h]ere goes nothing" ("Conspiracy Smoothie" par. 3). Overall, it seems as if Klein wanted to distance herself from dubious speculations.

Steffen Roth (2021) takes a slightly different approach to Marshall and Correa and sees the Great Reset transforming capitalism into 'restorism'. Roth's understanding of restorism is a "neo-medieval brave new world health society …, [a] new digitally enhanced medieval period where health plays the role once thought to be played by religion" (2). He also argues that the idea of a 'reset' implies that there are initial and normal conditions that one ought to return to (4). Employing a social systems-theoretical framework to investigate the Great Reset claims, he concludes that it is about restoring individuals, institutions, and the planet to optimal health (6). The obvious concern is that divisions in terms of unhealthy/healthy and pure/impure would arise in such a scenario. However, Roth also states that it is not directly the Great Rest that would initiate such a transformation. Instead, it solely reflects a social trend that has already been underway (7).

Unlike the previous authors, Steven Umbrello (2021) has not articulated his interpretations of what the Great Reset could be. Instead, he undertook a book review of Klaus Schwab's and Thierry Malleret's book *COVID-19: The Great Reset*. Umbrello explains that the book proposes a 'reset' on three levels: the macro, the micro, and the individual. The macro-level of the Great Reset centres primarily on the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Innovations under this plan will rely strongly on automation and AI (Umbrello 2). Another part of the 'macro reset' is moving away from economic globalisation. However, simultaneously, a shift towards global governance is necessary to protect against trends of hyper-protectionism or nationalism that are likely to emerge (Umbrello 4). In the micro reset, all principles of the macro reset are mirrored within individual institutions and organisations (Umbrello 5). On the individual level, the reset describes changes to everyday life, already apparent due to the pandemic (Umbrello 6).

This slim review reveals ample room for a scholarly investigation into the not yet well-studied phenomena of the Great Reset. None of the reviewed works has considered the Great Reset within the current discourse of change sparked by the pandemic. The present investigation will fill this research gap. Also, alternatively to conjuring up assumptions or dismissing the Great Reset, this thesis will identify what changes to the current system its

initiators communicate and how they do so. On this basis, it will be possible to rationally critique the WEF's strategy as it emerges from the textual analysis.

2.1 Neoliberal capitalism

Since the WEF proposes solving current global problems resulting from neoliberal practices, it is necessary to discuss neoliberal capitalism in more detail. As the name suggests, this economic system is a form of capitalism. Some scholars argue that capitalism has evolved through various stages, with neoliberalism being the latest (and current) one (cf. Duménil and Lévy 5,10). David Harvey specifies that neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices" (2) that rely on "private property right, free markets, and free trade" (2). Those adhering to neoliberal principles believe that a government's role is to create the necessary conditions for a free-market economy to thrive. In turn, the market will take care of society and advance individual well-being (Harvey 2). Others, however, challenge this logic. Mary V. Wrenn describes privatisation, deregulation and the absence of a welfare state as the "enabling myths of neoliberalism" that sets this period apart from earlier versions of capitalism (453-4).

Wrenn's description of neoliberalism's principal tenets as myths indicates that there is nothing inherently natural about the way neoliberal capitalism operates, which is evident from the ideology's underlying contradictions. For example, in theory, privatisation should enable private companies to provide society with common goods much more efficiently than governments (Wrenn 445). However, in practice, governments become a profit source for private corporations. This is often the case in privatised services and goods funded by state governments, such as private prisons and military services in some countries (Wrenn 446). Instead of benefiting the public, many partnerships between the private and public sectors generate profits for private companies (Harvey 77). A further paradox of neoliberalism is its emphasis on deregulation, which is a misnomer because private enterprises welcome state regulation that benefits them (cf. Wrenn 458-61, Harvey 67, Bakan 24-6). Most notably, in times of crises, the celebrated 'hands-off' approach of governments is forsaken in favour of providing financial relief measures to private corporations (cf. Wrenn 59, Harvey 67).

Aside from these discrepancies, some scholars are concerned that the neoliberal logic of free-market enterprises and personal responsibility leads to the economisation of all aspects of life (cf. Shamir 6, Bakan 111). Ronen Shamir finds that the neoliberal assumptions about the market are applied to other areas of society, thereby "extending a model of economic conduct beyond the economy itself, generalising it as a principle of action for areas of life hitherto seen as being either outside or even antagonistic to the market" (6). According to Joel Bakan, this

process results in society itself becoming a market (111). This commodification of society also means that neoliberal economic principles shape culture, and thus, cultural practices reflect neoliberal principles. Another result of transforming society into an economic marketplace is that individuals are no longer merely consumers. They become a product themselves, vexed by the constant anxiety to market and promote themselves (cf. Wilson 3).

Since neoliberal ideas do not seem confined to the market alone, scholars theorise that it is more than an economic system. Harvey adds that neoliberalism is also a "mode of discourse [that] has pervasive effects on ways of thought [and] has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (3). Similar to Wrenn's approach of viewing neoliberal ideas as myth, Harvey's definition also illustrates that there is nothing natural about this economic and social system. Indeed, from a Cultural Studies perspective, neoliberalism is considered a social construct (cf. Wilson 8). As such, it hinges on symbols and cultural practices for its perpetuation. There is also a powerful underlying ideology that legitimises the social and economic construct of neoliberal capitalism, which is freedom (Harvey 5).

In neoliberal terms, freedom entails individual agency and responsibility, which, in theory, both create a free market and can be gained from the free market. However, in practice, this does not work. In principle, the role of the neoliberal state is to provide legislation that protects individual freedoms (Harvey 64). In practice, neoliberal governments must interfere to ensure free-market conditions are maintained and fostered, specifically when influential collective institutions (e.g., trade unions) advocate on behalf of individuals or other demands for collective interventions are being made. (Harvey 69-70). Hence, the neoliberal state must make decisions that ultimately benefit only a small group of people, making neoliberalism incompatible with democracy (Harvey 66). In effect, the supposedly highly valued individual liberty of the many is suppressed to secure the freedom of a few selected individuals (Harvey 69-70). Therefore, Harvey concludes that under neoliberalism, a "desire for a meaningful collective life" opposes an "alienating possessive individualism" (69).

Since the neoliberal "free market" is regulated and benefits only a few, critics have commented that power is held within the neoliberal class (Duménil and Lévy 8, Harvey 16). The 'neoliberal class', comprised of "the highest income brackets, capitalist owners, and the upper fractions of management" (Duménil and Lévy 8), derive their power from a concentration of wealth and resources. Consequently, wealth and social disparities arise. Economist Anwar Shaikh ("#205 Capitalism" 2020) explains that instead of being a bug in the system, it is a feature of neoliberal capitalism to produce socio-economic inequalities. Moreover, in the

neoliberal market, private individuals compete against big corporations that are by law defined as individuals, which means they are granted the same protection of individual rights as any other person (Harvey 21). However, as a corporation's resources and economic power differ considerably from those of an actual person, the chances of an individual to compete and succeed in the marketplace seem rather slim.

As much as 'neoliberal class power' has tangible economic effects, such as creating wealth inequality, it also affects culture. If, as mentioned above, neoliberalism denotes both a set of economic principles and a mode of discourse, neoliberal class power must have some effect on the neoliberal cultural construct. In other words, discursive formations are shaped by this dominant economic paradigm and vice versa. Therefore, the understanding of discursive power can be enlarged through the concept of neoliberal class power. The Great Reset serves as an example to illustrate this relationship.

2.2 <u>Change management: 'Urgency' and 'Strategic ambiguity'</u>

'A sense of urgency' and 'strategic ambiguity' are concepts from leadership and change management, as well as rhetorical devices (cf. Kotter 2008, Eisenberg 2007, Jasinski 457, Ceccarelli 199). Given the rhetors' background and the corporate environment in which they operate, linking urgency and ambiguity as rhetorical strategies to concepts from organisational change seems fitting for this analysis.

John P. Kotter, Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School, has written extensively about leading organisational change. In his book *A sense of urgency* (2008), he explicates why 'true urgency' is fundamental for any change. Kotter sees it as the antidote to complacency, a state in which people are satisfied with their present situation and do not see the need for change (4,5). 'True urgency' also wards off 'false urgency'. The latter inspires fear-based actions, whereas the former gives a sense of purpose and stems from a "gut-level determination to *move, and win, now*" (8; emphasis in the original). *A sense of urgency* also outlines four specific strategies for creating 'true urgency', because as Kotter admits, "it's not a natural state of affairs" (15). Thus, urgency can be understood as a deliberately constructed strategy for motivating change, which is also reflected in the primary source, as will be discussed later.

While Kotter's work has been recognised for its groundbreaking contribution to leadership and management (cf. Brisson-Banks 2010, Pollack and Pollack 2015, Witzel 2003), it has also received valid criticism. Mark Hughes demonstrates that Kotter bases his models and claims solely on anecdotal evidence ("Leading Change" 450). Due to the lack of empirical

research, Hughes questions the appeal of Kotter's work for academics and critically inquires his basic premises. This critique could be extended to *A sense of urgency*, as the arguments and findings in this book are not grounded in sound and comprehensible scientific methods either. Elsewhere, Hughes (2011) also examines the 70% 'organisational change failure rate' claim that some authors, including Kotter in *A sense of urgency* (vii-viii), make. Hughes concludes that there is no empirical evidence to support this view ("70 Per Cent" 460). These findings are crucial because they indicate that basic assumptions in change management, such as urgency, are purely fabricated.

Another construct to convey messages of change is 'strategic ambiguity' (Merkus et al. 229), which Eric M. Eisenberg identified in his influential essay "Ambiguity as strategy in organisational communication" (1984). Eisenberg points to several crucial functions of strategic ambiguity. First, it can promote 'unified diversity', making possible an agreement on a shared, ambiguously communicated goal because it allows multiple interpretations of the objective. Second, strategic ambiguity enables a shifting of organisational goals and metaphors, which aids the process of change (Eisenberg 8-10). Especially when communicating with the public, strategic ambiguity permits the changing of goals, which is crucial since an organisation does not have to commit itself to specific outcomes (Eisenberg 11). Third, Eisenberg describes that on the interpersonal level, ambiguity leaves "greater the room for projection" (11), meaning it is easier to create the impression that the receiver and sender of a message share a commonality. Fourth, strategic ambiguity also maintains existing power structures (Eisenberg 12-13).

Many scholars echo the importance of strategic ambiguity, while others have commented on its potential shortcomings. Dennis Gioia et al. identify that strategic change – a profound change that reorganises fundamental structures - entails much uncertainty and various stakeholders with differing interests. The vague and ambiguous nature of such changes requires ambiguous visions (371-2). Also, Fabrizio Ferraro recognises the importance of ambiguity and call for "more ambiguous and less prescriptive" (382) approaches to change. Contrary, a case study by Chahrazad Abdallah and Ann Langley found that the initial effects of strategic ambiguity Eisenstein described may not be sustained long term (262). Further, Jori Pascal Kalkman and Tine Molendijk (2019) highlight the possible adverse moral consequences of strategic ambiguity, specifically for lower-level organisational members. Subsequently, this discussion of the Great Reset will show that while strategic ambiguity may be an obvious tactic, it has also led to much uncertainty about what this initiative is about and caused suspicion.

2.3 The first-person plural pronoun and questions of representation

Since the WEF's Great Reset is portrayed as including and benefiting everyone everywhere, questions around representing others and speaking for others necessarily arise. In this respect, the role and function of the first-person plural pronoun 'we' in the Great Reset texts requires further analysis. This deixis has also been studied in other disciplines. It was found that aside from the apparent meaning of referring to oneself and one or more other persons, it can have varying functions. Randolph Quirk et al. note that this 'inclusive we' can be expanded to include all of humanity, which is considered a 'generic we' (354). It can be identified in sentences that can be rephrased in the passive voice, as in "We now know that the earth is round = It is now known that the earth is round" (Quirk et al. 354). A particular form of the 'generic we' is the 'rhetorical we' that refers to collective nouns, such as "the nation" or "the party". 'We' can also refer to the hearer, replacing the second person pronoun. Quirk et al. argue that this 'exclusive we' may be perceived as condescending (350), while Annika Schimpff finds that speakers may use it to express closeness (6).

Adding to these findings, Inke Du Bois demonstrates seven different types of the 'exclusive we' (324-6): The 'humble first person plural' replacing 'I' to signal modesty, the 'directive plural' substituting 'you' that is used to give directions without appearing to impose on the listener, the 'Parantese Plural', which is used by caregivers when speaking to children to bond with them, and the 'Hospitalese plural', frequently found in a speech situation involving patients and health care professionals. The last two forms are the Editorial 'we', used in written communication to include the reader and the Royal 'we', used by speakers in a more powerful position than the listener. While Du Bois concludes that "[t]he different usages hint towards multiple connotations (politeness, solidarity, closeness, power)" (326-7), other scholars have predominantly focused on the issue of power involved in the usage of 'we'.

Since the context of a speech situation determines whether 'we' implies exclusivity or inclusivity (Du Bois 319), various scholars have highlighted a potential ambiguity in relationships of power (cf. Harwood 345, Mulderrig 708, Pease x, Íñigo-Mora 34). Bob Pease explains that "the use of 'we' is never unproblematic … more often than not, 'we' is used with a lack of consciousness about relations of power" (x). This statement suggests an unawareness on the speaker's part about their more privileged status than their listeners when speaking about 'we'. It could be concluded that unless a display of one's lack of awareness is intended, a rhetor making frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun jeopardises the persuasive effect of their message. The notion that the personal pronoun 'we' is always invariably tied to power relations

also affects discussions about representation and raises the question of who can represent someone else and how this could be done.

The feminist scholar Linda Alcoff takes up this issue in her essay "The problem of speaking for others" in the context of women speaking for and thus representing other women. Even though Alcoff considers the issue of representation within the specific domain of feminism, the concerns she raises are also applicable in other situations when someone speaks for someone else. The key arguments of her article can help to illuminate it why may be problematic when the Great Reset rhetors speak on behalf of others. Alcoff explains that recognising the problem of speaking for others rests on two principal assumptions. First, the understanding that one's social location, or social identity, "has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claim" (173). In other words, a social position shapes one's beliefs, views, and attitudes and thus affects the meaning of what a speaker communicates. Second, speaking from a privileged social position on behalf of the oppressed is dangerous, as more often than not, the representation reinforces rather than deconstructs oppression (Alcoff 173).

From this foundation, the question arises whether it is ever legitimate to speak for others, especially when they are less privileged than the speaker (Alcoff 173). Alcoff outlines some viewpoints on this question and explains why each may be improbable. One solution could be to only speak for groups to which a speaker belongs, which raises an issue of how to understand group identity and what to do about multiple group identification, especially when these group standpoints contradict each other. Thus, one may adopt the position of only speaking for oneself, which is equally fraught as this could result in neglecting one's political responsibility of speaking out against oppression (173). Moreover, Alcoff argues that the notion that one could speak only for themselves is a manifestation of Western individualist ideology (179). She illustrates that "there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others" (Alcoff 178), as no one is genuinely autonomous in a society where all people are interconnected.

Given that not speaking for others is equally as problematic as speaking for others, how does one navigate situations in which one has to choose between the former or the latter? For Alcoff, the onus to speak for others without perpetuating oppression or misrepresentation is on the speaker. Speaking for others entails accountability and responsibility and requires the speaker to be aware of their social position's bearing on their discourse. Speakers also need to be honest with themselves about their motivation to speak on behalf of someone else (180-1). Alcoff's solution seems sensible yet necessitates the speaker's awareness of the possible problem of speaking for others and, of course, a desire to not contribute to these problems.

3   Rhetoric as epistemic and rhetorical criticism

Central to understanding this thesis's approach to rhetorical criticism is the epistemic view on rhetoric and its relation to meaning-making processes. Before the 1970s, rhetorical scholars primarily worked within Plato's understanding of rhetoric (Brookey and Schiappa 1) and considered this practice "a stylistic ornament to truth" (Zhao 256). From this perspective, rhetoric is a way to reveal the truth about a given object of discourse, and a skilled rhetor can convey this objective knowledge to their audience. Robert L. Scott famously criticised this view that sees rhetoric as "making the truth effective" ("Epistemic" 9) and argued for an understanding of rhetoric as epistemic. With this conceptualisation, he caused much debate and confusion[4]. However, despite the controversy Scott sparked amongst rhetoricians, the initial argument that "rhetoric is a way of creating truth" (R. Scott, "Epistemic" 12), elsewhere specified as "rhetoric generate[s] a sort of knowledge (R. JScott, "Epistemology" 1), seems to align with the post-structuralist view on knowledge and truth. Hence, drawing on one of the most influential post-structural thinkers, Foss and Gill help clarify Scott's argument.

Building on Foucault's notion of 'discursive formations', these authors conceptualise a middle-level epistemic rhetorical theory that relies on the theoretical units of discursive practices, rules, roles, power, and knowledge (Foss and Gill 390). As mentioned previously, discursive practices consist of written and spoken language and non-linguistic acts. As such, it matches the understanding that rhetoric involves linguistic and non-linguistic symbols (cf. Burke 1969, Ehninger 1972, Foss 2005, Kenney 2005). From the finding that discursive practice and rhetoric are synonymous, Foss and Gill demonstrate how rhetoric is epistemic in the sense that it generates knowledge. Their epistemic rhetorical theory hinges upon the interaction between discursive practices and knowledge (Foss and Gill 390). Knowledge, in the Foucauldian sense, "is discourse that comes from individual's occupation of certain roles, that follows specified rules, and that involves certain power relationships of the discursive formation" (390). From this definition, it follows that knowledge is equivalent to discourse and thus rhetoric.

Knowledge and discursive practices are also impacted by the interplay of the other theoretical elements; rules, roles and power. Rules, for example, are principles that control a discursive formation and thereby restrict what kind of knowledge exists. Rules concern what

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[4] See, for example, R. Scott 1976, Brummett 1990, R. Scott 1990, Cherwitz and Darwin 1995, Greene 1998, Schiappa et al. 2002, Harpine 2004.

can be talked about, who can speak and how (Foss and Gill 388). However, 'who can speak' must not be understood in terms of individuals but what kind of roles they occupy (389). This means that it is not a specific person that legitimises knowledge. Instead, it is the role, enabling a person to speak that can produce discourse. This role, however, is also confined to specific rules. Therefore, speaking subjects are themselves created through discourse (Foss and Gill 389). Closing the loop, this dynamic between discursive practice, knowledge, rules and roles clarifies why power is considered productive (producing discourse, knowledge and discursive subjects) and permeating society (discourse is everywhere).

As Foss and Gill demonstrate, the notion of discursive formations helps to explain the validity of the 'rhetoric as epistemic' view, even though Foucault may not have entered directly into the debate Scott provoked (386). This understanding of rhetoric and the mechanism of the production of knowledge is foundational for this thesis's undertaking to unpack the discourse of the Great Reset. The three perspectives of rhetorical criticism[5], presented in the following, can be understood as analytical tools that help shed light on this meaning-making process.

3.1 <u>Rhetorical situation</u>

Before beginning any inquiry, it is reasonable to situate the object being studied within its larger context. For this reason, the 'rhetorical situation' is one of the critical perspectives for this analysis. Roderick Hart et al. stress the importance of starting a rhetorical critique with an understanding of a rhetorical artefact's background to avoid misconstruing the text (62). Any rhetorical analysis text might produce unconvincing and inept interpretations without considering the rhetorical situation first. However, despite this logical starting point, the theory of the rhetorical situation proposed by Lloyd F. Bitzer in 1968 has been widely criticised. With his response to Bitzer in 1973, Richard E. Vatz has sparked a debate about the rhetorical situation that has spanned more than fifty years now (Durian 58). Due to space constraints, it is impossible to summarise the entire body of literature devoted to this discussion, which has

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[5] While the theoretical framework consists of the rhetorical situation, rhetorical frames and rhetorical arguments, a fourth theory, 'visual rhetoric', that can be considered a distinct rhetorical perspective, will also help inform the analysis. This concept is needed when studying the primary sources containing visuals. However, due to space constraints, the research on visual rhetoric (see, for example, Medhurst and Desousa 1981, Foss and Kanengieter 1992, Foss 1995, Mullen and Fisher 2004, Foss 2005, McFarlane 2016, Gleason and Hansen 2017, J. Scott 2018, Ramirez 2019, Organ 2020) will not be outlined separately. It should suffice to note that Sonja K. Foss, a leading scholar in visual rhetoric, proposes a methodological approach for a rhetorical analysis of visuals. It relies on describing a visual's physical characteristics (e.g., distribution of visual elements, shapes, form, size, weight, and materials), connecting these material qualities to tropes, concepts and ideas, and evaluating their functions (Foss, "Theory" 146-7).

already been commented on extensively (cf. Smith and Lybarger 1996, Young 2001, Durian 2016).

Nevertheless, it is necessary to outline Vatz's chief criticism that caused the controversy surrounding Bitzer's theory, as his perspective reminds of the "rhetoric-as-epistemic" proposition. Vatz's primary concern with analysing a rhetorical situation in the manner Bitzer posits is the underlying assumption that situations have an intrinsic meaning (Vatz 155-6). In other words, Bitzer seems to suggest that a rhetorical act is concerned with a specific situation that is already meaningful in itself. According to Bitzer, rhetoric aims at offering solutions to an objective problem, which he describes as exigence (5-6). Thus, amongst other aspects, a situational analysis identifies the exigence the rhetorical text intends to rectify. However, Vatz emphasises that rhetors create meaning through language (157). Consequently, no situation is inherently meaningful, and instead of finding the right solution to an empirical problem, rhetorical acts contribute to the meaning-making process.

Since this rhetorical analysis is conducted based on the earlier outlined epistemic rhetorical theory, Bitzer's notion of being able to describe a situation objectively cannot be accepted entirely. The idea of an empiric exigence waiting to be addressed is contestable. Nonetheless, analysing a rhetorical situation can still yield valuable insights. Instead of identifying an already existing meaning within the constituents of a rhetorical situation, it can be studied how these elements figure in the creation of meaning. With such an approach, the scholarship contending Bitzer's approach is not disregarded, yet valuable aspects of his theory are not discarded either. That despite the debate surrounding situational rhetoric, this theory still has merits is also supported by Durian's findings that scholars agree on these critical elements:

> … 1) there are at least three essential constituents of the situation (exigence, constraints, and audience), 2) the role of the audience is complex and complicates the situation, 3) perception (especially of the audience) can affect the outcome of the situation, 4) there are different types of rhetorical situations, 5) some situations may have more than one possible type of fitting response, and 6) it is possible for the rhetorical situation to fail or persist if a fitting response is not produced by the rhetor. (Durian 21)

This discovery indicates that the constituents of a rhetorical situation originally theorised by Bitzer are generally accepted as crucial components. Thus, they will also be the focus of this analysis. Additionally, there seems to be an agreement about the complex relationship between rhetor and audience, which will also be addressed. The fifth of Durian's observation is likewise relevant, specifically in the context of frame analysis, discussed in the next section.

The analysis of each text's rhetorical constituents will be guided by Keith Grant-Davie's delineations and Bitzer's original understanding. First, the exigence, "the motivating force behind a discourse[6]" (Grant-Davie 266), can be identified using the following questions in the order presented: "what the discourse is about, why it is needed, and what it should accomplish" (Grant-Davie 266). The first question concerns the underlying issue of a rhetorical text's topic, the second question relates to its importance, and the third question regards the rhetorical artefact's objectives (Grant-Davie 267-9). Second, in terms of the audience, Grant-Davie draws on research by Douglas Park and finds four types of audience: anyone receiving the rhetorical artefact, the people directly addressed in a specific rhetorical situation, the rhetor's imagined audience, and lastly, anyone who fills the role that the text prescribes (270). Finally, according to Bitzer, a constraint "include(s) beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like [as well as the orator's] personal character, … logical proofs, and … style" (Bitzer 8). As Grant-Davies explains, constraints can aid and hinder the rhetor in achieving his objective (272).

3.2 **Rhetorical frames**

The notion of rhetorical frames stems from Erving Goffman's theory on frame analysis. In his book *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974), the sociologist describes how individuals create a shared reality in social interactions using frames (Persson 49). Building on two earlier concepts of frames, the cognitive (inspired by William James) and the communicative (inspired by Gregory Batesons), Goffman is interested in finding out how frames help people understand what social interactions are really about (Persson x). As such, frames can answer the central question of "What is it that's going on here?" (Goffman 8). According to Goffman, people use primary frameworks to decipher what is happening in a given interaction. These frames further shape how situations, events, and interactions are perceived and described (24). Therefore, frameworks could be seen as cognitive constructs for interpreting reality. Goffman observes that these frameworks are shared across groups of people and thus constitute a "central element" of our culture (27).

Although Goffman's publication has been criticised on different accounts (Persson 43-4), his theory has also been applied extensively in a wide range of research. Two specifically notable areas in which frame analysis generated great insights into various issues are news and media coverage (cf. Entman 1993, Entman and Rojecki 1993, Pan and Kosicki 1993, Greussing

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[6] Here, 'discourse' differs from the earlier described Foucauldian concept and instead refers to a rhetorical text.

and Boomgaarden 2017) and social movements (cf. Johnston and Noakes 2005, Verloo 2007, Stevens and Malesh 2009, Foust et al. 2017, Snow et al. 2019). Further scholarship relying on frame analysis has included research in criminology (cf. Hawk and Dabney 2014), leadership (cf. Alvehus 2019) and neoliberalism (cf. Kanade and Curtis 2019). This brief overview indicates that frame analysis has produced extensive research, despite the criticism Goffman's work has received. Additionally, rhetorical scholars have adapted frame analysis for rhetorical criticism.

Notwithstanding its's role as a stand-alone theoretical framework, Jim A. Kuypers notes that in early 2000 a trend to use frame analysis as a rhetorical perspective began to emerge ("Perspective" 286-7). Transporting Goffman's understanding of frames into the context of communication and rhetorical texts, Kuypers argues that "[f]rames are central organising ideas with a narrative account of an issue or event; they provide the interpretative cues for otherwise neutral facts" ("Framing" 182). In other words, frames are relevant for a rhetor because they shape how a rhetorical message is perceived and interpreted. Thus, they constitute a crucial element in the persuasive power of a rhetorical text. Thomas Gardner observes a further overlap between rhetorical and frame analysis. Both approaches are concerned with the audience's perception of a message (124). Therefore, a rhetorical frame analysis may help explain the persuasive effect of a text through the types of frames it activates.

Even though rhetorical analysis and frame analysis seem compatible, this approach has also been criticised. Roberto Franzosi and Stefania Vicari maintain that frame analysis is a mere reinvention of rhetorical analysis, which they claim has not been practised in the 20th century. In their view, frame analysis is not an adequate replacement for rhetorical analysis as it lacks the crucial focus on rhetorical tropes and figures (Franzosi and Vicari 394). Given that frame analysis originates from sociology and has proven to be fruitful for various research unrelated to rhetoric, the relevancy of this observation is questionable. Instead of replacing rhetorical analysis, frame analysis is another helpful perspective for rhetorical criticism to unveil persuasive strategies. Thus, this thesis will use rhetorical frame analysis according to Kuyper's conceptualisation.

A valid critique worthy of consideration has been made by Ryan J. Phillips (2019), who addresses the boundary work of frames. As frames emphasise certain aspects of reality and make them "more accessible" while neglecting others (Kuypers, "Framing" 182), they create discursive boundaries. Phillips argues that the current methodology of rhetorical frame analysis has paid little attention to how frame boundaries can be analysed (153). He proposes that framing is not only a way of agenda-setting but can also serve as agenda-dismissal (Phillips

167), meaning frames divert attention from a specific aspect intentionally. Heeding Phillips' findings, one of the aspects considered in this analysis is what is not spoken about and what aspects may be omitted intentionally.

Concerning the initial identification of rhetorical frames, this analysis will rest on two significant contributions to the scholarship on frame analysis. First, Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki have compiled individual foci of other researchers and ascertained five leading tools that constitute frames: "metaphor, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images" (56). Second, borrowing from Robert Entman (52), Kuypers summarises that "frames act to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (and that they) are located in the communication, the text, the receiver, and the culture at large" ("Framing" 182). As this statement indicates the importance of a frame's function and location, this analysis will focus on these characteristics and uncover which devices generate the frames.

3.3 Rhetorical arguments

One method for analysing arguments in rhetorical discourse is based on the Toulmin model. In his influential work *The Uses of Arguments* (1958), the philosopher Stephen Toulmin outlined an argumentation theory that differs from Aristotle's formal logic and deductive methods rooted in Euclidean geometry. While Toulmin did not intend to describe an analytical model that became known in Communication Studies as the 'Toulmin Model' (Toulmin vii), his ideas have found wide application and equally extensive criticism. For instance, Wayne Brockriede and Douglas Ehninger (1960) and Roderick P. Hart (1973) note the usefulness of Toulmin's model for rhetoric. Hart explains that "Toulmin's system takes the emphasis off formal, logical validity and permits a psychology view of argument" (76), which is valuable since the logic of persuasion is frequently based on various psychological factors rather than on pure reason (Hart et al. 87-9).

In *Handbook of Argumentation Theory* (2019)*,* Frans H. van Eemeren et al. provide a comprehensible explanation of Toulmin's criticism of formal logic and his approach to argumentation. According to Toulmin, formal logic, specifically with its criteria of formal validity, is inept at explaining arguments of everyday life (van Eemeren et al. 163). Formal logic is a universal approach in that the form of any argument, irrespective of the problem, determines whether the argument is valid or not. Toulmin demonstrates that most arguments outside mathematics and logic that can be considered reasonable do not meet the 'validity through form' criterion. In commonplace arguments, the conclusion is not implied by the premise or put differently; conclusion and premise do not share the same 'logical type' (van

Eemeren et al. 164-6). Moreover, Toulmin emphasises that an argument's soundness depends on the type of problem it addresses and the field in which it is presented (van Eemeren et al. 167). Thus, there are other aspects than its form that account for the validity of an argument.

To evaluate arguments on a different basis, Toulmin proposed a model, which has been adapted for rhetorical criticism (cf. Hart 1973). In his layout of an argument structure, Toulmin identifies the following elements: Major Data, Major Claim, Warrant, Modal Qualifiers, Backing and Rebuttal. For analysing rhetorical texts, scholars have focused on the first three aspects, Data, Claim, and Warrant (cf. Hart 1973). Hart et al. explicate that Major Claims are abstract statements that constitute a message's main point. Major Data are the backing of Major Claims, and Warrants are the bridge between claim and datum (100). An analysis of these three elements uncovers the logic of a text and exposes which elements are missing. This finding, in turn, reveals how a rhetor relates to their audience and why a message may fail to be persuasive (Hart et al. 101,106). Significant clues can especially be found when focusing on an argument's Warrant (Hart 78).

This central link between Claim and Data has been studied extensively (cf. Warnick and Inch 1989, Jasinski 2001, Freeman 2005, Keith and Beard 2008). Reviewing numerous studies on the Warrant, William Keith and David Beard claim that most scholars mistake them for inference licenses. Such an interpretation would render Toulmin's arguments structurally similar to the formal arguments he criticises (33). Thus, Keith and Beard reinforce Toulmin's extensive explanation that arguments are 'field-depended', meaning that also warrants vary from field to field (Toulmin 96). An assessment of whether the authors' readings of other studies are warranted lies outside the scope of this thesis. However, it can be argued that their view on warrants as inferences with an emphasis on their field-dependency does not describe them accurately either. Even though Toulmin explains that, contrary to data, warrants "are appealed to … implicitly" (92), it does not follow that a claim can necessarily be implied from the data in all arguments. Thus, the warrant as an explanation of how data and claims can be linked is still needed.

Furthermore, as Keith's and Beard's supplementation of the Toulmin model seems impractical, this research relies on a different study that offers a more practical application of analysing Warrants. Drawing directly on Toulmin's explanation, Brockriede and Ehninger explain that Warrants can be classified as substantive, authoritative, or motivational (48). Substantive Warrants relate to cause and effect, Authoritative Warrants to a source's reliability, and Motivational Warrants relate to internal motives for accepting a claim (Brockriede and Ehninger 48-51). In two exemplary analyses, Hart et al. also follow this classification

(103,105). Additionally, these authors investigate whether warrants are supplied or suppressed, allowing them to appraise the rhetor-audience relationship (Hart et al. 104). Since such an evaluation is part of this thesis's investigation, the analysis of the primary sources' rhetorical arguments is informed by these studies just presented. Moreover, Toulmin's original work and van Eemeren et al.'s study will be consulted to ground the evaluation of the rhetorical arguments for the Great Reset.

3.4 <u>The analytical framework</u>

With these three distinct perspectives of rhetorical criticism, this thesis is guided by an eclectic approach to rhetorical criticism, which is beneficial for three reasons. First, through a combination of different perspectives, it may be possible to capture the different rhetorical strategies within the texts and better highlight various concerns. Second, combining different approaches may help avoid the common pitfalls of confirming one's own bias and producing a dull and one-dimensional reading. Indeed, critics are often cautioned against using a specific method that allows them to detect results they were hoping to find (cf. Black 333, Kuypers, "Art" 18). Moreover, a mechanical application of methods turns them into "screens through which we view this symbolic world, and in most cases, these screens distort, alter, or damage what they are intended to explain and reveal" (Campbell 101). The multifaceted analytical approach is intended to help navigate these downsides and prevent interpretations that stem from (unconscious) prejudice.

The final motivation for choosing such a method relates to how these perspectives complement each other. Heeding Kuypers' caution that eclectic criticism is not a "jumbled mess of viewpoints presented in an unwieldy manner" ("Eclectic Criticism" 363), the chosen perspectives synthesise into a viable analytical framework. With *situational analysis* as a starting point, rhetorical artefacts can be situated within their broader context. Since it is not purely the situation that gives rise to rhetoric, as Bitzer assumed (4), *frame analysis* can illuminate how exigencies and constraints are framed. Metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visuals that create frames also generate exigences and constraints. Frame boundaries also interact with the rhetorical situation due to their function as constraints, such as restricting what can be said or given attention. A frame's location is relevant for the third constituent of the rhetorical situation, as it can also be found in the audience. This connection between the rhetorical situation and a message's frames also affects the analysis of *rhetorical arguments*. Since the Major Claims and Warrants of an argument depend on its context (Hart et al. 101), which, in turn, is framed in a specific way, frames determine the line of

argumentation to a certain extent. This interactive relationship between the individual elements of each perspective indicates that great insight may be gained when looking at these aspects together, rather than isolating one of them.

4   Rhetorical Strategies of the *Great Reset*

This chapter presents the main findings from the analysis of the rhetorical artefacts. It is organised in the same problem-solution structure as the primary sources themselves. First, the discussion will consider the exigence, how the respective rhetors frame it, how these frames operate and what boundaries they create. Next, relating to the solution, the analysis also identifies the prevalent frames, the constraints that shape how the solution can be communicated, and the audience's role. Where applicable, findings from analysing the rhetorical arguments are added to the discussion.

4.1   The problem according to the WEF

4.1.1   The exigence: COVID-19 as the crucial turning point

Identifying the context and exigence of a rhetorical artefact is a crucial first step for conducting a rhetorical analysis (Hart et al. 62). The artefacts this thesis is concerned with need to be understood within the larger framework of an unprecedented global crisis. On 30 January 2020, the WHO classified the initial outbreak of a novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, as a "public health emergency of international concern" ("Timeline"). Shortly after, on 11 March 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a pandemic ("Timeline"). To curb the spread of the virus and minimise risk, governments worldwide imposed lockdowns, travel restrictions, physical distancing rules, school and business closures, mask mandates, contact tracing and infection screening. During the first months living under the constant threat of an invisible virus and its effects on everyday life, discussions about the pandemic's broader economic, social, and political impact surfaced. The WEF introduced the Great Reset against this background and the palatable sense of radical change.

Therefore, the exigence described by the Great Reset texts is closely related to the unfolding effects of the coronavirus pandemic. However, to analyse the exigence more specifically, it is necessary to examine what the individual texts are about, why they are needed and what they seek to accomplish (Grant-Davie 267-9). Taking all primary texts together, Grant-Davie's first question, "What is the discourse about" (267), can be answered with: a 'reset of capitalism'. The texts share the same leading message that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that capitalism must be fundamentally altered. Based on this argument, each text

outlines current global concerns, such as climate change, wealth inequality, social issues, and environmental destruction. Additionally, the primary sources also present a solution to these problems, namely, restructuring capitalism. As such, the Great Reset discourse also deals with the more fundamental concept of addressing social and economic power relations to affect real change.

The answer to the second question, "Why is the discourse needed?" (Grant-Davie 268), can, on the one hand, be found in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and on the other hand, in the texts themselves. The WEF chimes in with the widespread view that 'going back to normal' once the pandemic is over is neither a desirable nor a viable option. It seems clear that the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated severe systemic problems (cf. Pleyers 2020, Kothari et al. 2020, Penkler et al. 2020). Some scholars argue that solving these problems requires an extensive shift of economic power (cf. Eisenstein 2020, Roy 2020, "#193 Prepare" 2021). The Great Reset is part of this discourse of necessary change and overcoming current global challenges. However, the texts indicate no awareness of this broader debate in which the WEF's call for change is embedded. This neglect creates the impression that the Great Reset is the only solution to the identified problems. According to the textual evidence, it must be accepted because a sustainable, fair, prosperous, and equal future for all is at stake.

While the primary sources are congruent in presenting the Great Reset as the answer to the global problems now at the forefront of the collective consciousness, they have differing objectives. Thus, the final question in identifying the exigence, "What is the discourse trying to accomplish?" (Grant-Davie 269), needs to be answered separately for each artefact. For example, the WEF's video "The Great Reset" seems like a commercial attempting to evoke interest in a particular subject. In this case, the subject is a reset of the world's systems. This 'reset' is symbolised by someone pressing a 'reset' button on a keyboard, which sets in motion a rewind of a series of frames representing economic problems, social unrest, pollution, environmental destruction, effects of climate change and overpopulation ("Great Reset" 00:00:43-00:00:54). These illustrations, the uplifting music, and the hopeful images presented towards the end are highly emotive. The clip closes with the invitation 'Join us', followed by a link to the WEF Great Reset website ("Great Reset" 00:01:26-00:01:29).

The encouragement to participate in the Great Reset and shape the future is also evident in the UK Royal Family's video. At the end of the short clip, HRH Prince Charles declares: "We simply cannot waste any more time. The only limit is our willingness to act. And the time to act is now" (Royal Family 00:01:32-00:01:38). Using the personal pronoun 'we' suggests that 'we' the audience must act and should not let a lack of willingness deter us from doing so.

Throughout the clip, various action verbs with the prefix 're' indicate that the action required now is a 'reset' involving reimagining, rethinking, reinventing, redesigning, reviving, recreating, and rebalancing, reinvesting, representing, reforming, restating, and recognising. Finally, these actions will result in a revolution (Royal Family 2020). While this and the WEF's video clip primarily create a sense of involvement, Klaus Schwab's article on the WEF website seems to subtly direct the audience's attention towards the desired kind of participation, i.e., accepting and seeing the value in stakeholder capitalism.

However, not all artefacts aim at making the audience feel included. For example, two days after the Great Reset introduction on 3 June 2020, the WEF released a video that showcases highlights of its launch. In the clip, well-known public figures and leaders within financial institutions and the private sector discuss the changes an economic reset would involve. Similar to the previously discussed sources, the message in this video reiterates the current global problems and stresses that in order to secure the planet's and humanity's future, fundamental change is unavoidable. Klaus Schwab's final note leaves no doubt about who is in charge of the Great Reset: "We have to live up to the expectations, which we have created. And we will do so" (WEF, "Launch" 00:04:55-00:05:00). This closing remark changes the previous offer to "join us" and thus also alters the dynamic between rhetor and audience. This shift in addressing the audience will be discussed in more detail in section 4.2.3.

For now, it should suffice to say that this video, along with the other sources, aims to create a sense of hope and inspire trust. The discussion among industry leaders on how to best tackle the world's problems functions as reassurance that all other people not directly involved are in good hands. The only requirement is to "follow the path of stakeholder capitalism" as they "will soon find that it leads to a more inclusive and sustainable economy for all" (K. Schwab, "Better Economy" par. 18). Again, this statement signals that the audience's thinking about a possible solution is pointed in a particular direction. SOMPO Holdings' and Marina Mazzucato's articles also reinforce the message that stakeholder capitalism is the only possible answer. The latter conveys this sense by imagining the year 2023 and describing how stakeholder capitalism has allowed the global economy to recover from the pandemic.

Mazzucato also returns to the original tone of the first videos in terms of involving the audience and evoking the feeling that their participation is needed. The WEF revisits this strategy as well in the chronologically last primary source that was published in preparation for its annual meeting in January, held at Davos, Switzerland (Graz 321). Usually, the event is known for its exclusivity, being open to the WEF's VIP members only (Graz 321). However, Davos had to be held online since the pandemic was still ongoing in January 2021. The virtual

meeting presented an excellent opportunity to offer participation to anyone interested. The promotional video invites viewers "who want to be part of the change [to] tune in, turn on and get involved" (WEF, "Davos Agenda" 00:04:07-00:04:11). Nevertheless, it seems that for this occasion, this offer was differently motivated than the original call to "join us" in the first video.

The reason is that the exigence for the later video had slightly changed. The Great Reset launch texts and the TIME articles address the state of the world in dire need of change. The Davos Agenda video takes up this theme but also seems to justify the WEF's initiative, which had received various criticism in the meantime (cf. Boutilier 2020, Coorey 2020, Coyne 2020). Instead of ignoring the issue, the WEF takes a stand in this video. After introducing the changes resulting from the pandemic and the problems it exacerbated in the accustomed fashion, the equally familiar solution is presented with an intriguing twist. The narrator states:

> With everything falling apart, we can reshape the world in ways we couldn't before. Ways that better address so many of the challenges we face. And that's why so many are calling for a Great Reset. A Great Reset? That sounds more like buzzword bingo masking some nefarious plan for world domination. Hands up. This kind of slogan hasn't gone down well. But all we really want to say is that we all have an opportunity to build a better world. And it's not surprising that people who've been disenfranchised by a broken system and pushed even further by the pandemic will suspect global leaders of conspiracy. But the world's not that simple. (WEF, "Davos Agenda" 00:00:47-00:01:26)

This comment illustrates that in addition to the known exigence addressed by the other artefacts, the Forum is aware of factors that may detract from the impact of its message. Thus, this video aims particularly to generate a renewed trust, sense of involvement and defend itself against criticism.

Combining the answers to Grant-Davie's three questions that help identify the exigence, it can be concluded that the exigence the rhetorical artefacts seek to alter concerns pressing global issues. All primary sources describe the same problems and agree on the same solution offered by the WEF and its founder Klaus Schwab. While each text contains elements that inspire hope and enthusiasm for the solutions presented, the artefacts differ in their involvement of the average reader or viewer and how they can participate in the Great Reset. Another exigence, albeit not predominant, is the expressed distrust in the WEF, which the rhetors also seek to address by focusing once more on the importance of solving global crises.

4.1.2   Frame and constraint: A sense of urgency

This section considers how Kotter's change and leadership management strategy of creating a 'sense of urgency' frames the rhetorical situation's exigence discussed previously and how this frame presents a constraint. The subsequent discussion will refer to this framing as 'urgency frame' for brevity. On the one hand, this frame can be identified through the tools Pan and Kosicki (56) describe and, on the other hand, through Kotter's tactics for generating urgency. Temporal lexis and metaphors connoting urgency, immediacy, and finality are the first indicators for this frame. For example, Klaus Schwab highlights that "time is quickly running out" ("Better Economy" par. 18) and "the world must act jointly and swiftly" ("great reset" par. 2). IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva exclaims: "Now is the time to think what history would say about this crisis. And now is the time for all of us to define our own role" (WEF, "Launch" 00:00:32-00:00:45). Also, HRH Prince Charles reiterates that "we simply cannot waist anymore time … the time to act is now!" (Royal Family 00:01:32-00:01:51).

These and similar phrases creating a sense of urgency are also closely tied to Kotter's strategy of "bring[ing] the outside in" (60), by which people within an organisation are confronted with external challenges and exigencies. All texts outline the current global problems in varying amounts of detail, which functions to raise awareness and help the audience become familiar with the crucial issues. Specifically, Klaus Schwab's first article presents numerous examples of the problems at hand:

> This will have serious long-term consequences for economic growth, public debt, employment, and human wellbeing. According to the *Financial Times*, global government debt has already reached its highest level in peacetime. Moreover, unemployment is skyrocketing in many countries: in the US, for example, one in four workers have filed for unemployment since mid-March, with new weekly claims far above historic highs. The International Monetary Fund expects the world economy to shrink by 3% this year – a downgrade of 6.3 percentage points in just four months. ("great reset" par. 4)

Hart explains that in rhetorical arguments, data that stress present situations with a view to immediate consequences create urgency (88). This strategy is precisely employed in this passage. While the rhetor use statistics to make the problems more tangible, he also manages to frame his examples via seven temporal references in just four sentences ("long-term", "peacetime", "since mid-March", "new weekly claims", "historic highs", "shrink by 3% this year", and "in just four months").

Additionally, other texts use another crucial element of Kotter's strategy to foster a sense of urgency; the emotional appeal (60). For example, two WEF videos and the Royal Family's clip employ emotionally compelling cinematic techniques. The Forum's videos rely on rapidly changing frames when portraying many current problems. The quick succession of images creates a feeling of urgency, while the large number of pictures appearing in a short amount of time visualises the extent and the gravity of the problems. This technique also makes it seem highly daunting to address any of them. Another aspect that helps create an emotional response is the use of sound effects. For example, in addition to the swiftly changing frames of the WEF Davos Agenda video, the background music is very upbeat and fast-paced, creating a dynamic and energetic atmosphere, which underlines the sense of wanting or needing to act. The Royal Family's clip uses more dramatic music, which has a similar effect.

Another tactic Kotter sees central to establishing 'true urgency' is thinking of crises as opportunities (61). This notion is reflected in the reoccurring catchphrase "window of opportunity" and variants such as a 'narrow' or 'unique' window of opportunity. Since a catchphrase, such as a title or a slogan, draws the audience's attention to a specific aspect of what is communicated, it functions as one tool for creating frames (Pan and Kosicki 56, Lee 35). In his article "Now is the time for a 'great reset'", Klaus Schwab uses the 'window of opportunity' phrase to reconceptualise the audience's perception of the pandemic. In the introduction, he exclaims, "… the pandemic represents one of the worst public-health crises" (par. 3). However, in his conclusion, he re-frames what the pandemic represents by stating, "… the pandemic represents a rare but narrow window of opportunity" (par. 15). The parallelism of "the pandemic represents" with a difference in what it signifies signals that one can choose to see this event as either a defeating crisis or an opportunity.

Mazzucato and SOMPO Holding are more direct in how the audience ought to view the pandemic. The latter states: "COVID-19 is a reckoning. While exacting a heavy price, it is also presenting us with the chance to safeguard our futures. We must make the most of this moment" (SOMPO par. 3), while Mazzucato writes:

> The COVID-19 pandemic took so much from us, in lives lost and livelihoods shattered. But it also presented us with an opportunity to reshape our global economy, and we overcame our pain and trauma to unite and seize the moment. To secure a better future for all, it was the only thing to do. (par. 21)

The modal verb 'must' in the first example and the phrase "it was the only thing to do" indicate that it is self-evident that a crisis is an opportunity and thus reinforces the sense of urgency.

Other examples of the 'window of opportunity' perspective abound in the texts. HRH Prince Charles affirms that "[w]e have a unique but rapidly shrinking window of opportunity to learn lessons and reset ourselves on a more sustainable path" (WEF, "Launch" 00:00:12-00:00:19). In that same video, UN Secretary General António Guterres explains: "The great reset is a welcome recognition that this human tragedy must be a wake-up call" (00:00:55-00:01:00). The Royal Family video echoes this notion: "The current global crisis has disrupted every aspect of our lives, but it has also presented us with an extraordinary opportunity: a chance to reset and accelerate efforts to improve the state of our world" (00:00:15-00:00:30). In the background, a swift change of verbs, with the prefix 're', visualising the idea of using this opportunity to start anew, can be observed. The Davos Agenda video reverberates, "With everything falling apart, we can reshape the world in ways we couldn't before" (00:00:48-00:00:51). Finally, also the well-known anthropologist Jane Goodall is featured to repeat the message that "[w]e have a window of time which is closing" (00:03:52-00:03:54).

Aside from shaping how the exigence of the texts is perceived, the 'urgency frame' can simultaneously be considered a constraint of the rhetorical situation. According to Bitzer, constraints are factors that limit and aid the rhetor in how they can talk about an exigence (8). In the primary sources, the 'urgency frame' presents a two-fold constraint. First, as noted before, Kotter's concept of urgency has been influential in change management and organisational leadership. His works are considered "a must read for organisational leaders planning and implementing change" (Brisson-Banks 248). Therefore, it is not surprising that the WEF's founder, with his background as an engineer and economist ("Klaus Schwab" par. 7), the Forum, and other leadership figures featured in the texts would employ such techniques. Consequently, the 'sense of urgency' paradigm acts as a constraint in that it shapes how business leaders themselves approach change. In this way, this frame limits how change can be motivated because those who employ it do not consider other factors that may be crucial for affecting change.

Nonetheless, considering the nature of the WEF and its aims, the 'urgency frame' can also be seen as an asset. The WEF is a global non-governmental organisation that provides a platform for exchange between leaders of intergovernmental organisations and corporations. While the Forum's innovative projects and ideas are highly influential for the public and the private sector, its status as a non-governmental organisation does not confer any legislative power (Garsten and Sörbom, "Tales" 19, Pigman 2). Thus, this organisation needs to exert its influence differently, which Christina Garsten and Adrienne Sörbom call the "soft power of persuasion and magical seduction" ("Tales" 21). An integral part of the WEF's persuasive

strategies is creating "a sense of urgency and high stakes, … exclusiveness and agency" (Garsten and Sörbom, "Tales" 19). This observation means that because the WEF cannot create legislation around Great Reset initiatives, it uses rhetorical strategies to convince those with such powers to do so. Simultaneously, the public is swayed to accept possible new regulations under the banner of warding off economic, societal and environmental collapse.

So far, this discussion has shown that a 'sense of urgency' pervades through the Great Reset discourse. Concurrently, with this relentless insistence that "now is the time to act", one cannot help but wonder "Why now?" which leads to questions about the motivation for the Great Reset. Additionally, this question of "why now" points to boundaries created by the 'urgency frame'. One of the boundaries is temporal, separating the past from the present. Furthermore, as already briefly mentioned, the focus on one way for inspiring change leaves out possible other strategies. The following section discusses these frame boundaries in greater detail.

4.1.3   Frame boundaries: Avoiding taking responsibility

Unsurprisingly, the unspoken and unseen often invite more curiosity than what is already in plain sight. This section focuses on identifying the frame boundaries created by the 'urgency frame' and other discursive boundaries detected in the texts. This analysis will reveal what aspects in the Great Reset texts seem to be obscured, which will help answer the main research questions and explain why they are omitted.

As illustrated in the previous section, the Great Reset texts rely on the 'urgency frame' that accentuates the immediate need to address the world's current problems. The emphasis that action must be taken 'now' is justified with the event of COVID-19 throughout all the rhetorical artefacts. Klaus Schwab argues that "[t]here are many reasons to pursue a Great Reset, but the most urgent is COVID-19" ("great reset" par. 3), and Mazzucato notes that "the pandemic had exposed critical vulnerabilities around the world" (par. 2). The notion of "exposed vulnerabilities" is frequently reiterated in other texts. The first WEF video clip consisting solely of imagery visualises this idea and comments with the short headlines "Our world has changed / Our challenges are greater / Our fragilities exposed" (00:00:14, 00:00:22, 00:00:31). The narrator of the Davos Agenda video points out that "2020 has been challenging on a lot of levels, as economic, environmental and societal frailties have been laid bare" (00:00:15 – 00:00:21).

It is difficult to disagree with the notion that the pandemic has uncovered the extent of the world's problems. Indeed, it could even be argued that pre-existing wealth inequality,

discrimination, and environmental destruction have exaggerated the current health crisis[7]. However, the 'urgency frame' employed in these texts suggests a certain unawareness of the pressing global challenges in pre-pandemic times. Mazzucato, who tells the story of the pandemic from the point of view in 2023, writes, "[w]ith COVID-19 still rampant, the world woke up to the need to prioritise collective intelligence and put public value at the centre of health innovation" (par. 7). The phrase "the world woke up", which she uses a second time in "people woke up to the need for governments to form a coordinated response to climate change" (par. 14), implies that pre-covid, the world and its people had been asleep. Similarly, SOMPO Holdings refers to the "problems that some among us chose to downplay or dismiss" (par. 1), suggesting deliberate ignorance.

These passages indicate that the 'urgency frame', which highlights COVID-19 as the turning point, creates a temporal boundary between a partly wilful ignorant, partly asleep pre-pandemic world and a post-pandemic world of revolutionary change. The effect of such a division could be considered a prolepsis, a "strategy of anticipating a counterargument and preemptively addressing that counterargument in order to strengthen one's own position" (Phillips 162). As mentioned before, the immediate question the identifiably constructed 'sense of urgency' raises is "Why now?". This question, however, is rendered obsolete through the framing of people and the world as ignorant or asleep. Thus, the boundary work performed by the 'urgency frame' excludes debates about why problems of climate change, economic inequality, social unrest, and the like had not been addressed sooner on the scale imagined when it can be done now. Additionally, avoiding such discussion also results in a failure to take responsibility and be accountable, which according to Kotter, indicates complacency, a quality that undermines 'true urgency' (33).

Moving away from the 'urgency frame' but staying with the discursive boundary around ownership, the texts present additional strategies in which limitations around what can be talked about are created. For example, Klaus Schwab acknowledges that "the bad news related to COVID-19 came on top of the enormous economic, environmental, social and political challenges we were already facing before the pandemic. With every passing year, these issues, as many people have experienced, seem to get worse, not better" ("Better economy" par. 3). Unlike the texts discussed before, this statement signals that people were aware of the world's

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[7] As such a discussion lies outside this thesis's scope, this argument will not be advanced further at this point. However, ample literature supports such a view: e.g., Patel and Burke 2009; Alirol et al. 2011; Myers et al. 2013; Dobson et al. 2020; Wu 2021. Joel Bakan also specifically traces the relationship between increased privatisation and insufficient government responses to the pandemic's beginning (130-133).

problems. Nevertheless, in the subsequent paragraph, the author draws a boundary around discussing the origins of these problems. Analysing the argument in the following passage based on the Toulmin model reveals that a discursive boundary is laid down through a moral judgment:

It is also true that there are no easy ways out of this vicious cycle, even though the mechanisms to do so lie at our fingertips. Every day, we invent new technologies that could make our lives and the planet's health better. Free markets, trade and competition create so much wealth that in theory they could make everyone better off if there was the will to do so. But that is not the reality we live in today. (K. Schwab, "Better economy" par. 4)

The first sentence can be split into two Major Claims: "There are no easy ways out of this vicious cycle [meaning the economic, environmental, social and political challenges that are only getting worse]" (Claim 1) and "The mechanism to [get out of the vicious cycle] lie at our fingertips" (Claim 2). Looking only at Claim 1, the Major Data is found indirectly in the statement "…. could make everyone better off *if* there was the will to do so" (my emphasis). The sentence implies that the will to "make everyone better off" is currently lacking. The Warrant, which is suppressed, is a Substantive Warrant of cause and effect and could be formulated as "we need willpower to overcome economic, environmental, social and political challenges". Since this Warrant implies a moral judgment, i.e., a lack of willpower, also the statement becomes a moral judgement, which is a type of argument identified by Toulmin (van Eemeren et al. 171).

The complete argument structure (loosely paraphrased) would look as follows: 'There is no will to use technologies to improve the planet's and people's health and free markets to create wealth for everyone' (Data 1), and since 'we need willpower to do so' (Warrant 1), 'there is no easy way out of this vicious cycle (meaning economic, environmental, social and political challenges)' (Claim 1).

Klaus Schwab makes additional implicit and explicit moral judgments throughout the text that create a discursive boundary. For example, he speaks of "virtuous instincts" (par. 8) that various companies exhibited at the beginning of the pandemic through the help they offered, and a "virtuous economic system" (par. 10), that, however, requires a "clear compass" (par 10). This rhetoric of moral judgements functions to exclude important debates about ownership and responsibility, as moral judgements could quickly lead to blaming. Thus, for Klaus Schwab, it suffices to say that "what's been missing in recent decades is a clear compass to guide those in leading positions in our society and economy" (par. 10) and to lament that

"dogmatic beliefs [in] … neoliberalist ideology … have proven wrong" (par. 11). This move is another example of prolepsis because it anticipates arguments concerned with neoliberal practices and directs them to a discourse about willpower.

Moreover, this statement accentuates the agenda-dismissing effect of the boundary around the critical issue of responsibility. Mentioning that the "neoliberalist ideology has increasingly prevailed in large parts of the world" (par. 10) conveniently disregards the WEF's role in disseminating neoliberal ideas around the globe (cf. Pigman xii). It also neglects that organisations such as the World Social Forum have challenged the WEF's vital role in strengthening and expanding neoliberal capitalism (cf. Pigman 128-29). A similar omission can be found in the Davos Agenda video. In the part that attempts to address the Great Reset critics (see section 4.1.1), the narrator explains, "See, at the start of 2020 1% of the world's population owned 44% of the wealth. And since the start of the pandemic billionaires have increased theirs by more than 25% whilst 150 million people fell back into extreme poverty" (00:02:27-00:02:42). This issue seems so crucial to the WEF that it also published an article on its website expressing this concern (Letznig 2020).

However, neither the article nor the Davos video identifies these billionaires and their involvement with the WEF. For example, four of these five wealthiest individuals - LVMH CEO Bernard Arnault, BMGF CEO and former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg (Hartmans par. 2) - are WEF partners. Facebook, BMGF, and Amazon are strategic partners, and LVMH is an associate partner ("Partners"). Also, other companies, whose CEOs are not ranking in the top five of billionaires but have increased their wealth significantly during the pandemic, are strategic partners of the WEF. Amongst them are, for example, Google and Dell Technologies ("Partners", Peterson-Withorn). These beneficiaries of the pandemic, who are intricately connected to the WEF as partners, pay extraordinary prices in annual membership fees, which in 2005 amounted to SFR 500,000 (Pigman 30). Hence, these companies are not only involved in the WEF, but the organisation itself benefits from their wealth and provides them with a platform to network and conduct business with other industry leaders and governments.

This correlation, easily found with some research, is deliberately overlooked in the sources mentioned above that appear to address the issue of wealth accumulation during the pandemic. Thus, a frame boundary is created because a central piece of information is purposefully neglected when discussing a crucial issue. Since the omitted facts directly concern the WEF's association and involvement, this strategy again points to the avoidance of responsibility and ownership. A similar distancing from responsibility is noticeable in a

statement by OECD Secretary General Ángel Gurría. He cautions that "[y]ou don't wanna go back to the status quo, that you had before, simply because it was the status quo that got us here" (00:00:40-00:00:47). This reference to the "status quo that got us here" is another way of addressing the problem without addressing it. Instead of attending to questions such as how the 'status quo' emerged, who has and is currently still profiting from it and who may have shaped it, the issue is reduced to the simple fact; it is what got us here.

This analysis of frame boundaries has revealed intriguing insights, which will be discussed in more depth in chapter 5. To summarise, the 'urgency frame' creates a temporal boundary, separating the world into a time before and after the coronavirus pandemic. Since the 'urgency frame' shifts the focus onto the present and future actions needed to change the world, a dwelling on the past, in which people ignored problems or were asleep, is unnecessary. Such a boundary prevents meaningful dialogue about crucial factors that can help guide the way forward. Most importantly, not talking about the past anymore and shifting responsibility to abstract concepts such as 'neoliberal ideology' and the 'status quo' relieves those who may have concretely contributed to the problems we face from taking ownership. This avoidance, in turn, prevents conversations of who ought to be in charge of finding solutions for the future. The moral boundary further discourages these discussions as it implies that it would quickly turn into assigning blame.

4.2 **The solution according to the WEF**

This analysis has shown so far that the rhetorical artefacts seem to be part of a larger current discourse that seeks to acknowledge and address social, political, economic, and environmental global problems. A sense of urgency is created by repeatedly stressing the need for immediate action, presenting various examples of how these problems manifest, and framing the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity. The urgency frame creates a spatial boundary, dividing time into pre- and post-covid, with an emphasis on the future. This discursive boundary is further reinforced through moral judgements and by passive constructions that purport to identify causes but fail to address them at their core. Thus, questions of ownership and responsibility for global problems are avoided.

The 'urgency frame' and the frame boundaries are also constraints of the rhetorical situation. It seems only practical that an organisation like the WEF, whose partners are large and influential corporations, would use strategies from leadership and management, such as inspiring a sense of urgency, to communicate its message. Furthermore, its membership base and participation in neoliberal practices also act as a constraint. Discussions about the possible

contribution to the identified problems by global corporations, governments, and organisations like the WEF are made off-limit. Thus, the representation of current problems and the compelling reasons to act 'now' are somewhat problematic in themselves. This subsequent section demonstrates that how the solution the Great Reset offers is communicated is equally fraught and thus invites doubts about whether the Great Reset truly presents a "solution".

4.2.1   Frame: Strategic ambiguity

For the following discussion, two elements of the proposed solution have been identified. The first is what can be called the 'vision', which refers to desirable outcomes resulting from implementing the proposed changes. The second is what could be termed 'action steps', denoting concrete actions that can or ought to be taken to achieve the vision. The primary sources indicate that the Great Reset can be seen as both a vision and a strategy for affecting change. However, both elements are often described in vague and abstract terms, creating a sense of ambiguity. The next section will include a discussion of firstly the ambiguity relating to the Great Reset vision and secondly, the concrete, or in this case somewhat abstract, action steps.

When reading across the primary sources, the objective of the Great Reset could be summarised with this statement: to create a better, fairer, 'greener', healthier, more just, more equal, more sustainable, more prosperous, and more inclusive world and economy. Each text reflects this vision in various ways, such as: "… reset our world to create a healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous future" (K. Schwab, "great reset" par. 15), "… initiatives like these demonstrate that a more inclusive and sustainable [economic] model is possible" (K. Schwab, "Better economy" par. 18), "… unless our societies are just, fair and healthy then our individual security and wellbeing are built on fragile foundations" (SOMPO par. 2), "[i]nstead of prioritising shareholders, companies value all stakeholders, and financialization has given way to investments, technology and sustainability" (Mazzucato par. 20). These descriptions of a 'better future' are underlined in the video clips through the employed imagery.

Two of the four videos, the Royal Family's clip and the first WEF video from 3 June 2020, rely heavily on visuals to convey the Great Reset's message. Towards the end of the WEF's video, emotionally compelling scenes of people coming together under different circumstances are shown. The first in a series of such frames displays a staff of health care professionals cheering for an elderly woman led by a nurse, holding a sign that reads "Mais Uma Guerreira Recuperada" (translation: "another recovered warrior"). This scene is followed by a close-up of a nurse crying out of joy, children playing at school and walking through an

arch of balloons, a child wearing a face mask rope skipping on the street, a French BLM protest, an ultrasound image of a foetus, and a close-up of a newborn's face in an incubator (see Fig. 4 – Fig. 10.) (00:00:58-00:01:06). These images representing community and a hopeful future allude to the 'more just, fairer, and more inclusive' part of the Great Reset vision.

The second set of visuals moves the focus from people to nature. A down-shot of a windmill changes into an aerial shot of a windmill farm, then a space shuttle taking off, astronauts hugging, and a view onto the globe. Next, the camera shifts to another series of aerial shots of a glacier over to a green, lush mountain range with a waterfall to underwater where a school of fish passes by. The final frame is an up-shot of trees, creating the impression that the viewer is standing in a forest looking up into the treetops, with the sun shining through (00:01:06-00:01:20). Generally, the depictions of nature symbolise the Great Reset's objective of a 'more sustainable, healthier, and greener' future. The last shot is intriguing as up-shots usually have the effect of putting the subject into an elevated position to the viewer and thus signal superiority, heroism, or danger ("Boords"). In connection to the earlier images and the sun rays coming through the treetops, this scene has a positive connotation and represents the importance of nature and preserving our environment.

The Royal Family's video is similarly focused on the importance of the environment. The visuals consist primarily of nature shots. Unlike the video before, however, the visual message is reiterated through spoken words, and thus a slight shift from the previous video is detectable. While the former video's aerial shots could be interpreted as highlighting the beauty of nature and reinforcing that nature is more powerful than humankind, the Royal Family's video inspires a different message. In order to illustrate the difference, the following passage presents a scene from this clip (see Fig. 1) with the verbal narration in bold font and the accompanying visuals in parenthesis in italicised font:

> **… we need to evolve our economic model** *(Establishing shot of landscape in Africa / RE:DESIGN)* **Putting people** *(Pan shot of a Black woman pumping water from a well)* **and planet** *(close up of water pouring into a bucket)* **at the heart** *(dolly shot of another Black woman from behind carrying the bucket of water)* **of global value creation** *(down shot of Black women at the well with children watching and playing)*. **If there is one critical lesson we have to learn from this crisis, we need to put nature** *(down shot of an unidentifiable power plant / RE:THINK / shifting to a right to left pan of a hill station in British India)* **at the heart of how we operate** *(down shot of green field with a lake moving to a down shot of fish farm in the ocean)*… (Royal Family, 00:00:49-00:01:09)
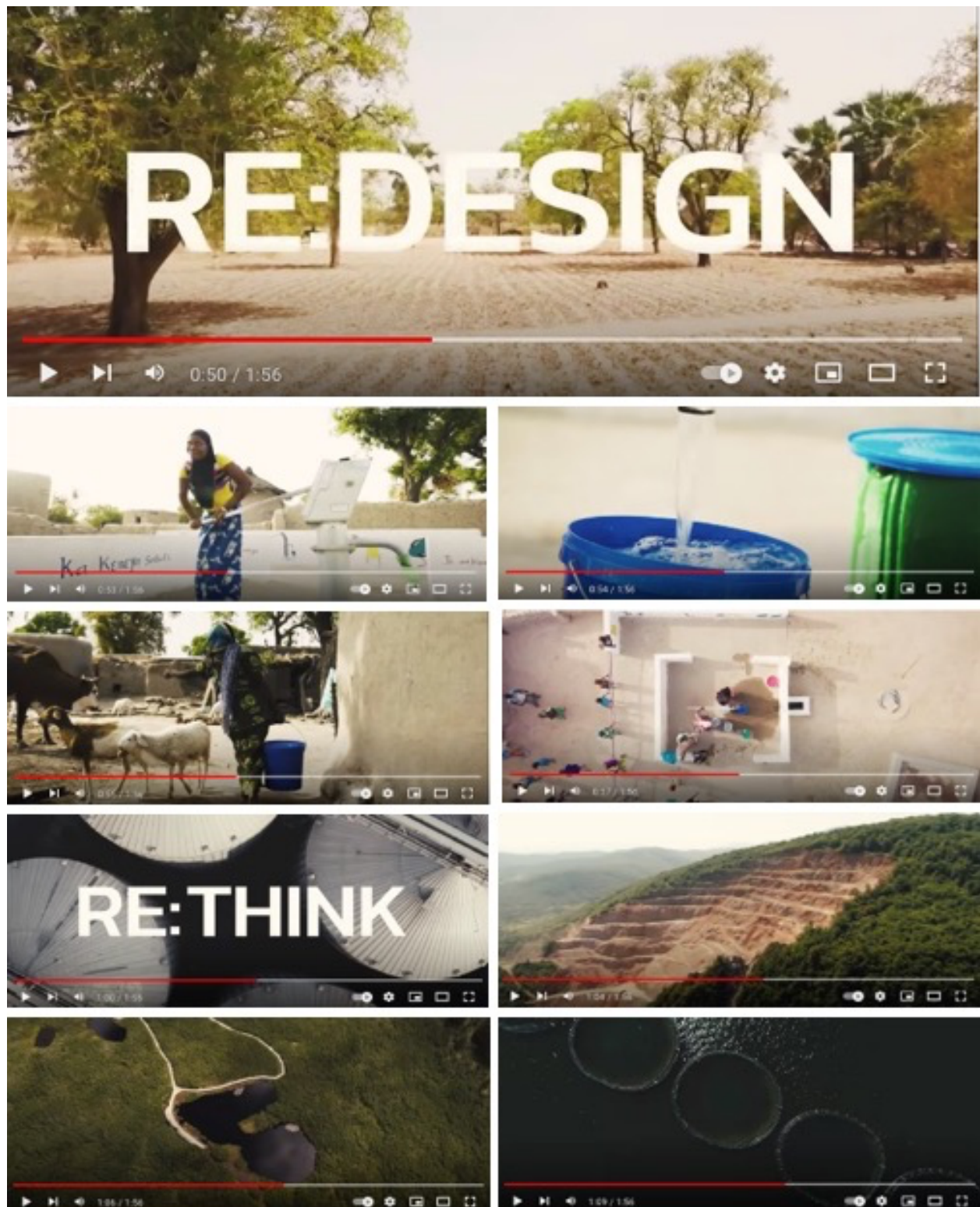
Fig. 1 Scene from #TheGreatReset, Royal Family 00:49 - 01:09

In contrast to the WEF's video, this one relies on frequent down-shots, which has the opposite effect to the up-shot and places the subject into a vulnerable and inferior position to the viewer ("boords"). Thus, the down-shots of a Black African woman carrying water with the commentary of "putting people and planet at the heart of global value creation" can imply exploitation. The imagery overrides the possible positive meaning of something 'at the heart' as particularly important. In this context, the "people" (Black women) and "the planet" (Africa) are seen as crucial to creating value for the rest of the world. This subtext inferring exploitation is further apparent in the two subsequent down-shots of a power plant and a fish farm with the overlying commentary "we need to put nature at the heart of how we operate". The visuals and this statement can hardly be seen as offering a new understanding of society's relationship to nature. Instead, they reiterate that nature is a means to end.

These inconsistencies and precarious representations reveal that the Great Reset's vision may not have as much substance as the rhetors would like it to appear. This sense of the plan's hollowness is further emphasised through the frequently used abstract terms to describe the Great Reset's objectives. Indeed, the employed lexical items could be classified as buzzwords. According to David Kaufer and Kathleen Carley, buzzwords are "labels for containers whose contents remain a foggy aspiration … [they] characteristically express long-term objectives and goals before they become attached to criteria or consequences" (206). The authors mention specifically 'justice' and 'equality' as buzzwords in a rhetorical context (Kaufer and Carley 214). Following Kaufer's and Carley's description, it can be argued that the other words frequently used to paint the Great Reset vision; equitability, sustainability, prosperity, inclusivity, green and health, can equally be considered buzzwords. It is unclear what criteria are attached to these words, which means it is unknown how one would recognise, for example, a more inclusive and prosperous world and economic system as envisioned by the Great Reset initiators.

Nevertheless, buzzwords fulfil a rhetorical function, which connects them to the concept of strategic ambiguity. Since they elude a concrete definition, buzzwords can efficiently be used to create the impression of shared goals and values (Kaufer and Carley 214). The terms to describe the Great Reset vision are imbued with symbolic value. 'Sustainability', 'justice', 'inclusivity' are not just measurable outcomes. They reflect broadly shared values and beliefs about what is important. Eisenberg states that while ambiguous, values are employed strategically because even though each listener may interpret them differently, they foster unity (8). In other words, because buzzwords represent abstract ideas rather than concrete concepts, they help unify people who seemingly share the same values but may have a different

understanding of what they entail. Aside from using buzzwords to create strategic ambiguity when communicating the Great Reset vision, the rhetors also rely on ambiguity to convey what this plan involves.

On the one hand, it seems evident what the Great Reset is – a shift from neoliberal free-market capitalism to stakeholder capitalism – but on the other hand, it is not clear from the texts how these two economic systems differ from one another. The Davos Agenda video explains that stakeholder capitalism "would shift businesses away from just profit … giving people a real stake in the economy and putting well-being before growth" (00:03:19-00:03:38). Klaus Schwab explains it entails that "companies should try and optimise for more than just short-term profits" ("Better Economy" par. 14). In "Now is the time for a 'great reset'", he outlines three components of the Great Reset: "steering the market towards fairer outcome" (par. 10), "ensur[ing] that investments advance shared goals, such as equality and sustainability" (par. 12), and "harness[ing] the innovations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to support the public good, especially by addressing health and social challenges" (par. 14).

These abstract descriptions leave ample room for interpretation, which is beneficial for the rhetors in two ways. First, Eisenberg notes that organisations rely on strategic ambiguity in their communication with the public because it allows them to change unsuccessful strategies without altering their goals (11). In the context of the Great Reset this means, that the rhetors do not have to commit themselves to a specific set of actions that, for example, companies would need to take. This non-committing attitude is evident especially in Klaus Schwab's text when he describes "… the Stakeholder Capitalism Metrics: nonfinancial metrics and disclosures that will be added (on a voluntary basis) to companies' annual reporting" ("Better Economy" par. 12). The side note in parenthesis illustrates the non-binding nature of such initiatives. Additionally, Eisenberg explains that strategic ambiguity is helpful because it makes space for an audience's projection, making it seem like rhetor and audience share the same beliefs (12).

A poignant example of various projections, though negative, is Klein's finding that people, who are sceptical about the WEF's motives, have created their own theories as to what the Great Reset is based on their political leaning. According to Klein, individuals from the conservative right interpret the Great Reset as a plan to usher in a socialist "green" new deal, while people on the left fear the rise of Big Pharma ("Conspiracy Smoothie" par. 7). Inversely, left-leaning individuals may welcome the idea of 'green' socialism, while right-leaning people who believe in the good of free-market neoliberalism may not see a problem with the success

of pharmaceutical companies[8]. As the texts reveal, the Great Reset is being communicated in such an ambiguous manner that both interpretations are equally plausible. It may not seem surprising that these contradictions have led to severe criticism, further investigated in the next chapter.

4.2.2   Constraints: Ambiguity and the claim that 'there is no alternative'

The previous section explicated how the Great Reset solution is strategically framed ambiguously, obscuring what this initiative entails. Like creating 'a sense of urgency', strategic ambiguity also finds application in the context of organisational change (cf. Eisenberg 2007). In the WEF's case, the rhetorical device of ambiguity may constitute a constraint due to the nature of the organisation. As already mentioned, the Forum does not possess any legislative power that would allow it to pass new regulations or legally bind governments and private businesses. As Jean-Christophe Graz describes, "the power embodied by … closed transnational élite clubs [such as the WEF] has intrinsic limits" (328). Thus, to exert influence, the WEF relies on ambiguous communication that rallies its affiliates around a vague yet value-laden and emotionally compelling goal.

To wit, because the organisation lacks legal or executive authority that could commit state and private actors to specific actions, it seeks to generate a moral and emotional commitment from its partners and audience. The promise of a more just, equal, sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive world speaks to a sense of shared humanity and has an ethical component. For the Forum, this ambiguous emotive language with moral connotations seems to be one of the few available options to evoke an air of authority. Nonetheless, this constraint is not only limiting. It is an asset in that it allows the WEF to present the Great Reset as the only alternative. Since the objective and the action steps necessary to achieve it are described in such ambiguous and vague terms, it could encompass a wide variety of possible scenarios, policies, and practices. Thus, the Great Reset does become the only solution because anything could potentially fall under its wide umbrella.

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[8] It must be noted that while some evidence from news commentary (discussed in more detail in chapter 5) supports Klein's argument, it is not unproblematic. It seems reductionist and assumes an easily identifiable and clear political divide between the "left" and the "right". Such a dichotomous view of the political landscape and worldviews obscures the complexity of varying views on different issues. Furthermore, the assumed dichotomy of political parties deters any discussions about shared (potentially problematic) beliefs and practices. The unchallenged assumption that, e.g., in the US context, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party present polar opposites reinforces the arguably questionable belief that fundamental change can occur by simply voting for a different party.

The logical conclusion that there is no alternative but a reset of the economy to engender stakeholder capitalism also emerges from the combined argument structures of the texts. The texts rely on a specific argumentation tactic to persuade unconvinced readers or viewers to accept the Great Reset's main idea. In his research, Hart found that rhetors create tension in their audience by presenting data in the form of problems. For uncommitted audiences, this is instantly followed with invitations to become involved in the issue (Hart 88, 92). In most primary sources under investigation, the rhetors also create tension at the onset via lengthy descriptions of the problems at hand. However, this tension is quickly resolved by outlining parts of stakeholder capitalism. Thus, the audience is not given much room to think about the problems from different perspectives. Instead, it is forced to think in a particular direction when considering the solution.

This strategy is notable in all four articles. Klaus Schwab's essay "Now is the time for a 'great reset'" opens with the statement "COVID-19 lockdowns may be gradually easing, but anxiety about the world's social and economic prospects is only intensifying" (par. 1). Since this sentence supports the overall communicative goal of the article it can be seen as the first Major Claim. The Data supporting this claim is: "a sharp economic downturn has already begun, and we could be facing the worst depression since the 1930s" (par. 1). The Substantive Warrant of cause and effect is supplied in the statement "[t]here is good reason to worry" (par. 1), indicating that in the light of the situation described with the Major Data, it is only reasonable that people would react as argued in the Major Claim. This type of opening creates tension, as this argument presents pretty discouraging information.

This suspense, however, is instantaneously resolved in the subsequent passage that ends with the Major Claim, "… we need a 'Great Reset' of capitalism" (par. 2). An ambiguous description of what a reset of capitalism entails constitutes the Data for this Claim. Data and Claim are connected through the supplied Motivational Warrant "[t]o achieve a better outcome" (par. 2). Since there is no space to consider the distressing information presented in the first paragraph, the audience may be more inclined to view this solution as the only possible approach. The immediate outlining of a solution also relieves them of the burden of pondering the problems' complexities themselves. The Motivational Warrant is helpful to achieve this effect because it provides the needed motivation, if only vague, to move from problem to solution and accept what the rhetor offers.

When describing the solution in more depth in the second half of the essay, Klaus Schwab presents a series of claims without providing any data. Hart et al. note that this could mean "the rhetor rants" (106). However, in this instance, it is much more likely that the claims

relating to the necessity of a Great Reset are by this point assumed as 'matter of fact' that do not need any more support. This interpretation is plausible because the author relies on numerous substantive arguments of cause and parallel case in the first half of the essay. The former rely on warrants explaining cause and effect, and the latter on warrants that "assert() that the instance reported in the data bears an essential similarity to a second instance in the same category" (Brockriede and Ehninger 49). Hart et al. explain that these substantive warrants "provide 'factual' grounding" (104), which increases the authority of the rhetor. Thus, because trust has been established, it is no longer necessary to support all claims with specific data.

Mazzucato takes a similar approach of offering claims without data. In her article "It's 2023. Here's How We Fixed The Economy", each paragraph, after three introductory paragraphs, contains one claim and a description of what was needed to "fix the economy". The introduction is vital because it establishes the central claim that legitimises all subsequent ones. The following statement presents the main argument around which the remainder of the text centres:

> In an echo of the "golden age" of capitalism – the period after 1945 when Western nations steered finance toward the right parts of the economy – it became clear that new policies were needed to address climate risk, incentivize green lending, scale up financial institutions tackling social environmental goals, and ban financial-sector activity that didn't serve a clear public purpose. (par. 3)

The data for this claim is provided in the earlier statement referring to the failed bailouts after the Global Fincial Crisis (GFC) of 2007-2008. In short, the author claims that one needs to revisit the practices of capitalism in the recovery period after WWII because the strategies for economic recovery after the GFC did not produce the desired results.

Two warrants help to connect this Major Claim and its Data. First, a Substantive Warrant of the parallel case, where the current recovery is contrasted with one that did not work and paralleled with one that did. Second, referencing the past (the 'golden age' of capitalism and the financial crisis) gives authority to the claim. Hart found that especially doctrinal rhetors derive their authority by using this kind of data (86). The Substantive and the Authoritative Warrant contribute to the rhetor's credibility so that subsequent claims describing what the recovery looked like do not need additional data. Moreover, this type of presentation reinforces that there is no alternative to what is presented, which is indeed Mazzucato's conclusion, when she states, "[t]o secure a better future for all, it was *the only thing* to do" (par. 21; my emphasis).

The article by SOMPO Holdings reaches this same conclusion but commences with presenting only data, which has a similar tension-creating effect as Klaus Schwab's article

discussed before. The first claim, introduced only in the third paragraph, consists of a series of three statements that all contain the deontic modal 'must': "We *must* make the most of this moment. Governments, citizens and business *must* change their behaviour. We all *must* prioritise how we can contribute to building sustainable societies" (par. 3; my emphasis). Since 'must' "the strict necessity modal … functions as a universal quantifier" (Suikkanen 355), it creates a strong obligation for the reader to accept this claim based on the previously stated data. The reiteration of what 'we' must do further increases the tension, which is finally resolved with the subsequent claim that "we need to reimagine capitalism, to incorporate social sustainability and people's well-being" (par. 4). This claim is supported by the preceding Major Data that "capitalism has lifted countless people out of poverty …[but] with the expansions of digitalisation and globalisation, capitalism has produced greater inequalities and divisions" (par. 4).

The Substantive Warrant bridging claim and data is supplied in the sentence, "[i]n its present form, capitalism is not truly contributing to the well-being of humanity" (par. 4). It is clever to include this particular Warrant while most others are suppressed. The qualification "in its present form" suggests that capitalism can only be reimagined within certain constraints of capitalism (which are subsequently defined in the article). Without this Warrant, one could potentially think about a way of reimagining capitalism that would do away with it entirely in favour of some other economic system that bears no resemblance to capitalism. However, as this article reinforces, stakeholder *capitalism* is the only solution. That the proponents of the Great Reset would position the solution as such seems completely understandable considering the WEF's ideological foundation.

The organisation's existence revolves around the stakeholder model. Pigman explains that this management theory, proposed by Klaus Schwab in the 1960s, holds that companies can operate at their full capacity when they consider the interests of all stakeholders (9). These include shareholders, a company's management and other staff, customers, broader communities, and anybody affected by a company's way of operating (Pigman 9). Since there are times when issues arise that concern all stakeholders, the Forum's founder sought to create a platform for them to come together and engage in productive problem-solving discussions (Pigman 10). According to Klaus Schwab, companies, and other entities, such as global organisations, nation-states, or civil society organisations, should also adapt the stakeholder model (Pigman 9). It is hardly surprising that Klaus Schwab's long-held conviction and belief in a particular economic and social model that underlines his organisation's work is presented as 'the only way' because, in the WEF universe, it is.

Another factor constraining the Forum in the type of solution it puts forward is the Davos Equation. This formula captures the notion "that economic growth can, and ideally should, work in tandem with a responsibility for the social and natural environment" (Garsten and Sörbom, "Tales" 20). Central to this equation is the notion that economic prosperity depends on social stability and environmental health and vice versa (Garsten and Sörbom "Tales" 20). Consequently, it also means that economic growth will benefit society and the environment. While it is debatable how much this idea differs from the current capitalist system (discussed in more detail in chapter 5), it explains the constant intertwining of the economic and social foundations found in the texts. Thus, the WEF's core tenets, the stakeholder model, and the Davos Equation provide a fixed framework that determines, and arguably restricts, the solutions the Forum can bring forth.

4.2.3 *The audience: Participants or bystanders*

As mentioned previously (3.1.), understanding 'audience' is not as straightforward as it may seem at first. Scholars have discussed the different meanings of audience and the writer's role in constructing their audience (c.f. Ede and Lunsford 1984, Park 1982). For example, Park identifies two types of the 'invoked audience', which will be the focus of this discussion. The two different 'invoked audiences' denote the readers and viewers the rhetor has in mind and the audience created by the text (Park 250). Analysing these two categories in conjunction with how the audience is addressed will give some insight into the audience's role in the Great Reset.

The discussion of the rhetorical situation and its exigence (see 4.1.1) detected an inconsistency in how the various texts address the audience. Even though the texts' objectives differ slightly, all rhetors create the impression of inclusivity through the frequently used pronouns 'we' and 'our'. This usage implies not only a shared problem but also a shared vision. Nevertheless, as the texts reveal, inclusivity does not mean the same level of involvement in the solution nor responsibility. The first two videos released on 3 June 2020 address the audience in a manner that promotes the feeling of 'we are all in this together'. For example, the WEF's "The Great Reset" video uses the headlines, "Our world has changed / Our challenges are greater / Our fragilities exposed / Our systems need a reset / Join us" (00:00:14, 00:00:22, 00:00:31, 00:00:41, 00:01:25). In the "#TheGreatReset" clip, HRH Prince Charles tells the viewer, "We have an incredible opportunity" (00:00:02-00:00:05), "changing our current trajectory will require bold and imaginative action" (00:00:35-00:00:40) and that "[w]e need to

evolve our economic model" (00:00:49-00:00:52). Finally, he warns that "[t]he only limit is our willingness to act" (00:01:36-00:01:39).

Both videos' final sentences indicate that although 'we' and 'our' are used throughout, the rhetor and the audience are not in equal positions. The WEF' invitation to "join us" implies that while *we* all face the same global problems, there are some of *us* that can join *those* who have already thought of a solution. Similarly, the statement "the only limit is our willingness to act" also separates the rhetor from the audience. Since the rhetor is communicating a possible solution and extends the invitation to join, they are not the ones who are unwilling to act. The implication is that it may be the audience who lacks the willingness and needs to acquire it. Thus, the evoked audience could be seen as people who are made willing to join the Great Reset because they have realised the grave problems the world is facing and grasped the urgency. This 'exclusive we' further suggests that the audience and the rhetor do not belong to the same group.

Klaus Schwab's article "Now is the time for a 'great reset'" illustrates the ambiguous usage of 'we' and that it is sometimes unclear whether it is inclusive or exclusive. For example, he states, "We must build entirely new foundations for our economic and social systems" (par.6) and "… we should use [government recovery funds] to create a new [system] that is more resilient, equitable, and sustainable in the long run" (par. 13). If the first-person plural pronoun were used inclusively, it would be aimed at the WEF partner's and government officials that can implement the changes the author mentions. However, this raises the question of why this audience would be addressed via an article on the WEF website. Moreover, the informal register, noticeable from expressions such as "revamp", "causalities still mounting", "unemployment is skyrocketing", "companies have stepped up", and the impersonal reference to "governments" would not be appropriate. Additionally, Klaus Schwab refers to how the pandemic "has shown how quickly we can make radical changes to our lifestyle" (par. 17), which is more likely to mean the average population rather than political and corporate leaders.

Therefore, it seems more plausible that 'we' is used exclusively, addressing a reader enthusiastic about the visionary change the author promotes and promises. In fact, the type of audience the Forum's CEO would cater for in his communications can be inferred from the WEF's mission statement. The organisation believes "that progress happens by bringing together *people from all walks of life who have the drive and the influence to make positive change*" ("Our Mission"; my emphasis). Klaus Schwab's text evokes this kind of reader through statements such as "… populations have overwhelmingly shown a willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of health-care and other essential workers and vulnerable populations

such as the elderly" ("great reset" par. 8) and "[c]learly the will to build a better society does exist" ("great reset" par. 9). The willpower and willingness implied in these statements seem synonymous with 'drive'. Thus, these comments could be aimed at anyone with this quality. Also, the implied positive change may further speak to someone who shares this vision, thereby making the audience feel included.

In contrast to this article, where the first-person pronoun inspires a feeling of inclusivity and closeness, it does not have the same effect as Klaus Schwab's second essay in TIME. In that article the exclusiveness of the first-person pronoun plural is increased through the frequent use of the first-person pronoun singular. Unlike the other rhetorical artefacts, this text relies on many descriptions directly from the rhetor's point of view. The author inserts his personal experiences and beliefs with statements such as: "Like most people, I was constrained to observing the situation from inside my home…" ("Better Economy" par. 1) and "In September, my belief that a more virtuous capitalist system is possible..." ("Better Economy" par. 12). Thus, when he states, "… we remain far from our goal of achieving a better global economic system for all" ("Better economy" par. 19), the impression is created that "our goal" could easily be replaced with "my goal".

The juxtaposition between the first-person pronoun singular and plural in this text highlights that the 'exclusive we' is aimed at those who seek change and are not yet part of the Great Reset. However, they are addressed with 'we' because they are welcome to join the WEF's vision. Consequently, Klaus Schwab's usage of 'we' could be interpreted as creating inclusion when the audience accepts and participates in the WEF's plan of a Great Reset. This clear distinction implied by 'we' is further apparent in the Davos Agenda video. After the video responds to the critical reception the Great Reset has received (explained in 4.1.1), the narrator further explains:

> But the world's not that simple. Every one of **us** has different priorities values and ideas, that's part of why solutions are so hard to come by, and why **we** all need to be involved in the decision making. Because whether it's politicians, CEOs, academics, activists, or you, **we're** all about getting people together. Even though you may not like to sit down at the table and develop solutions that work for all of **us**. (00:01:24-00:01:51)

This passage shows a noticeable difference between the inclusive (marked in blue) and exclusive (marked in red) 'we'. It also reveals that the evoked audience are ordinary people of the general population, as the viewer is distinguished from "politicians, CEOs, academics, activists". Indeed, the speaker explicitly sets themselves apart from the audience: "We're all about getting people together" includes the WEF and its partners, which stands in contrast to

the viewer, who "may not like to sit down …". This statement enhances the sense that the intended audience consists of people gladly welcoming and embracing the Great Reset because they would not want to think of solutions themselves.

The discussed examples have illustrated that the first-person plural pronoun usage is ambiguous, as Du Bois noted (319). Additionally, the 'exclusive we' has also been shown to have varying effects. However, the simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of the reader and viewer construct a particular audience: someone who understands the extent of current global problems and seeks to create a 'better world'. Concurrently, this desire and will to do so is channelled into a specific direction, namely into efforts that align with the Great Reset's primary objective of instigating stakeholder capitalism. Accordingly, the audience could be seen as bystanders instead of participants because the establishment of stakeholder capitalism depends on actions taken by corporations and governments, not ordinary citizens. Thus, even though it is declared that "top-down approaches won't get us anywhere" (WEF, Davos Agenda 00:03:07-00:03:09), one may wonder whether the Great Reset is not precisely that. This concern will be addressed in the next chapter.

5   Problematic aspects of the *Great Reset*

This chapter builds on the findings from the texts' rhetorical analysis and examines the potentially problematic aspects they have revealed. The first section outlines specific concerns arising from the rhetorical frames, the frame boundaries, and how the audience is addressed. The second section investigates the fallacy behind the argument that the Great Reset and stakeholder capitalism are the only possibilities for change. The claim that there is no alternative can be disproven for two reasons. First, textual and practical evidence will illustrate that the campaigned changes are not fundamentally different from neoliberal capitalism. Second, two concrete examples will demonstrate what an alternative to the current economic system and the Great Resets vision could look like.

5.1 Unsuccessful rhetoric

5.1.1   *Urgency and ambiguity: An invitation for suspicion*

As previously demonstrated, creating a sense of urgency and ambiguous communication is frequently employed in change management and leadership. In the context of the Great Reset, these strategies have proven unsuccessful for two reasons. First, framing the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to create urgency has led to substantial criticism. Roth finds the rhetoric of urgency and immediacy problematic because it implies the world was already in a state of crisis

before the pandemic (1). A YouTube video attempting to explain the economic principles of the proposed 'stakeholder capitalism' has likened this strategy to the credo "Never let a good crisis go to waste" attributed to Winston Churchill (Economics Explained 00:01-00:03). This sentiment has been taken on board by sensationalist media commentators, such as Laura Ingraham (2020) and Tucker Carlson (2020) from *Fox News*, Aaron Wherry from *CBC News* (2020), and Andrew Coyne from *Globe&Mail* (2020), who accuse the Forum of an opportunistic attitude. Viewers of the WEF's YouTube videos are similarly appalled by the readiness to use the pandemic as an opportunity. For example, one user commented "Anyone that [sic] calls a pandemic a 'golden opportunity' is a psychopath" (carolineykins)[9] and has received 75 approving replies.

Taking this criticism even further, some speculate that a crisis had to be created deliberately to usher in the Great Reset. For example, Justin Haskins has written both for *Fox News* and *The Hill*, suggesting that the elite are neither opposed to taking advantage of a real crisis ("Al Gore") nor manufacturing one if need be ("Introducing"). This sentiment is echoed by Ben Shapiro, a conservative political commentator (01:12:13-01:12:27) and can be found amongst the WEF's YouTube audience, of whom many seem to have very emotionally charged reactions. One of them exclaims, "The maxim 'never let a good a crisis go to waste' doesn't apply here BECAUSE THEY MANUFACTURED THIS CRISIS FOR THIS SPECIFIC PURPOSE" (HERDof BUFFALOED). This comment received 514 likes. Someone else's sarcastic statement, "This crisis certainly is a great opportunity. It is so perfect that you could almost think it was engineered" (Earnest Stringfellow), was met with even more approval, based on the 1.5k likes this comment earned.

Second, and probably more important than the issue of urgency, is that the ambiguous rhetoric inspired creative guesswork about what kind of world the WEF envisions. The mentioned commentators at *Fox News, CBC News, Globe&Mail*, and Ben Shapiro are not only suspicious about the suggested urgency to act. They also agree on what the WEF seeks to accomplish. According to them, the Great Reset is an attack on neoliberal capitalism, and they fear the consequent rise of socialism under a global government. Specifically, Ingraham stresses the Great Reset's threat to US Americans' freedom. This theme is also echoed by Glenn Beck (2020). Several articles in the digital magazine *The New American* (cf. Hoar 2020, Jasper 2020,

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[9] This comment on the WEF's YouTube video was sourced in July 2021 but had been removed by October 2021. The same applies to all other comments cited in this section, as the comment functions had been disabled. Nevertheless, the decision was made to use the comments here because they reflect the audience's reception of the Great Reset and support the argument about the unsuccessful rhetoric.

Jasper 2021, Newman 2021) that describes itself as "the essential news source for freedom-loving Americans" (*New American*) further reiterate that danger. Unsurprisingly, anyone subscribing to the neoliberal capitalist free-market ideology would be alarmed by statements such as "steer the market towards fairer outcomes" (K. Schwab, "great reset" par. 10) or "create a citizen-centered welfare state" (Mazzucato par. 5).

These commentators from more conservative media outlets have been heavily criticised, for example, by journalists from *The Guardian* and the *BBC*. Jack Goodman and Flora Carmichael from the *BBC* fact-checked the Great Reset and concluded it is a "baseless conspiracy theory" (2020). Quinn Slobodian from *The Guardian* calls it "nonsense" and speculates that it will soon be studied by research centres specialising in disinformation (2020). This commentary did not go unnoticed, and many of the original commentators have responded to this accusation and pointed out that this 'conspiracy' is not a theory. The WEF has publicly available information on the proposed plan (cf. Beck 2020) and even created a website dedicated to Great Reset resources. Also, author, and social activist, Russell Brand, whose content does not align with either the political right or left, notes that the Great Reset can hardly be a conspiracy theory if it is openly promoted (2021).

Due to this evidence and because the Davos 2021 Agenda was indeed themed 'The Great Reset', the accusation of 'conspiracy theory' has since been softened. For example, the *BBC* changed course in another fact-checking article, explaining that the "lack of clarity, combined with the plan being launched by an influential organisation, provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories to grow" (Robinson et al.). While this statement seems to be a self-correction on the initial dismissal of the WEF's initiative and the concerns it has raised, it also reflects some of this thesis's findings regarding the lack of clarity. Moreover, this remark and the initial conservative comments highlight the chief problem arising from the texts' obscurity. This element, which this analysis identified as strategic ambiguity, may indeed have led to wild speculations as to what the Great Reset is. Nevertheless, this development seems predictable given that strategic ambiguity leaves as much room as possible for interpretation to get as many people on board as possible.

As discussed before, under strategic ambiguity, objectives may deliberately be stated as abstract values to unify a broad spectrum of people (Eisenberg 8). However, the review of comments by prominent media figures has shown that for the WEF, this strategy does not seem to have been successful. Unless, of course, the aim was to create confusion, which is highly doubtful. Given the context of this organisation and its founder's professional background, it seems more likely that a commonly practised change management and leadership strategy

merely failed. This observation invites yet other questions that could be investigated further. One of them might concern how social change on the scale imagined by the Great Reset could be made possible and whether change could even be directed towards a specific outcome, if not to say, engineered? For some, this is highly unlikely. For example, according to Roth, the notion that "strong governments, big businesses or an alliance of the willing under [the WEF's leadership] can determine the future of the world" (7) disregards the intricacies of social systems.

Aside from the debatable assumptions that the Great Reset is a scheme to install a socialist world government, the media coverage has revealed another concern. It seems that the Great Reset has augmented a pre-existing division between the political left and the right. With that, it has failed to spark a unified enthusiasm for the plan. It can be argued that this outcome reflects an inherent problem of the underlying assumptions of the stakeholder model. Garsten and Sörbom consider the notion that all stakeholders can come together to find common ground coupled with the Davos Equation (section 4.2.2) as 'harmony ideology'. This concept holds that in "healthy societies … conflicts and confrontation are minimised and there is harmony between people" (Garsten and Sörbom, "Tales" 22). Thus, the authors observe that while theoretically, varied stakeholders can come together, practically, differing views cannot be expressed because it is seen as counterproductive (Garsten and Sörbom, "Values" 176). Consequently, the stakeholder model, focused on "aligning values" (Garsten and Sörbom, "Values" 176), brings diverse positions together to transmit the facilitator's preconceived ideas to stakeholders. Thereby, conflicting voices are not truly heard but are appropriated into the dominant discourse.

Strategic ambiguity bridges the gap between the reality of discouraging the expression of opposing positions and the appearance that all voices are heard and respected. It further creates the impression that a diverse range of stakeholders' varying priorities, concerns, and beliefs can be unified. However, as the conspiracy discourse around the Great Reset has shown, too much ambiguity sparks people's imagination which can result in being defamed as a conspiracy theorist. Since the WEF's communication strategy has added to divisions between people of different political orientations instead of helping to mend them, the stakeholder model's ability for inclusive, fair and democratic decision making can be questioned. In other words, if the Great Reset invites division and dispute already in its promotional stage, how can it create the more just, inclusive and equal world it promises?

Moreover, the stakeholder model also raises fundamental questions about assumptions on how to organise society, such as, but not limited to: Do diverse voices and interests need to

be brought into alignment to live peacefully? Is it enough to have mutual respect and accept each other's differences? If society is to be organised around shared values and beliefs, does a community's size play a significant role? In whose interest is a global form of governance? What other forms of governance could be effective? It would be impossible to attempt to answer these questions within this space. However, posing them makes clear that it does not suffice to package such a complex process as social and economic change in buzzwords and obscure it with ambiguity if one were serious about creating 'a better world'.

5.1.2   *Frame boundaries: Neglecting activism against neoliberal capitalism*

In the previous section, the overall media reception of the Great Reset was discussed. While some believe it means a socialist dystopia, others find it shocking that a group of people would seek to turn a crisis into an opportunity, yet others believe the Great Reset to be a conspiracy. It seems that these biased guesses about what the Great Reset may entail are based on attempting to decipher what the rhetors say about it. However, it may be more prolific to focus on what its promoters omit, which can be identified through the frame boundaries (see section 4.1.3.). In framing the issues we are facing as urgent, some rhetors have implied prior unawareness or ignorance and others a moral failing in acknowledging them[10]. Thus, the pandemic is the "wake up call" (WEF, "Launch" 00:00:59), and the global response to it has shown that "the will to build a better society does exist" (K. Schwab, "great reset" par. 9).

These discursive boundaries raise two crucial issues. First, the claim that the world was not aware of climate change, environmental destruction, wealth inequality, and social issues such as discrimination before COVID-19 is not only a sweeping generalisation but is also unsupportable. While it may be true that some people might not concern themselves with the world's political, social, economic, and environmental problems in their everyday life, there are numerous examples to the contrary. Geoffrey Pleyers notes that 2019 was "one of the most active years in terms of social movements and citizens' protests around the world" (1). In a pre-pandemic European context, this statement brings to mind, for example, the 'Gilet Jaunes' movement, which held protests across France every weekend beginning in November 2018 (Shultziner and Kornblit 535,538).

However, the French protests were only one of the many noteworthy movements in the second decade of the 21st century. In the same year in which people in France began to take to

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[10] The reference is to the analysed texts by Mazzucato and SOMPO Holdings that have suggested unawareness and Klaus Schwab's texts that infer that the lack of social and economic change so far is a moral issue.

the streets, the well-known social movement, 'Fridays for Future', led by youth activists, and inspired by the then 15-year-old Greta Thunberg, began to spring up (van der Heyden 197). Thunberg's celebrated speech "I want you to panic!" was even held at the WEF's annual gathering in Davos 2019 (Guardian News). The message of one young person from Sweden spread quickly, and soon FFF protests took place in numerous European countries (van der Heyden 198). Albeit her prominence, Thunberg has not been the first youth activist to confront state leaders with their inaction regarding climate change. As Patti Moore et al. explain, in 2015, 21 young Americans filed a lawsuit against the US government for promoting fossil fuel consumption despite knowing of their contribution to global warming since the 1960s (151, 152).

The existence of a wide variety of other social movements is also well-documented. In 2017 a special issue of the academic journal *Community Development Journal* was dedicated to discussing various movements worldwide. The editors mention the timeliness of their publication in the light of "chauvinistic populist movements across Europe and elsewhere, proxy incursions and conflagrations in various places, … an almost total surrender to market rationalities and austerity measures nearly everywhere, … [soaring] levels of global inequality" (McCrea et al. 379). It seems that this statement from 2017 succinctly describes similar problems that Schwab, the WEF and its supporters claim have not been addressed due to unawareness, ignorance, or lack of willingness. Niamh McCrea et al. continue to recall that in the first special edition of this kind in 1997, it was already apparent what kind of mechanism would lead to the situation described in the statement above (380).

A final example of social movements that highlights just how much the public has been aware of economic, political, and social problems and has been seeking ways of self-governance is the Occupy Movement. There is ample literature devoted to the origins of the movement, its chief message and its manner of operating (cf. Van Gelder 2011, Byrne 2012, Wolff and Barsamian 2012, Smaligo 2014, Szolucha 2016, Message 2019). The Occupy movement is mentioned within this discussion because of the shift in economic and political discourse it caused. Nicholas Smaligo comments that this movement made it possible to publicly discuss wealth inequality and its social and political implications (vii). Richard Wolff and Davis Barsamian specify the movement's importance in this regard even further and point out that before 2011 it was nearly impossible to voice any critique against capitalism. Occupy created a space for discussing the inequality, the injustice and the oppression created by this economic system (8). These explanations illustrate that since the 2008 GFC and the subsequent

Occupy movement, people have been openly debating and criticising neoliberal capitalism as the source of much of the world's problems.

This survey of social movements within the last decade is by no means exhaustive but demonstrates that the public at large has overwhelmingly been aware of the problems the WEF and its founder lay out so clearly. Thus, the suggested ignorance, unawareness, or unwillingness to change on the part of the audience is at best insulting and arrogant. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that the WEF's YouTube videos would receive comments such as: "Such a scam! From the title, I was hoping they'll tell me in details [sic], without ambiguity, what the "great reset" is. They only talked about problems we are all aware of, and how something wonderful called the great reset is going to magically fix it! Scammers always operate the same way!" (arthur samenu). On the one hand, this comment signals frustration with the ambiguity already discussed and supports the argument that it is pretentious to claim no one was paying attention to various problems before the pandemic.

On the other hand, calling the Reset's initiators' scammers' reveals another issue related to the second concern the frame boundaries raise. As discussed in the previous chapter, one effect of the discursive boundaries is that no one must take responsibility. In the light of the just discussed social movements and the Occupy Movement's diagnosis of the ills of capitalism, this lack of ownership is problematic. Not only do these social movements demonstrate that people worldwide have been aware of the problems they face, but they also identify the same root cause: a failed economic system. Moreover, as the Occupy Movement's famous slogan "We are the 99%" (Szolucha 4) indicates, not just capitalism is seen as the problem. Specifically, it is the 1%, "banks, big corporations and the other 'super rich'", holding on to the world's wealth at the expense of the 99% (Szolucha 4). Unsurprisingly, many individuals and companies that make up the 1% are also WEF members and partners.

Thus, if the capitalist system's beneficiaries are now proposing a solution without any sense of accountability, adverse reactions are to be expected. However, it is not astonishing that the Forum claims to launch monumental change without accepting ownership for problems it may have contributed to. As Klein makes clear: "If Davos wasn't 'seeking a better form of capitalism' to solve the spiraling [sic] crises Davos itself systematically deepened, it wouldn't be Davos" ("Conspiracy Smoothie" par. 9). An example that illustrates how Davos (synonymous with the WEF partners) has contributed to the "systematically deepening" of the crises is the oil company BP. The statements made by the company's CEO Bernard Looney during the Great Reset launch and the company's conduct highlight the discrepancy between the values it promotes and the values that seem to motivate its conduct.

BP professes to support the Great Reset's objective of a 'greener and more sustainable world', yet its actions to the contrary have also been documented. In the WEF's Great Reset Launch YouTube clip, Looney cautions that "any recovery stimulus should have green conditions attached to it, energy prices should reflect real costs" (00:01:49-00:01:56). However, based on the company's past and current actions, it is questionable whether this statement advocates for a completely fossil-free future required for net-zero emissions (Christophers). For example, in an article from 2018, Kate Aronoff reported that BP invested $13 million in an initiative that supports a carbon price of $40 per ton yet simultaneously undermines government regulation of carbon emissions (2018). Equally concerning is that major oil companies, including BP, helped design the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, which according to Joel Bakan, professor at the University of British Columbia, is "toothless" (44). He explains that it does not place restrictions on the current practices of oil exploration or hydraulic fracturing, contains no proposal for regulations, and cannot be enforced by law (44).

Moreover, renewable energy and a shift away from fossil fuels are not as profitable, and despite its displayed concerns for the environment, BP is still a profit-oriented company. It was found that BP's and Shell's CEOs and executives are partly renumerated with a high amount of their companies' shares, which creates incentives to further invest in the extraction and selling of fossil fuels (Watts). Additionally, journalist Brett Christophers notes that "hydrocarbon production in areas such as oil remains significantly more profitable than renewable energy generation" (2021). This finding suggests that while investing in renewable energy, the company's portfolio will continue to exist primarily of hydrocarbon production due to its profitability. Against this background, Looney's statement that "energy prices should reflect real costs" cannot be taken to mean the abandoning of fossil fuel but can instead be seen as a mere continuation of current practices. This observation leads to other problematic aspects of the Great Reset concerning the motivation and sincerity of the promoted transformation, and how much change it can produce.

Before this point is elaborated in section 5.2., this discussion is concluded by bringing the BP example into the context of the mentioned social activist groups. These instances of social activism illustrate that the employed 'urgency frame' and the argument of prior disregard and indifference relating to the significant global challenges is entirely unwarranted. This reasoning is seemingly used to deflect the evidence of the "1%" (which includes WEF members) having contributed to and benefitted from the crises they identify. The case of BP and the inconsistency between the objectives it promotes, and its business conduct exemplifies why some belief such corporations to be part of the problem. Thus, the core of the problem is

that the culprits subtly position the audience as inactive bystanders in the face of crises. In the light of their own conduct, this framing is dishonest and manipulative.

5.1.3   Inclusive & exclusive 'we': The issue of representation

The previous analysis (4.2.3.) revealed that the rhetors address the audience with an exclusive or inclusive 'we' and thereby evoke a specific type of reader or viewer: someone who agrees with the Forum's diagnosis of the current problems and is even more enthusiastic about the proposed solutions. Any person embodying this spirit is more than welcome "to join" the transition to stakeholder capitalism, while those who cannot be motivated are assured that they are in good hands. Roth describes that "people of all genders, ages, colours, castes, classes, and regions of the world are warmly invited to participate in the Great Reset […] but certainly not those who do not buy into the underlying paradigm" (Roth 6). This statement makes clear that the Great Reset is aimed at an ideal audience that would gladly join in the initiative. However, one look at the comment section of the only two videos that had at first allowed viewers to post comments illustrates that the actual audience differs considerably from this ideal evoked audience.

In fact, most viewers outright reject the WEF's attempt to include everyone in their plan. For example, one viewer states: ""We" "Us" "Our" "So many". You are not us. You are an incredibly small minority of people playing god and we will take back everything you stole from us" (a). Based on the 731 likes, other audience members seem to agree with this sentiment. Another viewer of the same video observes, "48k dislikes[11]. They keep saying "us" and "we" but the collective group has spoken through the dislikes" (bryan nuñez). A last noteworthy comment signals the commentator's awareness of how aggressively the first-person plural pronoun is used and turns it around to state: "Who the hell did even ask for this? We don't want it, we just don't want you and, most of all, we don't need you" (Elena Sistemi). Numerous other comments express a similar frustration about the WEF's and the Great Reset initiators' attempt to speak for the public.

This resistance to being spoken for or being represented in this manner resembles the previously discussed Occupy Movement. One of the general demands of this movement was to

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[11] Shortly after writing this section, YouTube disabled the public dislike count (YouTube Creators 2021). Thus, it is not possible anymore to see how many 'dislikes' the videos have received to date. YouTube's justification for this new policy protects creators from "dislike attacks" (YouTube Creators 00:01:00 – 00:01:32). However, the comment by the viewer nicknamed bryan nuñez shows that the 'dislike' button fulfils a crucial function for people to express how they feel about the ideas contained within a video. Especially for this video the number of dislikes is significant, as it was almost seven times more than the 'likes' it received.

be spoken with, not for (Smaligo xii), which highlights the broader concern of the improbability of direct democracy within a capitalist system. Some of the responses to the Great Reset make clear that a decade later, this issue of representation is still relevant. Instead of being spoken for, people want to be spoken with. Thus, the WEF's choice to approach its plan of radical change in the usual contested manner of speaking on behalf of the people calls into question two aspects: Who are the people that get to be involved in what the Great Reset seeks to accomplish? How genuine are the stated objectives of achieving equality and inclusivity if its initiators continue to speak about others instead of with others?

Despite these valid concerns, the question of representation requires a more nuanced analysis than a simplistic rejection of representation. In an analysis of practices of representation in Occupy Wall Street and the World Social Forum (an organisation intended to directly challenge the World Economic Forum), Teivo Teivainen concludes that some form of representational politics, meaning speaking on behalf of others, is required for a movement's effectiveness and success (33). Similarly, Alcoff finds that avoiding speaking for others is equally as problematic as speaking for others from a position of power (173). As previously discussed, Alcoff's solutions to this challenge consist of awareness on the speaker's part about their intentions, their personal status' impact on their communicated message and their readiness to take ownership and accountability for how the message is perceived (180-1). In other words, when speaking for others from a privileged position, that privilege comes with the responsibility of reflecting on oneself as well as the effect one's message produces.

In this respect, the criticism against the Great Reset rhetors for speaking for others is justified. Based on Alcoff's proposition on how and when to speak for others, the WEF's attempt of engaging the audience can be denounced for the rhetors' lack of awareness and accountability. A fitting example that illustrates this point is an already mentioned part of the Davos Agenda YouTube video, in which the narrator stresses that "we all need to be involved in the decision making. Because whether it's politicians, CEOs, academics, activists, or you, we're all about getting people together" (00:01:26-00:01:45). While it may be true that the WEF's annual gathering in Davos is about "getting people together", the organisation is highly selective of who these people are. Davos is known for its exclusivity and club atmosphere (cf. Graz 333). The WEF's partners pay outstanding membership fees that include a seat at the annual event. Non-members attending Davos can do so only upon special invite (Pigman 29, 31; Graz 335). From this perspective, the expressed sentiment of 'we are all in this together' is a rather disingenuous message.

Moreover, the Forum is an organisation with an exclusive membership, which means that who can be and is represented is highly selective. The WEF may champion "diverse voices [that] lead to better results" (WEF, "Davos Agenda" 00:03:12-00:03:14) but reserves the right to decide who these voices are. Indeed, the WEF does not even obscure its selectivity and exclusivity. For example, the Davos Agenda clearly states that it is "all about getting the right people in the right place at the right time" (00:03:39-00:03:43). The implication, of course, is that it is the WEF that decides who the "right people" are, what the "right place" for them is and when "the right time" is. This attitude is apparent in the entire discourse of the Great Reset, in the framing of the exigence and the proposed solution, and the disregard for diverse movements that have been challenging the current capitalist system for decades. Thus, the WEF's discourse maintains current power relations, disguises challenges to these power structures, and neglects to consciously confront and use its privilege to advocate for the less privileged.

In addition to the uncritical utilisation of their privileged position, Klaus Schwab and the Great Reset supporters also lack accountability. In the preceding section, the BP example demonstrated this point regarding the discrepancy between the company's rhetoric and its business practices. Moreover, the WEF members are also reluctant to take ownership of the consequences of their neoliberal business practices in other ways. For example, Mastercard's CEO Ajay Banga explains that the Great Reset relies on "enormous trust between the private sector and the public sector [but] that trust is hard to come by" (WEF, "Davos Agenda" 00:01:53-00:02:03). This statement makes it seem as if trust is something someone stumbles upon rather than something that is earned. Thus, someone's trustworthiness does not seem to depend on their actions but instead on their luck. It strikes as ironic that considering the glaring wealth inequality, environmental destruction, and demise of democracy that, as discussed, many have linked to capitalism, a CEO of a company invested in this very system deplores that "trust is hard to come by".

Nevertheless, Banga is not the only leadership figure who does not acknowledge their involvement in capitalism's harmful effects. Klaus Schwab displays a similar naïve attitude when he states:

> For the past 30 to 50 years, the neoliberalist ideology has increasingly prevailed in large parts of the world. This approach centres on the notion that the market knows best, that the 'business of business is business,' and that government should refrain from setting clear rules for the functioning of markets. Those dogmatic beliefs have proved wrong. ("Better Economy" par. 11).

While the WEF's founder attempts to describe the causes of the current woes of capitalism, his statement barely scratches the surface and fails to mention the WEF's involvement in neoliberalism. As Pigman explains, the WEF is most widely criticised as "an instrument of neoliberal globalisation" (124). Also, Graz finds that the Davos annual meetings display enthusiasm for the continuation of capitalism (332). Additionally, Schwab's explanation of the neoliberal approach to markets reflects a common misunderstanding. Julie A. Wilson describes that government plays a crucial role in neoliberalism, not for the protection of its citizens but rather of corporations and free markets (57). Neoliberalism's emphasis on liberty pertains to the individual, while the state is significantly involved in providing adequate conditions that enable economic growth (58). Given his educational and professional background, it is highly doubtful that Klaus Schwab would not know about this fundamental, paradoxical tenant of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, his over-simplified statement implies a tremendous lack of transparency that reflects a lack of accountability and may well contribute to the identified "lack of trust".

Thus far, these examples have shown that not only do the rhetors seem to be unaware of their own privilege, but they are also ignorant of their responsibility for perpetuating the many problems arising from neoliberal capitalism. Conversely, the responsibility is shifted to the audience by employing the personal pronoun 'we' to exclude readers and viewers. In turn, this transfer of ownership is indirectly connected to the neoliberal paradox mentioned in the previous paragraph. Bakan demonstrates, that concerning ecological destruction, the narrative of "consumer choice and responsibility help shield corporations from blame for fueling harmful consumerism" (75). Put differently, the systemic causes of environmental problems, such as the practices of corporations, are neglected, while consumers are held responsible for their lifestyle choices. This discourse forces individuals to change while corporations are free to continue their damaging business practices.

The invocation of individual responsibility is used extensively by the Great Reset rhetors. Klaus Schwab sees "how quickly we can make radical changes to our lifestyles" as evidence that "the level of cooperation and ambition" needed to instigate stakeholder capitalism is "not some impossible dream" ("great reset" par. 7). The Davos Agenda clip echoes this same sentiment of personal responsibility: "But [the pandemic] is also proof that when we need to, we can act rapidly and restructure our lives" (00:02:23-0:02:27). Less directly but still sharing the idea of consumer responsibility, SOMPO explains: "We need a new capitalism that increases consumer demands for goods and services that contribute to the SDGs, and that rewards companies meeting that "good demand" with economic returns" (par 7). These

statements exclude the audience from the 'we' of the rhetors or corporate leaders involved in the transition to stakeholder capitalism. However, this time this separation implies that those responsible for changing their actions is the audience.

As Bakan points out, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the importance of consumer choices. However, it is problematic that instead of demanding government regulation of destructive corporate conduct, people are preoccupied with their consumer behaviour (76). Unfortunately, a mere change of individual lifestyles alone is not effective enough to produce the needed change (Bakan 75). Thus, the inspirational call along the lines of "we are all in this together" can be seen as empty rhetoric at best. Moreover, since this rhetoric reflects the central paradox of neoliberalism, individual liberty and responsibility versus state regulation to foster market growth, it again stands to question whether stakeholder capitalism would be fundamentally different from current neoliberal free-market capitalism. The following section is devoted to this analysis.

5.2 The *Great Reset* "solution"

This section examines the proposed model of stakeholder capitalism that is said to solve the world's economic, political, social, and environmental problems more closely. While analysing the primary sources, genuine doubts about the potential of the stakeholder model to produce the claimed radical change have arisen. Thus, the following discussion will investigate these concerns in detail. Textual evidence and practical examples of current 'stakeholder' corporations will help illuminate the difference (or lack thereof) between the exceedingly criticised neoliberal capitalist system and stakeholder capitalism.

5.2.1 *The prospect of change as empty rhetoric*

At the onset of this discussion, it must be noted that the primary sources are not of significant help for determining the difference between the predominant current Western economic system and 'stakeholder capitalism'. One way to explain this curious aspect is that this lack of insight may result from the texts' strategic ambiguity. Another explanation could be that the distinction may not be detectable because the proposed solution does not fundamentally differ from the current system. It can be argued that both explanations are applicable and that strategic ambiguity helps conceal that despite the grandiose promotion, stakeholder capitalism is merely a slightly different form of neoliberal capitalism. However, it is not the advertised "paradigm shift" to solve the myriad problems the Great Reset initiators wish to address. Moreover, the primary sources contain numerous contradictions when describing the plan. Some texts promise

the Great Reset will fundamentally alter all of society while simultaneously being very forthcoming about the non-existing differences to the current economic system.

In this respect, the first noteworthy essay is Klaus Schwab's contribution to the TIME special edition. To support his hopeful "glimpse of what is possible, when stakeholders act for the public good and the well-being of all" ("Better Economy" par. 6), he describes numerous examples of novel business practices. According to him, companies that adhere to the stakeholder model are motivated by "virtuous instincts". Since their moral nature compels them to seek to improve the state of the world, a "180-degree turn" is not required and "corporations don't have to stop pursuing profits for their shareholder" (par. 8). However, this language does not align with the required "paradigm shift" conjured in the "#TheGreatReset" video clip. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a paradigm shift is "an important change that happens when the usual way of thinking about or doing something is replaced by a new and different way" ("paradigm shift"). Since the current model of neoliberal capitalism centres around pursuing profits for shareholders - indeed, corporations are by law required to do so (Bakan 81) - Klaus Schwab's statement does not seem to reflect an entirely new way of thinking.

This lack of a fundamental shift in attitude is further detectable in other descriptions. An example, already mentioned previously, is Klaus Schwab's praise of the "Stakeholder Capitalism Metrics". However, his acclaim of "nonfinancial metrics and disclosure that will be added (*on a voluntary basis*) to companies' annual reporting in the next two to three years" ("Better Economy" par. 12; my emphasis) seems meaningless. The manifold problems arising from the lack of regulation that gives neoliberal corporations free rein are well-documented (cf. Bakan 2020). Thus, the prospect of metrics that companies can voluntarily report on does not seem to solve the problem of their legally unregulated conduct. No one can be held accountable for not adhering to standards open to voluntary adaptation. Moreover, the article by SOMPO holdings makes clear that while stakeholder corporations may wish to help society, they are still primarily driven by profit motives: "[C]ompanies should set key performance indicators and take concrete actions to realise social value that can contribute to future profits" (par. 8). Even though 'social value' seems to be a priority, it is only relevant if it can contribute to future profits.

SOMPO's and Klaus Schwab's examples signal an intriguing element of the Great Reset rhetoric. Like the buzzwords that add to the ambiguity, the usual 'corporate' language of profit and competition seems to be infused with moral values (the frequent mention of "virtuous") and concerns for society (e.g., SOMPO's focus on 'social values'). However, it

appears as if this vague language is intended to distract from the fact that social and ethical aspects are simply another means to achieve profits. These aspects are not crucial as ends in themselves. The already described "#TheGreatReset" video (section 4.2.1) illustrates this point perfectly. The previously analysed part concentrated on the pictures accompanying the narration, "we need to evolve our economic model, putting people at the heart of global value creation. If there is one critical lesson we have to learn from this crisis, we need to put nature at the heart of how we operate" (00:00:49-00:1:09). It was mentioned that this description and the imagery could be interpreted as exploitation.

Furthermore, the message highlights the lack of the proclaimed "paradigm shift". Especially in a European context and its history of colonialism and imperialism, images of Black women carrying water in an African village overlayed with the statement "putting people at the heart of value creation" can have precarious connotations. This representation communicates that the population of the Global South is included ("put at the heart") in creating wealth for the Global North. HRH Prince Charles reason for having to "evolve our economic model" is "to secure our future and to prosper" (00:00:47-00:00:48). However, from the images, it seems as if at stake was the future of the Global North. The Global South will continue to be exploited to create prosperity for those nations. Additionally, the call to "put nature at the heart of how we operate" combined with the statement "investing in nature as the true engine of our economy" (00:00:10-00:00:13) does not suggest a fundamentally different attitude either. Nature is already "the true engine of our economy" since neoliberal capitalism relies on exploitating natural resources (cf. Klein 2014, Noble 231).

Two other sources seem to give more detail about how stakeholder capitalism can be understood. First, in the article "Now is the time for a 'great reset'", Klaus Schwab mentions three components of the Great Reset. Section 4.2.1 has already identified the ambiguity in two of them and shown that they do not reveal any information relating to concrete actions. However, the first aspect does give the reader a small preview of what is envisioned: "The first would steer the market toward fairer outcomes. To this end, governments should improve coordination (…), upgrade trade arrangement, and create the conditions for a 'stakeholder economy'" (K. Schwab, "Better Economy" par. 10). Even though this description is still vague, it is more precise than the two other additional elements. It also reveals that the little said here does not differ significantly from neoliberal capitalism. Governments are already involved in "creating the conditions" for the current economic system (cf. Wilson 58). Thus, it is difficult to evaluate the specific kind of change the WEF's founder has in mind from this statement alone.

The second source that seems to promise a discussion of the Great Reset is the "Launch" video released on the WEF's YouTube channel. However, even though different personalities from the public and the private sector are featured, it again proves challenging to gather more insight. Like Klaus Schwab's article, the small amount of revealed information does not seem innovatively different from current practices. For example, Mastercard CEO Banga explains, "you need private sector capital, private sector ingenuity, private sector technology, and private sector capabilities to come to the party" (00:01:57-00:02:05). Given that neoliberal corporations are private entities that already deliver on Banga's demands, it is again unclear how stakeholder capitalism would be a "paradigm shift". Quite to the contrary, it would further increase and strengthen privatisation that is already a focus in neoliberal capitalism, thereby proliferating the myriad problems that have resulted from this practice[12] (cf. Bakan 2020). Banga's statement also reveals a converse agenda to that identified by conservative news commentators (see section 5.1.1). The myopic view that stakeholder capitalism would mean greater government involvement and is thus a form of socialism can be negated through statements such as the one above.

So far, the textual evidence has revealed that the rhetors speak about stakeholder capitalism in a manner that considerably resembles neoliberal free-market capitalism and seems to build on it rather than 'reset' it. The lack of distinguishing features could be explained with the already mentioned Davos Equation and points to the WEF's constraint in conceiving a radically different way of shaping society, the economy, and politics. As Garsten and Sörbom explain, for the WEF, economic growth and social well-being are mutually dependent ("Tales" 20). This core belief does not set the Forum's ideology apart from the one underlying the current economic system. For example, in a study on media and neoliberalism Robert McChesney points out that "[n]eoliberalism is almost always intertwined with a deep belief in the ability of markets to use innovative technologies to solve social problems far better than any alternative course" (2). This statement reflects the guiding principle of the Great Reset precisely.

Throughout the videos and the articles, technological advances that would help better society and address the world's problems are promoted. One concrete example can be found in

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[12] Bakan demonstrates that corporations would replace governments in the WEF's envisioned economic system. This form of privatisation would have various destructive consequences. Since a more detailed description would go beyond this thesis's scope, two examples are mentioned briefly: First, privatisation in areas such as access to water is highly contested since it turns a basic human right into a commodity (119,120). Second, after the 2008 financial crisis, the city of Detroit was bailed out by the bank JPMorgan Chase, which turned off water and sanitation services in some areas. Many people still did not have access to these essential services twelve years later at the onset of the pandemic, which aided the spread of the coronavirus (115).

the article by SOMPO Holdings. The company describes its innovation in the "nursing care business" (par. 8), which relies on "technology and datadriven [sic] research … [to] reform eldercare and nursing homes" (par. 8). In line with strategic ambiguity, what these changes entail in practice is not revealed. However, the reader is assured that the company's plan "would bring greater happiness to society as a whole, and reduce the burden of nursing care on society" (par. 8). SOMPO Holding exemplifies the morally responsible company Klaus Schwab envisages under stakeholder capitalism with this mission. However, it has been pointed out that such companies operate within the same neoliberal market logic of personal responsibility and deregulation (cf. Shamir 2008, Bakan 2020).

5.2.2 *Neoliberal and stakeholder capitalism in practice*

As the previous section has shown, one aspect relating to the "there is no alternative" fallacy is that the WEF operates from similar core principles as neoliberal free-market capitalism despite its claims to the contrary. The examples discussed have shown that there is no fundamental difference in how the role of the economy in relation to society is perceived and that there seems to be the same emphasis on privatisation and deregulation. This information was revealed by illustrating how the rhetors talk about stakeholder capitalism and discussing one brief example of SOMPO Holdings' reformation of elderly care. An investigation of the primary sources' scarce concrete examples of corporations that seem to align with the stakeholder model further reveals how this form of capitalism seems remarkably similar to neoliberal capitalism.

As is apparent from the Great Reset text, companies within stakeholder capitalism appear to want to contribute to the well-being of society and "do good" (Bakan 5). Hence, in his book *The New Corporations: How "good" corporations are bad for democracy,* Bakan refers to such companies as "good" corporations. Nonetheless, such corporations are bad for democracy because their claim to be responsible and able to take care of society leads to more deregulation, more privatisation and a diminished role of government (Bakan 5). These developments, in turn, transform society into market economies (Bakan 136) and corporations into government entities (Bakan 94). Shamir's investigation into the discourse of morality and the market reaches a similar conclusion. The author finds that "moral consideration … [become] business opportunities" and that political issues are economised (14). While Bakan and Shamir note these processes with concern, the Great Reset supporters seem to welcome them.

For example, in her essay from the future, Mazzucato imagines that "[r]ising to the role of the 'entrepreneurial state', government had finally become an investor of first resort that co-

created value with the public sector and civil society" (par. 18). Bakan and others see such aspirations as worrisome because the principle of profit maximisation will ultimately govern all aspects of life (Bakan 136). To wit, services that are currently commonly believed to be fundamental rights, such as water, access to health care, and education, are commodified and thus become a privilege. Since such a condition is already a reality for many people, the question arises, what stakeholder capitalism would genuinely change. The evidence so far has shown that not much would change. Thus, one cannot help but wonder why the Great Reset is so heavily promoted as an alternative to the current economic system when it does not seem to be an alternative at all.

Nevertheless, the WEF, its founder, and the Great Reset supporters are convinced, or at least want to convince the public, that stakeholder capitalism is the only answer and will change the world for the better. Klaus Schwab expresses his hopes to that effect in his article "A Better Economy Is Possible" and gives some examples that confirm his optimism. For instance, he recalls that "[c]ompanies like Unilever approached the World Economic Forum's COVID Action Platform with offers to supply hygiene products, ventilators or simply logistical help" ("Better Economy" par. 7). While such a gesture of help during a public health crisis seems indeed noble and is one example of the good that corporations can do, Bakan presents a slightly different perspective. He argues that such help would usually be provided to citizens by their respective governments. However, in the case of the US, for example, basic medical supplies could not be provided because prior tax and spending cuts for corporations had led to underfunded public health programs (130-3).

This explanation means that the very practices of neoliberal capitalism have created the conditions in which governments are rendered ineffective to protect and care for their citizens in times of crisis. Thus, corporations are then needed to step in, and of course, profit from the help they offer. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that viewers would resist the Great Reset, as apparent by the YouTube comments. However, Schwab's framing of the Unilever example illustrates once again the disregard for this causal relationship between deregulation leading to ineffective governments that then require the aid of corporations. Another similar example related to the pandemic that shows only one side of the story is Klaus Schwab's praise of the Oxford University and AstraZeneca partnership. He commends the "multinational collaboration involving both the public and the private sector" ("Better Economy" par. 7) to help produce COVID-19 vaccines.

Once again, there is more to the celebrated collaboration. Before the partnership with AstraZeneca, Oxford University operated from an open-license platform, meaning any

manufacturer could freely use the university's vaccine and manufacture it. Since the institution partnered with AstraZeneca, the free license turned into an exclusive one for the pharmaceutical company (T. Schwab). Hence, AstraZeneca is also the only company that can manufacture, sell, and distribute the Oxford vaccine. The fact that the university can no longer open its invention to any manufacturer is not the only problematic aspect of this story. As Tim Schwab further explains, the collaboration was incited by Bill Gates, whose organisation, the BMFG, has been directly and indirectly funding the university with large sums over a few hundred million US dollars (2020). The journalist continues to explicate that "the traditional business model – based on exclusive licenses - … is designed to generate profits, not promote equitable access" (2020). Unsurprisingly, this outlook greatly diminishes confidence in the university's and AstraZeneca's guarantee for fair access to the vaccine.

Moreover, towards the end of 2020, it became clear that various governments had a considerably different understanding of what 'equitable access to vaccines' would mean on a global scale. In November 2020, South Africa and India had announced petitioning at the WTO for a temporary waiver of intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines (Shah). If the request were successful, countries from developing nations could also start manufacturing the vaccines and thereby ensure distribution in their countries. Despite the urgency and ongoing pandemic, no decision had been reached as of 18 June 2021, when Hannah Monicken reported, "countries remain divided on the proposed waiver, and progress is likely to come slowly" (2021). Thus, it remains to be seen what the resolution will be and who will get to manufacture vaccines and oversee their distribution[13]. So far, the account of AstraZeneca's partnership with Oxford University and the appeal for waiving patents to allow manufacturing in countries other than the Global North seems to reveal underlying profit-oriented motivation.

This finding also moves Klaus Schwab's subsequent statement into a different light. According to him in the initial responses to the pandemic, "there was also evidence of strong cooperation between governments and business, to secure the funds needed for vaccine development and distribution" ("Better Economy" par. 7). Regarding the intellectual property rights issue, a "strong cooperation between governments and businesses" could be understood as Western governments making decisions in line with the interests of the principal vaccine-

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[13] The debate surrounding the intellectual property waiver for COVID-19 vaccines seems to be a complex topic with a long-standing history relating to geopolitical issues. The research into this specific example revealed a clear media bias favouring the apprehensive position of the Western nations. This finding suggests that there may be a larger political and economic agenda behind prolonging a decision and the adverse reactions to the initial request. While certainly worthy of further inquiry, such an investigation would divert too far from the topic at hand.

producing pharmaceutical companies. Further, the objective "to secure funds … for vaccine development and distribution" can imply that these same Western nations are in the more powerful position of deciding how vaccines are distributed and present this distribution as an act of charity. Thus, given the background of AstraZeneca's and Oxford University's partnership and the dispute about vaccine manufacturing, Klaus Schwab's statement can be interpreted in terms of profit-seeking and maintenance of current power structures.

Moreover, the problem with the approach of countries from the Global North graciously distributing vaccines they produce was succinctly expressed in another article on the patent issue. The anonymous commentator finds that "the model of donation and philanthropic expediency cannot solve the fundamental disconnect between the monopolistic model it underwrites and the very real desire of developing and least developed countries to produce for themselves" ("vaccine apartheid"). This statement summarises the underlying fundamental flaw in this debate and the overall logic of the "good" corporation that Bakan discusses. "Good" corporations are needed to solve the problems they create in their pursuit of profit, and countries of the Global South depend on philanthropic gestures from their very oppressors. This example explains Klein's previously referenced sentiment that the WEF claims to solve crises that it helped to create and fester ("Conspiracy Smoothie").

Taking this argument further, Bakan notes that corporations "starve the beast" (129). In the context of the relationship between government and corporations, this process entails that deregulated and untaxed corporate conduct leads to crises that governments cannot solve due to being underfunded. Corporations then intervene to solve the problems resulting from conditions they themselves have created (Bakan 129). This same logic seems to play out in the vaccine issue. First, a forced partnership between Oxford University and a private pharmaceutical company (incentivised by private funding) ensures the current, profitable practice of exclusive license for vaccines is maintained. Consequently, these products are protected by intellectual property rights and produced in wealthy nations that can also afford to purchase doses in vast amounts. Concurrently, less wealthy countries are rendered dependent on handouts by potentially being denied the possibility to produce vaccines themselves.

This disavowal of agency and autonomy of developing countries parallels the imagery of the Royal Family's #TheGreatReset video mentioned earlier and its imperial subtext. Also, once again, this forced philanthropy raises the question, how these practices, championed by Klaus Schwab, differ from the current global economic model. Accordingly, it casts doubts why a system that seems to perpetuate current power structures, privilege, and inequality is promoted to do the exact opposite.

5.2.3 There are alternatives: Two examples

As discussed, the language of the Great Reset and the actual practice of corporations that exemplify stakeholder capitalism resemble current practices under neoliberal capitalism. Consequently, the potential for radical change under the 'reset' can be questioned. Studying examples that can be considered alternative visions to the Great Reset further reinforces the sense that this plan is insufficient in bringing about fundamental change. Moreover, the claim that stakeholder capitalism is the only solution that can address the world's problem and indeed shift the current paradigm can easily be disproven by contrasting alternative visions of change with the findings from the rhetorical artefacts. Before addressing two specific examples of other possibilities, it is worth recalling that the analysis of the exigence has shown that the Great Reset is situated within a current discourse of radial change.

The WEF is not the only organisation that recognises, as Klaus Schwab puts it, "now, is the historical moments of times" (WEF, "Launch" 00:00:05-00:00:07). Charles Eisenstein, renowned speaker and author, refers to the opportunity afforded by the pandemic to reflect and fundamentally alter our lives and society as the "Coronation" (2020). Arundhati Roy calls the pandemic a "portal" (2020). Social and cultural geographer Bradley Garrett, author of *Bunker: Building for the End Time,* also argues that the pandemic has given many people the chance to slow down and ask themselves central questions about what they want their lives and the world they live in to look like. A necessary introspection that the demands of the capitalist and neoliberal culture of the West often curtails ("Prepare" 00:37:35-00:38:23). Moreover, the discussion of frame boundaries (5.1.2) mentioned a few examples of social movements that had been demanding change and modelling alternatives long before the Great Reset.

These movements do not only show that it is untrue that people had not been concerned with problems such as environmental destruction, discrimination and wealth inequality before. They also signal that people have been discussing and thinking about possible alternative ways of living and organising society and the economy. Additionally, given that these movements have been challenging neoliberal capitalism for a long time and that there are innumerable voices in the current discourse, the contestation that stakeholder capitalism is the only option on offer to bring about radical change displays an intentional ignorance. While the Great Reset may describe the kind of world people want to live in, there are many different ideas on how to achieve such a world. The first example that stakeholder capitalism is not the only alternative is Eisenstein's article "Coronation" (2020).

While his message could be described as envisioning the same 'more just, fair, inclusive, prosperous world', it is noticeably rooted in completely different values than the Great Reset. Even just a small excerpt makes the difference plain:

> For a long time we, as a collective, have stood helpless in the face of an ever-sickening society. Whether it is declining health, decaying infrastructure, depression, suicide, addiction, ecological degradation, or concentration of wealth, the symptoms of civilisational malaise in the developed world are plain to see, but we have been stuck in the systems and patterns that cause them. Now, Covid has gifted us a reset.
>
> ….
>
> Already we can feel the power of who we might become. A true sovereign does not run in fear from life or from death. A true sovereign does not dominate and conquer (that is a shadow archetype, the Tyrant). The true sovereign serves the people, serves life, and respects the sovereignty of all people. The coronation marks the emergence of the unconscious into consciousness, the crystallisation of chaos into order, the transcendence of compulsion into choice. We become the rulers of that which had ruled us. ("Coronation")

It is noteworthy how this call to change is substantially different from the Great Reset. For instance, Eisenstein is precise about how he uses 'we', making sure to include the reader by specifying "as a collective", which is unlike the frequently used exclusive 'we' in the Great Reset texts. Further, the author's diagnosis of the world's problems seems much more holistic, recognising aspects of mental health ("depression, suicide, addiction") and interconnectedness ("decaying infrastructure") along with economic and environmental problems. Additionally, he pinpoints these problems as symptomatic, thereby ascribing them a root cause and locating them ("civilisational malaise in the developed world"), which the primary sources overlook entirely. As discussed previously, the Great Reset rhetors refer merely to intangible causes such as "the status quo" and neglect to mention their complicity. Further, there is no accusation of ignorance or a moral failing that have prevented change. Nonjudgmentally, Eisenstein recognises that society "ha[s] been stuck in systems and patterns".

Moreover, contrary to the primary source, Eisenstein's writing is infused with a more holistic and spiritual outlook on life. For example, he acknowledges the "gift" Covid has given us, which reflects a humble attitude that is markedly different from the Great Reset's competitive language of conquest connoted by phrases such as "seize the moment" (Mazzucato par. 21). Additionally, where the author speaks of serving people and life and "respecting the sovereignty of all people", the Great Reset is concerned with "accelerat[ing]

efforts to improve the state of our world" (Royal Family 00:00:26-00:00:30) and "putting people and planet at the heart of global value creation" (Royal Family 00:00:52-00:00:58). This materialistic and profit-motivated focus on increasing global value creation starkly contrasts the notion of being of service that Eisenstein evokes. The principles of service to others can be found in all spiritual teachings, which indicates that the author is motivated by a completely different set of values than the 'reset' rhetors.

Hence, the "paradigm shift" needed to affect change (Royal Family 00:01:23-00:01:24) seems to be exemplified by Eisenstein's ideas rather than the WEF's initiative. This impression is further underlined by the invocation of the Carl Jungian idea that the unconscious must emerge into consciousness. The Jungian inspiration is also apparent in the reference to archetypes (the "true sovereign" and its shadow archetype) (cf. Jung and McGuire 2012). This influence indicates that in search of radical change, one could look beyond debates of which economic model is best suited to address global problems. Notions derived from mysticism and spirituality could serve as a foundation for a vision of a "better world". Such ideas could also be personally more empowering than witnessing corporations move into a new reign of 'stakeholder capitalism'. The qualities of a "true sovereign" described by Eisenstein can be realised by anyone, not just global and corporate leaders.

This example is but one of the countless voices in this pandemic-inspired discourse of transformation and shows why the WEF may sell a "solution" arguably designed to benefit the same people that are presently profiting. The above passage highlights that some understandings of what needs to or can be changed differ significantly from what the Great Reset proposes. Hence, it stands to question which vision does indeed present a 'paradigm shift': A shift from 'neoliberal capitalism' to 'stakeholder capitalism' (á la WEF) or a transformation from a system dominated by capitalist economic principles to a society rooted in spiritual principles, such a service to others, respect, gratitude, and recognising all of life as a 'gift' (á la Eisenstein). As the latter operates from a completely different view of the world that could fundamentally disrupt power structures, it seems clear why these ideas would be a threat to existing systems and why some would want to detract from such possibilities.

Of course, a vision like the one expressed in "Coronation" is not the only other option challenging the Great Reset ideas. A second example that also contests the already discussed "there is no alternative" fallacy of the 'reset' rhetors stems from the previously mentioned Occupy Movement. The movement is not only significant for openly challenging and giving a language to the wealth inequality resulting from capitalism. Along with the fiscal crisis that sparked this movement, it also identified a crisis of democracy (Szolucha 19). As such,

capitalism is seen as a threat to real democracy because, as discussed previously, in this system, governments no longer represent their citizens. Instead, it represents and serves corporate interests. This understanding gives rise to the organisation of the Occupy movement itself, which presents another alternative to the stakeholder idea. Occupy presents a model for 'direct democracy' as it organised itself in "new forms of non-hierarchical collaboration, peer-to-peer organisation" (Eisenstein "Occupy") and made decisions by consensus (Szolucha 9).

While on the surface, the stakeholder approach and consensus appear remarkably similar, they embody completely different attitudes towards the involvement of individual participants. Consensus describes a decision-making process in which all members of a group participate in arriving at decisions that affect their respective group. It differs from compromise or agreeing on the "lowest common denominator solution" (Szolucha 9), as it is a process that involves the members directly in the group. Thereby it facilitates a personal process of reflection that allows members to make decisions in the best interest of their group despite their personal preferences. Even though the stakeholder model also upholds inviting all stakeholders to a discussion, it differs from consensus. As described previously (5.1.1), in the stakeholder model conflicting voices are appropriated into a dominant discourse instead of heard and respected individually. Contrary, consensus is not purely about arriving at a specific solution for the sake of resolving conflict. It also acknowledges the process of reaching a decision as an important part of the decision (Szolucha 9). Thus, solutions may emerge from the collective rather than the individual with the loudest and most convincing voice.

This example of one way to approach self-governance further demonstrates that ideas on how to organise society are abundant and do not rely on capitalism to work. Much to the contrary, they would render capitalism obsolete as they would most likely give rise to novel ways of coordinating economic issues as well. Thus, the 'window of opportunity' afforded by the pandemic opens countless others to re-imagine a world where the economy may not be the centre anymore, neither a neoliberal nor a stakeholder economy. Seen against this background, it seems clear why the WEF and Klaus Schwab are urging for immediate change and presenting stakeholder capitalism as the 'only solution'. Any paradigm shift that would somewhat resemble the two possibilities just described would also entail a shift of power, away from corporations and the 1% to the 99% and thus also render the WEF obsolete. Therefore, to prevent this type of change, the WEF, its founder and the economic and political elite it serves affirm that the required change to address the world's problem is indeed already underway.

However, as the discussion has shown, the Great Reset may be nothing more than a superficial make-over of an economic system that has, in recent decades, been exposed for the

inequality, environmental destruction, and political corruption it has created. The findings that have emerged from this analysis indicate that as a new flavour of capitalism, 'stakeholder capitalism' ensures that power remains where it currently is. Additionally, since it seems to continue practices of neoliberal capitalism, it is highly questionable whether it can really solve the problems it wants to address and whether it may even increase them.

6   Conclusion

6.1 <u>Why now?</u>

This thesis endeavoured to address the questions with which rhetorical strategies the Great Reset is promoted, what they reveal about the plan's promise to inspire "radical change", and why the proposed solution of stakeholder capitalism is presented as the only alternative. The analysis showed that the primary strategy for convincing the public of the need for a 'reset' is creating urgency, which includes framing the pandemic as a 'window of opportunity'. However, this perceived urgency neglects that social activist groups have recognised the necessity of addressing serious global challenges long before the Great Reset and long before the COVID-19 pandemic. This, arguably, purposeful forgetting, aids the rhetors in presenting the shift to stakeholder capitalism as the only way out.

However, this solution is problematic for at least three reasons. First, the rhetor's strategically ambiguous communication makes it extremely difficult to assess what it is about and thus obscures any understanding and actual involvement of anyone else but its initiators. This aspect is reflected in how the audience is addressed in all the texts. While employing the first-person plural pronoun 'we', which superficially creates the impression of inclusion, it functions to separate the audience from the rhetors. Hence, the second precarious aspect of the solution is that while one of the promises of the Great Reset is to create a more 'inclusive' world, the audience is excluded from actively participating in building that future. Third, the aspects of stakeholder capitalism that are communicated more precisely reveal that this economic system does not operate fundamentally different from neoliberal capitalism. Thereby, the reset's potential for actual change appears to be relatively minimal.

From these findings, one cannot help but question the WEF's intentions behind the Great Reset. Also, since the idea of stakeholder capitalism is not new, the question arises why the WEF insists on seizing the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to implement a plan of radical change that, at least, outwardly does not appear to change much. This thesis's discussion exposes a simple answer. Against the backdrop of a growing awareness of capitalism's failings,

sparked by the GFC and subsequent social activism (as briefly discussed in 5.1.2), the present disruption of 'normal' life holds enormous potential for a true "paradigm shift" in every sense of the word. It has been shown that this possibility has been recognised by many others aside from the WEF. However, a fundamental alteration could entail an uprooting of existing power structures and belief systems and undoing the assumed "natural" relationship between economic growth and social well-being.

Hence, it cannot come as a surprise that one of the most influential non-governmental organisations, proven to be invested in and strengthening neoliberal capitalism, capitalises on this disruptive moment to ensure current power structures that serve corporate interests and ultimately legitimise the organisation's work are maintained. In other words, 'stakeholder capitalism' is championed as the only answer to neoliberal free-market capitalism to deter any meaningful change in the current system.

6.2 Thesis contribution

This work has made three relevant scholarly contributions by investigating a timely and significant issue based on the notion that rhetoric is epistemic and grounding the rhetorical analysis within Foucault's discursive formations. First, the numerous discoveries relating to how the rhetors communicate indicate that the eclectic approach to rhetorical criticism has its merits. Despite the various points of critique each perspective must account for, they still revealed invaluable insights. Indeed, the combination of three different approaches may have allowed absorbing individual shortcomings. Moreover, the intersection of a perspective's individual elements with others demonstrates how rhetoric creates knowledge. An excellent example illustrating this point is Vatz's judgment of Bitzer's approach to the rhetorical situation. Before attempting an interpretation, it was crucial to understand the rhetorical situation and the context in which the rhetorical artefacts are embedded. However, while the problems the Great Reset rhetor's address, such as environmental destruction and wealth inequality, do exist, it has been shown that how these aspects are discussed and what should be done about them is constantly negotiated through discourse.

It follows that, in line with the epistemic rhetorical approach, rhetoric itself is about creating, exchanging, and transferring meaning. The perspectives of rhetorical criticism can serve to understand this meaning-making process better. In this regard, a beneficial tool was the rhetorical frame analysis, which uncovered the specific frames operating within the text to increase the saliency of some aspects of the exigence and the presented solution. Moreover, the frame analysis also uncovered the significance of the frame boundaries. As illustrated, agenda-

dismissal is a core feature of the Great Reset. Thus, for the interpretative work, various background research (e.g., social movements, BP, the Oxford University and AstraZeneca partnership) was required to understand the importance of what lies outside the discursive frames and possible motives for creating these boundaries. Moreover, the function of frames to regulate and constrain what can be talked about, or put differently, what knowledge can be created, establish them as equivalent to the rules in discursive formations,

Additionally, the roles in discursive formations and questions of power are closely connected to rhetorical frames' agenda-setting and agenda-dismissing effects. More precisely, this practice requires the rhetor to adopt a more privileged position over its audience. The framing of the problems and the solution signal that the rhetors make assumptions about the audience, producing an unequal relationship. Thereby frames not only shape perception but can also create hierarchical structures. The implicit positioning of the rhetor and their solution as superior further relates to the problematic issue of representing other people and how to speak for others. This challenge has had a practical effect on the rhetorical artefacts themselves, in that the usage of the first-person pronoun plural address strikes as a salient feature. Additionally, the closer analysis of this deixis, in connecting with the employed frames and the rhetorical arguments, has exposed the rhetor's unawareness of their privilege and the responsibility that comes with speaking for others.

This constructed hierarchy between rhetor and audience can be seen as a part of the rhetorical situation. This view supports Vatz's argument that there is nothing empirical in the situation itself and is thus constituted by meaning-making processes. Nevertheless, while the rhetors are dominant, they are also constrained by the negotiation of knowledge themselves. Due to their hierarchical place, they must work within real constraints that influence what can and cannot be said. Even though constraints are assets as they provide the rhetors with a framework for approaching a problem (e.g., thinking in terms of urgency and using ambiguity to convey a message), they are also restrictions. The WEF's position, mission, core assumption, and its founder's personal beliefs limit what solutions can be thought of and how they are communicated. Thereby, a real paradigm shift is prevented because the rhetors are trapped within their own paradigms.

This observation of the unequal relationship between audience and rhetor is further significant in terms of how power is thought of in discursive formations. As demonstrated, the hierarchy in which rhetor and audience are positioned is constituted through discourse. However, the discourse alone could not legitimise this construction of a social hierarchy. In the context of the Great Reset, this hierarchy and the discursive formation itself rely on the external

reality of neoliberal capitalism. Though, that is not to say that this economic system is a "truth" from which discourse emerges. Quite to the contrary, neoliberal capitalism, just as the proposed solution of stakeholder capitalism, is also merely a discursive formation. However, the point is that the prevailing economic system (which also receives its legitimacy from discourse) results in lived experiences and tangible structures of oppression and inequality. There may be nothing inherent and natural about these conditions that shape someone's everyday life, yet they become an external reality for a specific moment in time. This "reality", in turn, determines other discourses, such as the one of the Great Reset.

This understanding forms this research's second contribution as it is relevant for discussions of social constructs and the power relations shaping them that frequently overlook the economic interests far too often entangled in creating these constructs. Hence, to confront and deconstruct systems of power, 'class power' (as described previously) cannot be swept under the rug. To wit, conversations about power (currently) require conversations about economic wealth and financial profit motives. This point is also why the Great Reset and Klaus Schwab's stakeholder capitalism does not seem like an appealing alternative to neoliberalism capitalism. Nor does it appear to be able to achieve its stated objective of creating a better, fairer, greener, healthier, more just, more equal, more sustainable, more prosperous, and more inclusive world and economy. With their elusive rhetoric, the Great Reset supporters evade the exact conversation about economic interests interwoven in all the problems they want to solve. Of course, this evasion is revealing.

Herein lies the third noteworthy contribution of this thesis, which provides a clearer understanding of the Great Reset's controversy. There is no need to conceive of outlandish conspiracy theories when the evidence of a small number of economically wealthy and politically influential people calling for a paradigm shift without addressing their own class power is glaring. Spelt out more directly, when someone claims to rectify a problem without taking responsibility for their part, which is apparent to outsiders, it would be highly unusual to blindly trust them. Therefore, the opposition to the Great Reset is a sign that despite the significance of neoliberal class power, there is more to power itself and that in a Foucauldian sense, power is indeed productive (Foucault 119). Ultimately, understanding that power is everywhere and that it is productive may be why some seek to legitimatise and naturalise social and economic constructs that result in the temporary concentration of power over others, over resources, and over life. Hence, this centralised power can be challenged by deconstructing economic and social systems.

6.3 <u>Where do we go from here?</u>

This thought leads to a final point, after which this thesis's limitations are acknowledged, and inspiration for further academic inquiry is outlined. Despite its seeming lack of persuasion, the rhetoric of the Great Reset can still be considered successful. It is convincing in the sense that it has illuminated just how much power seems to presently be concentrated within specific systems and groups of people. It has also illustrated at what cost this concentration of power comes as it disavows other forms of discourse. It has further shown that the pandemic has turned the collective attention to the sacrifices everyone within this system has to make. The sentiment that COVID-19 presents a window of opportunity and is a wake-up call certainly resonates. Not because of an opportunistic attitude or scorn about people's wilful ignorance before the pandemic, but because it has brought us face to face with the fragilities of the very systems in which power is concentrated.

In the wake of fear and uncertainty, the ineptness of our economic system and governments to provide empowering leadership instead of reinforcing systems of oppression has been exposed. Therefore, the "solution" cannot merely depend upon letting corporations, at their own discretion, act socially responsible and bring all their stakeholders to a table to discuss issues. That approach is not a paradigm shift and may certainly not affect much change in terms of the concentration of power. Hence, if we accept the premise that the pandemic will be a turning point and that radical change is necessary but reject the solution presented by the Great Reset, we need alternatives. Here, further scholarship is required. In the space of this thesis, a few ideas, such as the Occupy Movement, were mentioned. Additionally, questions about what a re-organisation of society would entail were raised.

Due to this thesis' focus on the Great Reset's rhetoric and the textual evidence, this discussion was restricted in addressing such questions further. There was also limited space to discuss stakeholder capitalism in more detail and outline the extent of the present discourse acknowledging the need for change. In this respect, only a beginning was made. Here, more research could highlight other concrete ideas for change that may go beyond a slight alteration of capitalism. Such inquiries could also focus on the briefly touched upon Occupy Movement and its underlying approach to direct democracy. This thesis could not expand on this topic itself and, for example, consider why the initial momentum of Occupy seemed to phase out after a while because of space constraints and to avoid digression. Given the crossroads the pandemic has brought society to, it may be worth revisiting this movement and investigating if and how its ideas could be helpful at this moment in time.

Such inquiries may reveal what feasible alternatives to current neoliberal capitalism exist and may require looking outside the known intellectual and theoretical frameworks. Many social, political, and economic systems have already been tried and tested. Hence, instead of "resetting", which implies a normative state in the past, an entire 're-orientation' may be required. With that, this thesis is only a starting point to a much greater undertaking of creating a post-corona vision. Superficially it may turn out to be describable with the Great Reset buzzwords of equality, fairness, sustainability, prosperity, and the like. However, if these concepts were to have substance, such a vision would not be compatible with the driving force of gaining domination over life and exploiting humans and other living beings for the selfish pursuit of value creation. Thus, a collective shift of our inner attitudes is required if the world's economic, social, and political systems are to take on entirely new forms. And from there, *every*thing can change.

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Appendix

Abstract

This thesis undertakes a rhetorical analysis of articles and videos promoting the World Economic Forum's (WEF) *Great Reset.* It examines what the employed rhetorical strategies reveal about this initiative aiming to transform neoliberal capitalism into stakeholder capitalism to solve current global social, economic, political, and environmental problems. The analysis of the rhetorical situation, rhetorical frames and rhetorical arguments of the Great Reset discourse reveals that the texts create 'a sense of urgency', employ 'strategic ambiguity' and address the audience via an 'exclusive we', which reinforces unequal power relations. These findings, coupled with the fact that the Forum is arguably invested in neoliberal capitalism, lead to the conclusion that the Great Reset is not aimed at fundamentally altering current power structures and systems of inequality that underpin much of the pressing global problems. Instead, the WEF detracts from the emergence of other possibilities to change current systems by presenting its solution as the only alternative.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit präsentiert eine rhetorische Analyse von Artikeln und Videos, die für den *Great Reset* des Weltwirtschaftsforums (WEF) werben. Sie untersucht was die verwendeten rhetorischen Strategien über diese Initiative, die den neoliberalen Kapitalismus in einen Stakeholder-Kapitalismus umwandeln soll, aufzeigen. Laut dem WEF ist diese neue Form von Kapitalismus die Lösung aller aktuellen globalen sozialen, wirtschaftlichen, politischen und ökologischen Probleme. Die Analyse der rhetorischen Situation, der rhetorischen Frames, und der rhetorischen Argumente des Great-Reset-Diskurses zeigt, dass die Texte „Dringlichkeit" erzeugen, „strategische Mehrdeutigkeit" verwenden und das Publikum über ein „exklusives Wir" ansprechen, wodurch ungleiche Machtverhältnisse verstärkt werden. Diese Erkenntnisse und die Tatsache, dass das Weltwirtschaftsforum eine ausschlaggebende Rolle im neoliberalen Kapitalismus spielt, führen zu der Schlussfolgerung, dass der Great Reset nicht darauf abzielt, die aktuellen Machtstrukturen und Systeme der Ungleichheit, die einem Großteil der drängenden globalen Probleme zugrunde liegen, grundlegend zu ändern. Stattdessen lenkt das WEF von der Entstehung anderer Möglichkeiten zur Veränderung der gegenwärtigen Systeme ab, indem es seine Lösung als die einzige Alternative präsentiert.