

Beyond Verbatim: Embodied Truth and the Limits of Language in *House Arrest*

Verbatim'in Ötesinde: *House Arrest*'te Vücut Bulan Hakikat ve Dilin Sınırları

ABSTRACT

In an era marked by the proliferation of media images and the blurring of fact and fabrication, Anna Deavere Smith's *House Arrest* (1999) offers a compelling exploration of truth, language and the pervasive influence of media in shaping public perception. Through verbatim text, minimalist staging and emotionally resonant performance, Smith highlights how individuals, particularly those from marginalised groups, are vulnerable to having their narratives distorted or controlled by those in power. In light of media effects theories, including framing, agenda-setting and Marshall McLuhan's concepts of the 'global village' and 'the medium is the message,' this article analyses how the play compels a critical examination of media manipulation and the subtle ways language constructs individuals' understanding of truth. Transcending its historical context, *House Arrest* emerges as a timely call for heightened media literacy and a discerning approach to information consumption in a world increasingly characterised by political polarisation and misinformation. Ultimately, Smith advocates for an active engagement with diverse perspectives and a recognition of the limitations of language by encouraging the audience to cultivate a more conscious and critical relationship with the information that surrounds them.

Keywords: Anna Deavere Smith, *House Arrest*, Media Effects, Verbatim Theatre, Performance

ÖZ

Medya imgelerinin çoğaldığı ve gerçek ile uydurmanın bulanıklaştığı bir çağda, Anna Deavere Smith'in *House Arrest* (1999) eseri hakikatin, dilin ve medyanın kamusal algıyı şekillendirmedeki yaygın etkisinin ilgi çekici bir incelemesini sunar. Verbatim metin, minimalist sahneleme ve duygusal açıdan yankı uyandıran performans aracılığıyla Smith, özellikle marjinal gruplardan gelen bireylerin anlatılarının iktidardakiler tarafından çarpıtılmaya veya kontrol edilmeye karşı nasıl savunmasız olduklarını vurguluyor. Çerçeveleme (framing), gündem belirleme (agenda-setting) ve Marshall McLuhan'ın 'küresel köy' (global village) ve 'araç mesajdır' (the medium is the message) kavramları da dahil olmak üzere medya etkileri teorileri ışığında bu makale, oyunun medya manipülasyonuna dair eleştirel bir incelemeyi nasıl zorunlu kıldığını ve dilin bireylerin hakikat anlayışını nasıl incelikli bir şekilde inşa ettiğini analiz etmektedir. Tarihsel bağlamını aşan *House Arrest*, siyasi kutuplaşma ve yanlış bilgilendirmeyle giderek daha fazla karakterize edilen bir dünyada, artan medya okuryazarlığı ve bilgi tüketimine yönelik seçici bir yaklaşım için zamanında yapılmış bir çağrı olarak ortaya çıkıyor. Sonuç olarak Smith, izleyicileri onları çevreleyen bilgilerle daha bilinçli ve eleştirel bir ilişki kurmaya teşvik ederek farklı bakış açılarıyla aktif bir etkileşimi ve dilin sınırlarının tanınmasını savunur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anna Deavere Smith, *House Arrest*, Medya Etkileri, Verbatim Tiyatrosu, Performans

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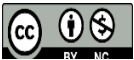
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Geliş Tarihi/Received 08.08.2024
Kabul Tarihi/Accepted 16.09.2024
Yayın Tarihi/Publication 19.09.2024
Date

Cite this article: Ünal, M. (2024).
Beyond Verbatim: Embodied Truth and
the Limits of Language in *House Arrest*.
Theatre Academy, 2(2), 136-152.



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Introduction

In an era defined by a constant influx of media images and a blurring of the lines between fact and fabrication, the pursuit of truth emerges as a complex and often elusive endeavour. Anna Deavere Smith's compelling documentary play, *House Arrest: A Search for American Character in and around the White House, Past and Present* (1999), confronts this intricate relationship between truth, language and the pervasive influence of media. Through verbatim transcripts of interviews with individuals caught in the throes of political scandals, Smith constructs a multifaceted exploration of how narratives are constructed and perceptions are manipulated.

This article examines how *House Arrest* uncovers the manipulative potential of language, particularly within the realm of political discourse. By analysing Smith's verbatim technique, minimalist staging and her characters' intricate relationships with language and embodiment, this article illuminates the play's preoccupation with the representation of truth in a media-saturated world. Drawing upon Marshall McLuhan's concepts of the 'global village' and 'the medium is the message,' as well as theories of media framing and agenda-setting, this analysis investigates how *House Arrest* prompts a critical examination of the relationship between the media and precedence. The play compels the audience to acknowledge the often-invisible forces that shape their understanding of truth, power dynamics and the political landscape.

Embodied Testimony: Smith's Verbatim Approach

Smith's use of verbatim theatre in *House Arrest* exemplifies the manipulative potential of language within political discourse. First coined by Derek Paget in 1987, 'verbatim theatre' refers to a specific type of documentary theatre. He defined it as a form of theatre using recorded interviews with everyday people, transcribed and often performed by the interviewers themselves (Paget, 1987, p. 317). Although terms like 'documentary theatre,' 'verbatim theatre,' 'theatre of testimony' and 'tribunal plays' are often used interchangeably, their sources and methods can vary. For instance, verbatim theatre relies on interviews with ordinary people, whereas tribunal plays use edited transcripts from official legal proceedings (Paget, 2008, p. 135; Wake, 2010, pp. 5-6). Despite this, verbatim theatre can be seen as a distinct form within the broader category of documentary theatre. However, this distinction is more prominent in the UK and documentary theatre is commonly used as an umbrella term for all non-fiction theatre in the US by rarely distinguishing verbatim theatre as a separate category (Wake, 2010, p. 6). While the term

‘documentary theatre’ might be more prevalent in the US context, Smith’s work exemplifies the specific techniques and aesthetic principles that define verbatim theatre as a distinct and powerful form.

As a leading practitioner of verbatim theatre, the American playwright and actress, Anna Deavere Smith is renowned for her series of one-woman performances *On the Road: In Search of the American Character*, in progress from the 1980s onwards. Her one-woman-performance series include *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1991), *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) and *House Arrest: A Search for American Character in and around the White House, Past and Present* (1999). In her performances created based on interviews, she acts all the characters herself by appearing on the stage with bare feet. She explains how she has adopted her performing style as well as why she performs in bare feet as follows:

[M]y grandfather told me when I was a little girl, “If you say a word often enough, it becomes you.” And having grown up in a segregated city, Baltimore, Maryland, I sort of use that idea to go around America with a tape recorder... to interview people, thinking that if I walked in their words – which is also why I don’t wear shoes when I perform – if I walked in their words, that I could sort of absorb America. (Smith, 2021)

The notion of being in someone else’s shoes is thus represented by bare feet in her performances. She does not wear shoes because the implication is that she is in the shoes of the character she is performing. She utilises a tape recorder in her interviews accordingly and emphasises in her performances that everything she does is “word for word of a tape” (Smith, 2021). She endeavours to imitate the interviewees’ tone of voice, mimics and even their postures in her performances. The real-life descriptions of the interviewees from age, race and gender to what they wear are projected through slides on the stage and their utterances—including the fillers like ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ as well as repetitions—are performed exactly as how they were uttered during the interviews¹. She asserts that these fillers and non-verbal sounds are “rhythmic beats that inform the development of character” (Smith, 2004, p. 5). As a part of the performing technique, she repeats the exact words and expressions of the interviewees over and over until she is able to mentally grasp the true nature of the characters becoming the interviewee by imitating everything that meets the ears. This is very crucial for her in the performances since she believes that “people speak in organic poems” (Smith, 2021). Through this organic poetry, it is possible to analyse and identify the speaker according to

¹ Her methods have provided the basis for many of the currently popular forms of Verbatim Theatre in the United Kingdom, namely Playback and Headphone or Recorded Delivery (Keen, 2017, p. 41).

the Australian playwright Colette F. Keen (2017):

Through this repetition of words and rhythms, the organic poetry that people speak is revealed, providing insights into why the voice hesitates or why the voice does not hesitate. Insights are gained into what is happening inside a person that makes them scared to speak, silences them, makes them stutter, and makes them search for words, make mistakes or talk non-stop. (p. 54)

Every tiny detail in a speech can be evaluated as a clue as to what is happening inside the speaker and the effects of the event they are talking about. In other words, according to Keen, how a character tells something is as crucially important as what they tell in Smith's plays in the revelation of the character and the truth.

Although she has not been trained as a journalist, Smith self-identifies as “an actress who’s moving through the world as a journalist” (Najera, 2014) and her works are described as “a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism and intimate reverie” (MacArthur Foundation, 1996). Dissatisfied with the practice of classical journalism, Smith aims to reveal the truth beneath the official declarations and devastating social incidents misrepresented by the media by interviewing common people in her plays. She, however, changes her target group in *House Arrest* and rather puts the voice of the representatives of the media and government officials forward to reveal the relationship between the press and the government

Smith's *House Arrest* transcends the conventional boundaries of documentary theatre, transforming it into embodied narratives. Utilising interviews with a diverse range of individuals—politicians, journalists, historians and people from all walks of life—the play explores the scandals surrounding Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky, Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings and Gary Hart, with a particular focus on the complex interplay between the presidency and the press. By presenting these events and their reverberations through multiple and often conflicting perspectives, Smith cultivates “a sense that there might be multiple, conflicting understandings of these realities” (Bottoms, 2002, p. 58). This multiplicity of viewpoints underscores the play's central preoccupation with the challenges of representing truth and the elusive nature of objectivity, particularly within a media landscape often driven by sensationalism and competing narratives.

Smith's minimalist staging further emphasises this focus on multiplicity and subjective experience by eschewing elaborate sets and props as well as foregrounding the body as the primary vehicle for conveying meaning as a choice underscored by her own deliberate decision to perform barefoot. Deniz Aras and Ahmet Beşe (2023) highlight the significance of the performer's physical

presence by stating that “the physical presence of the body will disrupt and break illusory reality, creating a reality that is not merely reported to the audience but experienced by them” (p. 18). Stripped of theatrical artifice, the raw physical presence of the actor becomes the central conduit for navigating the weight of history, the complexities of memory and the search for understanding within a contested and often fragmented reality. As Xavier Lemoine (2013) suggests, this approach becomes a “postmodern version of performing hybridity” (p. 237) that transcends mere mimicry or impersonation. Smith’s meticulous embodiment of vocal inflexions, gestures and postures allows her to channel the essence of her interviewees by removing theatrical artifice to expose the raw power of the body in conveying not just words but the unspoken emotions, memories and historical legacies embedded within them. Through this embodied transformation, she examines the complexities of identity formation within a multifaceted society.

This emphasis on the body as a primary site of meaning-making is central to Smith’s approach to documentary theatre. As she physically and vocally embodies their words and gestures, her embodied portrayal of interviewees demonstrates the transformative power of this form. Through embodying the lived experiences of historical figures, the audience confronts the biases that shape understandings of the past. Richard Schechner (1999) characterises Smith’s approach as ‘deep mimesis,’ a process distinct from mere ‘pretend’ that resonates with the techniques of African, Native American and Asian ritualists (p. 63). This emphasis on deep mimesis underscores the transformative potential of Smith’s performance style by highlighting its capacity to move beyond superficial imitation.

Smith’s presence on stage by embodying multiple characters simultaneously also underscores the shared humanity that connects diverse individuals. Jill Dolan (2008) articulates this concept as follows:

By allowing a multiplicity of characters to speak through her African American female body, Smith foregrounds the notion that gender is socially constructed and performative, as well as allowing a hopeful dialogue of difference that may lead to a more compassionate sense of common humanity. (p. 68)

Dolan’s observation highlights how Smith’s performance transcends individual representation to illuminate broader societal dynamics. Specifically, through the embodiment of diverse characters within a singular physical presence, fixed notions of identity are dismantled. The audience bears witness to the transformation of gender, often perceived as an inherent and immutable

characteristic, into a fluid and performative construct. Facilitated by Smith's transformative embodiment, this dismantling of fixed categories fosters a 'hopeful dialogue of difference' by encouraging empathy and understanding across social divides. The act of witnessing a multitude of voices and perspectives emanating from a single body underscores the interconnectedness of human experience by prompting a deeper appreciation for the commonalities that bind humanity despite perceived differences.

The Convergence of Past and Present: Embodied Transformation

Beyond its impact on perceptions of identity, this *dismantling of traditional binaries* achieved through Smith's embodied performance also extends to a reconfiguration of power dynamics. Carol Martin (1993) notes that Smith's embodied performances generate a 'convergence of presences' that challenges traditional conceptions of power and authority:

Smith gives these people the chance to speak as if to each other — in much the same way a 'spirit doctor' brings ancestors or other spirits in contact with the living — in the presence of the community of the audience (p. 45)

This convergence operates on multiple levels. Firstly, it collapses the distinction between performer and performed as Smith's body becomes a conduit for a multitude of voices by blurring the lines between her own identity and the identities she embodies. Secondly, it collapses temporal boundaries by bringing the past into the present through the invocation of historical figures and their words. This blurring of temporal distinctions allows past and present to coexist and engage in dialogue by challenging linear conceptions of time and suggesting the ongoing relevance of historical voices in contemporary social and political contexts. By collapsing the distinctions between the performer and the performed as well as the present and the past, this convergence disrupts hierarchical power structures. It fosters a more inclusive and dialogic comprehension of social and political realities by creating a space where marginalised voices can be heard and where the complexities of power can be examined through a multiplicity of perspectives.

The power of Smith's *House Arrest* resides in her remarkable capacity to embody diverse figures, collapsing the distance between historical periods and contemporary concerns. By inhabiting figures as distant as Thomas Jefferson² and as recent as Bill Clinton³, Smith

² Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was a Founding Father of the United States and served as the third President of the United States (1801-1809).

³ Bill Clinton was the 42nd president of the United States (1993-2001).

demonstrates how the complexities of power, scandal and the pursuit of truth transcend specific eras. This is not a mere presentation of historical figures but rather an invitation to recognise the persistent resonance of the past in the present. Through the juxtaposition of narratives across time, the audience is confronted with the enduring legacies of slavery, as seen in the contrasting perspectives of Elizabeth Keckley, a formerly enslaved woman who became Mary Todd Lincoln's⁴ dressmaker and Cinder Stanton, a historian discussing Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings⁵. This convergence of the past and the present is further highlighted through Smith's embodiment of both Anita Hill⁶ and Maggie Williams⁷, figures embroiled in the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings. By giving voice to both women, Smith illuminates how the struggle for social justice and the dynamics of race, gender and political testimony continue to shape contemporary discourse. Smith further amplifies this sense of historical continuity by including figures outside the political sphere, such as Studs Terkel, a renowned oral historian, and Lizzie McDuffie, a White House cook for FDR⁸. Through their narratives, seemingly distant historical moments are rendered immediate by revealing the ongoing relevance of past struggles and triumphs in navigating the present.

Beyond Words: Embodied Truth and Linguistic Ambiguity

House Arrest explores a complex and dynamic relationship between embodied expression and the limitations of language in the pursuit of truth. The play highlights the body's raw and undeniable eloquence by suggesting its capacity to bear the weight of history, trauma and lived experience in ways that surpass verbal articulation. As a reviewer for *TheaterMania* observes, Smith's performance, even when using verbatim text, evokes a powerful sense of embodiment: "When you think back on any particular scene from *House Arrest*, the picture in your mind is likely to be a combination of Smith and her interview subject" (Anonymous, 2000). Simultaneously,

⁴ Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882) was the wife of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States. She served as First Lady from 1861 to 1865.

⁵ Sally Hemings (1773-1835) was an enslaved woman of African descent who was owned by Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States.

⁶ Anita Hill is known for her public testimony in 1991 during the Senate confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, who was nominated by President George H.W. Bush for a position on the Supreme Court. Hill accused Thomas of sexual harassment when she worked under him at the U.S. Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the 1980s. Televised nationally, her testimony sparked a national debate about sexual harassment, power dynamics in the workplace and the treatment of women who come forward with allegations of misconduct.

⁷ The former Chief of Staff to First Lady Hillary Clinton

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, President

Smith acknowledges the inherent ambiguities and fragmentation within language itself. Her commitment to verbatim techniques captures both the authenticity of spoken words and their potential to obscure, distort or fall short of expressing the full complexity of experience. Smith's goal is not to mimic but to "allow a person's actual words... to reveal aspects of his or her character" by often leading to a "surprisingly sharp physical and vocal impression" (Anonymous, 2000). Characters stumble over their words, repeat phrases and employ pauses and silences by creating a fragmented linguistic landscape that mirrors the often messy and contradictory nature of human communication. Rather than undermining the play's authenticity, these moments of linguistic uncertainty serve to enhance it. They remind the audience that truth often resists simple categorisation by revealing itself through the interplay of embodied presence and the imperfect, yet powerful, tool of language.

Throughout the play, hesitant repetitions convey the characters' unspoken emotions and the inherent limitations of language in articulating profound experiences. This is especially evident in Maggie Williams's account of her polygraph test. Punctuated by nervous laughter, her fragmented sentences demonstrate the emotional weight of public scrutiny and the trauma of institutional disbelief:

Well /⁹ you know / it's like going to the electric chair¹⁰ / (*She laughs.*) [...] Uh / ya know, / I just / I just / ya know you just feel like a common criminal. / (*She laughs.*) is what you feel like / is like a common criminal. (Smith, 2000, p. 91)

Coupled with the nervous laughter that erupts, the repetition of phrases like 'you know' and 'I just' conveys a palpable sense of her anxiety and unease. Followed by a silence that allows the weight of that image to settle, the stark comparison to 'going to the electric chair' further underscores her fear and vulnerability. In these moments, silence transcends the mere absence of sound, eloquently conveying the depth of Williams's pain and powerlessness.

While Williams's struggle to articulate her experience reveals the limitations of language in the face of trauma, other characters in *House Arrest* demonstrate how language can be deliberately manipulated to obfuscate truth. President Clinton's strategic parsing of the word 'is' in response to accusations regarding Monica Lewinsky offers a potent example of linguistic manipulation

⁹ In the original work, the words uttered by interviewees at once are given on separate lines. For this reason, even if one word is spoken at a time, one line is used for that word. In order to save space in the study, lines are indicated with slash (/) and speeches are given in paragraph format.

¹⁰ "She is referring to the Whitewater Hearings, in which she had to testify" (Smith, 2000, p. 91).

within the political sphere. Delivered with calculated lawyerly precision, his now-notorious phrase, “It depends on what the meaning of is is” (Smith, 2000, p. 112) exemplifies how language can be strategically employed to obfuscate truth and evade accountability. Facing allegations of perjury regarding his relationship with Lewinsky, Clinton deliberately focuses on the semantic ambiguity of the word ‘is.’ Rather than addressing the substance of the accusations—the nature of his relationship—he deflects attention towards a seemingly philosophical debate about the verb ‘to be.’ A characteristic of legalistic argumentation, this tactic allows him to sidestep direct engagement with the allegations while creating an illusion of engagement. Rather than clarifying meaning, the repetition of ‘is’ further obscures the issue by highlighting the inherent slipperiness of language and its susceptibility to manipulation by those in positions of power. While ostensibly conveying a commitment to honesty and transparency, Clinton’s performance ultimately reveals a profound disconnect between words and their intended meaning within the realm of political discourse. His manipulation of language demonstrates how those in power can exploit the inherent ambiguities of words to evade accountability and shape public perception.

These instances of linguistic ambiguity and repetition as well as silence and pause underscore the inherent challenges of conveying truth through language alone. By adopting the often imperfect and nonlinear nature of human speech, Smith’s verbatim approach underlines that truth may not be easily contained within neat and readily definable categories. Smith challenges the audience to engage in attentive listening thereby recognising the nuances of language, the potency of silences and hesitations as well as the limitations of words in representing the complexities of human experience. The implication of Smith’s approach is that a more comprehensive understanding often resides in the spaces between words that are in the unspoken and the unexpressed.

The Power of Framing, Media Manipulation and Agenda Setting

Beyond examining the inherent ambiguities of language, *House Arrest* explores the media’s deliberate manipulation of language, especially within the context of political scandals. The play illustrates how journalists, often operating within a framework of sensationalism and pre-existing biases, employ language strategically to shape narratives, control the flow of information and ultimately influence public perception. As a central element in Smith’s critique of media ethics, this manipulation resonates with framing theory. Framing is the process of shaping news content

through careful selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration of specific details to promote a particular interpretation of an issue (Tankard et al., 1991). In other words, the way information is presented—the frame it is placed within—powerfully shapes the audience’s understanding and interpretation. Smith counters this potential for media distortion by employing a verbatim technique, allowing her subjects to speak for themselves, unmediated by journalistic interpretation.

Embedded within media language, this inherent power of framing is directly addressed by Gary Hart¹¹ in the play. Reflecting upon his own political downfall, a consequence of media scrutiny of his personal life, Hart poses a series of poignant questions: “What-is-the-meaning-of-language? / It’s: what is the power, what is / the control of the political process?” (Smith, 2000, p. 54). These inquiries expose the intricate connection between language, power and control within the realm of political discourse. Triggered by allegations of infidelity, Hart’s downfall exemplifies how the media can weaponise language to shape public perception and influence political outcomes. His pointed questions highlight the media’s capacity not only to report events but to actively construct the frameworks through which those events are interpreted. Through its ability to shape narratives and frame information, the media possesses immense influence by moulding public opinion and directing the course of political events. Amplified by a media eager for scandal, the framing of Hart’s alleged indiscretions ultimately overshadowed any discussion of his political platform or potential for leadership. His experience underscores the media’s potent capacity to determine which voices are heard, which narratives dominate and consequently, whose version of truth prevails in the public sphere.

Throughout *House Arrest*, Smith skilfully interweaves scenes featuring various journalists¹² by illuminating their biased reporting and use of framing techniques to shape public perception. The play demonstrates how the strategic selection of details, the omission of others and the deployment of emotionally charged language contribute to the construction of narratives that serve particular agendas, often at the expense of presenting a balanced and objective account of events. This critique is illustrated by a former photographer for *US News and World Report*, Brian Palmer’s cynical reflection on photojournalism:

¹¹ He was a prominent Democratic senator from Colorado who ran for President of the United States twice, in 1984 and 1988. His 1988 campaign was abruptly derailed by a media scandal involving allegations of an extramarital affair.

¹² R.W. Apple, Journalist - *The New York Times*; Michael K. Frisby, Journalist - *The Wall Street Journal*; Walt Whitman, Journalist; Christopher Hitchens, Journalist - *The Nation*, *Vanity Fair*; Brian Palmer, Photographic Journalist; James Callender, Journalist.

Like so many things in the journalistic realm these days / that's kind of market driven,
 / so / your competitors are there, / so you have to be there. [...] it does feel a little bit
 like you're just there / to, / watch the body. / And see, / you know and and and to to
 you know cover your organization / or protect (in the Washington lingo) / your
 organization in case / the unmentionable happens. / The unmentionable? / I mean just
 in case POTUS / gets you know POTUS gets waxed. / Oh right. / PRESIDENT-OF-
 THE-UNITED-STATES. (Smith, 2000, pp. 62-63)

Palmer's language reveals a stark detachment from the human element of news by reducing a potentially tragic event to the cold observation of 'watch[ing] the body.' His use of insider jargons like 'cover your organization' and 'POTUS gets waxed'¹³, further exposes a prioritisation of institutional interests and a cynical perspective that undermines objectivity. Driven by competition and the pursuit of sensational visuals, this framing often results in biased reporting that fails to capture the complexities of the events being documented. By incorporating Palmer's revealing monologue, Smith invites the audience to critically examine the forces that shape journalistic practices and to consider how framing can distort the representation of truth, particularly in a media landscape driven by competition and the pursuit of sensationalism.

The scene featuring Christopher Hitchens, a seasoned journalist renowned for his astute observations and incisive commentary, likewise provides a compelling illustration of how framing techniques function to shape public perception. Reflecting¹³ on his reporting of the Gennifer Flowers scandal¹⁴ during the 1992 Clinton campaign, Hitchens articulates an understanding of the complexities inherent in discerning truth amidst media manipulation:

[A]nd I must say from her tapes and her press conference, / however those were
 manipulated by the *Star* or the *Enquirer* or / whatever it was, / It was fairly obvious to
 me / that she had been telling the truth. And probably had been in love with the guy /
 and that therefore it couldn't be / between them, / well she says that and I say the other
 thing / He said / She said / never never actually really occurs. / Because if she's saying
 and it's not true / either I'm a liar / or she really is / a menace. / She'd have to be /
 wicked. / So that means you'd have to trash her, / to impute a bad motive / you can't get
 out of it. (Smith, 2000, pp. 107-108)

Despite acknowledging potential media spin, Hitchens' initial belief in Flowers' honesty highlights the inherent challenge journalists face in attempting to ascertain truth within a media landscape often characterised by distortion and manipulation. However, his subsequent reflection reveals a critical awareness of how the media employs framing to simplify complex narratives by

¹³ 'POTUS gets waxed' is a slang term that means 'the President of the United States is assassinated.'

¹⁴ Flowers, a former Arkansas state employee, claimed to have had a 12-year extramarital affair with Clinton while he was the governor of Arkansas.

often sacrificing nuance for sensationalism. As Hitchens observes, this difficulty is often compounded by the prevalent ‘He said / She said’ approach¹⁵ in media coverage, which frequently prioritises opposing claims over a nuanced exploration of complex situations. This tendency towards reductive framing is exemplified in the media’s portrayal of Flowers as ‘menace’ and ‘wicked’ for challenging the dominant narrative surrounding Clinton. Laden with negative connotations, this framing effectively discredits Flowers and protects the image of a rising political figure, namely Clinton. By casting her as a threat, the media silences her voice and reinforces the power imbalance inherent in the situation. This example underscores how framing, operating through subtle linguistic choices and emotionally charged language, can profoundly shape public opinion by determining who is deemed credible, who is vilified and ultimately, whose version of truth prevails in the public sphere.

The pervasive influence of media framing on public perception is further emphasised through the experiences of Anita Hill, whose testimony during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings became a focal point for debates about sexual harassment and power dynamics. Hill vividly describes the media’s manipulative tactics concerning her polygraph test, a tool employed to assess the veracity of her allegations:

First of all, / they used that whole idea of an uh / polygraph test as a threat. / They said well will you take a polygraph test, Ms. Hill? / So we called their bluff / then they accused us of inventing it as though / it was our idea to start with. / Then they said it’s a trick. / It was slick, it was dirty. / And another thing that you might think about, / it was slick it was dirty, / But President Bush in many ways was protected from that dirt. (Smith, 2000, p. 91)

The repetition of ‘it was slick, it was dirty’ reveals Hill’s frustration with the media’s attempts to control and distort the narrative surrounding her testimony. This manipulation extended beyond the polygraph test by permeating broader media coverage that often-favoured sensationalism over substantive engagement. Furthermore, Hill’s pointed observation about President Bush being ‘protected from that dirt’ exposes a deeper bias within the media landscape—a tendency to align with and even shield those in positions of power. This misrepresentation is reflected in Hill’s statement that she felt like an “imposter” due to the “myths that circulate” (Smith, 2000, p. 102). Rather than a careful examination of her allegations, the media’s focus on rumour and speculation generated an environment in which her credibility was perpetually undermined. By prioritising

¹⁵ A form of reporting that reduces complex situations to opposing claims without seeking deeper truths.

superficial assessments of Hill's demeanour over the substance of her allegations, media coverage ultimately cultivated a climate of disbelief by facilitating the public's dismissal of her as unreliable or vindictive. Through Hill's experience, Smith illuminates how media framing, particularly when imbued with gendered and racial biases, can have a detrimental impact on individuals who challenge power structures, effectively silencing their voices and impeding their pursuit of justice.

Smith's theatrical representation of Anita Hill offers a direct challenge to the media's reductive framing of her narrative during the Clarence Thomas hearings. By presenting Hill's testimony verbatim, unfiltered by journalistic interpretation or biased commentary, Smith grants the audience unmediated access to Hill's own words. This artistic choice underscores the limitations of relying solely on outward appearances or mediated portrayals to assess truthfulness, particularly within a media landscape saturated with images and susceptible to societal biases. Rather than staging an explicit contrast between Hill's public and private personas, Smith's performance, through its meticulous attention to vocal inflexion, cadence and subtle physical gestures, invites a deeper engagement with the emotional weight of Hill's testimony. This approach compels viewers to reconsider the reductive framing prevalent in much of the media coverage surrounding the hearings by prompting a more profound understanding of the personal and societal stakes involved when speaking truth to power. In essence, Smith's performance reclaims Hill's narrative from the distortions of media framing by allowing her voice to resonate with a power and authenticity that the media often sought to suppress.

The characters in the play also frequently express concern regarding the media's agenda-setting function, particularly its tendency to prioritise sensationalised narratives over more pressing societal issues. This tendency resonates with what communication theorists Werner Severin and James Tankard (2014) call the agenda-setting function, where "the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind" shapes our perceptions of what matters (p. 219). Studs Terkel¹⁶, for instance, laments the media's preoccupation with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal¹⁷ by exclaiming, "We got Lewinsky-ism and Monica-ism! / Instead of 'what the hell we been doing to all these countries and / to the have / nots in this country?'" (Smith, 2000, p. 15). Terkel's critique highlights how media attention is often

¹⁶ A renowned oral historian.

¹⁷ The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was a political sex scandal that dominated American news in 1998. It involved then-U.S. President Bill Clinton and 22-year-old White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

fixated on political sex scandals by diverting focus from crucial issues such as the impact of American foreign policy on other nations, economic disparities and social injustices within the United States. He alludes to significant political events of 1998, such as the Iraq disarmament crisis¹⁸ and the economic sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan¹⁹, as examples of issues overshadowed by the media's obsession with scandal.

The Global Village and the Medium's Message

This preoccupation with scandal and the media's power to dictate what the public perceives as important aligns with Marshall McLuhan's concept of the 'global village,' where the pervasive presence of media fosters a distorted sense of intimacy with public figures. McLuhan (1964) posits that media fosters a sense of intimacy with public figures by leading to the assumption that the audience 'knows' these figures and the issues they represent. In the play, Gary Hart articulates this dynamic by posing the question, "Who decides what is moral and immoral?" (Smith, 2000, p. 54). Hart's implication in his question—that the media, driven by its own interests, exerts significant influence in shaping moral perceptions—illuminates the play's critical engagement with media's power to frame public discourse. McLuhan suggests that this distorted sense of intimacy has profound effect on individuals' understanding of morality and ethics.

In *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan contends that "the medium is the message" (p. 7). This famous dictum implies that the form and structure of media technologies themselves shape the audience's perceptions and values even more powerfully than the content they convey. As McLuhan (1964) argues, individuals often prioritise the content of media ('the what') and neglect to consider the medium itself ('the how') and its inherent influence (p. 7). The linear nature of print media, for instance, encourages logical and sequential thinking, while the immersive and multi-sensory experience of television fosters a more emotional and immediate engagement with information. Therefore, the very technology through which information is transmitted fundamentally shapes how the audience perceives and interprets that information. Applying this to *House Arrest*, one might argue that the constant barrage of fragmented news snippets and sensationalised images on television fosters a culture of superficiality and cynicism by making it

¹⁸ A series of sanctions and weapon inspections by The United Nations and other national organisations aimed at disarming Iraq for its suspected development and deployment of chemical and biological weapons against neighbouring countries. It resulted in the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

¹⁹ The reason for the sanctions on India and Pakistan was the nuclear weapons tests these countries carried out in the late 1990s.

difficult to engage with complex political issues in a nuanced and informed way. In its exploration of media framing and manipulation, the play implicitly echoes McLuhan's assertion that the medium itself exerts a powerful and often invisible influence on its audience's understanding of the world.

Conclusion

Through its intricate exploration of language, power and truth, *House Arrest* transcends the conventional limitations of documentary theatre to offer a profound commentary on the complexities of representation and the pervasive influence of media in shaping public perception. Smith's artistic choices, particularly her commitment to verbatim text and minimalist staging, serve to amplify voices often marginalised or silenced by dominant narratives. The play compels a critical confrontation with the inherent ambiguities of language, the manipulative potential of framing techniques and the collective responsibility to engage critically with the information that permeates contemporary society. Through the careful construction of a fragmented linguistic landscape, Smith resists simplistic explanations and encourages a more nuanced understanding of the characters' lived experiences.

By interweaving personal narratives with broader historical and political contexts, Smith reveals the enduring legacies of power imbalances and social injustices. The juxtaposition of figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Anita Hill and Bill Clinton underscores how the dynamics of race, gender and political manoeuvring transcend specific eras by prompting a deeper consideration of the cyclical nature of history and the persistent challenges inherent in speaking truth to power. The inclusion of such individuals beyond the immediate political sphere like Studs Terkel and Lizzie McDuffie further emphasises this historical continuity. As a renowned oral historian and social commentator, Terkel provides a vital link between past and present by offering reflections on social change, political discourse and the enduring impact of historical events on contemporary society. McDuffie's intimate recollections of her time serving in the Roosevelt White House, a period marked by both national triumphs and social upheaval, illuminate the personal lives affected by political decisions and the ways in which individual experiences are shaped by broader historical forces. Their narratives demonstrate how seemingly distant historical moments retain a potent relevance in navigating the present by underscoring the importance of acknowledging past struggles and triumphs in confronting contemporary concerns.

Through its engagement with concepts like McLuhan's 'global village' and 'the medium is the message,' the play illuminates the pervasive influence of media technologies on societal values and perceptions by rendering visible the often invisible strategies of media manipulation that shape public discourse. The constant bombardment of fragmented news snippets and sensationalised images, which are the characteristics of television news, can be understood as contributing to a culture of superficiality and cynicism thereby hindering rigorous engagement with complex political issues. Through its examination of media framing and manipulation, Smith's work implicitly reinforces McLuhan's assertion that the medium itself wields a potent influence on human understanding. *House Arrest* therefore emerges as a call for heightened media literacy, a more discerning approach to information consumption and an ongoing commitment to pursuing truth within an increasingly complex and mediated world.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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