

# CRISIS & CRITIQUE

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**CINEMA**

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Dialectical Materialism Collective

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# Introduction: Cinema

## Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* has been produced under some rather unusual circumstances. These circumstances could at times seem as if they originated in a rather mediocre catastrophe movie and were then themselves rather badly translated into reality. The often-devastating effects the most recent conjuncture has created, impacting the editors of the present journal, the members of the editorial board that supports us, and certainly the invited contributors, each to different degrees—some of which for heartbreaking and gut-wrenching reasons or for reasons of unforeseeable fatigue and distress could not but withdraw their contribution. But the situation did not only affect in horrifying ways friends, colleagues, and comrades of the present journal and their families, the “political” effects it generated—at least in part—are sickening and mind-numbing (some effects which are ongoing, and some which haven’t even picked up pace yet).

It is clear to us that, especially in a time like ours, it can appear an almost ridiculous, unworldly, blind, idealist, or idiotic gesture to defend the need to think or to start thinking of other things than the present state of the world. This is why we will happily return to the world with our next issue, after, at least to some extent, leaving it if not aside, at least bracketed or reframed for a moment with our present issue. The reason for this is because we want to address with our present issue a specific way in which, a specific *modus*, a specific medium through which we see the world, namely through moving images. To mimic one of the famous titles of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in the following we want to address—rather implicitly than explicitly, as none of our authors was able to foresee what came over us—“cinema in times of COVID”.

From its very conception and material implementation, cinema—moving images—effectively and affectively moved the people; the masses. This is clear. But it is not entirely clear what it is that moves people when they see a film? Is it the images? Is it their movement? Is it their concatenation with a narrative? With music? Throughout the history of cinematographic theory and the history of modern philosophy there have been many answers given in response. In a very general and schematic manner, the different conceptual and theoretical approaches to cinema were once grouped into five larger attempts to understand and explain the power of cinema:<sup>1</sup>

Some of its theoretical viewers saw cinema as a mass art that created its appeal because it was able to mobilize the power of the image. Philosophers—since Plato—often argued that images fascinate people—and they (philosophers and images) still do. But cinema brings the power of the image to a whole new level. It allows everyone to perceive miracles of the visual. It offers something like a true spectacle, a truly popular art, excluding no one from the joys and insights of the imaginary artifice.

.....  
<sup>1</sup>We orient ourselves herein through Badiou’s elaborations in: Badiou 2013, 202–232.

Others argued that cinema adds and complicates the overall system of the arts (if we start from the assumption that such a system exists and, that is, if we start from assuming that we can make distinctions between the different particular arts). Cinema in this system is an art-form operating with images. Yet it is far more popular than painting. It also uses bodies moving, but it is more popular than dance. It uses words, yet is more popular than poetry. It thereby certainly—and materially—retains some aspect of what makes music, literary narrative, and theatre massively attractive. But it adds something new and different to their appeal by mixing and bringing together different art-forms. Cinema from this point of view is perceived not only as a new form of art but also as being the form of art that has the power to take up aspects from the other particular arts and through combination add something to it. Certainly other art forms were supposedly also able to do this (think of Wagner's idea of a total work of art, of literature using techniques of musically remixing material, of music being narrative, etc.). But cinema's specific capacity, its specificity vis-à-vis the other forms of art, is identified in the ability to bring together the other forms of art, thereby generating productive new potentials.

Again, other thinkers of cinema, like Deleuze for example, argued that cinema is able to make visible something that we otherwise never see, namely time. Cinema is not only an art of the image, it is an art of time. It is an art-form that presents us with a temporal flow that is capable of delighting everyone, because it makes visible what otherwise remains invisible. Cinema's images thereby capture through their very nature what might be a condition of possibility of the visual, but is impossible to see outside of cinema. It makes us see something impossible (to see).

Others again, like Bresson, believed that cinema is the only art that always and constantly borders on and thereby deals with what is not-art. It is the form of art that integrates the everyday—the everyday-imaginary and the boring ordinary images. Where else but in cinema has one seen profoundly insignificant car rides, closing of car doors, meaningless scenes of tables or houses and the like than in cinema? This is also what for others, like Badiou, makes cinema into a great democratic form of art. Not simply because it treats—as Rancière might have it—all its material equally and de-hierarchises what it presents through the way in which it presents it. Rather, because it treats all its viewers in the same manner. It is an immanently impure art as it is never fully art, never fully high art, but cannot avoid containing something boring, mediocre, or bad. Cinema is herein different to a bad musical piece. The latter everyone without any previous knowledge can understand, but it may just a bad piece of composition. Cinema can be understood because it does not necessitate any previous knowledge, yet this does not make a film that is understandable by everyone into a bad film. Non-artistic, bad sequences in even the greatest movies are not just bad sequences, but they are the internally worldly, non-artistic, everyday material that cinema works with. And because of this material, it is intelligible and accessible to everyone (differ-

ent from say painting or poetry). Cinema is an art for the masses, because it operates on a mass-imaginary.

Others, yet again, have argued that cinema is an art form of great character and figures. Not only of idiosyncratic characters, but also great ethical types—from Randle Patrick McMurphy from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to Rocky through Sadie in *Vigilante*, from all the great villains to all the great heroes, or even anti-heroes from the history of cinema. These characters are not always heroic in a classical sense, they are not even always “good” in a moral sense of the term, but they dramatize traditional ethical conflicts in ever new ways; in potentially universally moving ways.

Encore, others read current and contemporary depictions as reflective materialization or material reflections of present belief-systems. Cinema thereby is an art that always reflects its specific time by inventing contemporary ways in which dominant representations of the world (that are also our own) work and by depicting their limitations and potencies. It thus presents us with a strange (and thus per-or inverted) insight into the way in which the dominant imaginary works. It shows us and thereby reflects on the ways we think, act, and reflect. Cinema in this sense tackles what we take to be evident or unquestionable and presents us with how ideology, how the logic of our ideas works (and therefore is absolutely crucial to the understanding of the state of the world and specifically “our” subjective position within it). In cinema, we thus even learn and can see how we are supposed to and tend to desire.

This issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to investigate the contemporary and general significance and potentials of cinematographic film making in our contemporary world, and it invites answers to what and in what way cinema can teach us today. It seeks to discuss what ways may prove already co-opted or dead-ends. Thereby, it also hopes to point to paths still open or imaginary roads that need construction. In times like ours, seeing what is impossible to see, learning how to desire differently or experiencing what thinking in masses can look like, might actually be the beginning of something genuinely unforeseen.

Berlin/Prishtina, June 2020

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# “Who Do We Shoot?”: Capitalism and the Problem of Its Image

Pietro Bianchi

**Abstract:** How does capital appear and manifest itself? What is its image? According to Marx, capital is a contradictory object: it is founded on a structural dissymmetry at the level of production, but it appears in the realm of circulation as governed by a system of equivalences. This paper presents the argument that cinema, as a science of appearances, can be a mean to reflect on this particular self-effacing form of appearance, where the antagonism of class struggle is erased and transubstantiated in the one-dimensionality of the image.

Among the many examples there is Sergei Eisenstein who worked on a project for a film on Marx’s *Capital* and who wanted to inquiry the apparent “sensuous” immediacy of the commodity form opening it up to its hidden “extrasensory properties”: the social and economic mediations that made it possible but remain invisible. On the other, contemporary visual sensibility infused of big data and drone-aesthetics, critically analyzed by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, relies on cartographical means and views from above to figuratively imagine capitalist social relations as a global all-encompassing image.

But, as Michael Henrich and the theorists of the value-form, as well as Riccardo Bellofiore, have shown, value – capital’s *raison d’être* is not localizable: it is a spectral entity that, while governing the entirety of the process of accumulation, is empirically nowhere to be found. Cinema should not be therefore a way to grasp the secret of value and bring it to visibility but a way to reflect on the structural reasons of its effacement in the regime of appearance.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Marx, Appearance, Image, Eisenstein, Value-Form, Jameson

There is a famous sequence at the beginning of *Grapes of Wrath*, John Ford 1940s film based on Steinbeck’s novel, in which we see Tom Joad who, after being released from prison, returns to his family farm in Salinas, Oklahoma and finds it empty, destroyed and abandoned.<sup>1</sup> The land was confiscated by the banks and his family had to move to California to find jobs to make ends meet. But how is it possible—one wonders—that someone could take over the land where the Joads had lived and worked for more than fifty years? How could it happen? Muley—a man who had camped in the ruins of the abandoned Joad house and refused to flee to California—reveals who is responsible for what occurred to Tom’s family. In a three-minutes flashback John Ford not only shows, through the words

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the arguments of this article have been discussed in the seminar “Marxism and Ideology” taught at the English Department of the University of Florida in Spring 2020. I would like to thank the participants of the seminar Julia Burgin, Suvendu Ghatak, Jacob Hawk, Danielle Jordan, Ryan Kerr, Tyler Klatt, Claudia Mitchell, John Robison, Amanda Rose and F Stewart-Taylor for having shared with me their perceptive observations and for the discussions we had throughout the semester.

of Muley, a detailed representation of a confiscation of land in Oklahoma during the Great Depression, but also implicitly raises one of the most enigmatic and complex questions of capitalist modernity: how does capitalism manifest itself? What is its face when it appears in our lives with a traumatic event (such as a house eviction)? What is its image?

The flashback takes us to the day when an emissary from the land-owners who rented the fields where Muley used to work came to deliver an eviction notice to the tenant farmers. The man explains how the sharecropping system is no longer profitable: the company does not have a sufficient return for its investment anymore because now a man alone with his tractor is able to take care of 12 or 14 of those fields. It is more convenient to just pay him with a salary and take all the harvest. Muley complains that it is already difficult for them to live off what they earn right now: children are hungry and dressed in rags. But the man cuts him short and tell him that he is not the responsible for all this: he only carries out orders on behalf of the company. “So, whose fault is it?” a worker asks. “You know who owns the lands. It’s the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company,” replies the man. “And who are they?” replies the farmer. “Nobody. It’s a company.” Then the farmer, starting to get impatient, asks who should they talk to, perhaps with a rifle. But with a regression to infinity, responsibilities move continuously away: shouldn’t there be a president of that company? But they are told it is not even him who is to blame, because the bank told him what to do. And even in the bank, decisions are made by a manager, who is “half-crazy trying to keep up with his orders”. “Then, who do we shoot?” one of the farmers asks, now absolutely furious; to which the man finally replies: “Brother, I don’t know. If I did, I’d tell you. I just don’t know who’s to blame.”

This is the question that haunts the farmers: who is to blame for their despair and injustice? The banks? The man who brings the eviction notice? Or even their neighborhood friend, who is just as desperate as they are, and drives the tractor that is going to destroy their house for three dollars a day? Which of them is the true face of capitalism and responsible for their condition? What is the cause and reason for this process that seems so abstract and opaque? Who is to blame? This question still today represents a political quandary of great significance, especially in an era in which the value chain and the capitalist production network has become so stratified and complex that decision-making centers seem to have become invisible.<sup>2</sup> If everyone, from small entrepreneur to CEO of multinational financial groups, are only emissaries (or *Träger*, as Marx said) of capital, and execute orders taken elsewhere—just like the businessman from *Grapes of Wrath*—who is responsible for these orders? Where is the agency located? The question, even for a political agenda that wants to transform capitalism, remains today the same that haunted the workers of the Dust Bowl: who do we shoot? Who should we point the gun at?

2 Among the many possible accounts of the complexity of the different contemporary operations of capital see Mezzadra, Neilson 2019.

### “...so that the humble worker or peasant could understand Marx’s *Capital*”

This problem forces us to reflect on the nature of the *image* of capitalism and of its modes of sensible appearance: how is it possible to see the capitalist mode of production in the midst of the confused and opaque multiplicity of reality? How does capitalism manifest itself in experience given that, as the example of *Grapes of Wrath* shows, most of the time we only see its effects but not its hidden causes? Or—as someone might legitimately ask—does capitalism exist in the first place, given that in our experience it is nowhere to be found?

The question guided Sergei Eisenstein when between 1927 and 1928 he started to work on a project for a film on Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*: a project based on the idea that it was effectively possible to create images that would render capitalism visible. These were years when Eisenstein was at the peak of his fame, just after the most important commission of his life: a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution with *October*. The latter turned out to be one of the most expensive blockbusters in the history of Soviet Cinema: whereas an average Soviet production cost 30,000–40,000 rubles, for *October* more than 800,000 rubles were spent.<sup>3</sup> It might have been because of this ecstatic sense of grandeur<sup>4</sup> and provisional trust that the Soviet state gave him during those years (that rapidly changed during the 30s), that he thought that such an ambitious and challenging endeavor would have been possible.

As we can see from the scattered and not always coherent information (filled with cut-and-paste images and collages, as it now has been revealed by Elena Vogman<sup>5</sup>) left in his notebooks and diaries, Eisenstein wanted to construct a didactical project aimed at explaining not so much the conceptual passages of *Das Kapital* but the dialectical method of Marx (“to teach the worker to think dialectically. To show the method of dialectics”<sup>6</sup>). A couple of years later he would have synthesized his approach during a talk he gave at the Sorbonne in Paris:

My new conception of the film is based on the idea that the intellectual and emotional processes which so far have been conceived of as existing independently of each other—art versus science—and forming an antithesis heretofore never united, can be brought together to form a synthesis on the basis of cinedialectic, a process that only the cinema can achieve. A spectator can be made to feel-

3 Interview with Oksana Bulgakova from Alexander Kluge’s *News from Ideological Antiquity*.

4 Eisenstein during those weeks was “nearly blind, overworked, and living on stimulants in order to finish the film on time”: cf. Vogman 2019, p. 21.

5 Vogman 2019.

6 Eisenstein 1976, p. 10.

and-think what he sees on the screen. The scientific formula can be given the emotional quality of a poem. And whether my ideas on this matter are right or wrong, I am at present working in this direction. I will attempt to film *Capital* so that the humble worker or peasant can understand it.<sup>7</sup>

So, how would this project concretely look and how would it possibly make an illiterate worker to understand with images the conceptual intricacies of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* that usually require years of sophisticated intellectual training? The examples imagined by Eisenstein were numerous, eclectic, and ingenious. For instance in order to visualize the problem of the relationship between workers and the mechanization of production—between the “textile machines and machine-wreckers” or luddites, as he put it, i.e., the unemployment derived from technological changes in production—he thought of showing an “electric streetcar in Shangai and thousands of coolies thereby deprived of bread, lying down on the tracks—to die”.<sup>8</sup> To represent financial capital his plan was not to show the stock exchange or the typical images that we associate with finance, but rather “thousands of ‘tiny details’” like in *L'argent* by Zola: a concierge who works as a “broker” on the side and lends money to all residents of the building.<sup>9</sup> But it seems that Eisenstein's approach was closer to Marx when he emphasized the contradictions and antagonisms that coexists within a commodity (almost alluding to a potential reflection on the commodity form): like with the example of “silk stockings” where “the fight for the centimeter of silk stocking” placed one against the other artists and moralists, silk manufacturers and textile masters for long skirts, ending with “Indian women forced to incubate the silk cocoon by carrying them in their armpits”.<sup>10</sup> Or regarding a scene where Eisenstein seemed to have in mind a concrete plan of what he would have eventually shot, he writes,

Throughout the entire picture the wife cooks soup for her returning husband. NB Could be two themes intercut for association: the soup-cooking wife and the home-returning husband. Completely idiotic (all right in the first stages of a working hypothesis): in the third part (for instance), association moves from the pepper with which she seasons food. Pepper, Cayenne, Devil's Island. Dreyfus.

.....  
<sup>7</sup>The quote is taken from Samuel Brody's enthusiastic account of Sergei Eisenstein's lecture titled “Principles of the New Russian Cinema”, which was delivered at the Paris Sorbonne University on 17 February 1930 (Brody 1930)

<sup>8</sup> Eisenstein 1976, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Eisenstein's diaries from April 7, 1928 (RGALI, 1923-2-1107, pp. 26, 27) quoted in Vogman 2019, p. 238; Eisenstein 1976, p. 10, 17 and 25.

French chauvinism. Figaro in Krupp's hand. War. Ships sunk in the port. (Obviously not in such quantity!!) nb Good in its non-banality—transition: pepper-Dreyfus-Figaro. It would be good to cover the sunken English ships (according to Kushner, 103 days abroad) with the lid of a saucepan. It could even be not pepper—but kerosene for a stove and transition into oil.<sup>11</sup>

The soup that the wife prepared for her returning husband should have been the symbol of the minimal relief that calms down a need for social uprising—“the ‘house-wifely virtues’ of a German worker's wife constitute the greatest evil, the strongest obstacle to a revolutionary uprising”,<sup>12</sup> Eisenstein wrote. From that image, a whole series of connections emerged: the worker puts the pepper in the soup, but where does the pepper come from? From “Cayenne” in the “French Guyana”; and it was precisely in Guyana, in the “Devil's Island” just outside Cayenne, where “Dreyfus” was sent in a forced-labor camp after being convicted in 1894 for the famous affaire where all “the French chauvinism” emerged, promoted by “Figaro”. But who funded Figaro? Krupp, the famous steel factories that did not only support the newspaper but were also one of the biggest armament industrialists in the world; the latter brings to the “sunken English ships” that “it would be good to cover [...] with the lid of a saucepan”, exactly as if they were pepper grains in a pan...

In this crazy scene, an object is analyzed and interrogated, and reveals a complex network of unexpected associations: from a simple soup an entire system of relations is discovered and at the end it is almost as if the “sunken English ships” were really inside of the saucepan, given that effectively it was because of them that pepper was on that table in the first place (at least according to Eisenstein eclectic logic). Adopting this method, which at first may seem unorthodox, Eisenstein seemed to be aware that the Marxian process of “opening up” the social implications implied in a commodity is similar to a regression to infinity: from the concrete immediacy of an apparently simple object standing in front of our eyes in *Capital* we are brought to discover what are its invisible social mediations. From the immediacy of perception of its objectuality (“a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing”<sup>13</sup>) we are led to find out its “sensuous extrasensory properties,”<sup>14</sup> i.e., its *non-immediate* properties. Even today a mildly technological product is made possible by a complex network of logistics systems of transportation,

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<sup>11</sup> Eisenstein 1976, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Marx 1976, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> As noted in Henrich 2012, p. 72, this would be right translation and not “transcends sensuousness” as is translated in the Penguin edition of Volume 1 (Marx 1976, p. 163).

raw material extraction, semi-finished products, manufacturing plants as well as engineers, software developers, system administrators (and also janitors, delivery men, cafeteria cooks, etc.) that are nowhere to be found if we just look at it. If we open what is “inside” of a commodity, we find an entire world of social spheres that are completely invisible to its immediate appearance, but at the same time essential to it. The social “cause” that brought that particular commodity in front of us is absolutely opaque.

In Alexander Kluge’s *News from Ideological Antiquity*—a 9-hours essay-film that recently went back to reflect on Eisenstein project of filming *Capital*—there is a short feature that exemplifies this logic of “opening up” the immediacy of an object in order to reveal its hidden social mediations. Realized by Tom Tykwer, it is titled *The Inside of Things* and almost literally reenacts Eisenstein’s method of regression to infinity to analyze the commodity form. In this short feature, we see a woman running in front of a building and after a few seconds the frame suddenly freezes and for about ten minutes a voice-over isolates one by one the different elements that compose the shot: a door phone, the lock of the door, the house number, the leather shoes of the woman, her purse, and so on. All these objects are analyzed in detail, from a historical and technological point of view: where were they made, in which historical period were they invented, when did they start to be produced, where are they fabricated, etc.? The objects that compose that particularly frame—but we could say: almost *any* object that inhabits our world—are none other than commodities: which means that they imply a world market, a certain organization of production, and all those causal nexuses that are the base of the world capitalist economy. Every object that composes this image (but we could say, *every* image) is “opened up” to its multiple implications. What is interesting is the sudden feeling of immediate distance that separates the world as an “immense accumulation of commodities” and its immediate and spontaneous impression that we have in front of our eyes in our own experience. “Opening up” a commodity means to show the route it travelled before it was sold, the workers who produced it, the people who conceived it and designed it, the money invested in order to produce it, the bankers and the stock market that enabled the investment, etc. The social conditions that made possible the perceivability of that image are erased and excluded from perception.

In order to transition “from a bowl of soup to the British vessels sunk by England”,<sup>15</sup> Eisenstein referred to a section of Joyce’s *Ulysses*: namely the chapter called “Ithaca”, which is constructed in the form of a rigidly organized scholastic catechism of 309 questions and answers (“questions are asked and answers given”<sup>16</sup>). The continuous back and forth which goes on for the entire chapter, gives the impression of a

.....  
15 Eisenstein 1976, p. 15.

16 Ibid., p. 7.

scientific never-ending search that at every step goes deeper and deeper into a topic, fully investigating all its possible ramifications, as random and loosely associated as they might be. Every question leads to another question then to another question, then to another one, and so on. As Fredric Jameson perceptively claimed, Eisenstein had in mind,

[...] something like a Marxian version of Freudian free association—the chain of hidden links that leads us from the surface of everyday life and experience to the very sources of production itself. As in Freud, this is a vertical plunge downward into the ontological abyss, what he called ‘the navel of the dream’; it interrupts the banal horizontal narrative and stages an associative cluster charged with affect.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Eisenstein seem to have a didactic preoccupation—how to translate dialectic in simple visual formulas—what is implicit in his notes is an awareness of the epistemological problem that the commodity form poses us. In capitalism, perception is turned upside down: what appears as immediate and objective is in fact the result of a complex mediation of social practices that are invisible. Such an insight is particularly interesting coming from someone who works specifically on the manipulation of images. It is as if the absence upon which the capitalist image is predicated on cannot appear in the imaginary (the Lacanian term for our spontaneous-ideological perception) but has to be unpacked and searched for beyond the imaginary: deconstructing the immediate appearance, and reconstruing the chain of hidden links that leads to production. While Marx searched for this dimension of invisibility (which we will see, is called “value”) in the “hidden abode of production”, Eisenstein attempted to make it palpable or perceivable through the means of montage, which is not merely the juxtaposition of a series of images, but according to him something much more theoretical.

### A Figurative Understanding of *Capital*

In his *Memoirs*, in what is certainly a fictional ex-post invention of childhood memories, Eisenstein recalls what marked his premature affinity toward cinema and figurative arts: “the incomparable compositions” of Degas; a close-up in a short story by Edgar Allan Poe; a white lilac swaying above his cot just after his birth. And among them he lists the novels of Pushkin as well, which for the first time gave him the awareness of a profound figurative link between literature and painting. It is from a figurative interpretation of Pushkin’s writing that he saw how literature was capable of expressing an image even better than visual art:

.....  
17 Jameson 2009, p. 113.

[I]n Pushkin we find a description of an actual event or phenomenon done with such absolute strictness and precision that it is almost possible to recreate in its entirety the visual image that struck him so concretely. And I do mean 'struck', which applies to the dynamic of a literary description, whereas an immobile canvas inevitably fails. Hence it was only with the advent of cinema that the moving picture of Pushkin's constructions could begin to be sensed so acutely.<sup>18</sup>

Pushkin has such an intense sensibility for visual representation that according to Eisenstein it was possible to "arrange a passage by Pushkin for editing as a sequence of shots [...] because each step shows how the poet saw and logically showed this or that event."<sup>19</sup> Cinema would thus be able to *extract* images that were already present in the words of Pushkin and bring them to the surface. We can see here one of the many passages of his theoretical work where Eisenstein's understanding of the image has nothing to do with a representation or reduplication of something that exist in reality: an image is not a blueprint of a portion of reality but an expression of something virtually present even though not perceivable in the register of spontaneous experience. Images can only surface through the mediation of montage, given that only montage is able to create in the mind of the viewer what exists but is not immediately perceivable as such in a single point of view. That is why the "immobile canvas" can only deal with the immediately visible: an indefinite reproduction of "what is there". In order to go *beyond* the imaginary, it is essential to go beyond the visibility of "what is there" and rely on a conflicting clash between what Eisenstein already in 1923, when he was still a theater director, calls *attractions*:

An attraction (in our diagnosis of theatre) is any aggressive moment in theatre, i.e., any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion.<sup>20</sup>

The image is therefore a direct stimulation and a shock produced in the mind of the spectator: far from being the copy of something, it is rather created from sensible visual attractions in order to emerge as a bodily evidence in the experience of the viewer. The image is not that, which

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<sup>18</sup> Eisenstein 1995, p. 464.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 464.

<sup>20</sup> Eisenstein 1988, p. 34.

when put into a sequence can produce a signification (as if, borrowing from linguistic terminology, we could consider the image a word, and the montage of several of them a sentence): the image is a corporeal shock; a *resultant* force emerging from the clash of different visual attractions. It is the *production* of a conflict and not the static foundational element upon which a sequence can be constructed. To clarify this point in 1929, in his essay "Beyond the Shot", Eisenstein compares montage to Japanese hieroglyphs, where in one graphic sign two elements coexist:

The combination of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is regarded not as their sum total but as their product, i.e., as a value of another dimension, another degree: each taken separately corresponds to an object but their combination corresponds to a concept. The combination of two 'representable' objects achieves the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented.<sup>21</sup>

We should not be deceived by the term "product"—what Eisenstein means is that the relation between the two hieroglyphs is not of the order of accumulation, but of *difference*. A montage of attractions is a clash between two elements: or, in other words, what is left when the two constituting elements (we should not call them images) are arranged in a relation of opposition. There is a clear resonance here with what just a handful of years before Saussure was developing in the field of linguistic: like language, which is a system based on pure differences without positive terms, also the visual articulation of frames is based on a purely negative relation. There is in Eisenstein an awareness that something productive and constructive can effectively emerge from an act of pure negativity: an image emerges from a gesture of withdrawal from "what is there"; from a subtraction from the positivity of the imaginary, that according to Lacan *is* the realm of positivity par excellence. Against an understanding of the visual field based on presence and empirical perception, Eisenstein seems here to go in a completely other direction, where images are constituted as a shock in the mind of the viewer resultant from a suspension of the imaginary. That is why the Eisensteinian theoretical reflection will always be characterized by the oscillation between a conflictual dialectic predicated on a radical idea of negativity and an organicist translation of this "conflict of attractions" into a bodily synthesis (which starting from the Mexican years will progressively assume the connotation of a synthesis of primordial archetypes). As brilliantly articulated by Luka Arsjenuk,

The Eisensteinian dialectic of montage is [...] characterized not merely by a historically original recognition of the disintegrative

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

force of nonrelation and negativity (Eisenstein's insistence on the primacy of the cut and conflict), the corrosive and critical power montage carries into the domain of form, but also by the constant attempts to invent the countertendency of a new type of form invoked by the disintegrative tendency of montage. Eisenstein is as much a filmmaker of montage as he is a thinker of new ways to be done with montage, as much an experimenter with the potentially endless disintegration of form as he is an inventor of new ends for montage's corrosive force.<sup>22</sup>

The years of *Capital*, which are also the years of one of his most theoretical films, *The General Line*, are the years when Eisenstein had faith in the possibility of reconciling these two sides: an understanding of the visual as purely subtractive and based on negativity, and a faith in the creation of a new regime of vision emerging positively from the conflicts of montage. It is as if at the peak of negativity (when an image would be nothing other than the pure subtraction between the two different constituting elements), something positively synthetic could emerge. The film on *Capital* in its utopia of bringing together the height of negativity—i.e., abstract thought—with the sensibility of visual images, was exemplary of this theoretical audaciousness. Despite the project ending up being set aside (after *The General Line*, Eisenstein and his two collaborators Aleksandrov and Tissè started a trip around the world in order to study sound cinema), Eisenstein's insights on the nature of capital appearance, as being at the same time sensible—because manifested in experience—but also extrasensory—because of its social mediations continuously disappearing—surprisingly demonstrates their timeliness. We cannot imagine how Eisenstein's *Capital* would have looked like as a film, but it seems that the most unrealistic and eccentric idea of his notebooks—i.e., a possible reconciliation between art and science, between sensation and abstraction—will paradoxically be the core of what the post-Adornian theorists of the value-form will develop from the late 1960s onwards. What is “value” if not an abstraction that exists only in a sensory form outside of any subjective representation? What are the *perverted [verrückte] forms*<sup>23</sup> of capitalist reality theorized by Hans-Georg Backhaus if not the deceiving erasure of social mediation enacted by the imaginary?

22 Arsenjuk 2018, p. 174.

23 We refer here in particular to Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva's interpretation of Hans-Georg Backhaus (Bellofiore, Redolfi Riva 2018).

## The Opaque Image of Capitalism

Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle recently came back to reflect on capitalism's peculiar regime of appearance and visual representation. If Eisenstein is right and the commodity form, beyond the fetishism of immediacy, could be grasped in montage only through the negative differences of its social mediations (financial capital, productive capital, merchant capital, etc.)—or, if we want to put it in more appropriate and less Eisensteinian terms, if the only possible image of a commodity is a *non-relation between all its social instances*, and therefore a paradoxical “non-imaginary image”<sup>24</sup>—the question of the appearance of capitalism becomes rather problematic. Capitalism is based on a fundamental unbalance: there is a dissymmetry between the antagonism pertaining to the different moments of the production process, where surplus-value is extracted through the activity of labor-power, and the system of equivalences of the sphere of the market, where commodities are already fully constituted and exchanged with money. The movement from production to circulation is a movement of self-erasure of value's and capital's genetic formation: it is in fact a cancellation of labor exploitation and ultimately of class struggle. The commodity form contains, but at the same time also dissimulates, all these mediations. That is why in Eisenstein the question regarding how to look at capitalism becomes very soon a question regarding how to look at a commodity: “opening up” its hidden social mediations, as in the sequence of the worker's soup. If Marx's *Das Kapital* aimed at unpacking all the different stages of the process of accumulation, a cinematographic reflection on capitalism cannot but begin with the immediacy of commodities in front of our eyes. How is it possible to see them as embodiments of value and products of exploitation, and not as self-sufficient objects? Or to put it in another way: how is it possible to see commodities for how do they not appear from a non-imaginary point of view? Or even better, how is it possible *to see appearance itself*?

Primarily, we can say that there could be two different strategies: on the one hand the unpacking of a commodity as a single instance of the process of accumulation—where does it come from? How it has been made? etc. as Tom Tykwer's short feature shows very well; on the other the widening of our perspective on the world market, considering the global implications of capitalism in the largest possible way and analyzing the relations between different branches of capital: for example, today, how the manufacturing sector in East Asia is connected with the industry of the raw materials in South America and how in order to understand capitalist relations of production is important to keep these two phenomenon (along with many other) together.<sup>25</sup> Toscano and Kinkle cleverly open their

24 We do not have the opportunity here to develop further this point, but a non-imaginary image is what Lacan refers to as the manifestation of the object (a) in the realm of visibility, or gaze. Cf Bianchi 2017.

25 Cf Mezzadra, Neilson 2018.

book<sup>26</sup> with a reference to a short film that could constitute an allegory of the two approaches: Charles and Ray Eames's *Powers of Ten* (1968 and then 1977<sup>27</sup>) is based on the idea of representing the universe first expanding out from the Earth until the entire universe is looked at, and then turning inward until a single atom and its quarks are observed. The film begins with a view of a man and woman having a picnic in a park in Chicago. The camera then slowly zooms out to a view ten meters across and continues at a rate of a power of ten every 10 seconds: first at 100 meters ( $10^2$  m), then 1 kilometer ( $10^3$  m) (where we see the entirety of Chicago), until arriving at  $10^{24}$  meters where we can see the size of the entire observable universe. Then the camera goes back to the picnic and zooms in into the man's hand, to views of negative powers of ten:  $10^{-1}$  m (10 centimeters),  $10^{-2}$  m... until we see the quarks in a proton of a carbon atom at  $10^{-16}$  meter. Which point of view should we adopt? How should we look at capitalist relations: from the point of view of the inside of a single commodity or from a God's eye-view of the entire world of global capital?

Already Marx envisioned that in order to grasp the capitalist specificity of the process of accumulation (and its profound, structural instability) it was necessary to keep these two *scales* of analysis together; *Das Kapital* in fact opens with a description of the appearance of a single commodity and then arrives at the end of Volume 3 to incorporate the total social capital, the world market and the banking and financial system. The relation between the two levels though is not based on the idea that the general is a mere sum of particulars, but that each of them can be found inside of the other: the particular is inside the general because for instance world market instabilities mirror the instability and the duality that harbors at the core of every commodity; but also the other way around is true, because a commodity is like a monad containing the universality of global capital—for example the rate of profit of a single commodity and of a particular branch of industrial capital is determined by the different allocations of investment of the total social capital in different branches of production, which makes the determination of the price of a single commodity directly depended on every other commodity.<sup>28</sup> Diagnosing a ten-

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26 Toscano, Kinkle 2015.

27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww4gYNrOkkg> (last access: 30 April 2020)

28 "If different branches offer different rates of profit, then capitalists will try to pull their capital out of branches with low rates of profit and invest their capital in branches with higher rates of profit. If the movement of capital between branches is possible (and not, for example, impeded by legal restrictions), then more and more capital will flow into branches with high rates of profit and out of branches with lower rates of profit. This leads to the amount of available commodities increasing in branches with high rates of profit and decreasing in branches with low rates of profit. Due to the competition between capitalists, the increasing supply in the branches with initially high rates of profit will on the one hand lead to decreasing sales prices and ultimately declining profit rates, whereas on the other hand the declining supply in the branches with initially low rates of profit leads to a rise in prices and ultimately increasing rates of profit. The different rates of profit equalize into an average or general rate of profit" (Heinrich 2012, pp. 146–147).

dency in contemporary aesthetic to rely on a God's eye-view to envision the complexity of capitalist relations, Toscano and Kinkle detect a general reluctance to assume the radicality of the concept of capital: which is not a "thing" composed of a myriad of parts whose place have to be meticulously reconstructed, but a social relation whose dynamism is directly consequential to its structural dissymmetry and antagonism. Capital's ability to valorize and increase its magnitude *is* a consequence of its inner antagonism and contradiction, and its impossibility to be reduced to an object is precisely what makes its image so difficult to grasp, and its appearance so deceiving.

While it might seem that in the age of Google Earth and Big Data the reconstruction of the nexuses and relations that define the global economy would be more easily representable, still this passion for a verticalized view from above is not without problems. As it has been claimed by Hito Steyerl "the view from above is a perfect metonymy for a more general verticalization of class relations in the context of an intensified class war from above"<sup>29</sup> and the idea of relying on drone-like technologies to map the complexity of the social sphere risks overlooking the structurally antagonistic nature of capital's relation. In other terms, if the problem of the opacity of capital were only due to the multiplicity and complexity of its various actors, an improvement in data recording made possible by AI and Big Data technologies would be sufficient to produce a faithful image of it. The increase in the use of drones and satellite images in contemporary visual arts and cinema demonstrates how the view from above is increasingly becoming the privileged ideological way to figuratively imagine social relations. Still, at the very peak of this alleged transparency it becomes all the more evident how the social crack at the core of capitalist accumulation is nowhere to be found in that image. That is because the visual model of the view from above still relies on the register of the imaginary: it can only detect "what is there". But what if the secret of capitalist self-valorization does not belong to the sphere of the imaginary?

Articulating this problem Toscano and Kinkle construct their argument on the mode of appearance of contemporary capitalism around the Jamesonian concept of "cognitive mapping".<sup>30</sup> Developed at the intersection between Althusser's notion of ideology and the urbanist Kevin Lynch's concept of "The Image of the City", "cognitive mapping" is a term through which Fredric Jameson articulates the particular relationship that subjects entertain with capitalist relations, which on the one hand determine their position but at the same time remain deeply opaque to them. There is therefore a separation between the way in which social relationships are organized and the way in which they are subjectivized (or imagined, or better "imaginarized") by the actors involved. Through

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29 Steyerl 2012, p. 26.

30 Jameson 1988, pp. 347–360.

“cognitive mapping” a subject tries, albeit always uncertainly and provisionally, to figuratively imagine a relationship between their own particular situatedness and global capitalist relations (or what Jameson usually calls, in Lukacsian way, a “totality”). Jameson made clear though that “cognitive mapping will be a matter of form”, and not so much a question of rendering fully intelligible the entirety of capital’s social relations, as if they were on object waiting to be reconstituted and represented. The problem would be rather to determine what is the impossibility around which this form will constitute itself. What prevent the totality of social relations to become fully visible, even when we have at our disposal satellites, drones and data-driven platforms? What is missing in the imaginary picture of capitalism? Why, even when capital seemed to have reached the peak of its transparency, it still remains elusive and opaque?

### Excursus: The Problem of the Localization of Value

To answer this question, we have to abandon the perspective of the God’s eye-view and the illusion that the totality of capitalist relations is an imaginary object ready to be appropriated and visually grasped, and we have to turn our analysis to that particular element that crooks (but also makes possible) the process of accumulation and whose localization is always problematic. (Surplus-)value, or abstract labor,<sup>31</sup> is the name of that element, and its process of constitution in capital’s self-valorization is what will help us to determine the impossibility around which the imaginary appearance of capitalism is formed.

For instance, the value of a capitalistically produced commodity can be looked at from two different and incompatible points of view: profit and surplus-value.<sup>32</sup> When the factors of production—means of production and labor-power—are assembled in the production process, their different role is not immediately apparent and seems to be comparable. According to the capitalist, they are on the same level: it was him who bought the machinery and the labor-power (i.e., he “buys” the labor expenditure of the worker) on the market, and what comes out from their encounter, if everything goes well and commodities are sold, is an increase in respect to what he spent. For him there is no difference between the contributions of the two types of capital, constant capital and variable capital: both are essential to the production, and therefore the surplus that is originated must come from both. If the quantity of money that a capitalist receives when a commodity is sold on the market is *more* than what he previously spent when he bought the factors of production: that “more” is called profit. The problem is that this argument, according to

<sup>31</sup> We rely here on a processual and dynamic understanding of the constitution of abstract labor in the process accumulation as developed by Bellofiore 2018b.

<sup>32</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 143–144.

Marx, mystifies the essential contribution of living labor:

In surplus-value, the relationship between capital and labor is laid bare. In the relationship between capital and profit, i.e., between capital and surplus-value as it appears on the one hand as an excess over the cost price of commodity realized in the circulation process and on the other hand as an excess determined more precisely by its relationship to the total capital, *capital* appears as a *relationship to itself*, a relationship in which it is distinguished, as an original sum of value, from another new value that it posits. It is in consciousness that capital generates this new value in the course of its movement through the production and circulation processes. But how this happens is now mystified, and seems to derive from hidden qualities that are inherent in capital itself.<sup>33</sup>

The mystification is double: on the one hand there is the illusion that both factors of production can equally contribute to the creation of a “surplus”, while in fact the entire value of constant capital is transferred to the value of the newly produced commodity, and therefore the surplus must have been generated somewhere else (i.e., from the living labor of labor-power); on the other there is the presumption that wage would be a fair compensation for the living labor extracted in the production process. But there is effectively no compensation for having used the creativity and human potentiality of the workers for the self-valorization of capital.<sup>34</sup> So, would it just be a matter of deconstructing the illusion and reaffirming how things effectively are?

The answer is no. The perspective illusion which makes the capitalist look at this process from the point of view of profit, and the labor-power (when organized in a struggle) form the point of view of the extraction of surplus-value, cannot be sorted out with rights and wrongs. Marx’s argument is not that the perspective of the working class is right and that of the capitalist is wrong: each of them is right according to their own logic. Their two points of view are both correct, but they are absolutely incommensurable. The antagonism does not pertain to different points of view that look simultaneously but differently at the same object: *the antagonism pertains to the object itself*. Borrowing a Lacanian concept, we can say that the antagonism is in the Real of the gaze, not in the eye of

<sup>33</sup> Marx 1991, p. 144.

<sup>34</sup> As beautifully affirmed in the opening paragraph of Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt’s *History and Obstinacy*: “‘Labor’ is the human ability to change matter purposefully. [...] It not only consists of commodity production, but also engender social relations and develops community. It possesses OBSTINACY. Its product is HISTORY.” (Kluge, Negt 2014, p. 73). What capitalism takes from the workers is not only a quantity of wealth, but also (and maybe even more) the purpose of one’s own activities in the world and the form of the labor activity: what do we do with our labor—its qualitative dimension—how do we want to use it, to which end? For a discussion on the notion of purpose in Marx see Bianchi 2010.

the beholder. Surplus-value is not a substantial object that a positivistic science, such as political economy, can faithfully represent in an unquestionable manner: *surplus-value is nothing but the unbalance of the entire structure of accumulation*. There is no ultimate economic objective reality that can support the claims of the working class (or of the capitalists). Surplus-value nominates the ultimate insurmountability of class struggle and social antagonism. There is no last objectivity: the Althusserian “last instance” is nothing but the Real of the unsurpassable antagonism upon which the structure is based. That is why Marx did not develop a theory of political economy, but a *critique* of the categories of political economy,<sup>35</sup> knowing that a Marxian science could only be a non-positivistic science that posits class struggle as a foundation of capitalist totality.

It was merit of the research within the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (Helmut Reichelt,<sup>36</sup> Michael Heinrich, Hans-Georg Backhaus,<sup>37</sup> which will be amended here with the interpretation of their work given by Riccardo Bellofiore<sup>38</sup>) to have articulated this problem of localization of value and abstract labor in a systematic way. First, they criticized a substantialist approach to value, according to which value would be fully constituted in the sphere of production in a single commodity and then only represented, measured, and transformed into money in the sphere of circulation. Such a position would still be indebted to a positivistic understanding of accumulation that would reduce it to a secret to be unveiled in the realm of production. On the contrary Reichelt, Heinrich, and Backhaus elaborated a processual and dynamic understanding of value, where what is crucial is not so much the *quantity* of units of labor-time that are transformed in prices in the circulation, but the *social form* that they acquire in the process of valorization. Value is like a phantasm that takes possession of different bodies in the cycle of accumulation: it can take the *form* of a commodity as much as the *form* of money. Its status is that of a “purely fantastic objectivity”: even though Marx uses also the term “spectral” or “ghostly”, to give the idea of a peculiar form of objectivity that is not empirical but rather *phantasmatic*.<sup>39</sup> Not differently than a sensuous extra-sensory commodity, value is *objectively phantasmatic*.

Already at the beginning (if such a thing would be effectively thinkable) of the process of valorization, commodities are internally split between a concrete labor that created them, and a ghostly “abstract” one

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35 Cf Redolfi Riva 2018 but the same point has been developed often by Bellofiore as well (lately in Bellofiore 2020, p.143.).

36 Reichelt

37 Backhaus 2016.

38 Bellofiore 2018a.

39 Here the resonances between Marx and Lacan become more evident: for a similar analysis, even though developed on different themes, see Tomši 2013.

that eventually, under certain conditions, will morph into value. We have to understand abstract labor here as only half-constituted: at the stage of the commodity-before-it-is-sold, its abstractness is only a wager of something that can eventually emerge from its body in the event of a successful exchange with money in the sphere of circulation.

The transformation of abstract-labor-in-potential into abstract-labor-as-money is crucial: contrary to a plan economy where society organizes the production from the beginning of the cycle, capitalism is the first societal organization where labor is organized privately. This means that private entrepreneurs can freely decide what to produce, how to produce, and in which quantity, without knowing whether society will effectively need their products. The fact that a particular labor expenditure will be recognized as “useful” by society, meeting the needs and the purchasing power of someone, remains uncertain until an exchange with money is effectively made. In the event of an economic crisis for example, we see that this moment of socialization fails, with detrimental consequences. That is why capitalism is a society where social validation of labor occurs only through the market: valorization is not only the phenomenon through which money “magically” emerged from the body of a commodity (the abstract is generated from the concrete), it is also the moment of recognition of the “mediated sociality” of a particular private expenditure of labor (the concrete is recognized *après-coup* as abstract).

The spectral presence of value is therefore already present at the beginning of the production process: when a capitalist goes to the market buying the machinery and the labor-power in order to organize a production in the hope that it will eventually be profitable, he acts on the basis of the future metamorphoses of commodities into money (and he therefore plan all his action with such an outcome in mind). No matter if he is aware of it or not, what guides his actions is value-in-potential. The “sensuous extrasensory properties” that Marx believed were “fetishistically” projected into commodities are not a deceit (*schein*) that have to be deconstructed; they are the organizational principle underlying the capitalist world. As Hans-Georg Backhaus said, “when we speak of the commodity [...] we are also obliged to think about the absurd condition according to which a supersensible quality inheres in sensuous things, so that, it is reasonable to talk about an economic dimension like the natural dimensions of distance, weight, temperature, etc.”<sup>40</sup> The problem is that when we look at the commodities, those supersensible qualities are nowhere to be found: which leads to the paradox that despite how value orchestrates almost everything of our world, if we look at the objects surrounding us, there seem to be no trace of it.

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40 Backhaus 2016, pp. 343–404.

## The Appearance of Cinema

Capitalism seems to be based on a profound contradiction: founded on a structural dissymmetry at the level of production—where the potentiality of historical transformation of the labor-power is hijacked by the capitalists in order to increase the magnitude of their capital—it appears in the realm of circulation as governed by a system of equivalences. As in the case of the incommensurability of profit and surplus-value, capital seems, according to the logic of the former, to be governed by a self-propelled act of self-valorization, and at the same time, if considered by the point of view of the latter, to be parasitically dependent on the living labor of the working-class. These two points of view are at the same time both right and incompatible. That is because the antagonism lies *in the object itself*: it is not a matter of adopting an objective God's eye-view perspective according to which it would be possible to grant the capitalist and the labor-power their fair share of surplus. At the core of the capitalist reality there is the Real of social antagonism. That is why value is a spectral entity that, while governing the entirety of the process of accumulation, is empirically nowhere to be found. That is why, even if we search for the secret of a commodity in the multiple social mediations that made it possible, we will be unable to go beyond a logic of the anecdote (the de-anecdotalization pursued by Eisenstein is impossible if we remain at the level of a single commodity).

It was merit of Isaak Illich Rubin<sup>41</sup> in the 1920s to underline how this process of mystification and fetishistic inversion was not a cultural superstructure inessential to represent the functioning of the capitalist mode of production, but a crucial pillar to understand Marx's theory of value. The fact that the extraction of surplus-value is transposed into an objective state of things is not part of a deceit, but is a necessary condition of manifestation of the capitalist exploitation. In Lacanian terms, the fetishism of commodity—i.e., the translation of the relations of domination, from being personal and visible, to being objective (*sachlich*) and naturalized—is the process of *imaginarization* of the capitalist relations. The way through which capitalism appears is the way through which its system of exploitation founded on a social antagonism *necessarily* manifests itself in the realm of sensibility: that is the way through which capitalism is transposed into an image.

The question that we should ask is therefore not how cinema could represent the antagonism of the capitalist mode of production or how could it discover the enigma of the formation of value beyond the commodity form, but *how it could reflect on the necessity of this transfiguration into the imaginary*: cinema as a way to think *appearance itself*; as a science of appearance. So, to go back to the problem that was haunting Muley, it will not be so much a matter of asking ourselves who do we shoot, who

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<sup>41</sup> Rubin 1973.

is to blame, or what is a faithful image of capitalism, but why we were already part of that image in the first place; why, so to speak, capitalism was already shooting at us.

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# After Finitude It's a Wonderful Life

## Rex Butler

**Abstract:** The much-loved Christmas classic Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) is still the subject of much popular and academic discussion. Most recently, against its apparent feel-good message, progressives have lamented the way that it shows the victory of mercantile Pottersville over communitarian Bedford Falls, while conservatives (for example, Mullen 2016) have criticised it for its attack on the town's chief businessman Henry Potter (in 1947 the film was even taken before the US House Committee on un-American Activities for its seeming Communist values). As opposed to this usual back-and-forth, this essay seeks to open up another way of thinking the "ethics" and perhaps even "ideology" of *It's a Wonderful Life* by reading it through the work of speculative materialist Quentin Meillassoux. Can we understand the film as opening up a certain thought outside of the "correlationist" circle with its introduction of "contingency" into everyday life, and indeed in its final triumphant return to Bedford Falls after George Bailey asks to be rescued by God do we not have a perfect example of Meillassoux's "resurrectionist" ethics? Put simply, to borrow the slogan from the embroidery George's wife Mary gives him when they get married, does *It's a Wonderful Life* seek to "lasso the moon" or not?

**Keywords:** *It's a Wonderful Life*, speculative materialism, correlationism, Quentin Meillassoux, Slavoj Žižek

The first thing that occurred to me as I watched the extraordinary opening sequence of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) last Christmas with my family was Quentin Meillassoux's notion of the "arche-fossil". Of course, over the many intervening years since I had last seen the film, I had read Meillassoux's *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2006), and I recalled (without telling anyone sitting next to me and spoiling the film for them) his famous thought experiment of seeing a comet pass through an empty galaxy and realising that it preceded the advent of life on earth. For Meillassoux, this comet serves as evidence that the world is not merely a reflection of human consciousness, or more exactly it allows us to think the limits of the idea that the world exists only insofar as it is filtered through the categories of human consciousness. As is well known, the great target of Meillassoux's book is Kant and his argument that the world "as such" is inaccessible and we can know it only as it is "for us" through such transcendental categories as time and space and cause and effect. We can relate to the world only as it appears to us and not as it is in itself. This is for Meillassoux what that comet arriving from the far-flung reaches of the universe makes clear: that there is a world outside or beyond and certainly before the human. It is this "great outdoors" that he wants to hold up against what he characterises as Kant's "correlationism": the idea that things only exist in some kind of relation to the subject

perceiving them. This is the much-quoted passage in question in *After Finitude*:

I will call ‘arche-fossil’ or ‘fossil matter’ not just materials indicating the traces of past life according to the familiar sense of the term ‘fossil’, but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event: one that is anterior to terrestrial life.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, if we think about that opening sequence carefully, and not quite so festively sentimentally, it hardly appears to fit Meillassoux’s requirements. The film begins on Christmas Eve at that moment when the despairing George Bailey, after his careless Uncle Billy has mislaid \$8000, inadvertently passing it to the diabolical town patriarch Henry Potter, is facing the closure of Bailey Brothers’ Building and Loan, the small-town bank he has devoted his life to, and possible criminal prosecution. George has gone over with Billy all of his steps during the day, hoping to make him remember what he had done with the money but has failed to. He then goes home to his loving wife Mary and four children and terribly and uncharacteristically takes out his frustrations on them. He heads out for a drink at the bar of a man he had once given a loan to so that he could buy a house, but abruptly leaves before crashing his car into a tree. Running from the car, chased by the irate neighbour whose tree it was, he stands in the middle of the town’s bridge and leans over its handrail. In despair—and thinking that perhaps his life insurance might cover the missing \$8000—he looks down into the dark, swiftly flowing water and contemplates suicide. Meanwhile as all of this has been going on, the townspeople, having become aware of George’s situation, send their Christmas prayers up to heaven: “Help my friend, Mr Bailey”, “He never thinks about himself, God, that’s why he’s in trouble”, “George is a good guy. Give him a break, God”.

Their words—which we in the audience also hear—pass upwards through the cosmos until they reach their intended recipient. The camera cranes up from earth and we seem to see in some faraway cosmos two stars blinking back and forth as the following conversation takes place between God and the disciple Joseph:

God: Hello, Joseph, trouble?  
Joseph: Looks like we’ll have to send someone down. A lot of people are asking for help for a man named George Bailey.  
God: George Bailey. Yes, tonight’s his crucial night. We’ll have to send someone down immediately. Whose turn is it?

Together they decide to send an angel, Clarence Odbody, down to earth to

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1 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 10.

help George. After viewing as though on film the events of George’s life, Clarence then heads down, and just at that moment when George decides to jump leaps himself into the water beneath the bridge where George is looking, forcing George to rescue him and putting all thoughts of his own fate out of mind (Clarence knew that George would jump into the water to save him because he remembered, from looking at the events of George’s life, that George had similarly plunged into freezing water to save his younger brother Harry when the ice had cracked beneath him and he had fallen in while they were both out ice-skating as boys).

Needless to say, that opening sequence can hardly been seen as an instance of the “anteriority”<sup>2</sup> of Meillassoux’s comet, insofar as the stars flash on or off according to whether it is God or Joseph talking and Clarence the angel is sent down to help George in response to the townspeople’s prayers. On the contrary, it is as though the universe responds to our wants and needs and Clarence arrives to show George the errors of his ways and the purpose and meaning and not the contingency of his life.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, more than this—and this is the comforting, sentimental reading of the film that has made it a holiday favourite when we like George supposedly reflect on the meaning of our otherwise distracted or unmindful activities throughout the rest of the year—Clarence allows George to see the world as a *reflection* of him: that the world as it is would not have been possible without him and his actions. If not for him, Clarence makes clear in that alternative reality he shows him, his brother would have drowned beneath the ice, the chemist he worked for as a boy would have gone to jail for accidentally poisoning one of his customers, his wife would have become an old maid, his mother would be running a boarding house, and the many clients of the Bailey Brothers’ Loan and Trust would not have been able to buy their own houses and been forced to rent one of Potter’s slums. More than this, comparatively unspoilt, idyllic, and communitarian Bedford Falls would have turned into the squalid, exploitative, and individualistic Pottersville, full of bars, burlesque theatres, and even strip clubs, undoubtedly controlled by the ruthless tycoon Potter. All of this showing of the consequences of a world without George undoubtedly corresponds to an argument *per negationem* for that “correlationism” Meillassoux speaks of, in which, just as we can “never grasp an object ‘in itself’, in isolation from its relation to the subject”, so we can “never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object”.<sup>4</sup>

However, if that opening sequence and the visit of Clarence to

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2 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 14.

3 It is undoubtedly in this regard that we might think the embroidery Mary makes for George, “Lasso the Moon”, although the question will be asked in the film whether George is ever able to do this or what would this imply if he did.

4 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 5.

show George that the world as it is would not have been possible without him appears to go against Meillassoux, read another way it can appear close to Meillassoux's fantasy of being able to look on at the world as though we were not there and see it how it really is. We might begin with that moment when Clarence arrives in order to show George what life would have been like if he had never been born. After rescuing Clarence from the river, they both first dry off in the nearby toll house keeper's shack before going to a bar that was previously run by Martini, to whom George had lent the money, but now is run by Nick, his surly assistant. There they meet Gower, the chemist George had worked for as a boy and saved from poisoning a client, when in mourning for the death of his son he had accidentally put the wrong pills in a bottle of medicine, but now has spent twenty years in jail and after getting out is homeless and mocked and reviled by the cruel townspeople. George defends Gower and is thrown out of the bar, whereupon he wanders bewilderedly throughout Pottersville, before getting in a taxi and driving to the house he and his wife Mary had fixed up and lived in, but now is the wreck it was before. After being challenged by the police for trespassing on the abandoned property, George goes and looks for his mother, who after the death of her husband and without George's support now runs a down-at-heel boarding house and who to his immense shock and horror does not recognise him, her own son. They then visit Bailey Park, the neighbourhood of low-income people in their own houses that George made possible through his Building and Loan company, but now is a cemetery, in which George finds the gravestone of his brother, who had drowned without George to save him. Finally, George implores Clarence to let him know what has happened to his wife. Clarence is at first unwilling to do so, but then points him towards an unlikely-looking woman who is the town librarian, closing up for the night. George grabs her and insists that they were once married, but she backs away fearfully before running into a nearby bar, where the locals confront George and call the police. The sequence ends with the policeman and George wrestling together in the snow outside the bar before George leaps up and runs away, with the policeman firing a shot into the air and getting into his police car to chase after him. George runs again to the bridge where he originally met Clarence, but this time, appalled at how things would have turned out without him, pleads for things to be as they once were and for him to return to the life he had once lived.

Throughout this long sequence, both when he is by himself and when he is with Clarence, George looks on if not unseen then at least unrecognised by that world he once knew. Not only do his wife and mother not know who he is, but neither do the barman, taxi driver and policeman. In the sequence with Clarence at the bar, George will greet Nick, who was formerly Martini's assistant but is now the owner, but Nick to the first of George's surprises will refuse to acknowledge him before throwing him out. On several occasions, George will insist to Bert the policeman—

whom he has known throughout his life and who in fact serenaded his wife and him on their wedding night with Ernie the taxi driver—"You know me!", only for the same policemen alternately to tell him to move on, wrestle with him or fire a pistol after him and pursue him in a police car. Or when after wandering disorientedly through Pottersville and deciding to catch a taxi to go to the house where he and Mary lived, he will greet Ernie the taxi driver, whom he has also known all of his life, with the words "Ernie, take me home. I'm off my nut!", only to be coolly asked: "Where do you live?" Although George is physically present and able to speak and even occasionally accost and confront people, he is forced in effect to look on at his life from the outside, with no one with the exception of Clarence knowing who he is. And when Clarence leaves after showing him Mary, there is no one at all in the changed world of Pottersville who recognises him and remembers his place in their lives. Here perhaps we have something of Meillassoux's idea of breaking with or otherwise thinking that correlationist "two-step" in which the world and the human subject are inseparable, each existing only for the other: "From this point on [after Kant's transcendental revolution] intersubjectivity, the consensus of a community, supplants the adequation between the representations of a solitary subject and the thing in itself as the veritable criterion of objectivity".<sup>5</sup>

Of course, there are any number of fantasy or science fiction films that play out the fantasy of one of the characters being able to look on at the world and their lives from the outside.<sup>6</sup> The first that comes to mind and that is often mentioned in the context of *It's a Wonderful Life* is Harold Raimi's *Groundhog Day* (1993), in which TV weatherman Phil Connor gets to live out the same day over and over with only him and none of the other characters realising this. But there are also other older Hollywood films from around the time of *It's a Wonderful Life* with similar plotlines, such as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), in which a British airman shot down while flying a plane during the War is allowed to appeal his being called to heaven insofar as he has fallen in love with his female radio controller while speaking to her during his last moments on earth, or Capra's own *A Pocketful of Miracles* (1961), in which a gangster creates a whole alternative reality for a poor woman from whom he buys apples on the street so that she is able to pass herself off as an aristocrat to the lost daughter she has only recently re-encountered. There are also a number of films and TV series also cited in the context of *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which it is angels who look on at the world from the outside or a character passes away and becomes an angel, who is then able to deliver a judgement from afar about the world and its

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<sup>5</sup> Meillassoux, 2008, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of *It's a Wonderful Life* in relation to a number of these films, see the chapter 'Reclaiming the Real', in Walters, 2008, pp. 115-34.

failings. Examples frequently pointed to include Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987) and *Touched by An Angel* (1994-2003), in which angels, after listening to people's prayers, render assistance to those in need; and there is also Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), in which Christ on the Cross escapes to live another life before reconciling himself to his fate and agreeing to be recrucified. However, in all of these cases, if we can generalise, it tends to be a matter of characters either entirely enmeshed in their new reality so that they have no consciousness of what is happening to them—the "human" perspective—or simply outside of this reality so that they can offer only a distanced, uninvolved view onto it. The possibilities they point to are simply inside or outside, subjective or objective, contingent or necessary. We have not yet got to what we will see is at stake in Meillassoux's argument that while it is not possible to think outside correlationism, it is nevertheless a matter of thinking a certain internal limit to it:

Facticity [contingency] thereby forces us to grasp the 'possibility' of that which is wholly other to the world, but which resides in the midst of the world as such. Yet it is necessary to place inverted commas around the term 'possibility' insofar as what is operative in facticity is not knowledge of the actual possibility of the wholly other but rather our inability to establish its impossibility.<sup>7</sup>

Let us go back then to George's episode with Clarence and think how it is more complex than either of the alternatives it is usually considered in terms of. As we say, the most common reading of the film is that George's time spent with Clarence seeing how the world would have turned out without him reconciles him to the life he has led and makes him willing to go back and confront the situation with the missing money. Although he is able to see—or we are able to see in that first section of the film that shows his life in replay—his frustrations and thwarted ambitions, he also realises that the rewards and pleasures of the life he has led (his wife, his children, his satisfaction at helping people at the Building and Loan) counterbalances them and renders it, weighing up both sides, worth it. Indeed, more than this, he even understands that the good things in his life would not have been possible without the bad. He would not have run the bank unless his father had died of a stroke, he would not have continued to run the bank unless his brother got married, he would not have married his wife unless he had been forced to listen to her obnoxious boyfriend over the phone, he would not altogether have appreciated his life unless Uncle Billy had lost the \$8000 and he had been driven to the brink of suicide. Everything has its place in a logically unfolding chain of events, and if one did not happen—even the most

7 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 40.

seemingly unnecessary or contingent—then all the rest would not have occurred either. It all makes retrospective sense, and it allows George to go back and face the consequences of his and Billy's actions, knowing that they have necessarily come out of what has come before and he could not have had what came before unless he also had these (it is the idea that, just as whatever was good in the past can be seen to have led to this terrible incident in the present, so we cannot hope for something good in the future without taking into account this terrible incident). All of this constitutes a kind of fatalism or predestination, which on the balance George would not change, even if he could.

On the other hand, as has also been said of the film, if George can comfort himself with the fact that his actions have preserved Bedford Falls and prevented it from turning into Pottersville, this is mistaken. It is not the sequence when he wanders alone through the luridly lit Pottersville alone at night that is a fantasy, but when he strolls familiarly through Bedford Falls greeting others during the day. The world of the film, in which the film was made and in which we watch the film, far more resembles Pottersville than Bedford Falls. The post-war America of the 1940s is indeed a world of rising consumerism, raunchy entertainment (including Hollywood films themselves, a selection of which we see on the hoardings of Pottersville), and the breakdown of community values.<sup>8</sup> That sequence with Clarence, in which George is exposed to a supposed alternate reality, might be understood not as a nightmare-like dystopia, wedged between two moments of everyday reality, but actually takes place *after* Bedford Falls, with Bedford Falls itself as the conservative, backward-looking and now surpassed alternative reality. In this sense, all of George's actions would count for nothing; would have had no effect. If his keeping of the Bailey Brothers' Bank and Loan open and refusing of Potter's seductive offer to work for him at one point in the film were to keep the world of Pottersville at bay, he failed. The ultimate victory of Potter—who does not seem to age throughout the film as though some kind of abstract principle—has come to pass. If the test of a person's life, as Clarence at one point in the film puts it, is "how many other lives they have touched", then George did not succeed, and his failure has not even been noticed, his absence from the world as it now exists has not even created a "hole".

However, as we suggest, the film is more complicated than either of these readings: the first nostalgic, conservative, and backward-looking and the second hard-headed, realistic, and even socially engaged. Let us go back to the events surrounding George's episode on the bridge and the arrival of Clarence. As we know from the replay of George's life that takes place before Clarence arrives, George's Uncle Billy, his dutiful father's irresponsible brother, had inadvertently passed \$8000 of the Bank and

8 For examples of this contrarian take on *It's a Wonderful Life*, see Smith, 2007; Cohen, 2010; and Mullen, 2016.

Loan money, which was meant to be deposited in a bank, to the evil Potter in a newspaper featuring a story about the heroic arrival of George's brother Harry after the end of the War. Upon returning to the Bank and Loan empty-handed and having to confess that he had lost the money and not deposited it, George angrily makes him retrace his steps, even back implausibly it seems before he arrived at the bank that day and was handed the money, to see where he might have left it. All to no avail. The money is not to be found, although we and presumably the angel Clarence who watch George's life with us know where it has gone. And it is this traumatic event that leads George just a little later to the bridge and to retrace himself (if can take the film to be something of his own thoughts as he ponders his fate) the events of his own life and to determine where it all went wrong: the stroke of his father, his brother getting married and being unable to replace him at the bank to allow him to go to college, his turning down of a lucrative offer from Potter, even his getting married to Mary and having children and of course entrusting Uncle Billy with the money earlier that day.

Except that it was also Uncle Billy's losing of the \$8000 that led to this examination of George's past to see how everything came to this (whether this is understood as George's own recollection or God's replaying George's life for Clarence). In other words, the losing of the \$8000 does not lead George merely to go through the events of Billy's day to see where the money went, but to go through the events of his own life to see where it went (in effect, God does for George what George does to Billy). That is to say, it is exactly this contingent event—contingent because it cannot be located, cannot be explained, cannot be placed within a narrative of cause and effect—that allows the construction of that fate or necessity that George is retrospectively able to see constructing his life so that things appear as though they could not be otherwise or he had no choice in the matter. And it is *this* that blurs that previously strongly held opposition between those two understandings of the George's life: that, on the one hand, it was necessary and meaningful and, on the other, arbitrary and meaningless. That George's life changed those of those all around him and things wouldn't be the same without him and that he had no real impact at all and things turned out exactly the way they were always going to. For, we might say, George's life was meaningful and had an effect on others, but this only because of an event that was arbitrary and contingent (which is why the events of the film have to be told in a temporal flashback or even circle with the prayers of the townspeople after Billy has lost the money leading to the telling of the story in which Billy loses the money).

It is at this point that we return again to Meillassoux. For, as we say, in his quest to overcome Kantian correlationism, he does not suggest that it possible simply to think outside of the transcendental categories. Indeed, to the extent that we are human, we must inevitably think within them. Nevertheless we *can* think—and this is the real point

of that example of the “ancestral fossil” of the asteroid—that it is the “unknownness” or “contingency” of the world outside of these categories that is not a limit to our knowledge but in fact the very thing we are trying to think. Indeed, pushing the consequence of this to its furthest extent, Meillassoux is able to say that it is this contingency or what he calls “factuality”<sup>9</sup> that characterises the universe. Against any attempt to impose rules or insist upon the necessity of categories, nothing remains the same, everything is able to be different. From one moment to the next, there is no way of predicting or proposing physical laws that will hold into the future. And even the proposing of the laws of contingency can only be the effect of contingency, so that any confirmation of such a law would only be the consequence of the equally contingent possibility that things do not change for a moment. It is only this contingency that is necessary, of which we can be certain, even though it is also the end of all necessity and certainty. However, Meillassoux in *After Finitude* insists in very clear and unambiguous terms that it is only the taking of contingency to this limit that would stand against correlationism: it is not that we can know things in themselves but that we cannot know things in themselves, and it is *this* that tells us we are thinking the thing itself:

In other words, instead of construing the absence of reason inherent in everything as a limit that thought encounters in its search for the ultimate reason, we must understand that this absence of reason *is*, and can *only* be the *ultimate* property of the entity. We must convert facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world *is* without reason, and is thereby *capable of becoming otherwise without reason*.<sup>10</sup>

But in *After Finitude* and the larger doctoral thesis from which it originally comes—and this material has appeared in a number of essays such as ‘The Divine Inexistence’ that have appeared subsequently—Meillassoux also draws out what we might call the “ethical” and he more accurately calls the “immanent”<sup>11</sup> consequences that result from this. For, astonishingly—and here is where undoubtedly Meillassoux's interest in science-fiction comes from—if contingency is the only rule of the universe and absolutely all physical laws are able to be overturned with none necessarily remaining consistent from moment to moment, then it must be possible to imagine, for example, the resurrection of the dead.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Meillassoux insists, this possibility of resurrection—of course,

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9 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 75.

10 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 79.

11 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 195.

12 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 189.

against the usual religious understanding—goes *against* the very idea of a God, insofar as what is required for it is the breaking of the connection between cause and effect, the doing away with of any omniscient intelligence overseeing the inevitable unwinding of things. Conversely—and showing that within Meillassoux's conception even God or the idea of God is subservient to or an effect of this chaos or contingency—it must also be logically possible that, if there does not presently exist a God, in the future there might be something like one.<sup>13</sup> Again breaking with correlationism or any limit to what is imaginable, it is entirely possible that the dead might rise up and a God be born. There is no limit to how a future world might turn out. And it is on this basis that Meillassoux insists that must think an ethics. For him the idea of something like historical justice or the correction of “existent and irreparable wrongs”<sup>14</sup> has no meaning unless justice can be rendered to those same people to whom injustice was originally done. However, in Meillassoux's system it is entirely possible that these figures from the past *can* come alive again in the future, and it is on *this* basis that we should think and prepare justice in the present.

Meillassoux in his thinking is implicitly critical of someone like Slavoj Žižek. In *After Finitude*, he will speak of the attempts to circumvent or circumscribe that contingency he sees at the heart of the universe, to think that there is some outside to it or that the very ability to think it implies some kind of reflective space beyond it. It is something he sees in undoubtedly the most profound attempt before him to take contingency into account with Hegel, who will oppose Kant's correlationism only to propose a higher philosophical order in which contingency exists only insofar as it can be thought. This is Meillassoux in *After Finitude* paraphrasing Hegel: “It is necessary that there be a moment of sheer irrationality in the midst of the unfolding of the Absolute. But this contingency is deduced from the unfolding of the Absolute, which in itself is devoid of contingency”.<sup>15</sup> And Meillassoux will sharpen his critique of this Hegelian refinement of Kant by more directly critiquing undoubtedly the leading Hegelian today, Žižek, in an interview he gives at the end of Graham Harman's book on him, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (2011). In Žižek, Meillassoux is able to see even more directly than in Hegel this effective limiting of contingency by turning it into a necessary and retrospective rule. In effect, that is, if for Meillassoux it is a matter of the *contingency of necessity*, for Žižek it is a matter of the *necessity of contingency*, so that in the end we can always find something higher than or an exception to it. This is Meillassoux in the interview responding to Harman's question prompting him along these lines:

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13 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 231-2.

14 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 192.

15 Meillassoux, 2008, p. 80.

I am opposed to two points of view: A) that of Žižek, and perhaps also Badiou, which would consist at bottom of making of materialism a ‘misfired correlationism’. [These materialisms] are supposed to detect the trace of an impossible coincidence of the subject with itself, and thus of an extra-correlational residue in which one could localise a ‘materialist moment’ of thought. But, in fact, such misfires are only further correlations for others: it is always *for a subject* that there is an undecidable event or failure of signification.<sup>16</sup>

Žižek, for his part, has spoken of Meillassoux and the school of speculative realism he at least in part helped found on several occasions, most notably in *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012) and in an interview he conducted for the anthology *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (2011). Žižek, in fact, is extremely impressed by Meillassoux's intellectual project, and reading his responses to it it is frequently hard to distinguish his own Hegelian-influenced position and his summary of Meillassoux. In a sense, he both makes Meillassoux his own and turns his own argument to sound like Meillassoux's. But there are at the end of his lengthy engagements a number of criticisms and distinctions he consistently makes. Most straightforwardly, he *does* assert a certain necessity in relation to contingency, but it is a necessity he says that allows contingency and not as Meillassoux characterises it any kind of exception to contingency (importantly, Žižek uses the Lacanian notion of not-all in this regard: there is no exception to contingency, but not-all is contingency<sup>17</sup>). This is Žižek's particular conception of Hegelian necessity, which again against the usual readings does not stand outside contingency but rather is what makes it possible. As he puts it in his interview in *The Speculative Turn*: “Consequently, not only does Hegel deduce the necessity of contingency, but he also develops the opposite, the contingency of necessity”.<sup>18</sup> This leads Žižek to his second qualification of Meillassoux: he insists on the necessity of a certain *subjectivity* in the thinking of contingency, but once more it is not the unified subject that Meillassoux imputes to Hegel and implicitly Žižek himself. Rather, for Žižek what is opened up by Meillassoux's pushing of the contingency of the world to its limit is not a “correlation” between the subject and the world but a movement from S to \$, substance to subject. The subject has to lose its object in order to become the subject of the signifier and the object has to have the subject withdraw from it in order for it to constitute itself as reality. It is not any kind of correlation between the subject and object but rather an

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16 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 166.

17 Žižek, 2012, p. 636.

18 Žižek, 2011, p. 414.

impossible overlap between the In-Itself of reality and the internal split in the subject. It is the very gap between the In-Itself and the For-Itself, the subject that always gets in the way and thus is divided from itself, that *is* the very In-Itself that is being looked for. As Žižek says, it is *this* that finally escapes correlation: not the In-Itself of any object, but the subject as object.<sup>19</sup>

It is at this point that we might return to the film for the last time to think what might be at stake in this relationship between Meillassoux and Žižek. We spoke before of the paradoxical fact that it is the contingent act of Uncle Billy losing the \$8000 that allows George to construct the necessity of his life, including Billy losing that \$8000 (it is, after all, his losing of the money that leads to the townspeople calling upon God, who sends down Clarence to show George what the world would have been like if he had never been born). It is this that Meillassoux means when he speaks of the fact that “a world that is capable of everything ought *also* to be capable of not accomplishing those things of which it is capable”<sup>20</sup> and Žižek when he says it is not a matter of the “discovery of some pre-existing inner Essence, but a ‘performative’ process of constructing that which is ‘discovered’”.<sup>21</sup> But there is also another remarkable contingency in the film, which is the equivalent, if apparently the inverse, of the first, and that might allow us to think the proper “ethics” at stake in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. As we say, the usual reading of the film is that the second sequence with Clarence showing George the world as if he had never been born must be seen in opposition to the first: one happy and connected and the other unhappy and atomised, one nostalgic and old-fashioned and the other realistic and up-to-date. They are inevitably seen as alternatives, with the first being real and the second a dream or nightmare, but occasionally this is reversed and it is the first that seen as fantasy and the second as authentic. However, one disallows other and both cannot be real, forcing us to choose between them, as George does when he calls upon God the second time, this time to go back to Bedford Falls.

But what happens—and this was my second Meillassoux moment as I watched the film that Christmas—if we imagine instead of any *return* to Bedford Falls the second time we have something like that “rebirth”<sup>22</sup> or “resurrection”<sup>23</sup> Meillassoux points to as the consequence of a truly contingent world, in which the dead could hypothetically come back to life because God is absent (and this moment is indeed marked by the absence

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19 Žižek, 2012, p. 644. See also Žižek, 2011, p. 412-3.

20 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 178.

21 Žižek, 2011, p. 414.

22 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 214.

23 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 192.

of Clarence or any divine intervention). That is to say, what happens when we are not forced to choose between the reality of Bedford Falls and the imaginary of Pottersville but are able to think that both are *equally true*? That it is not so much a shift away from reality in Pottersville and then a shift back at the end but that what we have is rather an example of Meillassoux’s hypothesis that the “world is destined for a transformation without reserve, in which there remains no determinate substance that remains unchanged amidst change”?<sup>24</sup> That it is not an imaginary Pottersville in between two Bedford Falls realities or even Pottersville as reality against the illusion of Bedford falls, but simply three different and discrete worlds? So that when George returns to Bedford Falls at the end – this is why we suggest it is equivalent in contingency to that first passage to Pottersville—it is not any kind of return or making up but an entirely different reality. If the first is as sudden as Clarence suddenly jumping from out of the shot into the water—for George appears not to see him previously on the bridge when he looks—the second is just as sudden with Bert the policeman one moment firing a pistol after him and getting into his police car to chase him and the next rounding the corner (exactly the same kind of impossible entry into the world as Clarence) and saying to the incredulous George that he has been looking for him everywhere and that he should go home where his family waiting for him.<sup>25</sup>

What then of the status of this return to Bedford Falls if we must imagine it as a possible coming to life of the dead in an utterly contingent world? It is, to begin with, against what we have said of the relationship of Pottersville to Bedford Falls, not to be understood as any retrospective revelation of the truth or making up for what is lost. And this is, we suggest, the truth of the townspeople gathering together to raise the money in the famous heart-warming scene at the end. It is a matter not of making up for any missing money but of *new* money that has nothing to do with the old (it is this, we would contend, that is the real meaning of the much-debated fact that the film does not render retrospective justice upon Potter for not returning the \$8000 he got from Billy, even though he knows exactly where he got it from. Just as it is not a matter of compensating or making up for the losses of George’s life, so it is a matter of taxing or taking a cut of the gains of Potter’s life). In a sense, the money comes out of nowhere, just like that copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that Clarence leaves behind as a Christmas present to George. It is the same resurrection we see with Martini, who has come back after being missing from his bar, his wife who remarries him after

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24 Meillassoux, 2011, p. 177.

25 Altogether on the incessant contingent “novelty” of the film, we might think that Bert deals with George no fewer than three times while he is in Pottersville without apparently remembering that he has previously met him. It is also undoubtedly important on this matter of a “crack” opening up in reality that George’s encounters with Clarence and Bert take place on a bridge. We might also recall along these lines the dancefloor opening up the night George first properly meets Mary.

being an old maid and of course most spectacularly his brother Harry, who in the previous world was buried in the cemetery where Bailey Park used to be, now returning as a war hero. We think we even see something of this in the famous grin of George as he hugs his wife and holds a child in the last shot of the film. It is exactly not a matter of returning to reality with a sense of how good things actually are, but as we read it a slight reserve and even startlement, as though he is now inhabiting a new world, as unrecognisable in its way as Potterville in that second sequence of the film (certainly, he could tell no one about what had just happened to him, so that there is the same loss of shared memory he had there).

It is at this point, to pick up something of Žižek's analysis in relation to Meillassoux, that we might say we pass from *desire* to *drive*. Žižek makes the point in his transcribing of Meillassoux's speculative materialism into Hegelian Lacanese that what is properly implied by the transposition of the gap separating us from the Thing-in-Itself into the Thing-in-Itself is a move from the "longing" of desire to the stuckness" of the drive.<sup>26</sup> If in desire there is a "lost object", in drive this "loss itself is an object".<sup>27</sup> It is part of Žižek's insistence that in the proper conception of what is at stake in Meillassoux's attempt to think against correlationism is a New that "retroactively posits/creates its own necessity".<sup>28</sup> In drive, as opposed to the attempt to refind the lost object, with the always subsequent disappointed realisation that what we have is not it, it is the very repeated action itself that is the satisfaction. What is at stake is not the attempt by the subject to make itself whole again by finding that object that would fill its "hole", but the equivalence between an always divided subject (\$) and an always lost object or world (S). This is Žižek in *Less than Nothing* outlining what he sees as the real consequence of that chaotic anti-correlationism Meillassoux opens up: "The problem is not to think the Real outside of transcendental correlation, independently of the subject; the problem is to think the Real *inside* the subject, the hard core of the Real in the very heart of the subject, its ex-timate centre"<sup>29</sup> And again this is the best way to understand George's final return to Bedford Falls at the end of the film: not the last in a series of compensations, each seeking to make up for what was previously missing (Potterville to make up for the disappointments of Bedford Falls, the return to Bedford Falls to make up for the meaninglessness of Pottersville, with the implication that George will eventually find Bedford Falls once again disappointing and beg God to take him away when things settle down). Rather, it is this *repetition* itself that George now finds satisfactory: he at once realises

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26 Žižek, 2012, p. 639.

27 Žižek, 2012, p. 639.

28 Žižek, 2011, p. 415.

29 Žižek, 2012, p. 644.

that he will never get what he wants and that nothing remains the same. But if we could inflect Žižek with Meillassoux at this point, it would be that drive here is not just the repeated return to the same, like any kind of restorative desire, but the fact that *everything* always different, with absolutely *no* turning back to the past.

Of course, *It's Wonderful Life* is a perfect example of what Meillassoux calls not just science-fiction but extro-science-fiction, with its breaking of the physical laws of the known universe with angels coming down from heaven, the positing of alternative realities and the impossible appearance of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as a Christmas present.<sup>30</sup> But it also helps us think—Meillassoux's real point—that our universe itself is a kind of extro-science fiction, with the ever-present possibility if we can think outside of the correlationsist circle that the known laws of the universe could change at any moment, the dead could rise from their graves and a retrospective justice might be rendered to those previously gone. Why not indeed think *It's Wonderful Life* in terms of Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, or better subtitle *After Finitude It's a Wonderful Life*? And in fact is not the conclusion to *It's Wonderful Life*, its for-generations celebrated Christmas message, ultimately not the same as Meillassoux's? That the possible presence of God is not the inevitable guarantor of the necessity of the world, so that some underlying order might be discerned in it, but on the contrary only possible insofar as the world is contingent? The true passage of the film is from the idea that it is only insofar as we can think of some higher order to the world that could dispense justice—as the townspeople and George call upon God at the beginning of the film—to the idea that it is only insofar as the world is utterly contingent—as George realises by the end of the film—that He exists. That is to say, God exists in our very ability to think his absence, which is why it is only with the *disappearance* of Clarence and George's realisation that there is no other world than this one that Christmas can be celebrated at the end of the film and He can appear again in the form of Tom Sawyer. It is only at this point, when George realises that everything is always different and that there is absolutely no one he can talk to about what happened to him that he gathers himself and starts singing with the others. But he is alone as the only Meillassouxian in the room, insofar the other townspeople do not realise that their prayers touched the stars and believe that they raised the money themselves, instead of it appearing miraculously.

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30 Meillassoux, 2015, pp. 3-57

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# The Documentary Form and Lacan's Four Discourses

David Denny

**Abstract:** This paper is an exploratory sketch that considers how we might employ Jacques Lacan's four discourses, as developed in his seminar XVII, to analyze how the genre of non-fiction film deals with its own internal limit (the film form) to document reality or adequately disseminate knowledge. By first reading a series of documentary films alongside the master's, university, and hysteric's discourses (all of which reify some social link), we then consider if the analyst's discourse can be utilized by the documentarian to produce a knowledge of the unconscious; a knowledge that can expose and potentially dissolve the social link.

**Keywords:** object *a*, surplus-*jouissance*, master signifier, Other/knowledge, discourse, documentary form, seminar XVII.

"No doubt it's around this word 'knowledge' that there is a point of ambiguity . . ." (14)<sup>1</sup>

"Sneaking around is not transgressing. Seeing a door half-open is not the same as going through it." (19)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In the 2009 documentary film *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Slavoj Žižek likens watching a film to a pervert. We the viewer look through the peep hole waiting for and anticipating the real to appear on the screen, exemplified in the famous toilet scene in *The Conversation* (1974) where what we expect to happen, the remnants of a murder emerging through the one contraption that is supposed to remove the evidence once and for all, suddenly appears, to our horror and delight. Cinema allows us to enjoy what we normally do not get to experience in our day-to-day reality. The structure is perverse because while we gaze at the illicit or transgressive, we remain in the safe confines of the movie theater. If narrative film flirts with a real that teases and baits the limits of reality, then documentary film is struck by a similar fate. But in this latter form, could we say that the difference, if any, is didactic; that is, a didactic exploration of various cinematic techniques of manipulation in order to present a reality from which we might just get closer to a knowledge of the real (of some event, question, problem, political or aesthetic persuasion, etc.)? Even the word didactic might be too strong. What I am suggesting is that the documentary form is always already haunted by approximation, and therefore, whether consciously or unconsciously, resorts to manipulation to either conceal or foreground its own conceit. Of course, getting closer

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1 Lacan, 2007, p. 14.

2 Lacan 1977, p. 19.

to the Lacanian real is precisely just that; it is not some-Thing that can be accessed or seen or put into words. The point I am making is that, conscious or not of the object's impossibility of coming into the light, the documentary form is just as troubled with reality as narrative film. Each is fated to mess with form in order to influence how content delivers it's (un)intended message. And so it is through the medium of artifice, or by way of the obstacle or gap between so-called reality and some presumptive real, that allows us to interrogate how form tends to lead content down this troubled path to some obscure object.

From here, we could say that documentary film has its own history of experimentation before the altar of the real. Lacan writes, "[*episteme*] is all about finding the position that makes it possible for knowledge to become the master's knowledge".<sup>3</sup> A discourse (or *episteme*) is founded on the differential logic of signifiers ("a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic or nonlinguistic, under the same heading")<sup>4</sup>, how they fit together to create an apparatus (*dispositif*), which then recognizes patterns of intelligibility, transmits knowledge, and produces power relations and shapes behaviors. Key to the position of a discourse is its disavowal or repression of some internal limit. What a discourse strategically *seeks* to internalize is a metalanguage that then enables the discourse to function smoothly, without stutter, doubt, or bad conscience. Here metalanguage is synonymous with Lacan's 'master's knowledge'; it is a language that elevates mere discourse to the status of knowledge. We could say that the study of film genre is first and foremost a question of establishing a discursive apparatus that recognizes patterns, predictability, and transmission. What often happens in genre studies is a discussion of how a film or a filmmaker tests the boundaries of genre; how elements or signifiers are added to the film that undermine or stretch the authority of the genre. Bill Nichols, in his *Introduction to Documentary Film*, attempts to create a discursive apparatus through which we could identify the various modes existing within the genre. He develops a taxonomy of modes and identifies six of them; Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative.<sup>5</sup> The problem with Nichol's work is not its descriptive quality of categorization or even its degree of categorical correctness; it is rather what it has to leave out in order for the book to hold together, to make sense. My interest is to consider what does not make sense in any given documentary film, or what forms at the limits of sense. How does a documentary film acknowledge or account for nonsense, or fail to do so? How might such nonsense lend insight to Lacan's work on *jouissance*—a useless or excess expenditure produced at the limit of sense?

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3 Lacan 2007, p. 22.

4 Agamben 2009, p. 2.

5 Nichols 2010, p. 31.

This is why we need to turn to Lacan and his four discourses. Not to present a rival taxonomy, but to add to how we might read the documentary film. Consider this exercise as borrowing from the Deleuzian metaphor that philosophy is a toolbox. Here we use Lacan's four discourses as a tool to bugged the documentary form with precisely those terms that a discourse fails to contain (surplus *jouissance*) represses (master signifier), or disavows (the split subject). Lacan's contribution in his XVII<sup>th</sup> seminar is, among other things, to examine how lack and enjoyment function within four particular discourses. Lacan writes, "[discourse] subsists in certain fundamental relations which would literally not be able to be maintained without language. Through the instrument of language, a number of stable relations are established, *inside which something that is much larger and goes much further than actual utterances can, of course, be inscribed.*"<sup>6</sup>

Lacan's project is to determine how the discourse of the master gives way to the university and hysteric's discourses, which then gives birth to the analyst's discourse. More specifically, how does a discourse account for the following: 1) A signifier (S1) which represents a subject for another signifier, and whose point of signification is arbitrary and nonsensical; 2) The production of knowledge (S2), or the know-how needed to make knowledge something that sticks to a master and have value; 3) The split subject (\$) who represents a negativity that threatens the integrity or value of any given discourse; and 4) a surplus-*jouissance* or enjoyment (*a*) that is produced by the incommensurable relation between a signifier (S1) and knowledge (S2). How these four terms influence each of the four discourses depends on how they are positioned within a dynamic structure that includes an agent that addresses a certain knowledge or Other, which then produces some product or surplus, and manages to conceal or repress some position of truth (or guiding presupposition) from which it comes. This dynamic will become clearer below. Suffice it to say here that my claim is that all documentary film contains these elements. For example, you have the filmmaker who considers her position of authority (editing, sound, lighting, shot selection, participation, etc.); the actual edited content of the film (the stitching of elements or signifiers into a whole); the unconscious optics of the camera, which, to some degree, of course, escapes the authority of the filmmaker, and which becomes the domain of the reader, what Roland Barthes termed the pleasure of the text; and a hidden presupposition that sets into motion the intended outcome of the film but which never arrives at its destination. All of this constitutes what is "much larger and goes much further" than how the film is inscribed within the discourse of filmic form as well as the particular film's content.

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6 Lacan 2007, p. 13. Italics my emphasis.

What follows is a preliminary sketch. It is not meant to create a discursive apparatus on its own and from which we could then slot and interpret film (even though it clearly entertains this thought). Rather, it is meant to see how Lacan can bugger the documentary form so as to impregnate new or different takes. Further, it is to attempt to put forward a theory and method of documentary filmmaking that takes seriously the discourse of the analyst. If the discourse of the analyst is the only revolutionary discourse, the one that exposes and dissolves the master signifier, how might documentary filmmaking apply this discourse to their art? I will proceed by way of example(s), beginning with the master's, followed by the university, hysteric's and, finally, the analyst's discourses.<sup>7</sup>

**The Master's Discourse:**

S1 → S2

\$      a

Agent → Other  
Truth      Product

Watching Werner Herzog's remarkable and critically acclaimed documentary film *Grizzly Man* about Timothy Treadwell, a self-made expert on grizzly bears who, for thirteen summers, would camp in a remote area of Alaska in order to research and protect the bears from poachers, and in 2003 was, with his girlfriend Amie Huguenard, mauled to death by a grizzly bear, one cannot but be taken aback by Herzog's hovering voice over. Herzog does not simply point out critical pieces of information to help the audience gain their bearings; rather he intervenes at the level of philosopher, psychologist, and film critic. The objectivity of Herzog's reading of Treadwell begins to feel off when we sense that a rivalry is afoot. This tension is crystallized in a remarkable sequence in which Treadwell becomes emotionally upset when a baby fox has been killed and a baby cub has been eaten by a male bear so as to prepare the female bear, as she continues to lactate for the cub, for mating. Herzog voice-over says: "(Treadwell) holds the sentimentalized view that everything out there (in nature) was good and the universe in balance and harmony. I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony but chaos, hostility, and murder." Here we begin to see the outlines for a master/slave like drama: Treadwell's naïve romanticism and amateur filmmaking (the heroic but ill-fated 'slave' who sets out to live off the

7 What follows is the development of a brief section of a paper I recently wrote on the film *The Act of Killing*. See Denny 2017

grid, free of the demands and discontents of civilization) and Herzog's dark enlightenment philosophy and expert filmmaking (the 'master' whose very intelligence is premised on the heroism of the slave to reach for the impossible but to fail).

Strange is not so much Herzog's analysis of Treadwell, but the insistence of Herzog's desire to locate meaning in Treadwell's labor, to form some social link so that Treadwell's questionable motives may be redeemed into a sacrifice from which something might be gained. Lacan writes, "Philosophy in its historical function is this extraction, I would almost say this betrayal, of the slave's knowledge, in order to obtain its transmutation into the master's knowledge."<sup>8</sup> We know from Lacan's discourse of the master that the master's authority comes from something external to him, that he is nothing without the other's recognition, and that the fight to death at the heart of the master's survival is the maintenance of those symbolic terms that form the coordinates of the relation. It is not so much that Herzog needs Treadwell's recognition (of course, he never met Treadwell, and only knows him through 100 or so hours of Treadwell's own footage and interviews with family and friends), as he does Treadwell's insights, his labor of love, his madness. As such, Treadwell becomes a kind of cipher or ghost from which Herzog can stage and then answer a philosophical problem; namely, what is the relation between nature and civilization and is there an invisible boundary or gap that holds them apart; one that cannot be crossed without lethal consequences? Here Treadwell becomes S2, a conflicting battery of signifiers, what Lacan calls "[T]he stomach of the Other, the big Other, . . . (which) is like some monstrous Trojan horse that provides the foundations for the fantasy of a total knowledge."<sup>9</sup> This 'monstrous Trojan horse' is precisely the Other that threatens the master, or, in Herzog's case, fascinates him, presenting a puzzle of sorts that requires domestication.

But this begs the question: what represents the S1, the master-signifier, that sits on the top left-hand corner, and which represents the sign of authority that sets into motion knowledge, providing cover (symbolic status) for the split subject (\$) ? I argue that the master signifier, S1, that frames the films unfolding and direction is not Treadwell, but nature. Treadwell becomes a Trojan horse that stands in for the more probing question—not only what is nature, but how does nature lend insight into human nature? We clearly see this in the film's conclusion, where, over a *misc-en-scene* of foxes and grizzlies playing in the grassy field, and Treadwell aimlessly walking amongst his animal friends, Herzog says:

8 Lacan 2007, p. 22.

9 Lacan 2007, p. 33.

What remains is his footage. And while we watch the animals in their joys of being, in their grace and ferociousness, a thought becomes more and more clear. That it is not so much a look at wild nature as it is an insight into ourselves, our nature. And that, for me, beyond his mission, gives meaning to his life and death.

Given the grammar of the film, the use of editing and shot selection to parse together a 1 hour and 44-minute film, one cannot but be struck by this conclusion. Due to constraints of time, I will not develop this point by analyzing scenes from the film, but suffice it to say here that Herzog focuses less on Treadwell's becoming-animal in the affirmative and impossible vein of helping the bears or subverting the requirements of civilization or commenting on the limit and folly of anthropology.<sup>10</sup> Rather, he focuses almost exclusively on Treadwell's inner journey, propping up nature as a mirror to expose his inner demons. For example, we get Treadwell talking about his problems with women and how cool it would be to be gay in order to get quicker results; we get Treadwell talking in a performative diva-like voice, as he insists on the authenticity of his love for these animals; and we get this long take towards the end of the film of Treadwell berating the park service for trying to run him off the land and not fully appreciating his cause. In fact, Herzog feels compelled to provide a voice-over here: "His rage is almost incandescent. The actor in his film has taken over from the filmmaker. I have seen this madness before on a film-set. But Treadwell is not an actor in opposition to a director or a producer—he's fighting civilization itself." Herzog then feels compelled to say how this is a line he will not cross with Treadwell. Juxtaposed to this footage of Treadwell, Herzog also enlists others to support his thesis that Treadwell has crossed an imaginary boundary. There is a native working in a local museum who speaks about ancient customs in which the grizzly world is revered as separate; a wildlife ecologist who gives scientific testimony to the real nature of the grizzly; and there is a pilot who says that Treadwell got what was coming to him. We also learn from his Long Island suburban parents that he left home, changed his name, attempted to become an actor in Los Angeles, suffered from alcoholism, and loved his teddy bear, which he had with him in his summer trips into the wild.

Given this body of evidence, Herzog's position is pretty straightforward: Treadwell is a naïve romantic who seeks to escape the confines of civilization, and who thus sublimates some deeper angst or disappointment with a dangerous love affair with the bears. While it is true that Treadwell may indeed be haunted by some obscure event or object from his past life, and, through sublimation raises this abject remainder of whatever event or object to the dignity of the Thing, the

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent reading of this film see Pettman 2009.

*stranger thing*, nonetheless, is Herzog's insistence to determine these terms over and against other signifiers that could complicate his own mastery of the situation, or, for that matter, allow the terms and the events to unfold on their own. Further, his insistence is tinged with his own satisfaction in poetizing for the audience the lesson that can be gleaned from Treadwell. This is what allows him to stitch a stomach full of signifiers into a final establishing shot (cited just above) which then creates the social link. Despite Treadwell's demons, narcissism, and misguided rage, he nonetheless gives meaning to our own inner struggle with nature. And so it is: nature functions as the master signifier—the nonsensical and irrational kernel that unites Treadwell (naïve romantic) with Herzog (dark enlightenment)—which then sutures the incommensurability (rivalry) between the master and slave, or between Herzog (the split subject) and Treadwell (the Other). Treadwell's actual work, his knowhow, a point that cannot be taken lightly when you consider how much time he spent in the wild with the grizzlies, is used to promote Herzog's *own* vision of nature. As such, what is produced, the object *a*, at the bottom right corner of the master's discourse, is a surplus *jouissance* or enjoyment, which is enjoyed at the expense of Treadwell. More specifically, it is an enjoyment that is procured for the master, in this case not only Herzog but also the viewer.

Before moving on, I need to mention one crucial scene, perhaps *the* crucial scene. In the middle of the film, we see Herzog's listening to an audio of Treadwell and Amie Huguenard screaming bloody murder as they are gorged to death by a grizzly bear. We view this from a side angle that allows us to look at the face of Jewel Palovak, a close friend of Treadwell who held all the rights to the video files and who gave Herzog the permission to make the film. It is this scene where Herzog truly assumes the position of the master. Herzog listens for only a minute or two of the six minutes and then says that he has heard enough. He earnestly tells Jewel, whose face is riveted with horror as she watches Herzog listen to the tape, that she should never listen to it, that it will always represent a white elephant, a siren song, and that she should either burn it or lock it up in a safety deposit box. One cannot help but think that the reality being withheld is the master signifier itself, the horror of nature itself, testimony of its deeper chaos and murder, one that we can only approximate in reality, or, better, in film. In narrative film we can get Lars von Trier's fox in *Antichrist* that utters "chaos reigns" or Marlon Brando at the end of *Apocalypse Now* when he whispers "the horror, the horror." The real of nature is staged/acted. In a seeming stroke of luck (that Treadwell had his camera on, though with lens cap on, when he was attacked), Herzog has access to the (non-fictional) thing itself, unfettered by acting or a stage. Curious in Herzog's gesture is not so much that we feel or experience our lack of being, our alienation within language that is conferred upon us by our acceptance of the master; rather, in this instance, we modern subjects are instructed to accept it. It is a strange cinematic moment.

Because Herzog assumes this paternal position of 'knowing better', he also finds himself in a position to enjoy what is produced from this situation; namely, a surplus-*jouissance* generated from our forced submission. This is not to say that he should have let us hear the screams or that the film would be better for it; rather, it reveals his own relation to truth (\$, in the lower-left hand corner). In other words, why did Herzog film the scene the way he did? Because it provides the evidence for the efficacy of his master signifier. Nature as real is something that *can* be directly accessed. It can be shown, displayed before our eyes or ears, and, as such, it is horrific, not something the general public should have to endure. Herzog is far from castrated. The potency of a master signifier is to precisely secure the standing of the master or subject over and against the Other. However, from a Lacanian perspective, we can argue that Herzog is in fact furthest from the real, that his safeguarding it is a gesture that betrays the safekeeping of his own master signifier. Nature functions as a lure, and Treadwell as the bait.

### University Discourse:

$\underline{S2} \rightarrow \underline{a}$   
 $S1 \quad \$$

$\frac{\text{Agent}}{\text{Truth}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Other}}{\text{Product}}$

The example of a documentary film that assumes the position of the University is the very popular 2006 film on Global Warming called *The Inconvenient Truth* directed by Davis Guggenheim. The film is mostly comprised of Guggenheim following Al Gore on a speaking tour. The film functions as a fascinating sort of liberal manifesto. It summons the courage to address the real problem and enemy that faces humanity, using sophisticated visual effects to simulate the horror that awaits our future if we fail to do anything about it. At the level of science, it is hard to complain about this film. It is indeed expertly researched and presented. The problem is that Gore, who clearly assumes the position of the agent of expert knowledge, is repressing or, perhaps better, burying the truth (the master signifier) that confers his own position within a chain of other signifiers. This becomes clearer towards the end of the film when he explains the psychological reasons why we allow this warming to continue. We liberal citizens of the world are like the frog who sits in a pot of water that is ever slowly rising in temperature. We, the frog, do not realize this gradual increase until, that is, we either die from the temperature or are rescued. The striking conclusion to this film is the message that we need to change the way we think, and, even better, that this is not a political issue but a moral one. Therefore, and more

succinctly, what is being repressed or disavowed from Gore's position of agency is his master, namely globalized capitalism.

While it seems as though he is addressing us, his fellow liberal citizens, he is actually addressing an excess or a surplus-*jouissance* that he cannot contain, nor wishes to properly address (upper right-hand corner). Thus, from a Lacanian perspective, Gore's beautiful soul is exposed; his attempt at addressing the Other with an expert knowledge that will help change how we think in order to save the world turns out to be a liberal fantasy. What we really need to think about is how to traverse the fantasy of the liberal democratic institution for which Gore serves.

While it is true that Gore mentions economics and the lack of political will, he does so in rather soft and even vague terms. For example, he never even utters the word capitalism, let alone how this economic force completely revolutionized the modern world, throwing a seemingly harmless human dependency on nature into a mortal fight for survival. He even says that through new technologies we can maintain economic growth, which betrays the fact that he does acknowledge that capital is premised on growth. So, we can have our cake and eat it too; the incessant but productive revolutionizing force of capital at the cost of a slight shift in habit formation, that is, moral psychology. We have become habituated creatures of consumption who understandably operate through the guise of a rationalist choice theory. He uses the historical examples of cigarette smoking and the civil rights movement to suggest that humans are capable of moral change; that a stronger argument will eventually win out over a weaker one. As for the rhetorical spirit of moral psychology, he solicits a sentimental connection with his audience by recounting the story of his 6-year old son who was near fatally struck by an automobile. We are led to think that it is this sudden existential encounter with the mortality of his son that sent him on his Sisyphus-like journey to educate the world of the one moral problem that unites us all. To argue that climate change is a moral and not a political issue is to reproduce the ideology of capitalism itself: change happens on an individual level, who then incites the political will for real change. To not foreground climate change as a political problem, first and foremost, enables a critique of political-economy to remain repressed or disavowed. This position is solidified in the closing credits where we, the liberal viewer, are provided with the actual terms of the manifesto. We are told to recycle, buy a hybrid car if we can, write to congress, talk to others, conserve electricity, etc. The result or product of this discourse (\$, situated in the lower right-hand corner) is the reproduction of the liberal subject—at once outraged and incredulous over the Koch brother, Republicans, fossil fuel lobbyist, Fox News, family members, while also faithful to recycling, buying locally, feeling bad about not riding a bike to work; in a word, political cynicism. Here enjoyment, or surplus-*jouissance*, is mobilized in the production of subjectivity. Thus, we wring our hands and mock our own faithfulness to the altar of sustainability,

despite having the knowledge that sustainability is a cruel joke; that real economic sustainability entails a political revolution of the economic system. The rub is how surplus enjoyment is given value, a kind of imitative *jouissance*; how enjoyment becomes squeezed and exploited as a source of value. When Gore laments that he has failed in his educative mission, it seems clear that he has succeeded in giving value to his own personal sense of failure. As he says, “you make the most of the situation.” It seems that the following words from Lacan could be applied directly to Gore: “Capitalist exploitation effectively frustrates him of his knowledge by rendering it useless. What, in a type of subversion, gets returned to him is something different—master’s knowledge. And this is why all that he has done is change masters. What remains, in effect, is the essence of the master, namely, that he does not know what he wants.”<sup>11</sup>

The university discourse presents a challenge to filmmakers who want to make a difference through the dissemination of well-argued and presented information. As we will see below, the hysteric’s discourse may be too indulgent, insistent, or performative, the analyst’s discourse too difficult to stage and pull off, and the master’s discourse too heavy-handed, and thus not convincing. I mention this to reiterate that Lacan’s discourses are not totalizing formations; that there is a certain degree of play between them depending on where one stands in relation to the other coordinates. Whether consciously or unconsciously, filmmakers have to ask themselves how to document and present information of an event that somehow moves beyond (mediated) reality to the (impossible) real. I can think of a recent film that struggles with this problem: *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016). This film explores the socio-political and economic reality of the mass incarceration of African-Americans, a trend that began under the Reagan Administration, exploded under Bill Clinton, and which persists to the present moment. The film uses tropes common to expository documentary filmmaking such as historical footage and clips to provide context, interviews with a range of experts and activists in the field, and clips or interviews with the opposing side. On the surface, it looks like it belongs in the University; it expertly disseminates historical information. However, what differentiates this film from *An Inconvenient Truth* is the way it addresses the non-sensical *jouissance* of racism (the object *a* in the upper right-hand corner) versus the way Gore addresses the enjoyment of denying climate change. The principal cause or quilting point (the *S1* in the bottom left corner) that holds the tapestry of a thread that spans from slavery to mass incarceration is twofold; political economy and theft of enjoyment. It is important to emphasize principal causes because they are not the only factors, but it is the one thread that runs through it all, especially with regard to political-economy: early prison labor, Jim Crow laws, redlining, and mass incarceration. So, the agent of knowledge (*S2*),

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11 Lacan 2007, p. 32.

Ava DuVernay, the filmmaker, does not directly name the master, but simply exposes a chain of signifiers, all connected, that leads back to this one enigmatic signifier that implies both terms: capital and enjoyment. Indeed, slavery was principally an economic motive, which seemingly runs right up to and through mass incarceration, but it is also the anxiety that the Black man will steal the White man’s enjoyment—his jobs, his women, his manhood, his property, etc. My point here with regard to the university discourse is that while DuVernay assumes the position of knowledge, she manages to hystericize this knowledge by troubling the relay between *S2* and *a*. This is best illustrated toward the end of the film. Here, a Black commentator remarks on how Whites express astonishment over past instances of hate and intolerance—attending a lynching, separate water fountains—and how they would never have tolerated that. He retorts, “the truth is, we are living at this time, and we are tolerating it.” If the film produces value for the subject, it is a value that affirms the subject’s own negativity; that is, if there is enjoyment leaked to the viewing subject it is one that ends up challenging one’s own libidinal investment in the issue. Here the typical liberal disposition that morally grandstands about the value multiculturalism and tolerance is inverted, therein becoming the very symptom that sustains racism. Again, I cite this example because I feel the documentary form struggles with the University discourse due to the way it tends to be self-aware of its own authority. Where Gore uses his authority to display his beautiful soul, DuVernay uses her authority to cross discourses (between the University and the hysteric) by hystericizing the chain of signifiers that justify law and order<sup>12</sup>.

### Hysteric’s Discourse:

$\$ \rightarrow S1$   
*a*     *S2*

$\frac{\text{Agent}}{\text{Truth}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Other}}{\text{Product}}$

The documentary form that has experimented with and explored different techniques in order to get at something more real than reality is the hysteric’s discourse. I agree with William Rothman’s brilliant thesis in his *Documentary Classics* that the genre’s trouble with reality, from a very early start, led filmmakers to explore the technical and formal aspect of its own art-form, eventually coming to embrace these obstacles as opening up a creative space between so-called reality and some

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12 In fact, I think it is safe to assume that DuVernay is well aware that her audience is mostly white educated people.

presumptive real. Rothman's conclusion is that these innovations bring the documentary form to the same ontological shores as narrative film.<sup>13</sup> The documentary genre and the narrative genre both realize the need to mess with form, to use the obstacle, the element of fiction or *techne*, in order to access something more real than reality.

So, what does this have to do with the hysteric's discourse? The documentarian, already self-conscious of the obstacle presented by the camera, distrusts the perceived advantage or mandate of their form; they recognize the more masculine and thus unreliable discursive position of the master or the expert—and so they resist. In some form and measure, they simulate the Modernist tradition in literature by foregrounding their own perspective as unreliable. We especially see this in the emergence of personal narrative built from within the story so as to shed light on the very unreliability of the subject matter at hand, as exemplified in the 1985 film *Sherman's March* and, more recently, in the 2012 film *The Stories We Tell*. However, the hysteric's discourse is not relegated to this personal twist in which the filmmaker asserts herself into the film; it can also refer to how the camera and editing techniques are manipulated in order to produce the effect of the undecidable. An early and classic film that assumes this position is Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *A Chronicle of Summer* (1961). If Herzog's film is about the invisible boundary between nature and culture, we can say that Rouch and Morin's film is about the invisible boundary between reality and the real, or between a reality mediated by the presence of a camera and an authentic real, some pure expression of one's inner being. In the beginning of the film, Rouch and Morin express their intentions to a young woman who will play a key role in many of the scenes to follow. Revealing is how they frame this intention to this young woman. They admit in advance that what is at stake is the ability to be authentic: how do we speak honestly when we are self-conscious of being recorded; at what point can we distinguish acting from not-acting; what would count as an authentic moment or emotion? Morin and Rouch occupy the position of the hysteric (the split subject in the upper left corner) in that they seem to delight in the impossibility of their question, as if they know in advance that there is nothing in the big Other that could support or prove the question. The contrast to Herzog waxing poetic about nature's diabolical tendencies and Treadwell's naivete, and Gore's solemn persistence to travel the earth's surface showing the same slideshow over and over is striking. Morin and Rouch simply let the Other speak, capturing the trials and dissatisfaction of their responses with regard to the question. It is an exquisite modernist film in that the cinematic frame is used to expose the limits of the frame itself.

Because of time, I will discuss the scene that exemplifies the hysterical moment par excellence. At the end of the film, after Rouch

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13 Rothman 2007.

and Morin had gathered together their Parisian subjects for a debriefing session, we see the filmmaker's walking down the hall. Morin says something quite remarkable, "they criticized our characters as not being true to life or else they found them too true." Morin does most of the talking in this sequence and laments that "We're reaching a stage when we question truth which is not everyday truth. As soon as they're more sincere than in life, they're labeled either as hams or as exhibitionists." It seems what Morin is saying here is that authenticity is either indecent (for revealing too much of ourselves) or fake (our true selves are always masked, acted). Rouch does not share equally in this lamentation. He responds by saying, "but people do not always know if they are acting." The key to this ambiguity—the impossible space between inauthenticity and authenticity—is precisely the perceived obstacle; namely, the camera, and how the filmmakers utilize the problem to become the solution. Rothman quotes a subsequence interview that Rouch gave: "We contract time, we extend it, we choose an angle for the shot, we deform the people we're shooting, we speed things up and follow one movement to the detriment of another movement. So, there is a whole work of lies. But, for me, and Edgar Morin at the time we made the film, this lie was more real than the truth."<sup>14</sup> Manipulation, staging, and directing—indeed lying— become necessary in order to expose the gap between phony and less phony; indeed fiction is the condition for the possibility of truth.

Lacan argues that the hysteric's discourse is the only discourse that produces knowledge. Rouch and Morin are not simply addressing a chain of signifiers that produce knowledge, they address the obstacle itself (S1), the point of incommensurability between signifier and signified. In other words, they assume the role of the split subject (\$), interrogate the master's incompetence (the hegemonic narratives of popular cinema), its false satisfaction at the auteur's and audience's expense, and produce a keen insight into the ambiguity of knowledge or mastery itself (S2). But a question lurks: does the knowledge they produce subvert the social link? Might their probing, interrogation, setting snares in order to capture truth in fiction the source of their own enjoyment? The hysteric is satisfied with nothing, but this nothing becomes the source of enjoyment itself, which is why surplus enjoyment occupies the place of truth in the hysteric's discourse.

Alenka Zupančič writes: "The hysterical is the guardian of the negative, of the incommensurable and the impossible. The well-known problem of this stance is that it fails to see that this renunciation and sacrifice themselves very quickly become the source of surplus enjoyment or satisfaction".<sup>15</sup> To what extent does this role of being a guardian of the negative play into and reproduce the contemporary social

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14 Rothman, p. 70.

15 Zupančič, p. 167.

link? If the social link is determined by a permanent self-revolutionizing economic order, how might a certain and often *avant-garde* documentary form, loosely associated with Lacan's discourse of the hysteric, be complicit with the reproduction of this very social link? The problem is that while the master-signifier might be exposed for what it is, arbitrary and non-sensical, this exposure is easily reabsorbed as the source of a surplus-enjoyment which, in turn, both feeds the hysterical subject and is subsumed by capital. The social link is not threatened because the arbitrary and non-sensical is something that is already accounted for by cynicism, the ideological antidote to political impotence.<sup>16</sup> When looking at such films as *Sherman's March*, *The Stories We Tell*, and *Chronicle of a Summer*, one cannot help but sense how enjoyment undergirds the performance of the (unreliable) filmmaker(s); indeed, how they get off on their subject.<sup>17</sup> It is for this reason that documentary filmmaking needs to turn an eye towards Lacan and the discourse of the analyst in order to effect or change the coordinates of our current social link.

### Analyst's Discourse:

$\underline{a} \rightarrow \$$   
S1    S2

$\frac{\text{Agent}}{\text{Truth}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Other}}{\text{Product}}$

In a recent paper, I explore in detail how Joshua Oppenheimer's stunning documentary film *The Act of Killing* pulls off the seeming impossible: the making of a film that meets the terms or requirements of Lacan's discourse of the analyst.<sup>18</sup> The key, I argued, was the uncanny coincidence between the actual killers (a handful of militia-like henchmen who participated in the execution of approximately 1.5 million communists, ethnic Chinese, peasants, and land reformers in Indonesia in 1965) agreeing to re-enact their crimes *and* real time interviews of these same killers and others who were associated with the genocide. The juxtaposition between the re-enactment scenes, live interviews, and the creative use of cinematography and editing creates a surrealist landscape of conflicting images and signifiers that create the formal, if not clinical, conditions that allows Oppenheimer to assume the position of the analyst. Not only this, and perhaps more importantly, he

<sup>16</sup> This might help explain, though admittedly in reductive terms, both the quality and the success of TV programs on platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu.

<sup>17</sup> This is particularly obvious in Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March*.

<sup>18</sup> Denny 2017.

succeeded, perhaps beyond his own wildest imagination, in manipulating the contents and analyzing the data through the art of editing to create not simply a fever dream<sup>19</sup> but a simulacrum of what Freud called the dream-work. Oppenheimer said in an interview that “the editing is not just about how I’m going to put together a great story out of what I shot or show what happened: it’s an excavation, it’s an analysis of all the data.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, he adds, “All these layers of meaning make the material much smarter than I am.” Oppenheimer succeeds as an analyst by inciting Anwar Congo, the main character and former henchmen, to free associate, to essentially externalize and reproduce his own psychic scars through his acting and rambling interviews (S2). As such, he not only provides an intimate look into the mind of a killer, but this *active mind* becomes a discursive frame to analyze the unconscious knowledge of the event within a broader historical frame, and therein implicate a whole cast of characters who all share a relatively similar relationship to the artful obscenity of rationalization, of white washing, of living with a heinous and obvious crime.

So, how can Oppenheimer's film, especially its technical and formal principles, create a blueprint for other documentary filmmaker's? Enter Louis Theroux's 2015 film *My Scientology Movie*. Theroux, not satisfied with traditional forms of documentary filmmaking, wanted to find a different way to get inside the protective walls of Scientology. He comes across and names the technique as “negative access.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than seeking out information through traditional means—the interview, the cross reference, embellished re-enactments that more often simply convey the director's point of view—Theroux, inspired by Oppenheimer's film, uses the ploy of dramatic re-enactment in order to provoke negative responses, or resistances that disrupt typical modes of understanding. Theroux's method is to produce an unconscious knowledge of the Scientology phenomenon by provoking another scene, one that coughs up signifiers that are otherwise held in check by the typical modes of the documentary form. Tim Robey of *The Daily Telegraph* contrasts Theroux's film from the more methodical *Going Clear* by Alex Gibney, “where Gibney circled the movement right from its beginnings, seeking to analyze its methods and impugn its motives, Theroux just gets right in there and jabs it in the ribs, that imperturbable mask of irony driving its partisans even more bananas than usual.”<sup>22</sup>

As it turns out, the real protagonist (and thus analysand) of the film is David Miscavige's right-hand man (Miscavige is the Church

<sup>19</sup> A fever dream is how Oppenheimer describes what he feels he has created.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, p. 486.

<sup>21</sup> Theroux 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Robey 2013.

leader, having replaced Ron L Hubbard in 1987, and has been accused of repeated acts of abuse and intimidation on his own followers). This man is Marty Rathbun, a senior executive and inspector General of the church from 1999 to 2004. He left the church in 2004 and has ever since been deemed a 'suppressive person', and who is thus followed and harassed by a shockingly weird special Scientology squad called the squirrel busters.<sup>23</sup> If anyone from the inside could reveal something about the master, David Miscavige, it is Rathbun, whose job entailed the protection and enforcement of doctrine—a job whose methods are precisely those which Miscavige has been accused of abusing. It is Rathbun who functions as the quilting point that holds the entire film together. Without him, the re-enactment scenes are merely gratuitous; a dramatic side-effect.<sup>24</sup> As Theroux says, "it soon became clear that the re-enactments would allow me to question and probe those former Scientologists' versions of event."<sup>25</sup> Testimony from victims is not enough; there is never enough evidence, and nothing but denial from the Scientology camp. By having Rathbun participate in the cast selection for the Miscavige and Tom Cruise roles, as well as writing and directing scenes, we find ourselves more interested in observing Rathbun's reactions to the accuracy of the re-enactments than the acting itself. Not only do his reactions confirm that there were indeed serious abusive techniques being used inside the church so as to break people, but we also observe his own enjoyment in now revealing this secret, as if reliving the enjoyment of standing in for the abusive idiot master himself. His enjoyment seems to undermine his clear conscience.

Where things go slightly off the rails for Rathbun is when a bunch of 'squirrel busters' taunt him by alleging that his own adopted child is really a foster kid who therefore helps him pay the bills. In the very next scene we witness an emotionally distraught Rathbun, saying how Miscavige had to have scripted the entire exchange. Theroux seizes this moment, just as an analyst would who recognizes a narrative discontinuity with his or her analysand, and asks Rathbun why he would be so upset if he in fact used similar techniques with infidels. Rathbun, in turn, becomes irate with Theroux. In this moment Rathbun is exposed as a split subject; we observe a discontinuity between his ego talk (his confident takedown of Scientology) and unconscious desire (the way a signifier, here re-introduced to his own narrative framing, undoes and therein exposes the

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<sup>23</sup> For those of you who have seen the HBO show 'The Leftovers' think of the white cult who called themselves 'the guilty remnant', and whose stone-cold presence was designed to incite memory of the event, and thus guilt.

<sup>24</sup> Though Rathbun and Anwar Congo are very different in terms of culpability, they are interesting to compare. Though Congo openly never renounced his participation with the death squads, he nonetheless admits that he is haunted by them. In this way, the two share a certain proximity to a crime that is inaccessible except through indirect means.

<sup>25</sup> Theroux 2015.

lie of his own self-serving narrative or rationalization, not to mention his own enjoyment in both the handing out of abuse and now his position to expose its injustice). The subject who was once a master of abusing the other is now the object of that same abuse; the letter has returned to its destination. It is a striking moment in the film, one which Peter Bradshaw claims to be "an unsatisfying aspect to the film."<sup>26</sup> But I claim that this is the most satisfying moment. For it is in this moment that we come close to something like the transference, where Theroux, the kind therapist helping Rathbun tell his side of the story, becomes Miscavige (the object *a*), the cause that incites Rathbun's unconscious knowledge to emerge. Indeed, Rathbun becomes the cipher, or the signifier (S1) that exposes the lie of Scientology; namely, how the cult-value of Scientology functions as a fetish in order to confer belief in an otherwise arbitrary chain of signifiers (S2). Put differently, the transference operates less for Rathbun (he disappears after this encounter) and more for the audience. We observe the agent of knowledge (the one who sheds light onto the Scientology cult) unravel, and in this rupture or discontinuity the real appears precisely as *this* rupture or discontinuity. The truth of Scientology (the S1 on the lower left corner) is arbitrary, non-sensical and thus inherently violent.

And this is why the ending of Theroux's film is so spot-on. The obscene underside of Scientology is really not that different than any other expression of group psychology or social organization—the social link requires and needs abusive and coercive techniques in order to keep the social tie together. Theroux does well in the end to admit his own attraction to the religion; it's weird blend of science fiction, new age wisdom, and Hollywood glamor. This final admission of Theroux forces the spectator to perhaps or hopefully understand not so much what Scientology is, but how its social link is not that different than their own social ties. Theroux, the analyst, succeeds in shifting our attention from the object of Scientology to the social tie that holds it together, which, in theory, is the condition for the possibility of forming a new social link.

To conclude, I cannot help but think that with Oppenheimer's 2012 film, *The Act of Killing*, a slight alteration in the documentary form presents itself for other filmmakers to adopt. The key is twofold: the first is the use of re-enactment for some scene or event that is laden with a trauma by actual participants of the event in question. The intent is not to use the re-enactment to dramatize or heighten the reality of the event, but to open up discontinuities between the past event narrated (voluntary memory) and the re-enacted event that can cough up a signifier that does not fit, and which thus produces something different or awry. Just like in the psychoanalytic clinic, the key is how surprise or accident (*tuche*) is punctuated by the filmmaker, therein opening up another scene.

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<sup>26</sup> Bradshaw 2016.

The second is what the filmmaker does with the hours upon hours of footage, how he or she uses the art of editing to create an effect (layers of signification) that is similar to Rouch and Morin *but different* in that the object is not to foreground the impossible but to punctuate the slips, discontinuities or gaps between cause and effect in order to cough up something new. This ‘something new’ represents a stutter in the social link, opening up the possibility for the impossible, the master signifier to be dialecticized so that a new or different social link can be formed.

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# Defending Representation; or, Thinking the Paradox to the Limit

Matthew Flisfeder

**Abstract:** Beginning with a response to some contemporary Posthumanist thinkers, this article defends the category of representation as a heuristic for thinking the logic of contradiction and the ethical implications that it derives. Comparing examples in science fiction cinema, and referring to genres such as cyberpunk and dystopia, and tropes such as the time-paradox and the multiverse, and by linking them to the form of cinematic representation, this article demonstrates how representational and teleological thinking help us to grasp the ontological contradiction at sites of ethical action and its possibility. Through an interpretation of these dimensions in time-paradox and multiverse cinema, this article shows that the category of representation, in opposition to the claims of posthumanism, make it possible for us to build—rather than withdraw from—emancipatory reasoning.

**Keywords:** Cinema; Dystopia; Multiverse; Posthumanism; Representation; Teleology; Time-Paradox

## Staying With the Trouble?

There is something rather unsavoury, particularly during the times in which we now live, about an ethic of: “staying with the trouble.” In her book of that title, Donna Haraway writes that in times of crisis, “many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations.”<sup>1</sup> Against this urge, Haraway advocates “staying with the trouble.” Doing so, according to her, means cutting off ties with the times we call “the future.” What she calls the chthulucene represents a posthuman politics and ethics of absolute presentness: staying with the trouble means withdrawing from linear time in order to be “truly present.”

Haraway defends her category of the chthulucene, which she refers to as a “timeplace” for learning to stay with the trouble, against two other popular concepts for reading our present circumstances: Anthropocene and Capitalocene. The former, of course, refers to the geological period that is now said to have begun with the rise of industrialization and humanity’s full impact on the geological formations of planet Earth. It, thus, identifies human activity and impact as leading towards the contemporary crisis of climate change and global warming. Capitalocene, a term popularized by Jason W. Moore,<sup>2</sup> shifts the focus away from humanity, more generally, and onto the capitalist mode of production, specifically, to identify, not humanity as such, but the capitalist system as the primary culprit in the climate emergency.

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway 2016, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Moore 2016

From my own perspective, Anthropocene as a category of Posthumanist critical theory appears to be fully aligned with the predominant neoliberal rhetoric, which proposes that individual human actors are each singularly responsible for their own ethical attitudes. More than this, it ties the crisis to the specificity of our embodiment, which we can never escape, and which we are doomed to inhabit. As such, the critique of anthropocentrism has the potential to devolve into a necro-politics that sees as the only salvation of the planet the extinction of humanity.<sup>3</sup> Anthropocene, thus, produces a kind of moralizing attitude that downloads collective responsibility for the crisis, not only onto individual behaviours, but onto humanity as such; whereas Capitalocene, in contrast, acknowledges that the mitigation of the climate crisis is tied to the political struggle against capitalism, the inequalities it produces, and its inequitable distribution of resources and needs.

Regardless, both perspectives—Anthropocene and Capitalocene—position the current dilemma within the context of an overall historical and teleological trajectory that Haraway dismisses in favour of the Chthulucene. But hers is an attitude that I, for one, find troubling, to say the least. Can we even imagine saying today to a family suffering from irrecoverable medical debt, or refugees fleeing war or catastrophes caused by climate change, forced from their homes due to the changing material conditions of land and resources elsewhere, or even now, with the entire transformation of global culture caused by the COVID-19 crisis—can we really imagine saying to people in dire circumstances such as these (which applies relatively to most of us today): “Don’t worry—just stay with the trouble”?

Haraway expresses particular dismay with a certain variety of “futurisms,” which she claims express bitter kinds of cynicism towards the future—an apocalyptic and dystopian attitude undermining hope. But we should pause here to expand a bit on what that means dialectically, from the retroactive position of the teleological limit. It may be helpful in this regard to distinguish between two divergent formulas of dystopia: critical dystopias and uncritical ones.<sup>4</sup> Dystopia is a relevant genre of postmodern science fiction cinema, and we can certainly see why. Like utopia, dystopia is a highly self-reflexive genre. It speaks less about the future, and so much more about the present, but only from the backward looking perspective of the future times. Uncritical dystopias—such as John Hillcoat’s *The Road* (2009) and Jeff Renfro’s *The Colony* (2013)—are those that truly do speak apocalyptically about the future, but in a way that encourages us, indirectly, to *stay* with the present (if not necessarily “the trouble”). Uncritical dystopias present a dystopian future in which the world deviated too far from the present course of things—or, at

3 See, for instance, MacCormack 2020

4 See Mirrlees 2015

least, it disavows the centrality of the contradictions in the present, located in the antagonisms in the capitalist mode of production—which is retroactively assigned utopian status: the future looks grim, but only if we deviate too much from the way things are now. In this sense, uncritical dystopias do ask us to “stay with the trouble,” but only if we perceive the negative into the future.

Critical dystopias, such as Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2005) and Neill Blomkamp’s *Elysium* (2013),<sup>5</sup> in contrast, are those that help us to grasp the very contradictions and paradoxes present *within* the current society. They are, as Mark Fisher explained, representative of “capitalist realism:” the sense that “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”<sup>6</sup> They show us the potentials and possibilities for chaos and decay that are virtually present (in the Deleuzian sense) in the current society, and which have the potential to become actual if we *do* stay with the present course of things—that is, if we *don’t* do anything to change our present circumstances or to affect the current system. Without altering the course, the current system is bound to unravel into absolute madness and destruction; and when we look at the world of the present, one would be hard pressed to say that we weren’t in the least forewarned by a whole series of cyberpunk and dystopian films, from *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, to *Children of Men* and *12 Monkeys*, to *Blade Runner 2049*<sup>7</sup>—all of which emerged in particularly significant historical moments of crisis and transformation, from the stagflation and late recession of the 1970s and the early 1980s rise of neoliberal capitalism, to the import of cyberspace paranoia in the age of globalization, to the Bush-Blair period of the War on Terror in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and even in the Trumpian era of rising global Authoritarian capitalism. We can see, then, in dystopian futurisms of both varieties the kinds of social and cultural fantasy structures mapping our desire and enjoyment to the present. But beyond this, it appears that Haraway’s Chthulucene ethics align with much of the Posthumanist rhetoric and New Materialist thought that chides, not merely *teleological* thinking, but more specifically the category of *representation*, which I hope here to recuperate as a pivotal component of emancipatory ethical thinking.

5 See Mirrlees and Pedersen 2016

6 Fisher 2009

7 See Flisfeder 2020

## The Trouble with Representation

We see specifically how the posthuman disdain for representation operates in much of the Deleuzian, Derridean, and Foucauldian registers of contemporary critical theory. Karen Barad,<sup>8</sup> for instance, with her concept of “agential realism,” rejects the category of representation in favour of performativity and entanglement. For her, as she puts it, “representation is the belief in the ontological distinction between representation and that which they [the representations] purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representation.”<sup>9</sup> The implicit assumption, in other words, is that those who deploy the category of representation assume that it is assigned secondary status—it is an after-the-event effect. First, the real event takes place, and *only then*, afterwards, is the event represented. What we get with the representation appears to be an attempt at a mirror-like reflection that it tries to fix and arrest at the level of its meaning.

Bryant,<sup>10</sup> too, holds similarly to this conception of the representation and it would seem that for both he and Barad, and other Posthumanist thinkers, very much as an extension of the anti-humanism of post-structuralist thought,<sup>11</sup> representation emerges as a point of artificial and contingent—and, therefore, illegitimate—fixation, or arrest, or suture, located in the identity of the concept, leaning too closely to an overt and hierarchical humanism. Representation, as Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition*, subordinates difference to the concept. Difference, he claims, disappears through representation, congealed in the *identity* of the concept.<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of Posthumanist thought, representation, therefore, arrests the flow of “intra-active” differences, to use Barad’s terms, and the multiplication, or splicing, of diffracted particles of pure difference. Here, the rejection of representation binds the Posthumanist perspective squarely to the defining feature of postmodern ideology, subjectivity, and theory, which Fredric Jameson so aptly described, relying on Lacan, as a “breakdown of the signifying chain;”<sup>13</sup> and, it is worth being reminded of this since it was, of course, the Deleuzian critique of representation that worked itself out in Jameson’s periodization of the postmodern as the cultural logic of finance

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8 Barad 2007

9 Ibid, p. 46

10 Bryant 2011

11 Although, many Posthumanists still identify post-structuralism as a wing of humanistic thinking.

12 Deleuze 1994, p. 266

13 Jameson 1984

capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Both are consequences of the absolute deterritorialization of the despotic signifier.

I raise this point about the breakdown of the signifying chain to indicate the paradox at the heart of financialization, which on the one hand, concerns itself with speculations about the future—speculative financial futures—while, at the same time, for many, on the other hand, financialization produces the sensation of a perpetual present. The underside of the financial stage of capitalism is that of the debt economy; where it becomes necessary to borrow from the future in order to live in the present.<sup>15</sup> For the indebted subject, the future never arrives since it has already been borrowed and spent, and therefore, we are plagued to live in (beleaguered to the condition of) a perpetual presentness. Ultimately, finance forces us into a cultural condition in which we have no choice but to stay with the trouble. In such a situation, futurisms form the front and back of the same condition—those that encourage us to stay with the trouble—uncritical dystopias—and those that entertain the possibilities for emancipation in the present—critical dystopias; each one implies its own relative ethical dimensions, insofar as they either affirm or negate the current run of things.

Some consequences follow from the Posthumanist critique of representation, which I intend to address by asking: if representation is merely an anthropocentric and, therefore, illegitimately contingent prosthesis on the real, from where, then, does the representation (and its critique) originate? In other words, if as Barad argues, reality is performatively constructed through our entanglements, producing diffracted agential reality, is it not the case that representation, itself, forms one point in the diffracted splicing into multiplicities? Or, even more than this, if representation is a merely contingent fabrication, what is its point of origin? The same question can be directed at Bryant: if all substance is of the same kind or type—where the development of each object is autopoietic, the product of infinite splicing and withdrawal of each into diffracted particles of the pluriverse—does the representational operation not also function here in the mode of translating objects through interpretation (and, therefore, representation) into points of self-development of each and every object?

Put differently, my point is that posthumanism misconstrues the category of representation. Far from being a mere mechanism of reflection—an after-effect of an event; its capture in the form of the representation—representation is the mode through which thought takes place. We need to distinguish between “reflection” as mirroring, and as contemplation. It is the latter that takes place in representation,

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14 Jameson 1998

15 I raise this point at the beginning of my book on postmodernism and *Blade Runner*. See Flisfeder 2017

here conceived. Here, I am happy to occupy the Cartesian terrain—fully developed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the operation of reasoning and thought are the consequence of the analytical discourse<sup>16</sup>—and take it to its dialectical ends: representation, reason, and thinking are precisely that which allows us to approach the Real in our limited capacity to apprehend the contradiction at the heart of reality. My claim, in other words, is that thinking is not the human capacity to elevate *above* substance. Rather, representation and thought are what *alienate* us from substance. However, it is this very alienation that allows us to transcend the finite limitations of our merely corporeal existence as substance, and to perceive the infinite in reason. We can thus think the Real through forms of representation, and in what follows I will compare genres of science fiction cinema that permit us the comparison between the dialectical perspective that I advocate, and the Posthumanist one that rejects the category of the representation all together. The two genres I have in mind are that of the time-paradox as an expression of contradiction, and that of the multiple universe, as a corollary of diffraction and splicing, analogous to the agential realism of Posthumanist new materialism. Before arriving there, though, I want to first attempt to respond to the foundational problem of the origins of representation.

### How Does Representation Derive *From* Reality?

Žižek addresses the question of the origins of representation in his response to Barad in *Less Than Nothing*.<sup>17</sup> There, he asks: how does thought arise out of matter? This question is somewhat paradoxical insofar as the subject is an *a priori* necessity for *thinking* reality—reality, in other words, cannot be thought without the subject; but from where does the contingency of subjectivity arise? Subjectivity, we might say, is the product of the self-alienation of matter. At the same time, the subject's alienation produces, too, that of substance as limited. While the Spinozan and monistic new materialists may wish for a closer connection with the immediacy of matter, as Gregor Moder puts it, the immediacy of matter is only ever a constitutively lost.<sup>18</sup> We only ever perceive immanence as constitutively lost; a product of the self-alienation of the human subject. We might think of this mutual self-alienation of substance and subject as the “big bang” of thinking reality. But, again, the question

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16 Here, I am more or less drawing on arguments from Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek, and others, regarding the feminine side in Lacan's logics of sexualization. The masculine logic is on the side of mere understanding, whereas the feminine side is that of thought and reasoning. See Copjec 1994 and Žižek 1993.

17 Žižek 2012

18 Moder 2017, p. 76

of representation returns as one of the self-knowledge of substance—can we maybe even think of the subject as the self-knowing of substance?

Insofar as the self-knowledge of substance relates to the question of representation, Barad argues—via quantum theory—that apparatuses of measurement are *performative*, rather than merely reflective of reality. In this sense, the subject's very act of observing reality is entangled with its diffractory production of itself. But Žižek is correct to ask, “[I]f ordinary empirical reality constitutes itself through measuring, how do we account for the measuring apparatuses themselves which are part of this same empirical reality?”<sup>19</sup> To rephrase: why would we think of representation and reflection as mere after-the-event phenomena when, in fact, the apparatuses of measurement—apparatuses of representation—are themselves part of the very reality so constituted? In other words, doesn't Barad's critique of representation imply the perception of a conceptual apparatus of reality set apart from substance? Or, to repeat differently: in defending her own view of agential realism as the product of performative entanglements, how does Barad explain the emergence (from her perspective) of the *wrong or illusory* category of representation? Starting from Barad's account, can we ask: how did critical theory get things *wrong* in the first place? How do we account for the emergence of the prior *false* appearance? According to Žižek, it's here that we see how what looks like a limitation in our knowledge of reality is, in fact, a central feature of that reality, itself—that reality, itself, is non-all.<sup>20</sup> It is the *error* of the representation that marks the point of origin of subjectivity.

According to Žižek, the philosophical consequence of quantum theory is that it shows how reality itself, not merely the finite human subject, is ontologically incomplete. For him, the lesson of quantum theory “is thus not that reality is subjective, but that we—the observing subjects—are part of the reality we observe.”<sup>21</sup> The limit in our knowledge of reality—the fact that it has to be represented; the fact that the representation itself is both set outside of substance *and* within it—is redoubled back into the truth about the ontological contradiction. Grasping this is how we begin to arrive at ontological truth. Here, I argue, that representation, instead of being presented as a mere after-the-event phenomenon of mirror-like reflection, is very much constitutive of our ethical approach to reality. That is, it forces us to ask how we come to freely affirm or negate the representation. More than that, it is only through a foundational representation that we are at all capable of *thinking*, and not merely knowing and understanding reality. It is in this way that we are made capable of transcending the finite limitations of human embodiment; not without, of course, the intersubjective/discursive

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19 Žižek 2012, p. 918

20 Ibid, p. 925

21 Ibid, p. 932

dimension required for grasping the self-reflective lack at the heart of subjectivity.

If, in another register—that of Deleuze—the claim is that contradiction is *imposed* upon reality through the representation, we have to then account for the context in which we are saying this is so. Contradiction, according to Deleuze, is not a fact but an imposition—it is, for him, “the manner in which the bourgeoisie defends and preserves itself,” thereby subordinating all difference to the representation.<sup>22</sup> His ethic is one of an absolute and indefinite negation of the signifier. But, on the contrary, what we need to grasp is that it is only *within* representation that we can even come close to grasping the contradiction at the heart of its imposition as both contingent and necessary—that is, it remains contingent as an imposition, but necessary insofar as we cannot grasp its contingency without the prior instance of its having been imposed. Representation is, thus, both an artificial construction *and*, at the same time, a concrete necessity. In the semiotic register, we recognize that the signifier is both an imposed contingency *and* a basic necessity for thinking reality and subjectivity together.

### Affirming a Limit

The two poles so far discussed of the Posthumanist perspective—the rejection of history (Haraway's “staying with the trouble”), and the rejection of representation—align in contrast with the poles of Kant's third *Critique*: the aesthetic and the teleological judgements.<sup>23</sup> The task set out by the *Critique of Judgement* is to build unity between pure and practical reason—between theory and practice. The production of unity, according to him, as set out in the introduction to the third *Critique*, requires the invention or affirmation of the regulative idea as a heuristic *limit*; but just how we *arrive* at the limit is a matter of thinking aesthetically—that is, at the level of the representation.

Representation matters to the aesthetic insofar as it produces the concrete form of an imposed limitation; and, as limit, the idea here presents itself as the form of the represented teleology. It matters that the representation of the regulative idea, or the concept, as teleology, as limit, also operates heuristically to provide for the subject an object of its own *contemplation*, as well as the starting point for thinking its freedom in the form of the negation. Freedom, as such, consists in both the act of imposing the contingency of the limit, while also producing the conditions necessary for its negation. The representation is, therefore, for the subject, paradoxical in as much as it is both a contingent product of the subject's own (unconscious) positing, but it is only by way of the subject's

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22 Deleuze 1994, p. 268

23 Kant 2009

contemplation of *it* that it can perceive the justification for its own *prior* imposition. Its justification, in other words, is judged and affirmed only *retroactively*, in the act of its negation: what Fabio Vighi refers to as “retroactive signification.”<sup>24</sup>

Put differently, the subject chooses, affirms, its own represented limitation freely, if however unconsciously; but it is only after the fact that its imposition is justified—it is justified retroactively, after it has already been affirmed. Just as historical necessity is only recognizable after the fact, so too is the contingency of the regulative idea posited as necessary retroactively by occupying the site of the subject's thought and contemplation. From the outset, it is only in hindsight that a contingent act of representation is posited as necessary. By making it an object of its thought, the subject is then free to *negate* it—but in what way?

Reason, contemplation, and thinking become possible only by continuing to negate an initial point of understanding. The understanding and its frameworks of knowledge must *precede* as a contingent point of imposition; but from the perspective of reason, such an imposition is nevertheless constitutively necessary. Without it, reason has no groundwork to negate—it has no object to infinitely pursue. Such a lost object (the Lacanian sublime object, the *objet a*) that the subject pursues infinitely through practices of negation is posited by the initial affirmative imposition of the represented limit. We call this object sublime because it expresses both the enjoyment procured in the pursuit of the necessarily *lost* object; but also because of the *jouissance* received by the unconscious knowledge that the limit is imposed—that made the object a lost object—is itself contingently and artificially set in place by the subject in an initial act of free (yet repressed or disavowed) choice, the product of which is the constitution of the subject as an alienated being. The paradox of contingency and necessity can be perceived as an epistemological contradiction, when taken towards its own limit, and should be seen, not merely as a limitation in understanding, but as an ontological principle. The transposition of the external limit of knowledge into an ontological contradiction in the dialectical register, is sublated in the knowledge that the contingent limit is a necessary condition of reality. Once we grasp this, thought is freed to become ethical in practical action, which sets loose the subject to impose or affirm its own *new* limit.<sup>25</sup> In terms of the Lacanian discourse of the analyst, it's at this point that the subject produces a new master-signifier. Because this achievement is reached at the limit point of thinking contradiction, action is at the same time ethical, subjective, *and* universal insofar as it overlaps the limit point in both thought and reality. When this limit is reached it creates

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24 Vighi 2014

25 Here, I adapt to a certain extent, Anna Kornbluh's Lacan-inspired political ethic of formalism, structuration, and building, requiring the setting of new limits. See Kornbluh 2019

the ethical conditions for the subject to act within the co-ordinates of the material reality.

### The Cinematic Representation

My goal in expressing the preceding points is to justify, against the Posthumanist perspective, the necessity of the representation in a critical theory that remains truly committed to an emancipatory ethics. Whereas posthumanism seems to chide representation due to the fact of its contingency—a sign of its humanism—it fails to acknowledge the necessity of the representation for thinking the infinite in the form of the contradiction of contingency and necessity. The latter, we might say, is achieved, not merely by negating finite externally contingent limits of knowledge and understanding, but by freely (self-)affirming and building our own limits. Thinking, that is, only begins by negating an affirmed limit as its *point of departure*—even posthumanism begins with the humanism it negates.

Cinema is, in this way, and in this capacity, quite useful since the specificity of the manner and form of its own representational apparatus allows us to think, at the level of its content, certain degrees of the very problematic of which representation is, itself, a condition—that is, of the paradoxical and/or contradictory ontological truth that thought makes it its mission to grasp and assess.

We can see, even, in its material constitution, that film—to borrow and adapt Deleuze's categories of cinema—reflects a depiction of the paradox/contradiction of contingency and necessity in its form as a “movement-image,” and one of the infinite *regress* of the splicing in its capacity as “time-image.”<sup>26</sup> If we think the former in terms of montage, we see in it the formal dimensions of the dialectic. Here, the Soviet montage theorists, like Eisenstein, detail for us the way that movement in the “motion picture” is aesthetically dialectical, the product of the juxtaposition of the shot-reverse shot.<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, the illusion of motion in the cinema also makes possible the perception of the isolation of the *moment*, not merely the unconscious optics of the image that Walter Benjamin described,<sup>28</sup> in space, but of the moment as pulled out of time. Here, in this sense of the “time-image,” we can conceptualize the withdrawal (to use the term deployed by the Object-Oriented philosophers) of one moment out of time. Doing so, time can be spatialized as one moment out of many in parallel with all of the others, not unlike the splicing or diffractory dimensions of Object-Oriented Ontology and posthumanism.

Conceived in this way, we can grasp the profundity of even the

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<sup>26</sup> Deleuze Cinema 1986 and 1989

<sup>27</sup> Eisenstein 1974

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin 1968

earliest technological developments in the motion picture, for instance in the example of Edward Muybridge's horse gallop. The story, here, is familiar: that Muybridge built his motion picture to settle a bet—is there, at any point in the horse's gallop, an instance at which all four of the horse's hooves are lifted off the ground. To resolve the matter, Muybridge set up a series of cameras along the horse track, with wire trips, used to trigger the shutter. As the horse passed by, each trip was successively triggered, and the gallop itself captured by the series of cameras. Muybridge's experiment did, in fact, prove that the horse lifts all four hooves at one point in the gallop, but compiling the series of still images, he was able to put them together into a sequence that created the illusion of motion. Reversing this process, once we have the production of the illusion of motion, we can conceive the removal of the single moment from the whole course of the image/process in motion—a singular instance/moment withdrawn from the rest.

Similarly, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) puts together a series of still images, not in a motion picture, but to recount its story through a much more basic process of montage—of shot/reverse shot—that dialectically produces its plot. Marker's film also tells the story of a man in the not-too-distant future, who lives some time in the mid-twenty first century. The hero of the film is chosen to become a voyageur into the past to help the scientists of the future hone their time-travelling technologies. The film's hero is chosen for the experiments since he holds onto, himself, a very powerful memory of the past, one that the scientists feel gives him a much better chance of perceiving his existence in two separate time periods. The memory that he holds onto is very specific—it is a memory of a woman, standing on the pier at the airport in Orly. He remembers the woman and a particularly tragic image of a man being shot dead. We later learn that the man whose death he witnessed as a young child on the pier at Orly was, in fact, himself, sent from the future. The story is significant here because, as I am claiming, the film is both, at a formal level—that of the practice of dialectical montage—and at the level of its plot or content, evocative of the time-paradox in the cinema that represents the form of the contradiction that we are able to contemplate. The key is located about halfway through the film, in the only instance of motion found in the work—a scene of the woman waking up from her sleep, blinking her eyes. Here, at the centre, where the illusion of the motion picture is placed, we see in what sense I mean that the “movement-image” is the manner in which the cinema presents for us the dialectical dimensions of reality. As a film that applies the trope of the time-paradox, the film is doubly intriguing for the way that form and content intersect in a shared identity.

Another detail about the film is worth noting. At one point, the hero is visited by time-travellers from his own future. They have travelled back in time to enlist the hero to help them to achieve the knowledge that will be required to save and protect their own future. The hero sees this as

a sign that he must indeed accomplish what the future time-travellers request of him, otherwise, how would they survive into the future in order to come to meet him in the past. His compliance is both assumed freely—that is, contingently—but is also necessary. Therein lies the time-paradox posited by the teleological limit set in place by the film.

In the sense I describe here, the dialectical movement-image is analogous to the historical image of the teleological representation/reflection; whereas the time-image, as we see with the Muybridge film, reflects the splicing ethic – the infinite *regress*—of posthumanism; of the multiple of “particle-ization”—but of the kind that stands out as a multiplication of moments in parallel with each other. The single still image of the horse’s gallop exists in parallel with all of the other moments or instances captured singularly by each triggered camera. When we think about these two forms in this way we, thus, also discover the same analogue in two popular tropes of modern and postmodern science fiction: that of the time-paradox, and the other of the multiverse, which require some elaboration in the present context.

### First as Multiverse, Then as Paradox

As I have been describing, much depends upon how we conceive the limit form of the representation. Does the limit impose the kind of finitude that sublates all difference; or, on the contrary, does the limit put in place the conditions of possibility for *thinking* the infinite through the very form of its negation? One way of addressing this is by thinking through the form of the time-paradox and the multiverse (or the parallel universe) in science fiction cinema and its ethical implications insofar as it deals with the dialectic of contingency and necessity.

Time-paradox narratives in cinema often address directly the ethical dilemma of the paradox. The obvious example is Robert Zemeckis’ *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985-1990).<sup>29</sup> In its manner of dealing with the time-paradox, the film reveals its generally conservative political bias, representative of its own historical conditions of production. The plot of the film can be summarized as the hero, Marty’s, attempt to bring back the power of his “impotent,” weakling father—the film, in other words, is an attempt to resurrect the father function fully in line with Reagan era neo-conservatism.

<sup>29</sup>There are, of course, a number of other useful examples that I could cite here, but for the sake of brevity I am limiting myself to only a couple of relevant texts. Other noteworthy films, of which there is more than enough to express ideas similar to those I here describe include *The Terminator* (1984), *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), and *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018), to name only a few. On the side of the multiple universe narrative, it is worth mentioning, as well, the recent *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), *Run, Lola, Run* (1998), *Sliding Doors* (1998), and the television series, *Sliders* (1995-2000), amongst others. Of course, my thoughts here are also inspired by relevant episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999).

The teleological dimension of the first film in the series is marked by the hero’s present, in the year 1985—hence, the paradoxical title: “Back to the Future,” not “Back to the Present.” Here, I’m referring to the teleological as the marker of a certain limit against which acts of a particular kind of negation present themselves. Marty’s present is used as the limit point through which the judgement of the past is evaluated—it is posited, initially, as the ideal towards which he desires his return. However, in the course of the film, Marty disrupts elements of the past, interfering with his parents’ coupling, and as a consequence risks his very own existence. He works quickly to prevent this from happening, and in the process of ensuring that his parents fall in love (and have children), he ends up altering his own present. By coaching his father, George, on how to court his mother, Lorraine, Marty influences his father into becoming a much more emotionally powerful paternal figure. When Marty returns to 1985, everything remains familiar; however, slightly altered around the paternal nucleus of the family. George is transformed from a weak figure into a much more dominantly paternalistic character by the end of the film.

The paradox that presents itself, on the one hand, is that of Marty’s own interference with his very existence—he interferes with his parents’ coupling and therefore risks negating his own birth. But it is also, on the other hand, the one that makes his intervention retroactively necessary. The question we need to raise for all time-paradox narratives is whether the intervention is merely a contingent, accidental act, or if it is always already necessary and assumed. At first, it appears that Marty’s intervention is merely accidental since the fact of his own prior existence seems to prove that he wasn’t necessary at the site of his conception—his orchestrating of his parents’ coupling. However, the sequel films put this into question.

In *Back to the Future, Part II*, Marty travels to his own future, to the year 2015, one based on the altered present seen at the end of the first film. From the future 2015, the villain, Biff, steals the time machine and goes back in time to the year 1955, overlapping with the events in the first film, and alters the past in his own greedy interests. When Marty and Doc (his scientist friend, and the inventor of the time machine) return to 1985 from 2015, they arrive at a third version of their present, where Biff has become a powerful, obscene figure, not too dissimilar from Donald Trump, who marries Lorraine after murdering George in the early 1970s. Marty and Doc, then, once again, use the time machine to return to the past to ensure that the present is not transformed into the dark version where Biff is the dominant, obscene father figure. However, the present that they revive is not the original one from the *beginning* of the first film; it is the one from the ending, the second, altered, version. The fact that they return to this second version of 1985 proves a few details about the series.

First, it proves that Marty’s intervention in the past was, from the perspective of the politico-ideological co-ordinates of the film, not merely

contingent but necessary. It shows that while the film is conservative it remains consistent in its moral-ethical outlook.<sup>30</sup> Second, it does not propose that the past shouldn't be altered, but that it *should* only be altered towards a particular direction – towards a particular set of self-motivated interests. Third, it is necessary to point out the particular limit dimension of the film: the initial teleological trajectory of the film is comprised of a split between utopia and dystopia. It is utopian insofar as it establishes the ground, the origin point, to which Marty hopes to return. It therefore presupposes the direction of the hero's pursuit. It is dystopian to the degree that there are details that Marty wishes to alter, specifically the power of his father.

Finally, we see that the time-paradox in the film is tied to the production, the splitting into the multiple universe. It produces three parallel versions of the year 1985: the one with the weak father, the one with the potent father, and the one with the obscene father (Biff). What ties them together is the central version of the potent father. This fact accomplishes two things: first, it demonstrates the ethico-political dimensions of the series; second, it also shows how, even at the intersection of the production of the multiverse, there exists a singular *point-de-capiton* that ties all of the others together as its universal function—this function becomes, not the end point of the process in practice, but the product of *thinking* the paradox as a contradiction taking it to its end as an ethical act of choice. *Back to the Future* serves as a useful starting point, too, because of the way the trilogy maps out the various withdrawals—in the Posthumanist sense—of the self-contained worlds in the films, aesthetically; but also, how they are nevertheless bound to contradiction. What the multiverse in a film like *Back to the Future* shows is that the production of reality is, nevertheless, bound to ethical acts of decision, making our “entanglements” with reality constitutive in a way that both Barad and Žižek describe, if however differently vis-à-vis quantum theory. But thought through this example, it's worth bearing upon the relation between the ethical and the nexus of the teleological discovered in the representation.

In an example that contrasts well with *Back to the Future*, Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) treats the time-paradox in a way that is ethical while avoiding the split into the multiverse. *Arrival* also appropriately makes use of the montage to represent the contradiction.<sup>31</sup> The plot

30 In some ways, as much as I enjoy the *Back to the Future* trilogy, it has seemed to me to be a kind of conservative masculinist response to the “effeminate” (or feminizing) “liberal” 60s. Read in this way, the trilogy can be read as somewhat reactionary.

31 It does so in a style that Todd McGowan refers to as “atemporal,” a product of the digital age, which sees a preponderance of film narratives that depart from linear plot development. See McGowan 2011. *Arrival* also relies on a technique that McGowan, elsewhere, calls the “priority of the deception,” referring to the films of Christopher Nolan, where spectators are deceived at the origins of the film as a practice to lure them at the level of their desire. We require the deception in order to be drawn towards the truth; or, as Lacan is known to have put it, the truth has the structure of a

of *Arrival* is anachronistic and non-linear in its telling of the story. Its opening sequences are presented as if they were the beginning of the story when, in fact, they are the end. But added to this, during the course of the film, drawing on the Sapir-Whorf theory that language affects perception, the hero, Louise, learns how to read the language of the alien heptapod visitors to Earth, which allows her to perceive time anachronistically, making it possible for her to see both past and future events (or premonitions viewed as memories) simultaneously with the present, as if they existed on a single, flat, plane or continuum. The non-linearity of the form of the film intersects with the plot in that the resolution of the film requires Louise to have a premonition-memory into the future in order to grasp the ethical course of action in the present.

At a crucial moment in the film, Louise is able to see into the future the scenario of a conversation she has with the Chinese General, Shang, who, in the present, is set to begin an attack against the alien heptapods. In the future conversation, Shang gives Louise his private mobile number and tells her a secret that she will use to gain his trust in the present: his wife's dying words. Louise uses this information to help to negotiate a cease fire to avoid an armed conflict with Shang in the present. In this scenario, the prior event must have taken place first (the knowledge that Louise has learned the heptapod language that allows her to perceive memories of the future) since the future Shang already seems to know that Louise was capable of having premonitions of the future—this is why he provides her with such crucial personal information. However, the event also *begins* in the future, where the resolution in the present depends on the priority of the future conversation. Knowledge, here, moves both forwards and backwards, simultaneously, through time. However, unlike *Back to the Future*, the paradox does not split time into separate competing/alternate realities; rather, it is transformed into a contradiction that is nothing less than purely ontological and constitutive of the reality of the film. This ontological contradiction, relayed in the film's plot, is reflected, as well, in the very form of the film's montage.

At the beginning of the film, we see that Louise's daughter dies from a terminal illness—because of the way this unfolds in the plot, we assume that this is a past event, a rendition of a memory taking place prior to the primary events of the film. However, we later learn, as we witness the way that Louise perceives the future through the heptapod language, that these events happened only following the primary story events, at some point in the future that comes later. We learn that Louise, in fact, had the foreknowledge of her daughter's death, because she was able to perceive it in the alien language, and decided, nevertheless, to have her child. Her choice, I claim, is determinately ethical insofar as it is not predetermined, but is the product of thinking the contradiction

fiction. We might even say that the original scenario in *Back to the Future* works in this way, too, as the prior deception that launches us into the paradox. See McGowan 2013.

to the end and of accepting, or grasping it in positive terms. Hers is a choice already made, necessary, but nevertheless assumed freely. This is radically different than the choice made by Marty in *Back to the Future*. He chooses to alter reality and therefore splits it into the multiverse, withdrawing into the one that suits him best. But this multiverse, we can see, suffocates ethical action insofar as it devolves into infinite regress. When any choice is possible, every choice is possible, and choice is no longer ethical insofar as the consequences are not determined by their ends. The multiverse, I claim, presents us with a false conception of freedom, where anything and everything is made possible—all possible options that can exist *do* exist, in which case, choice becomes inconsequential.

Another noteworthy example, with regards to its manner of treating the time-paradox and the multiverse at the level of its ethics, is Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012). This film is set, as well, in the not-too-distant future, in the year 2044, where "loopers" have been hired by crime lords from thirty years later into the future (in the year 2074), when time travel has been invented and outlawed. Since in 2074 it has become easier to track when crime syndicates kill and try to dispose of dead bodies, the crime lords send the bodies back in time to 2044 where the loopers are hired to kill and dispose of the bodies in the past. When the crime lords in the future decide to end the contract with the looper, the looper's own body from the future is sent back into the past, which they then kill and "close the loop."

*Looper* intriguingly depicts the intersection of the multiverse and the time-paradox. When the older version of the film's hero, Joe, is sent back to be killed, thereby closing his loop, the young Joe continues living his life, after killing the older version of himself, into his own 30-year older self in the future. The old Joe falls in love and gets married; but when his wife is murdered by one of the crime lords, the Rainmaker—one of a few humans who have developed telekinetic powers—Joe decides that when he is sent back to close the loop, he will escape to kill the Rainmaker as a child. He sends himself back, unbound and unmasked, and evades the killing of himself, by his younger self, thereby altering the future and creating two competing, contradictory versions of the future: the one where the older Joe is killed, and the one where he evades his own killing. Because he evades his own killing, once sent into the past, he thereby alters the future (not the past or the present), clashing with and undermining the very conditions which made his return possible in the first place.

At the film's conclusion, the young Joe takes the radical step of committing suicide to resolve the contradiction during the climax of the film, when the older Joe attempts to kill the child, Cid, who he has discovered will grow up to become the Rainmaker. While Cid's mother, Sara, tries to block old Joe from shooting her son, the young Joe kills himself, to prevent the older Joe from accidentally killing Sara. In the

moment before he kills himself, the young Joe perceives the contradiction itself, the paradox of how the older Joe's actions will still lead to the conditions that created the crisis in the first place. He perceives how by accidentally killing Sara, that this will build into the anger of the young Cid, causing him to grow up into the Rainmaker who will later murder old Joe's wife. The difficulty, here, is that we realize that the older Joe's evasion from being killed was, on the one hand, always already necessary in order for the very conditions of looping to become possible; but, on the other hand, even with the suicide of the young Joe, the contradiction is not resolved since accidentally killing Sara in the past created the conditions in the first place for Joe to arrive at this scenario from the outset. While the film does not resolve this—it appears to do so—it does makes possible on the part of the spectator the ability to perceive the contradiction and to think it to its ontological ends. It demonstrates, even, how the problem of the withdrawal of reality into the multiverse is still evocative of the spatial contradiction in which the subject/spectator is able to think it, giving priority, still, to the dialectical contradiction. To put it simply, the two realities are *both* necessary. Neither is contingent and this is what moves the paradox into the realm of the ontological contradiction. Materially, both realities need to exist. At the most, we are only capable of grasping the fact of the contradiction. It becomes unethical to try to evade it. The form of the film paradox, here, provides for the spectator a useful heuristic for being able to grasp the actuality of the contradiction.

The difficulty with the multiverse and of multiple realities, is that the ethical begins to infinitely regress—where no option, no choice, is truly ethical because we see that we can always redo and change our choices (in the same way that a digital document is never finished because we can always go back and make changes), so that every possible option is available to us, which means that our act of choice, itself, becomes meaningless. Our choices, freely assumed, make no difference at the level of determinate reality.

We have, however, another way to think this explosion into multiple realities—we might think of this in the psychoanalytic register in terms of the fantasy that gives structure to our desire. In fact, when we think of the kind of splicing conceived in the multiverse scenario we come to see it as the genre of fantasy – the fantasy, that is, as conceived by psychoanalysis—*par excellence*.

### Enjoying the Limit

Another way to conceive the multiverse is in terms of the fantasy structure as revealed in psychoanalysis; the various unchosen realities are just so many of the negated choices we make in the pursuit of our desire. We might reflect upon this in terms of the subject's foundational act of a forced free choice, which transforms—or alienates it—it into the

form of the subject. What Lacan describes as the subject's alienation into the Symbolic order coincides with its symbolic castration. Here, the subject must choose: "to be or not to be." At the crucial moment of the subject's emergence into the Symbolic order, it must simultaneously affirm its identity, while negating others. When the subject affirms, chooses, its identity in the terms of the Symbolic big Other, it also negates all of the unchosen choices of what it *could have been*, which are relegated to the position of the unconscious. What we call fantasy is the forgotten, yet present, "memory" of the unchosen, negated, choices, which we sublimate through the turn towards the agency of the Other, onto whom we displace the blame for our own act of the forced free choice of being. If only the Other didn't force me to choose I would have available to me all of the other choices I was forced not to take—that is, I would have access to the lost object. It's in this way that the fantasy constructs the scenario of the subject's desire, the desire for the lost choice principally negated in the formation of subjectivity, the inaccessibility of which is thought to be thwarted by the limit as prohibition.

As an example of this logic, let's take the case of the married couple—of the partner who fantasizes about all of the affairs they could be having if not for the fact of being married. The marriage, here, serves as the limit onto which is displaced the prohibition against the multiple affairs that could be taking place. Desire is propelled in the form of the fantasy of limitless sexual partners, prohibited by the married partner preventing this realization. However, the enjoyment in such a fantasy exists only insofar as the prohibition is set in place. Without the prohibition, the enjoyment in the fantasy dissipates. We require the form of the limit in order to enjoy the fantasy. Enjoyment is in the fantasy and not what lies virtually beyond it. In the same way, the fantasy of the multiverse only exists insofar as it remains regulated by the necessary limit imposed through the foundational representation. The point, then, is not merely to negate the limit, but to acknowledge the agency of the subject in having chosen it in the first place itself, the result of a forced free choice of being.<sup>32</sup>

The plurality of negated choices exist as the multiverse of all of the other virtual/possible realities. They are the ones that remain unchosen, prohibited, perhaps, but which orient the subject towards the affirmative choice chosen, which it asserts, however unconsciously, as its own self-appointed limit—that is, as its own point of self-affirmation and regulation. This limit exists as the ground against which the pursuit of the lost choice, of the lost object of desire, is determined. The subject can, in this way, continue to negate all material objects in favour of its search for the lost object that fuels its activity. But we need to acknowledge that this alternate reality of the choices not chosen is

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32 I address this point in more detail in an article responding to McGowan's book on Hegel. See Flisfeder 2019.

only ever a virtual reality, and that their fantasmatic existence is only possible against the grounds of the limit self-imposed by the subject in the moment of its own formation. Once again, here, we discover the dialectic of contingency and necessity, where the subject experiences the limit as contingent, as something it can evade, but which is also at the same time the necessary condition of possibility for the existence of the other alternate-fantasmatic realities. They exist only insofar as they remain tied to the limit—only insofar as they remain lost. It's when the subject is capable of avowing this limit as self-imposed—of choosing the limit itself—that it becomes capable of an ethical act—where it affirms its own lack as consubstantial with the contradictory gap in reality. In the case of the happy couple—to employ a tired "Hollywoodism"—the choice of affirming the right lover (not merely in the romantic sense, but in the sense of love as emancipatory) may just be one of the most radical-ethical gestures we can make.<sup>33</sup> It's only through the reflection of the self in the other that we have the chance to gain access to and recognize the lack in the self.

### Responding to the Trouble

What we see in both the cinematic and psychoanalytic examples is that acting ethically is impossible outside of the representation. Representation is tied both to the contingency of the human intervention, but it is also a necessary aspect of our (self-)alienation from the substance of reality. We are both stuck with it, while we require it to make possible are ethical acts by way of the various forms of negation. Thinking the paradox—thinking the contradiction—shows the value in representation. Through the representation, we are able to perceive the constitutive place we hold in reality. Against the Posthumanist thinkers, we see that neither chthulucene nor Anthropocene helps us to grasp this aspect of the contradiction, since we can neither stay with the trouble, nor evade our anthropocentric conditions of alienated subjectivity. It remains impossible to stay with the trouble without even knowing what the trouble is in the first place—and in order to grasp this we require representational and teleological, or limit thinking. It's only by representing and thinking the limit that we are made capable of grasping the infinite, translating it into an ethical act of decision. Thinking, as Comay and Ruda put it, "involves a decision."<sup>34</sup> Absolute knowing is perfectly antagonistic to the multiversal "all-sidedness." The path towards universal truth begins with a strictly partisan gesture that retroactively posits the presuppositions of its own conditions of possibility.

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33 Here, I rely quite a bit on Todd McGowan's Hegelian interpretation of love, as well as, to a certain extent, Anna Kornbluh's defence of the Lacanian formalisms. See McGowan 2019 and Kornbluh 2019.

34 Comay and Ruda 2018, p. 8

Cinema, as we see, both at the level of its form and at the level of its content, proves useful in its capacity to allow us to think through such contradictions. However, we should add that the mediated conditions in which we are made capable of grasping the contradiction are historically contextual. The manners of representation in every new epoch, in other words, help us to grasp differently the conditions of the present contradictions. Media, in this way, are metaphors for our reality and the conditions of our collective existence. Reading media as our metaphors, we are able to understand them as representations – not merely as reflections of reality, but as the grounds against which we are capable of perceiving the conditions of our existence and possibilities for transformation. To think the trouble—more than simply staying with it—we need to think through the representation. This requires thinking the times we call the future—even thinking—and in some ways relating to—the *fantasies* of alternate realities—in order to produce the kinds of cognitive mapping that we need to respond appropriately to the troubles that we, no doubt, continue to face.

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# “Repeating the *Square*: From Satisfaction to Jouissance”

Jennifer Friedlander

**Abstract:** Ruben Östlund's 2017 Palme D'or winning film, *The Square*, is routinely characterized as a “satire” of the contemporary art world, and in particular, of the film's titular art exhibit. This essay considers the question of the psychoanalytic and political implications of Östlund's ruthless cinematic caricature of his own (self-declared) successful real-life art installation of the same name. It argues that the repetition of the Square from an apparently sincere artwork aimed at building social cohesion, to a satire of the self-serving political aspirations of contemporary art, unleashes the politically destabilizing dimension of the Other's jouissance that is constrained by the Square's original iteration as art installation.

**Keywords:** Ruben Östlund; art world; jouissance; psychoanalysis; repetition

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Ruben Östlund's 2017 Palme D'or winning film, *The Square*, is routinely characterized as a “satire” of the contemporary art world. This claim seems unimpeachable, particularly when considered in the light of the film's brutal treatment of its titular art exhibit: a 2 meter by 2 meter installation housed within the fictional X-Royal Contemporary Art museum in Stockholm. Visitors who enter the Square are asked to abide by its inscribed principles: which read, “The Square is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within it we all share equal rights and obligations.” But the values endorsed by “the Square,” which Christian [Claes Bang], the museum's urbane chief curator, movingly extols, are shown to be sorely at odds with his own actions.<sup>1</sup> For example, in what might at first appear to be an act of “caring,” in line with the principles of the Square, Christian agrees to buy a sandwich for a woman begging for food, but he deliberately denies her special request to order it “with no onions.” When he delivers the sandwich, he cannot help but betray a hint of perverse pleasure in honoring solely the need at the heart of the demand and refusing the surplus of her desire. For Christian, as for the Square exhibit itself, distance from the Other's jouissance, via an investment in sanitized symbolic power, scaffold any attempt to act for the good of another.

It is thus hard not to agree with the critic from the *New Republic* who writes that, “As an essay on the art world...the film mostly confirms popular assumptions:...[namely] that the art world makes a cynical pretense of concern for social justice when it's completely indifferent to

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<sup>1</sup> Christian suggests, for example, that you might enter the Square and say “My father just died, and I have no one to talk to about it, can you talk to me for an hour?”

the homeless people down the block.<sup>2</sup> But I suggest that consideration of a key extra-diegetic dimension complicates this claim. Prior to making the film, Östlund (and a partner, Kalle Boman) created an actual “Square” installation in four Scandinavian cities, each boasting the identical social pact that appears in the film.<sup>3</sup> Not only is it nearly certain that Östlund undertook these art projects in earnest, without parodic aims, but also he frequently affirms that these real-life “Squares” have functioned to mobilize communal solidarity and political actions.<sup>4</sup> In this light, the question that I take up here is why Östlund would ruthlessly caricature his own (self-declared) successful art piece in his film of the same name? I attempt not to answer the question of his motivation, but rather to speculate about some of the psychoanalytic/political implications of the repetition of the Square from an apparently sincere attempt at building social cohesion to the satirical embodiment of the self-serving political aspirations of contemporary art. I contend that the repetition of “the Square” into its filmic incarnation functions as the ruse required to unleash the politically destabilizing dimension of the Other’s jouissance, which is inhibited by the Square’s original iteration as art installation.

In particular, the move from “the Square” as sincere art exhibit to *The Square* as filmic satire works to disrupt the possibilities of both the (super)egoic-pleasure associated with earnest socially-engaged art and the cynical detachment associated with satire. Although seemingly at odds with one another, both of these positions prevent an engagement with destabilizing jouissance and conspire to uphold the ideological fantasy of socio-symbolic wholeness. The unstable alignment of the Square between these two forms, I contend, opens up a gap within which the unassimilable jouissance of the Other erupts, disturbing the ideological fantasy of completeness. Following the insights of psychoanalytic scholars, Todd McGowan, Sheldon George, Slavoj Žižek, and others, I contend that such a fantasy of socio-symbolic totality, spoiled only by unwelcome external intrusion, undergirds the logic of racism. I advocate, along Lacanian lines, that this damaging fantasy can

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2 Lorentzen, 2017

3 In the film, the artist who created the Square is Lola Arias, a real-life Argentinian artist. Arias has publicly renounced the attribution in the film. She argues, “It has hurt my reputation as an artist because I am associated with an artwork that is not mine and that I dislike... I was shocked when I saw how they used my name without consent.”

Östlund maintains that Arias had agreed to the use of her name. (<https://nordicdrama.com/artist-lola-arias-fires-allegation-at-the-square/>)

4 In a 2017 interview in the *Village Voice*, Östlund tells us: “The Square” exhibit is in two cities in Sweden and two cities in Norway now. And in one city, Värnamo [Sweden], it really has become a bit of a movement... For example, in Värnamo, there’s a group of functional handicapped people that have been protesting because they lost their benefits, so they went there and had a demonstration. The local newspaper came and took a picture and reported about it... This summer, something kind of beautiful happened. Someone put a flower in ‘The Square’ with a little note saying, ‘Thank you to you who helped our son.’”

be traversed through a recognition that the Other—as the socio-symbolic order—is *constitutively* lacking. Exposing the inherent incompleteness of the Symbolic order may work both to destabilize racist structures and free the subject to experience freedom by taking on a Symbolic position of its own.

I will argue that the film stages a series of diegetic repetitions that function as a cipher for interpreting Östlund’s repetition of “the Square” from art to film. Each repetition points us towards an encounter with the jouissance of the other. Only when the subject comes to face the Other’s negativity—the excess jouissance that emerges at the site of its lack—does, in Žižek’s words, “a unique space of freedom” emerge.<sup>5</sup>

I will focus primarily on what I see as the key repetition: namely, the figure of the child as it manifests in the film in two forms: 1) At the center of the narrative action is a poor, immigrant boy, who functions as the ostensible relentless external obstacle to Christian’s fulfillment and 2) Its repetition, which we encounter later in the film: a virtual image of an indigent blond girl appearing in a publicity campaign for the Square, who comes to function as the hegemonic element around which disparate groups passionately unite. I will argue that Christian’s eventual identification with the boy suggests a move away from the fantasy of society as a sutured totality, marred only by external obstacles, to a recognition of the constitutive lack in the Other.

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Now to set the scene: An attempted “good deed,” albeit one undertaken with initial hesitation, sets the plot of the film in motion. Christian, interpellated by a fellow bystander, helps protect a woman running down the street towards them screaming for help. Christian’s immediate self-satisfaction at this heroic act dissipates quickly when he discovers that his phone and wallet are missing; the street scene, he now realizes, was a staged robbery. With the help of his techie assistant, he tracks down the location of his phone to a low-income housing complex in a rough neighborhood. Not knowing which specific apartment contains the phone, Christian puts threatening notes in the mail slots of every door in the building, requesting the return of his stolen items to a local 7/11. He is stunned to discover that the next day his phone and wallet (replete with his cash) arrive.<sup>6</sup> But on the following day he receives another call from the 7/11 notifying him that a second package has arrived with his name on it. This early repetition inaugurates a sharp turn for the worse and portends the role that repetition will play throughout the film.

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5 Žižek, 2017 p. 334

6 Christian excitedly doles out the unexpected cash to the same beggar for whom he begrudgingly bought the sandwich.

The second package contains a threatening note from a young boy who lives in the apartment building, in which he confronts Christian with the unforeseen consequences of indiscriminately distributing his accusatory letter. The boy's parents now think that he is the thief and they are unjustly punishing him. The boy's demand is straightforward: Christian must tell the boy's parents that he is not the thief, or he will "make chaos." Christian refuses to take the threat seriously, but the boy's persistence proves distracting, and, as a result, Christian mindlessly approves a disastrous publicity campaign for the Square exhibit, which leads him to bringing chaos upon himself.

The ludicrous publicity video is the creation of two young go-getting marketers, who seek to make the exhibit relevant within the attention economy of the current media landscape, which privileges sensationalist images that garner the most clicks.<sup>7</sup> The PR team points out that values inscribed by the Square exhibit carry no "edge" or possibility for "controversy" and can only forge anodyne consensus. From a publicity point of view, they liken it to a Facebook post that announces, "Daniel wants peace on earth." Rather than depicting an act of kindness occurring in the Square, they suggest stirring up shock by making something terrible happen to a vulnerable person within its borders. After some deliberation, they decide that beggars are the group of vulnerable people about whom we most often share internet links. Their campaign video features a little indigent blonde girl, dressed in dirty, ragged clothing, carrying a blanket and a kitten, wandering into "the Square," but rather than being helped she is startlingly blown up. The video promptly "goes viral," inciting predictable indignation at its shocking insensitivity. Although it becomes clear in the film that no one can pinpoint who exactly is damaged by the video and how, there is nevertheless widespread consensus that the video has created unmistakable and severe harm. The very ambiguity of identifying a victim only intensifies the outcry; it enables the Square to function as a repository for offense-as-such, bringing disparate factions together in opposition to the exhibit. We are shown, for example, a centerfold story in the following morning's newspaper, which features an imam, a priest, and a rabbi arm in arm, unified by their opposition to the Square. In Ernesto Laclau's terminology, we might say that the fictional white child functions as a hegemonic element around which the social order consolidates.

As outrage fomented, a press conference is held during which Christian announces his responsibility for the campaign, apologizes for acting "irresponsibly," and declares that "in accordance with the board" he will resign from his position. Predictably, he is subjected to a series of attacks from the assembled journalists, most of whom take pleasure in

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<sup>7</sup>Their position is reminiscent of András Szántó's reminder that "it would be a mistake to think that museums are still in the art business. They are now in what might be called the attention business" (Szántó 191).

smugly skewering Christian for the offensive campaign. As one reporter scolds, to the applause of the assembled crowd, "[W]here is your solidarity with the voiceless and vulnerable members of our society? You should be ashamed of yourself!" Another journalist, however, takes an opposite tack, calling Christian out for cowardly accepting the indictments of the public and for too gamely consenting to his resignation. He presses Christian on whether he "personally believes that [he] has crossed a line" and whether a video of "a fictional girl getting blown up" is truly beyond the limit of tolerable free speech. Christian responds by reiterating formulaic statements of regret until the journalist literally calls, "bullshit," rebuking Christian for "the highly alarming future [he is]...creating for our society."

It might be tempting to align one's position with this rebuke, especially in the light of Christian's readiness to take on the self-flagellation mandated by the board. This readiness seems to point to Christian's failure to stand up for, and indeed deny, his own principles, which he enunciated in an earlier scene which primes viewers to dismiss his expression of guilt as hypocritical. In this earlier scene, when Christian is initially confronted by his boss over the public outrage caused by the video, he urges her to seize it as an opportunity for the museum to take a strong stance in favor of unfettered free expression. His boss is utterly unmoved by the possibility of taking a principled stance; her concerns are purely market driven. The true disaster of the campaign, she indicates, is the museum's inevitable loss of Baby Bjorn as a sponsor.

But, I argue, it would be a mistake to both discount the resignation as an empty, hypocritical gesture and to dismiss the publicity video as a merely regrettable overlay to an otherwise worthy project. Rather, as we will soon see, the resignation helps pave the way for freeing Christian from the obstinate grip of the Other, enabling him to assume proper responsibility for his actions. And in a similar way, I argue, rather than a meaningless media spectacle, the video is integral in stripping back the fantasy of being able to marshal symbolic resources for regulating one's proximity to a sanitized other. The campaign provokes us to engage with the limits of the symbolic to protect us from the unruliness of unassimilable excess.

In short, I suggest that the readiness with which Christian apologizes for the publicity video be read within two contexts, **first** the film's treatment of the boy, who has been unrelenting in **his** pursuit of an apology from Christian. Christian's **excessive apology** for the publicity video repeats (in negative form) his **lack of apology** to the boy. I argue that this moment in which the central lack propelling the film overlaps with the film's excess inaugurates a transformation in Christian. To be specific, the forced circumstance of his apology paves the way for him to take responsibility freely, not just for damaging the boy, but also for his own chaos, as it were. He, in effect, traverses the fantasy of seeing the boy as the obstacle preventing his full satisfaction, to accepting his own identification with the cause.

The **second** context for thinking about Christian's apology occurs the night before the press conference. While publicly addressing the fate of the fictional girl, Christian is privately consumed with worry that he may have seriously harmed the actual boy. During a late-night confrontation with the boy on the stairs of his apartment, a weary Christian, with his own sleepy daughters in tow, pushes the boy away.

For Christian, as well as for viewers, the subsequent fate of the boy is left in suspension: did Christian knock him down the stairs or not? After putting his daughters to bed, Christian hears muffled screams for "help," but it is uncertain whether they are coming from the child or whether they only exist in his imagination. When he looks down the stairs, he finds no source for the sounds. In this moment (what may be seen as the gap between the two deaths), the resonant signifier of the film, "help," echoes between the domains of the Real and the Symbolic. It appears as an eerie, unlocatable return of the repressed—a residue of the symbolic's failure to properly integrate the excessive dimensions of earlier pleas for "help."

Haunted by the disembodied echoes for "help," Christian, still clad in his tuxedo from a disastrous dinner for patrons of the museum, undertakes the abject act of descending into the communal dumpsters behind his apartment, in the midst of a downpour, sifting through trash to find the discarded letter from the boy, containing his phone number. This scene prefigures Christian's loss of symbolic identity on the eve of officially resigning his professional position. After finding the number, Christian, filthy and drenched, fails to reach the boy, leaving open the mystery of his fate.

In response to his failure to reach the boy by phone, Christian then records a rambling video message, in which he belatedly honors the boy's demand for an apology. The choice of making a video recording, rather than leaving a voice message is significant, not only as a repetition of the media form of the publicity campaign. Earlier on when Christian and his assistant were debating who should go into the apartment building to distribute the letters, Christian points out that it should not be him since he is a recognizable, "semi-public" figure. In making the video recording, Christian further sheds his investment in upholding this privileged symbolic identity.

But the rambling video message wavers from this initial good intention. Christian confirms that the boy is not a thief and tells the boy to show the video to his parents as proof. He then offers what appears to be a heartfelt apology, admitting that "it was a rotten thing I did... It was so selfish of me... careless and prejudiced." He also confesses to holding a personal bias, revealing that he left the notes because he was too afraid to knock on the doors and ask people directly. "I was too afraid," he explains, "of the people I picture living in a building like yours." He then begins to discuss that "those negative expectations say something about me," but quickly qualifies this by addressing that "they say something about our society." Christian's acknowledgement

of his bias is also offset by pointing out that "I'm not the only one who is prejudiced. You must... have preconceptions about us,... because our lives are so different." His equivocation between individual and structural explanations is further deepened when he follows his apology by noting that "it is not enough to admit I was wrong... there are bigger, structural problems involved that society needs to deal with." In particular, he directly invokes the systemic problem of "the unequal distribution of assets"—a problem "which can't be fixed by individuals alone," only to promptly undercut this claim by announcing, "I actually know one of the 291 people who owns over fifty percent of the world's wealth. A guy like that could fix all this in an instant."

How might we make sense of this invocation of class inequity as holding the key to the solution for which it is the problem? Christian's wavering logic appears to mirror the function of the symptom: namely, as something which both gives shape to an underlying problem while providing a way for coping with it. Perhaps we can see this as a clue to the politics demonstrated within the film, which, I argue, plays with the tension regarding one's relationship to the symptom. Ultimately the film reveals the futility of attempting to eradicate the symptom in an attempt to achieve socio-symbolic harmony, and favors of the political efficacy of identifying with the symptom itself as constitutive to the symbolic order itself.

As we will come to see, Christian's struggle over the question of responsibility—over whether to deny or accept his own role as cause—operates as a cusp moment in the film. In particular, I will argue, it involves him grappling with the question of his relation to the lack of completeness in the Other. But, I will show, it is not until the conclusion of the film that Christian comes to terms with this question, and comes eventually to "traverses the fantasy" by putting himself in the place of the lack in the Other.

Two other repetitions in the film enable us to push this thesis further. The first involves an outburst by a man with Tourette's syndrome in the audience of a public discussion with superstar artist, Julian (a send up of Julian Schnabel, played by Dominic West), moderated by Christian's colleague. The on-stage discussion is interrupted by increasingly vulgar outbursts by a man in the audience clapping and shouting obscenities: "Garbage!" "Get Out!" "Fuck Off!" "Show us your boobs!" etc. The female interviewer determinedly continues with her questions amidst the unrest in the crowd. Here unfettered jouissance triggers obvious discomfort among the audience until a fellow audience member attempts to stitch the disturbances back to the symbolic framework. He scolds the audience for showing signs of uneasiness, reminding them that this man has an illness and that they must show "tolerance." Here the explicit instruction regarding the correct symbolic response to this unexpected occurrence intervenes to contain the possibility of a destabilizing encounter with the jouissance of the Other.

As the audience struggles to remain focused on the interview, the scene nicely captures the difficulty with “liberal tolerance” at the heart of the Square exhibit. As Jodi Dean, characterizing Žižek’s insight, describes: “liberal tolerance today is in fact a ‘zero tolerance’ of the other in his excessive enjoyment... liberalism wants an other deprived of its otherness.”<sup>8</sup>

But the symbolic mandate is unable to fully stem the disruption. The excessive jouissance unleashed in this discussion is seized by Anne (Elizabeth Moss), an American journalist who earlier interviews Christian about the Square exhibit. An intoxicated Christian and Anne find themselves in the queue for the toilet at a party later that night. Anne gets Christian’s attention by imitating the interruptions of the man with Tourette’s syndrome. Her repetition ups the vulgarities when she suddenly claps her hands above her head and yells “cunt.” This time, the outburst comes with no explanation or any attempt to re-inscribe it into a symbolic framework; its senselessness permeates unbound. As with the other repetitions in the film, we are confronted with the impotency of the symbolic scaffold to contain disruptive jouissance.

The encounter between Christian and Anne leads them to spend the night in Anne’s apartment, where we are introduced, unremarked, to Anne’s surprising roommate: a domesticated ape, inconspicuously puttering about the apartment. The figure of the ape marks the final repetition that we will discuss. Anne’s tame, humanized ape meets its match in a performance artist named Oleg [Terry Notary], who performs as a wild ape during a special dinner for elite donors to the X-Royal Museum. Oleg’s performance changes the register of the film, creating a twelve-minute scene that has been described as “the most unnerving, uncomfortable scene of the year.”<sup>9</sup>

Oleg’s performance is preceded by a build-up that adds an element of edginess and excitement to the otherwise staid proceedings. As soon as diners are seated the lights flicker and ominous rain and thunder can be heard, over which a voice comes through, welcoming guests to the jungle. The announcer advises “utmost caution” as a wild animal with a hunting instinct for sensing fear is about to enter the room. The diners are warned: “[I]f you try to escape, the animal will hunt you down” but if you are still and “don’t move,” “you can hide in the herd, safe in the knowledge that someone else will be the prey.” The warning sets up diners to “enjoy” the fear and discomfort that will be coming their way. As one woman whispers to her companion: “[O]h, this will be

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8 Dean, 2006 p. 40

9 Yuan, *Vulture*. Yuan continues to describe the scene as “insane,” “bonkers,” and “fucking nuts,” before promising: “Guaranteed, you have never seen a scene like this. It is a scene of legends...” (Yuan *Vulture*).

exciting.” But Oleg, intense, grunting, and shirtless, embraces the role of wild animal beyond all expectation. Over the course of the scene, his behavior escalates from slightly amusing, to socially awkward, to outright terrifying. Oleg initially sets his sights on Julian (the artist interviewed), first mocking and mimicking him, and then swatting a water glass out of his hand sending it shattering to the floor and Julian scampering out of the dining room. More glass breaks soon as Oleg jumps upon the tables, tormenting the diners, as they work hard not to draw his attention their way. Eventually Christian calls upon his symbolic authority by standing up and courteously thanking Oleg for his performance and beginning to applaud. Oleg takes no notice as he menacingly zeroes in on a young, female guest; he begins by perching on the table in front of her chair, staring intensely and longingly at her before beginning to stroke her face. Her nervous laughter quickly gives way to desperate screams for help as Oleg forcefully gathers her hair in his hands and proceeds to pull her down from her chair and drag her by the hair along the ground before finally squatting on top of her. Eventually, a dinner guest breaks free of the thrall of the mandate to sit back and enjoy and runs to her rescue. As he begins furiously pummeling Oleg, others begin to join in the attack; all claims to civility vanish as a shout of “kill him” rings out and multiple fists rain down upon Oleg’s body as the scene cuts away.

This scene is most often discussed in terms Oleg’s excessive identification with the fiction of being a wild ape, but I suggest that we note, too, the museum patrons’ own over-identification with the symbolic mandate to enjoy. Their fidelity to the injunction keeps them docilely bound to their chairs well after the performance becomes intolerable, even as it verges on the criminal. The inefficacy of Christian’s symbolic intervention marks a palpable increase of unease among the audience, perhaps throwing into doubt the efficacy of the symbolic, more widely. But, as we see, this conspicuous symbolic failure leads not to a weakening of the social bond, but rather opens a space for the audience to free themselves from the stricture to sit back “and hide in the herd,” liberating them to take communal action. Rather than seeking to protect their individual security by hiding passively in “the herd,” they come to recognize that no one is safe unless they risk acting together. As the failure of symbolic conventions for reigning in the Other’s jouissance becomes increasingly palpable, new possibilities emerge.

Here, as in the earlier repetitions, an inassimilable, “excremental” element shifts the established symbolic terrain, foreshadowing the unexpected role that “the Square” art exhibit will come to play in the film.<sup>10</sup> To be specific, “the Square” exhibit, through its contamination by the vulgar publicity video, becomes stripped of its ability to generate surplus jouissance by ridding it of its ability to generate “moral

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10 Žižek, 2017 p. 251

superiority.<sup>11</sup> It is only when the exhibit comes to function as an absurd object of derision, rather than a virtuous space, that it ceases to foment self-righteous satisfaction and begins to spark solidaristic bonds, in much the same way that it is only through failing as an artistic fantasy, that Oleg’s performance piece creates solidaristic bonds among its audience.

But the violence catalyzed in response to Oleg’s transgression must not be glorified. By contextualizing it in terms of extra-diegetic dimensions of the film, we can consider how it echoes key tensions within the film. Specifically, it functions as a way to police the intrusion of an “improper” other into the group. Once the conventional apparatuses for safeguarding against the disruptive other are exhausted, a physically repressive form of policing galvanizes. The violence, however, is excessive to the situation, leaving some critics to wonder if the scream “kill him!” is meant to be taken literally in the film. The extremeness of the response resonates with the paradoxical way in which our deep libidinal investments in protecting ourselves from the “too other” other, transforms us into the thing we seek to reject. As Östlund, himself, describes the scene:

The most uncivilized thing about our time is the collective rage against individuals that have been uncivilized... I don’t know if it makes sense for you, but the most uncivilized thing today for me is that complete anger that comes like a rage, like a riot, towards individuals who have been uncivilized. And for me, the film is very much about this in some way. I understand the audience in that room because Terry Notary [Oleg] is so scary—or his character is so scary. But I wanted him to walk into a room and be like an uncivilized animal. And in the end this tuxedo-dressed audience have themselves become uncivilized. So, they are having a revenge on him in the same way that he has been behaving<sup>12</sup>.

Östlund perhaps heightened the stakes in the clash between the “civilized” and the “uncivilized” by inviting actual elite donors from the Swedish art world to play themselves,<sup>13</sup> a detail he withheld from Notary until the filming was finished. Notary confirms that the dynamics of the scene may have been altered if he knew in advance that he “was throwing water on a... billionaire donor... Because I thought they were making 120 bucks a day being extras.<sup>14</sup>” It is noteworthy, not only that the

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11 Ibid, p. 157

12 Yuan, *Vulture*

13 Östlund reassures us that the woman who Oleg drags off her chair by her hair is a stunt actor.

14 Yuan, *Vulture*

“wealth gap,” to which Christian refers in his video message, informs extradiegetic levels of the film in terms of Notary’s performance, but also, possibly, in terms of the donors’ zealous response to Notary’s performance. To be specific, Notary describes the passionate violence displayed by the crowd in terms of an injury he sustained: “[M]y right pinkie toe got broken... so painfully raked! I was like, ‘Maybe on the next one, if you could not rake up my feet and kick on the floor...’ But everyone was so in the moment that it was like, ‘Oh well, it’s going to happen every time.’ It was really good, because the pain was so real.<sup>15</sup>”

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The final thirty minutes of the film may appear as if Christian has finally managed successfully to activate the Symbolic in the cause of regulating his relationship to excessive jouissance. Rather than concluding with an image of Christian dramatically stripped down, “symbolically destitute,” the film inserts him into an oddly banal, conventional social setting: a school cheerleading tournament in which his daughters are participating. But we should avoid reading this ending in an ideologically conservative way—as a restoration of socio-symbolic wholeness. Rather, I suggest that this concluding scene points towards a radical restaging of Christian’s relationship to the fantasy of symbolic totality by identifying with the lack in the other, rather than attempting to seal it over.

As Christian, dressed in a grey sweatshirt and sporting facial stubble, undertakes this routine parental duty, he evinces no signs of self-satisfaction. He has abandoned ego-pleasure in favor of both the flickers of pleasures and the boredom involved in upholding the symbolic ritual for the sake of others/the Other. It is not incidental that the cheerleaders, performing within a delineated white square, engage in feats of trust. But rather than the pact of “trust and caring” required by individuals entering the Square exhibit, these acts of trust operate via collective responsibility. This point is amplified by the team’s coach, who reminds the cheerleaders that, if anyone “messes up,” she must “move on” and keep going with the routine. In specifically admonishing against dwelling in “guilt” over a mistake, the film advocates communal commitment ahead of individual ego-fortification.

After the cheerleading tournament, Christian takes further action to find the boy by returning to the apartment complex where the boy lives, this time accompanied by his own daughters.<sup>16</sup> Rather than erect a

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15 Ibid

16 Christian’s arrival at the apartment complex with his daughters follows the pattern of repetitions occurring throughout the film. The first time that Christian and his assistant go to the apartment to distribute the letters, Christian fears leaving his Tesla unattended in the neighborhood. His fears appear well-founded since while his assistant is waiting in the car, he is harassed by a guy who starts kicking the car. In this second iteration, it is this noteworthy that Christian asks his daughters to wait

distance between himself and the other, Christian now inserts himself (and his family) into the fray. Christian, I contend, comes to reject the fantasy of the “immigrant”/“other” as the obstacle to socio-symbolic wholeness by accepting that the figure, embodied by the boy, is rather the cause of his “freedom”—the freedom to inhabit the dissolution of the symbolic fiction of wholeness.

Throughout each instance of repetition within the film, we unlock possibilities for responding to the original key question this paper: what are the political ramifications of the transformation of the Square from art exhibit to filmic satire? My wager is that as an art installation, “the Square” contributed to consolidating the social around hegemonic ideals, whereas its filmic treatment continually highlights the social system’s instability that comes from the surfacing of its inevitable exclusions. In particular, the assertion of an excremental element in the place of the “all” (here accomplished by replacing the fictional blond girl with the brown immigrant boy) prevents symbolic closure. This destabilization thwarts any claim to a sutured totality, thus preventing the unavoidable exclusion totality requires and perhaps opening up a space of freedom for the subject as well.

alone in the car, while he goes inside to look for the boy. The girls ask to come with him, and he agrees to let them accompany him. Ultimately, he is unable to locate the boy or get any definitive answer to his survival. All Christian is able to learn, from a neighbor in one of the apartments, is that a boy and his family used to leave in the building, but he thinks that they moved away.

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# A Hand for Hitchcock

## Tom Gunning

**Abstract:** Using the films of Alfred Hitchcock, this essay addresses the concept of “haptic cinema”, Applying a term from art history and perceptual psychology and physiology that refers to the role of the hand in sensing and grasping to film style. The essay argues that while previous discussions of haptic cinema have focused primarily on the sense of touch, that the grasping hand needs to be considered. Drawing on close analysis of sequences from films by Alfred Hitchcock, the essay stresses the complex role the hand plays especially in relation to grasping.

**Keywords:** Alfred Hitchcock; Haptic cinema; Hand: *Psycho*; *Vertigo*

### Hand and Eye

Eyes gaze at us from the films of Alfred Hitchcock: the closeups of a woman’s eye in the credit sequence of *Vertigo* (1958); Norman Bates’s eye peering through his peep-hole into Marion Crane’s motel room in *Psycho* (1960); the eyes in Dali’s décor in the dream sequence of *Spellbound* (1945) sliced by huge scissors; the slowly rotating close-up of Marion’s dead eye soon after her death in the shower; or the hollow eye sockets that stare at us from the corpses of Mrs. Bates as well as Dan Fawcett in *The Birds* (1963).<sup>1</sup> Apparatuses of vision abound as well: the photographic equipment—lenses, camera, viewers, flashbulbs—in *Rear Window* (1954); the huge glasses reflecting Marion’s murder in *Strangers on a Train* (1951); the telescope that views the distant murder in *The Secret Agent* (1936); not to mention the images projected on movie screens in *Rebecca* (1940), *Sabotage* (1936), and *Saboteur* (1942). These images occur in films portraying the seductions and perils of vision. Hitchcock explores vision’s many modes: its ability to penetrate (Norma Bates’ gaze invading Marion’s private space); to receive (the dark pupils into which the camera seems to plunge in the *Vertigo* credits); and to reflect (the dark lens of Miriam’s glasses imaging the moment of her death). But hands abound as well in Hitchcock, opening an aspect of our physical being that offers dynamics of action and sensation just as profound as the seeing eye.<sup>2</sup>

Hitchcock entered filmmaking in the late ‘twenties, the point in film history when filmmakers sought self-consciously to define their

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1 Hitchcock’s use of the eye is described by many critics, with Pomerance 2004, providing a particularly rich discussion.

2 Hands in Hitchcock have already been a topic for a number of critics. As early as 1956 Phillipe Demonsablon’s *Lexique Mythologique pour l’oeuvre de Hitchcock* in “Cahiers du Cinema” 62 included an entry on hands. Walker 2004 (pp. 202-237) includes an insightful section on hands with which I share a number of insights. McElhaney 2006 (pp. 138) discussion of touch in Hitchcock offers a brilliant of hands in Hitchcock. Barton’s essay “Hitchcock’s Hands” (Barton 2002, pp. 159-178) deftly discusses the way hands are gendered.

medium. Throughout his career Hitchcock used a key term from this era to define his film-making, “pure cinema,” indicating the discovery of the nature of film as unique medium.<sup>3</sup> But even pure cinema requires a viewer, and that viewer requires a body. Hitchcock understood both directing and watching a film as an embodied process. In recent decades film theory has turned away from the disembodied concept of spectatorship that characterized apparatus theory to an understanding of film viewing that engages the whole body.<sup>4</sup> Strongly influenced by phenomenology, scholars such as Antonia Lant, Jennifer M. Barker, Vivian Sobchack, and Laura U. Marks undertook pioneering work on this concept of embodied spectatorship and specifically “*haptic*” cinema, a cinema reflecting the bodily sensation of touch and tactility.<sup>5</sup> Following the path these scholars opened, I will present a somewhat different emphasis in my understanding of the haptic. The haptic does not refer exclusively to the sensation of touch; it engages a broader understanding of the *hand* (and not just its fingertips). Touch explores the surfaces of the world, but the hand also reaches into space and grasps things. It is this aspect of the haptic, acknowledged by previous critics but often underemphasized in relation to film, that I will explore.

Touch, of course, cannot be eliminated from the “haptic.” The term comes from the Greek word *haptikos* sometimes translated as “to touch”, but also as “to grasp.”<sup>6</sup> Its use as a critical term comes primarily from art historian Alois Riegl who used “haptic” to define a change in the way space was portrayed in art, moving from a mode of representation in antiquity based on the contours of objects as felt by the hand to an art that triumphs in the Renaissance that addressed the eye primarily by placing things with a deep container of empty space.<sup>7</sup> Lant was one of the first to apply the term to film. Recent writers on “haptic cinema” have primarily evoked the sensation of touch that is conveyed by films—“the tactile eye” as Jennifer Barker puts it. But, while important, touch addresses only one aspect of the haptic, and does not exhaust the full embodied experience of the world that the hand affords us. As a scientific practice haptics divides the hand between prehensile acts—dealing with gripping and holding—and non-prehensile ones in which fingers perform but do not grasp (from feeling surfaces to tasks like typing).<sup>8</sup> Keeping in

3 A late and clear discussion of pure cinema occurs in a 1963 interview. See, Hitchcock 2015, p. 288.

4 Besides the critics I cite for the discussion of haptic cinema, the work on embodied spectatorship is now voluminous. I will cite the pioneer work of Shaviro 1993 and a more recent book, Shaviro 2016.

5 Lant 1995, pp. 45-73; Barker 2009; Sobchack 2004 and Mark 2002.\_

6 Jones 2018, p. 1.

7 Reig 1985. Lant offers the best summary of Reigl's use of the term in an art historical context in Lant 1995, pp. 47-51.

8 Wilson 1999, p. 120.

mind this varied terrain of the haptic, I will explore how Hitchcock treats the hand not simply as a source of sense-data but as an active means of interacting with the world.

The hand interacts with the world differently than the eye. As the canny title of Mark Patterson's book, *Senses of Touch: Haptics Affects and Technologies* indicates, the way the hand senses the world is varied.<sup>9</sup> Lynette A. Jones, senior research scientist at MIT, divides the haptic principally into touch and *kinesthesia*, the sensation of movement of body and limbs.<sup>10</sup> Not only is the hand not our *only* organ of touch (in contrast to the uniquely specific role of the eye in vision), touch itself is not really a singular sensation. Patterson includes several areas within touch: *proprioception*, sensing the position of our body in space; *vestibular*, a sense of balance based in our inner ear; *kinaesthesia*, based in our muscles tendons and joints; as well as the *cutaneous* sensation of touch based in the skin.<sup>11</sup> Such an inventory can't be neatly divided into sub-senses, since these aspects interrelate and each possesses its own complexities. Jones notes “even within the skin itself there are four recognized submodalities,” cuing us to touch, temperature, pain, and itch.<sup>12</sup>

Further, our hand does more than simply relay touch. It enables essential aspects of our embodied being in the world. Jones puts this succinctly. “The essential element of haptic and haptic exploration is that there is active movement of the hand, so that the sensory information a person receives does not come just from passive contact but from actively exploring the environment.”<sup>13</sup> This sense of exploration, of grasping and holding, and of moving through space becomes essential for understanding what the hand means in Hitchcock. Laura U. Marks' beautifully defines the tactile dimension of cinema as “touching, not mastering” {p. xii} and sees her task as a critic in terms of “moving along the surface of the object” [xii].<sup>14</sup> While I find this a profound insight into certain possibilities of cinema, I do not think it gets us far in understanding Hitchcock. Jennifer Barker tackles haptic relations beyond the tactile sense in her chapter entitled “Musculature” which deals with the bodily sense of movement. But her concept of the “film's body” moves away from the bodily affects that film can invoke so powerfully.<sup>15</sup> As a viewer I am directly physically affected by the closeup views of grasping

9 Patterson 2007.

10 Jones 2018.

11 Patterson 2007, pp. 3-4.

12 Jones 2018, p. 9.

13 Ibid., p. 5.

14 Marks 2002, p. xii.

15 Barker 2009, p. 69.

and searching hands that Hitchcock presents, recalling how our hands felt in similar moments.

### The Director's Hand

The hand mediates between the bodily and the meaningful: it is never simply a mass of flesh and bone or an organ of physical need, but always forges a relation to our being in the world. Through gesture, it constitutes one of the major modes of expression for the actor articulating its individual digits and performing symbolic motions. In film, a close-up can make the hand the center of a viewer's attention, the pivot of drama. In film history, close-ups of hands played almost as important a role in the development of editing as did facial close-ups. Strong film directors have used hands in distinctive ways, both in terms of actors' performances and the images they construct. Early on Hitchcock recognized that the hand could play a unique role in film style.<sup>16</sup>

In his 1937 essay "Direction" Hitchcock described the unique possibilities of the film medium—"pure cinema"—and stressed the power of editing.

The screen ought to speak its own language, freshly coined, and it can't do that unless it treats an acted scene as a piece of raw material which must be broken up, taken to bits, before it can be woven into an expressive visual pattern.<sup>17</sup>

To explain this, he describes the sequence of the killing of the anarchist Verloc by his wife from his recent film *Sabotage* (1936), perhaps his most ambitious film to that date. As he describes the power of editing, he demonstrates the expressive role of the hand, even preferring it to the face. Mrs. Verloc serves dinner to her husband after she has learned her brother has been killed by one of his bombs.

So, as she serves at the table, you see her unconsciously serving vegetables with the carving knife, as though her hand were keeping hold of' the knife of its own accord. The camera cuts from her hand to her eyes and back to her hand; then back to her eyes, as she suddenly becomes aware of the knife making its error. Then to a normal shot-the man unconcernedly eating; then back to the hand holding the knife. In an older style of acting Sylvia [Sidney] would have had to show the audience what was passing in her mind by exaggerated facial

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<sup>16</sup> My book on the films of Fritz Lang discusses his use of the hand, which makes an interesting comparison to Hitchcock. See Gunning 2000. McElhaney compares Lang and Hitchcock's use of hands in McElhaney 2006, p. 138

<sup>17</sup> Hitchcock 2015, pp. 253-261. (originally published in 1937).

expression. But people today in real life often don't show their feelings in their faces, so the film treatment showed the audience her mind through her hand, through its unconscious grasp on the knife.<sup>18</sup>

Hitchcock's discovery of the language of the cinema went hand in hand with his insight into the expressive human body, moving away from portraying conscious intentions through legible facial expressions into a more shadowy realm, as repressed desires become revealed through unconscious gestures.

Hitchcock used the language of film to reveal the hidden languages of the body. Hands often betray Hitchcock's villains. Not only are his murderers frequently stranglers (Uncle Charlie in *The Shadow of a Doubt* (1943); Brandon and Philip in *Rope* (1948); Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*; Bob Rusk in *Frenzy* (1972)), but unconscious gestures reveal their murderous impulses. Uncle Charlie makes violent gestures with his hands that belie his suave charm and elegant manners. (The way he tears his toast as he has breakfast in bed; the twisting of the napkin as he speaks to niece Charlie in the bar; the convulsive motion of his fingers as he watches her from his window). The hands of Bruno Anthony seem possessed, literally demonic. Like the lobster that emblazons his tie, they resemble large claw-like appendages emerging from the depths of a murderous unconscious. His hands are reflected grossly enlarged in the lens of his victim's glasses as he murders Miriam in the amusement park. Bruno's hands have a will of their own, most obviously when he almost strangles a lady at a Washington party in a sort of trance. In the film's most suspenseful sequence Bruno's hand reaches down into a sewer drain to retrieve Guy's incriminating lighter. This cloacal realm of darkness perfectly suits his evil intention, an image of the subterranean depths from which his impulses come. Bruno's hand ultimately turns against his plot against Guy. The dying Bruno still denies he has Guy's lighter, but his hand betrays his claim, opening as he dies to reveal the exculpatory object and deliver Guy from his sinister influence. His hand seemed to radiate a dark power. Critics have pointed out that the demonic energies of Bruno's hand seem to contaminate the apparently innocent Guy. Hitchcock cuts from Guy's rage at his cheating wife, as he says "I'd like to strangle her" to a close-up of Bruno flexing his hands, ready and willing to fulfill Guy's wish.<sup>19</sup>

The hand frequently serves Hitchcock as an emblem of guilt, literally catching characters "red-handed." Recall the close-up of Norman Bates's blood-stained hands as he cleans up after the murder perpetrated by his "mother," or Philip's bloody hand after he breaks

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>19</sup>

his stemware when Mrs. Atwood mistakes him for her nephew David whom he has just helped strangle in *Rope*. But the signs of guilt are not restricted to villains. In Hitchcock's underrated exploration of the effect of guilt on the innocent *The Wrong Man* (1956), Hitchcock shows Manny Balestrero's fingers besmirched with ink after his fingerprinting for a robbery he did *not* commit. Close-ups of dirty hands recur frequently in Hitchcock and often carry primal association of shame more than evidence of actual guilt, as characters become marked in a circuit of guilt and shame. Thus the brown make-up that smears Dr. McKenna's hand after the knifing of Louis Bernard in *The Man who Knew Too Much* (1956); or the spot of blood on Melanie Daniels' glove after the gull attacks her in the *Birds* (an attack for which at least one character blames her). These images announce that these characters have become implicated in scenarios of violence they cannot control. Marnie's unconscious guilt is triggered by images of red stains, which Hitchcock turns into a red filter suffusing her visual field at moments of panic, transferring this stain of shame and guilt from hand to eye.

In all these instances the hand reveals hidden impulses and displays shame or guilt in ways that either the conscious mind represses or tries to hide from view. In Hitchcock's first film focused on psychoanalysis, *Spellbound*, Dr. Peterson described the body's role in expressing something the conscious mind denies. John Ballantyne exclaims he feels his hand burning but cannot consciously recall the war incident in which his hand was injured. Dr. Peterson, his lover and analyst, offers the Freudian insight that he is really suffering from memories. Ben Hecht's dialogue succinctly describes the process of repression and displacement: "The memory only touched the body, the mind that feels." The feeling mind here dwells in the hand.

But more than through dialogue, Hitchcock portrays visually the hand's capacity for expressing shame and acting out evil impulses, triggering our own physical participation as viewers. We not only watch these scenes, we *feel* them. The sequence of Bruno's hand searching for the incriminating lighter which he dropped into the sewer drain symbolizes his affinity with darkness and the depths of human evil. But the effect of this sequence lies in Hitchcock's ability to root this gesture in our haptic experience. As we watch Bruno's frustrating attempt to gain a purchase on the lighter's polished metal we feel it in our hand. In spite of our lack of sympathy with Bruno's evil purpose, we feel relieved as his ineffective stroking motion of fingertips on the lighter's surface converts to the hand's firm grasp.

### Give me your hand! / Nothing to Hold

Hitchcock's films can grip us from the very beginning of action as *Vertigo* proves. The film begins in deep darkness. An image fades in, but remains somewhat obscure: a horizontal bar divides the frame in the foreground

as the distance remains a soft focus blur. Abruptly it becomes more defined: a hand grasps the bar with a metallic clang, then another hand reaches up to grasp it as well. The camera pulls back as a man climbs up a rooftop ladder and rushes towards the camera, then dashes off-screen. A uniformed policeman and a plain-clothed detective climb up the ladder and chase after the man. Our location becomes defined: an urban rooftop as behind the figures a cityscape under a twilight sky. The film's first image emerges with the haptic gesture of the grasp, signaling this film is about holding on precariously. Demonsablon listed as one of his categories of hands in Hitchcock, "grasping hands": this gesture play a crucial role Hitchcock's haptic cinema.<sup>20</sup>

The opening chase of *Vertigo* ends with the terrifying plunge of the cop off the roof top, witnessed by detective Scottie McPherson (James Stewart) as he clings desperately to a collapsing gutter. The fall is preceded by one of Hitchcock's most daring visual metaphors, visualizing Scottie's POV of the alleyway below him. As in the famous shots of the mission stairwell later in the film, here the space seems to stretch unnaturally, as if Scottie's view were being pulled downward, yet also resisting that plunge. This visual manipulation beautifully expresses the contradictory impulse of the sensation of vertigo, sometimes described as the conflict between the fear of falling and the desire to jump. It is also a perfect example of haptic cinema that goes beyond touch, evoking the vestibular sensation of loss of balance that provokes the dizziness of vertigo. Hitchcock's dominant editing figure—an off-screen look/POV shot/reaction shot—conveys Scottie's anguish as he remains suspended over this abyss. As Scottie stares into the depth below, an offscreen voice offers salvation: "Give me your hand!" Scottie looks up. We see the police officer holding on to the slanted roof, as he reaches downwards to Scottie. Cut to Scottie staring upward. In the following medium close-up the cop repeats, "give me your hand", his arm outstretched toward the camera, his hand blurred beyond the range of focus, trembling and seeming ungraspable.

Hitchcock presents the cop's fall in nine shots lasting a total of 20 seconds, and ending the first scene of *Vertigo*. Two shots show the drama of the failed hand grasp. The first a beautifully designed process shot in which the cop's arm and hand reach down toward Scottie from the left as Scottie in the middle of the frame clings for dear life and looks up helplessly towards the offered rescue, while the depth stretches below in wide-angle distortion. The next very brief shot shows this hand reaching downward as Scottie's two hands grasp the gutter tightly. The hands do not touch. Then three shots show the cop's fall: a very brief medium long shot of the slanted rooftop as the cop falls past the suspended Scottie and a medium close-up focused on Scottie's face as we glimpse the body

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20 Demonsablon 1959, p. 26. The French phrase is "mains saisissant".

falling behind him and his gaze shifts downward. The third process shot shows the cop's body hurdling through space, growing smaller until it lands on the ground below. The last three shots reprise Hitchcock's look/POV/reaction pattern as Scottie looks below in horror. We see from his aerial POV the small figure of the dead man as others rush to toward it, then a cut to Scottie again in closeup, his eye wide staring downward.

Hands in Hitchcock are more than just a recurring motif.<sup>21</sup> Like eyes, the hand forms a nexus between our bodies and the world. As a director of thrillers, Hitchcock not only portrays bodies in action but creates sequences and situations in which we, as viewers, experience intensely this bond between our embodied self and the dangers and delights the world affords. Hitchcock's popularity as "master of suspense" depends on his ability to almost physically bind audiences to unfolding action. This is the aspect of directing that Hitchcock stressed most often: the necessity to make the audience "participate,"—become immersed in the action. As he explained in "Direction":

The point is to draw the audience right inside the situation instead of leaving them to watch it from outside, from a distance. And you can do this only by breaking the action up into details and cutting from one to the other, so that each detail is forced in turn on the attention of the audience and reveals its psychological meaning. If you played the whole scene straight through, and simply made a photographic record of it with the camera always in one position, you would lose your power over the audience. They would watch the scene without becoming really involved in it, and you would have no means of concentrating their attention on those particular visual details which make them feel what the characters are feeling.<sup>22</sup>

In the opening of *Vertigo*,<sup>1</sup> he constructs Scottie's ordeal so that the viewer doesn't just witness the drama, but empathizes with the physical fear of falling, the strain of trying to maintain a grip and the horror of missing a rescuing grasp. Through an intensely experienced scene like this, Hitchcock's cinema makes us aware of our body's place within the world as well as the cinema. The hand serves as a pivot in this interaction.

The cinema has the ability to make us not only witness, but *experience* what we see through bodily empathy. As we watch bodies move on the screen our own bodies recall the feel, the motion and the postures we watch, making them experiences we share rather than simple depictions. As we watch Scottie's ordeal our bodies recall what it is like to cling against the pull of gravity and to anticipate the grasp of the

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21 Although they are of course also motifs, as Michael Walker's section on hands show, Walker 2004, pp. 202-237.

22 Hitchcock 2015, pp, 256-57.

offered hand. But this recollection is more than a sensation; it involves the hand's capacity for exploration and movement through space that Jones defined as the unique aspect of the haptic. The hand that searches for Scottie's grasp and his reluctance to take it for fear of losing his tenuous hold underscore the essential difference between haptic sensing and the sensation of vision. As Jones puts it:

Haptic sensing therefore differs from other senses, like vision and audition, in that it is bidirectional: the information we can extract about an object's properties is exquisitely linked to the movements made to perceive those properties. In the act of exploring an object we may even change its properties, such as when we exert too much force on a ripe strawberry and crush it ...<sup>23</sup>

Scottie can see the outstretched hand but cannot take hold of it.

Embodied cinema, including haptic cinema, not only draws on our memories and fantasies of physical actions and encounters, but allows us to explore their possibilities real and imagined. The goal of phenomenal analysis should be to cue us into the manner in which our actions weave the complex nexus between the world and our bodies. In his tantalizingly brief essay on film Maurice Merleau-Ponty claimed:

This is why movies can be so gripping in their presentation of man: they do not give us his *thoughts* as novels have done for so long, but his conduct or behavior. They directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and clearly defines each person we know.<sup>24</sup>

The great phenomenologist refers here, of course, to cinema generally, its ability to capture our physical being and its inherence in the world. If every film possesses this possibility, no filmmaker exceeds Hitchcock's skill in making us feel the force of gesture and gaze, hand and eye.

The failed grasp becomes a motif in Hitchcock. Scottie invokes the trauma of failure powerfully in the second scene of *Vertigo* when he recounts his recurring dream of the policemen's fall and says, "I try to reach out to him, and..." But nowhere does it appear more powerfully than in Marion Crane's death scene in *Psycho*,<sup>1</sup> a moment that for me resolves the frenetic violence of the shower murder into a deep sense of loss. Although few scenes could be more terrifying than the rooftop plunge in *Vertigo*, the emptiness that echoes through this scene in *Psycho* makes it Hitchcock's darkest and perhaps most poignant use of the hand. In *Vertigo*

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23 Jones 2018, p. 7.

24 Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 58.

Scottie's dilemma lies partly in his inability to reach out to the extended hand. His thwarted instinct to cling relates the complex of hand, arm, and shoulder which form Scottie's lifeline to the primitive hand grip humans inherited from their primate ancestors. Preceding the upright bipedal mode of walking that defines the advent of the human, the hand served to cling and release when swinging from tree limb to tree limb provided the major means of locomotion. As Frank R. Wilson points out in this primal stage "falling was a *normal mode of locomotion*."<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately it is not a mode Scottie can rely on.

In *Psycho* after the shower attack, we see an extreme close-up of Marion's hand, flat against the bathroom wall, her fingers spread wide in contrast to Scottie's fingers gripped tightly on the gutter. Marion's fingers slip down the smooth and slick tiles, her hand splayed uselessly. Here in one of Hitchcock's most tactile shots there is nothing for her to cling to. We feel the wet expanse of this clean and frictionless surface as a lack. As her hand moves downward, her finger curls slowly as if hoping to scratch a hold in the slick, unyielding space. In the following medium shot, in contrast to Scottie's wild-eyed taking-in of his situation, Marion's eyes become progressively blank, unseeing, as life drains from her. After the rapid montage of the murder containing many shots of less than a second, this shot seems agonizingly slow, awaiting the growing stillness of death. The camera follows Marion's slow slide down the wall until she settles at the bottom. She lifts her arm and the camera withdraws a bit. Her hand is nearly silhouetted, backlit against the gleaming white of the shower tiles. Its movement outward seems to respond to the camera's retreat as beseeching it not to abandon her.

As if in deliberate contrast to Scottie, Marion's tragedy does not come from being unable to grasp—which she does in her penultimate act of seizing the shower curtain. Rather, she makes this grab, the most fundamental haptic gesture—but to no avail. There is no human hand offering rescue here, only empty space and inanimate objects. Death seems almost to eat away space in the following extreme close-up, as the image blurs, the right half of the shot dissolving in vagueness. On the left the plastic shower curtain hangs, its opaque translucence rhyming with the blurred space. But the sharp focus of Marion's hand in the foreground, groping for something and touching the curtain, seems almost severed from the mottled mass of her nude body, barely recognizable in the background.

Marion's last living act is to grasp this flimsy curtain in a pain-filled gesture. Her final grip on life brings neither rescue nor comfort. She collapses in the next shots, dying as the curtain, her final means of support, tears from its rungs. Both the silent horror of the Marion's death in *Psycho* and the anguish of the opening of *Vertigo* evoke the power of the

<sup>25</sup>Wilson 1999, p. 78.

hand to grasp. We *feel* as we watch these sequences the urge to hold on to something, to be rescued from the inevitability of death. Scottie as he hangs to the gutter endured both the fear of falling to one's death and the guilt and trauma of survival. Marion dies alone. No human hand reaches to take hers. Her convulsing hand can only contact the inhuman textures of tile, enamel, plastic and the relentless spray of water.

### Monumental Cliffhangers

In *Vertigo* and *Psycho* Hitchcock offers his most powerful and extended images of grasping hands. But the grasp struggling against a fall forms a recurrent motif in his work, almost an obsession. The rooftop fall in *Vertigo* was preceded by the intricate, if less affective, climax of *Saboteur* (1942) The central action of this sequence recalls *Vertigo*: one man reaches out to another clinging desperately as he hangs above a fearsome drop. But beyond the drama of the attempted grasp, the hand takes on emblematic force here due to the location of this struggle: the massive arm and hand of the Statue of Liberty. The rescue is attempted as the characters move precariously upon this giant hand.

Chasing the Nazi saboteur Fry to the upper reaches of the monument, the protagonist Barry Kane confronts him on the outer guardrail of the uplifted torch, causing him to tumble over the edge. In long shot Kane leans over the railing as Fry falls and catches himself on the cleft at the base of the statue's thumb. As Kane dashes to look over the other edge of the railing we get the first shot that watches this drama from an aerial perspective above the statue. An abstract geometry dominates this shot, largely a matte painting of the foreshortened statue and its polyhedral base, with Kane and Fry tiny human figures shoved into the bottom left corner of the frame. Fry twists his dangling legs as Kane precariously descends stepping onto the statue's massive hand, sliding along its crooked index finger. We see a high angle medium close-up of Fry, terrified and trembling, holding onto the all-too-smooth surface of the monumental hand. Hitchcock follows this with a brief close-up of Fry's two hands trembling, his fingers seeking to gain purchase. Kane bends down towards him and we see a close-up of his hand descending toward Fry, and Kane's outstretched fingers almost brushing Fry's hands, which dare not release their grip to take the offered hand. Kane tells Fry, "I'll get your sleeve." A close-up shows Kane's hand touching the back of Fry's hand as he edges down his arm to grasp the cuff of his jacket. Hitchcock intercuts Kane and a closer shot of Fry's sweat-covered face until we get the crucial shot of the sequence.

An extreme close-up reveals the seam of Fry's jacket as it begins to tear. The master of suspense here flaunts his control of space and time, cutting from this crucial detail to a distant long shot framing the statue's extended arm, reducing the characters we care about to tiny figures. This high angle shot frames the titanic arm to which miniscule human

beings cling against the watery surface of New York Harbor. This extreme contrast in scale epitomizes Hitchcock's editing, demonstrating cinema's ability to switch spatial viewpoints radically. Withdrawing at this crucial moment to a distant view not only plays with the audience's immersion in the scene, but expresses his almost sadistic power to toy with our immersion in the scene. It also sardonically replicates the human drama of hand and arm in another dimension of scale, from vulnerable humans to impassive monument. Hitchcock returns to the intimate close-up of the fabric of Fry's jacket as the seam gapes open, exposing his pinstripe shirt through the widening rent in the dark cloth.

The next shot reiterates the contrast in scale with a shot of the statue filmed from a lower angle that shows not only the statue's arm but shoulder and head framed against the sky. Fry and Kane, seeming insignificant and barely visible, struggle for life powerlessly, while the frozen face of the statue stares away from them. We shift to the nearly microscopic level as the fabric continues to tear. The alternation of close-up and distant views continues with yet another angle of the statue filmed from below and canted so that she fills the frame diagonally, her arm seemingly thrusting the torch with its visually insignificant human burden into the upper left corner of the image. These three long shots of the statue intercut with the parting of the seam visually animate this titanic figure. Recalling Eisenstein's lion statues in *Potemkin*, it nearly allegorizes the scene: the vengeful spirit of Liberty awakening to revenge herself on one who threatens her. That this godlike entity uses the tiniest means, the tearing threads, for her act of nemesis aligns its power with that of the director, viewing all this from above and stirring it into motion.

Human scale returns as the tear opens so that the sleeve pulls away from the shoulder the threads snapping barely audibly on the soundtrack. In close-up, Fry, viewed as always from above, glances over at his shoulder as he notices his clothing unraveling and looks up in bewildered terror, pleading, "Quick, the sleeve..." Kane holds tight to the sleeve as Fry's arm slips out of it. In perhaps Hitchcock's most perfectly imaged fall, Fry plunges towards the ground. After a close-up of his grim reaction, we see Kane crouched in the notch of the statue's hand, the now empty sleeve rippling in the breezes until he releases it and it blows away, an emblem of the failed grasp. He climbs up the monster hand to the observation ledge where other hands reach out to him and he is gathered into the embrace of his lover as the film ends.

In later interviews Hitchcock indicated his mistake in placing an unsympathetic villain in danger, limiting audience concern. The opening of *Vertigo* demonstrates the power of having the film's star dangling over the abyss. The unique power of *Saboteur*'s final sequence lies in visualizing both extremes of the inanimate, the pure materiality of the ripping fabric and the allegorical power of the statue. But in *Vertigo* and *Psycho*, the deaths we witness are also humanly painful and deeply felt. Gripping and reaching hands in those two films have a different register than in

*Saboteur*, marking Hitchcock's increased concern with the precariousness of human existence, and with making it more painful to watch.

If the opening of *Vertigo* can be seen as a variation on the closing of *Saboteur*, both these films are referenced and their tones redefined by the ending of *North by Northwest* where the hand-grasp and danger of falling reappear. I believe Hitchcock designed NBNW specifically in response to *Vertigo*, released one year earlier, but its final climax most closely resembles *Saboteur*. Again, the location is an American National Monument composed of gigantic figures, in this case Mt. Rushmore. Hitchcock again plays with scale, as small human figures climb over the titanic faces of American presidents, impassive as dramas of life and death play out upon them. There are many differences between NBNW and the other two films—most crucially here the hand grasp holds and a rescue takes place.

Gender plays a key role in this transformation. The dramas of clinging hands and failed rescues in *Vertigo* and *Saboteur* involved only men. But in NBNW it is Roger Thornhill's inamorata, Eve Kendall, who hangs on the beveled edge of the monument unable to get a foothold, or a sure grip that would allow her to hoist herself up. In fact, Hitchcock's earliest cliffhanger in *Young and Innocent* (1937) had also put lovers in peril, with the hero rescuing his girl as their car falls in a collapsing mine shaft. The closeup of their hands as the hero Robert Tisdall pulls young Erica Burgoyne out of danger anticipates later scenes, but the sequence remains elementary compared to Hitchcock's later elaboration of this situation. A firm hand grasp also prevented a fall in the climax of *To Catch a Thief* (1955), but here the dangling person held in the hero's grip is a thief and her situation is used to force a confession from her. But in *North by Northwest* the grasping hands resolve a romance plot. It comes as the climax to a game of hide and seek as spies pursue Eve and Roger across the faces of the monument, attempting to retrieve a pre-Columbian figure that contains government secrets. Action and conflict dominate the scene, compared to the suspenseful paralyses of the previous films.

A spy leaps at Roger as the couple come around a rocky corner. After a struggle Roger pushes the villain off the edge of a cliff, his fall shown in the process shot of a body hurtling through space that appears in all three cliff-hanger sequences. The threat eliminated, Roger sees Leonard, the most villainous of the spy-ring, struggling with Eve, wresting the terracotta figure from her and pushing her down. In a plunging longshot Eve hangs desperately to the cliff wall, the moonlit abyss gaping beneath her. Roger reaches downwards towards Eve in long shot. In close-up Eve lifts one trembling hand and Roger strains his hand towards her. The possibility of imminent rescue disappears as a rock ledge gives way beneath Eve's feet in close-up. But in the following close-up Roger grips Eve's wrist before she falls. Roger clings to Eve as she dangles over the cliff's edge. A close-up shows Roger's other hand struggling to maintain its hold on the cliff edge. We return to the high angle shot of the

pair with the depth looming below, as Roger looks upwards. Roger asks Leonard: “Help, help me,” and Leonard in the next shot steps forward seemingly in response.

The situation recalls *Saboteur*—enemies drawn to help each other by a dire situation—but quickly reverses it. As the camera lowers, framing Roger’s hand on the edge of the cliff Leonard raises his foot and brings it down on his gripping fingers. This may be the most literally painful image of the hand in Hitchcock’s films even if its over-the-top quality hardly carries the sense of loss found in *Vertigo* or *Psycho*. A hand-grasp becomes a sadistic act of crushing. The following closer shots stress both pain and the danger of falling, Roger winching and Eve terrified. A closeup of foot grinding on fingers becomes redefined by an off-screen sound of a gunshot and Leonard’s foot tilts off the hand. A surprising cut shows the terracotta idol smashing as coils of microfilm pop from its belly. Two shots show Leonard’s plunge off the cliff as Roger and Eve hold on.

Hitchcock delivers the end of the sequence and of the film, in his most positive and indeed magical image of redemption offered by a hand-grasp. In a low angle close-up Roger looks down intently as Eve strains on his grasp. Roger encourages Eve and she declares, “I can’t make it,” adding “pull harder!” As Roger grins in the next close-up, his tone of voice changes and he declares, “Come along, Mrs. Thornhill.” The cut here is perhaps Hitchcock’s most daring—yet playful—as the action of lifting Eve is continued over a change in location and a major ellipsis of time. Roger pulls Eve by her hand up into an upper berth in a train sleeping car, the camera pulling back from close-up to show the couple embracing in their mobile wedding bed. Roger defends himself against Eve’s claim he is being silly by saying, “I know, but I’m sentimental.” The film then ends with the shot that Hitchcock jovially confessed in interviews to be a phallic symbol as the train enters a tunnel.<sup>26</sup> All of the sequences discussed demonstrate Hitchcock’s devotion to montage and its ability to transport the audience through space and time through the gestures and emotions of characters. Until this moment the editing in this sequence has not been as intricate as our other three examples. But this cut shifts characters from one time and place to another and its recklessly interrupts suspenseful action stands as one of Hitchcock’s most powerful experiments in montage.

The sequence also stands out for its successful resolution of the hand grasp. Hands here neither fail to make contact nor come apart. The emotional bond between lovers underlying the handclasp (literalized as a marriage bond) did not appear in the previous films. The contrast with *Vertigo*, the film that just preceded it, carries significance for Hitchcock’s career. Although the handclasp and fall that opens *Vertigo* does not

26 [Hitchcock/Truffaut](#) (revised edition) (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 150.

involve lovers, no other Hitchcock film deals as painfully with the failure of lovers. In spite of its current reputation, *Vertigo* was initially a critical and box office failure and it is hard not to feel that in *NBNW* Hitchcock hoped to exorcise the tragic tone of that film. The last line of *NBNW* seems to dispel the sting of one of Scottie’s most bitter lines when he says to Judy/Madeline after discovering her duplicity, “You shouldn’t keep souvenirs from a murder, Madeline, You shouldn’t ... you shouldn’t be that sentimental.” The end of *NBNW* labors to reverse the horror of repeated falls to the death of Madeline and Judy in *Vertigo*. The very magical and literally incredible nature of the rescue seems to suggest Hitchcock may see such a happy ending to be only achieved through cinematic trickery, more a wish fulfillment than a dramatic resolution. Hitchcock’s emotional pendulum swung back to the tragic with his next film, *Psycho*, which is as much a reversal of the comic tone of *NBNW* as that film is of *Vertigo*.

If the three handclasp/falling sequences in *Saboteur*, *Vertigo* and *NBNW* form a trilogy of variations from melodrama to tragedy to comedy, they all contrast paradigmatically with the death scene in *Psycho*. Their public spaces contrast sharply with the privacy and intimacy of the bathroom, the multiple characters reverse the isolation and nudity of Marion Crane. Even the failed handclasps offer more human fellowship than Crane’s lonely death. All this makes her final gesture of reaching out into nothingness that much more painful. While her collapse in the bathtub may seem less horrific than the male bodies hurdling into the abyss, her physical vulnerability and exposure make the action more haptic. The feel of wet enamel plastic and downpouring water offer the tactile equivalent of the empty-handed reach. That gesture in its futility and poignance holds the key to Hitchcock’s haptics. It is not simply touch, but the need to grasp *something*, the blind searching of space for some response, some comfort or aid. This reaching out, its failed attempt to master the world around one provides the climactic moment of this the coldest scene in Hitchcock’s coldest film. Although the hand ultimately takes hold of the shower curtain, it seems at first to reach out towards the camera as a witness. But the camera offers no solace. Marion’s lifeless nude figure is observed at the end by circular images recalling a cold eye and pitiless gaze: the low angle shot of the round showerhead with its rays of spray; then a moving camera following the stream of water washing away blood, the drain with its mini-maelstrom, which slowly dissolve into the wide open dead eye of Marion. Hand and eye here grasp and reflect nothingness.

### Pointing: Hand as gesture, gesture as sign

There is a famous publicity photograph portraying Hitchcock at work. Taken early in his career in the late 1920’s, Hitchcock’s plump jowly face is unmistakable, even if his hair is dark and uncharacteristically full. The young director stares fixedly at something off-frame, presumably the

scene he is directing. Behind him to the left stands his wife and collaborator Alma Reville holding what seems to be a script and casting her own intent gaze, but more cautious and observant compared to Hitch's almost ecstatic expression. The keynote of the image lies less in Hitch's stare, than his gesture, outstretched arm and pointing finger. The gesture seems deliberately excessive; it looks more like a witness pointing an accusing finger at a fleeing culprit than a director instructing an actor. Along with the outreaching grasping hand this pointing gesture, a motif Demonsablon had already noted and named "indicating hands," defines the essence of Hitchcock's haptic filmmaking.<sup>27</sup> The pointing finger is polysemic, and its two primary meanings are on display in this image of the director: most obviously pointing something out, directing attention; and more subliminally the primal gesture of accusation, pointing the finger at the guilty one.

My intention in this essay has been not only to explore certain key moments in Hitchcock's films, but to demonstrate how his mastery of cinematic language was founded in a deep intuition of the relation between our body and the world. The haptic opens a way into understanding how cinema can do this, especially, if we do not limit the term to tactile sensation. Our hands do more than feel or grasp the world; they orient us within it, pointing the way, opening us to both sites and sights. Hitchcock's hands create a nexus with language and signification through gesture. Too often critics reduce the embodied nature of aesthetic experience to simple bodily sensation. Phenomenology as a method undoes the duality of body and mind, the tendency to think of meaning as simply intellectual in a narrow sense. Gestures make us aware of the way language itself, the vehicle of meaning, remains rooted in our bodily being and our movement through space. Cinema relies on this embodied nature of language.

Body language is more than turn of phrase; it indicates how strongly language dwells in our embodied nature. Gestures make this evident. Frank R. Wilson describes the "hand-thought-language nexus" the evolutionary interrelation of language and gesture.<sup>28</sup> But this nexus does not rest simply in our biological past. Our relations to the world around us, as much as our communication with our fellows, begins with gestures. The pointing finger opens the path into the human realm of sense:

Cognitive and developmental psychologists regard the appearance in children of pointing as a "gesture of intentionality" (at about fourteen months) to be an important milestone in their mental development and consider it exclusive use by humans a demarcation from chimpanzee cognitive potential. Chimpanzees neither spontaneously produce this gesture nor acquire it through training.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Demonsablon 1956, p. 27. The French phrase is "mains designant."

28 Wilson 1999, pp. 35- 60.

29 Ibid., p. 50.

The pointing gesture shows again the merging of hand and eye as we navigate the world. As the publicity photo of young Hitchcock shows, the pointing finger directs the look, vectorizing our gaze to literalize what Robert Bresson has called the "the ejaculatory force of the eye."<sup>30</sup> In evolutionary terms, Wilson relates pointing to what is known as the *dorsal* visual system, "essential both for simple target identification and tracking... and to guide the preformation of the hand so that it can perform an anticipated task as soon as it makes contact with the object."<sup>31</sup>

As an emblem of the director's role the pointing finger relates to another hand gesture that publicity images of Hitchcock often featured: framing a scene with the extended thumb and index finger of two hands visualizing the director's position as observer and master. The gesture literally frames the scene, claiming it or owning it—defining it. If the framing gesture expresses Hitchcock's mastery over the image, the pointing gesture speaks more to his desire to plunge the viewer into the action allowing her to participate in it. The act of pointing exemplifies Hitchcock's role as director, directing the spectator's attention to the significant detail or action.

While Hitchcock's description of the language of film stresses editing's ability to break a scene into its significant parts, his direction also makes these fragments hang together. I would describe this aspect of his direction as *vectorization*, making one shot lead to another with continuous energy or trajectory. The POV pattern in which an off-screen look leads naturally to what was seen provides a prime example of this vectorization. But composition, camera movement and even actor's movements also carry out this role of pointing the audience's attention in a specific direction and moving it along. The opening of *I Confess* (1953) beautifully demonstrates this vectorization aspect of Hitchcock's direction.

The film opens with a series of an establishing shots of Quebec City as if Hitchcock were flaunting his location shooting as much as setting the scene. After a couple of picturesque images, a shot dominated by a large arrow-shape sign indicating a one way street appears. A second shot of an arrow sign follows soon after, marking it as a motif. The next shot shows the only living human being in this sequence as a distant silhouette of Hitchcock performing his cameo as director, crosses the frame at the top of a stairway. Then a third pointing sign moves us into the heart of the plot, as a camera movement follows the direction of the arrow and tracks through an open window to discover a dead body on the floor. Although this opening sequence does not show a human hand pointing, the signs embody the indicating gesture. Hitchcock stresses their link to the essence of his style with a pun: these French signs for one way street actually say "Direction".

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30 Bresson 1977, p. 6.

31 Wilson 1999, p. 107.

The pointing finger appears frequently in Hitchcock's films. Already in *The Lodger* it occurred near the opening after the discovery of the Avenger's victim. An elderly lady who saw the perpetrator escaping describes him and seems to see his reflection in a lunch wagon coffee urn. She points offscreen with outstretched arm and we see the reflection of a bystander jokingly masquerading as the murderer. Here the gesture performs two essential traits: directing the gaze off-screen and making an accusation (and significantly, a misidentification). From the beginning of his career to its end this essential gesture embodies Hitchcock's style. A pointing finger actually appears in the last minute of Hitchcock's last film, *Family Plot* (1976) as Blanche in close-up points out the glowing diamond hanging from the chandelier. The pointing finger takes on an almost emblematic function for Hitchcock, not simply drawing attention to something, but thematizing the act of pointing something out and its ambiguities of this gesture of identification.

The finger can point to evidence, but in Hitchcock it often involves uncertainty as well. A shot in *The Man who Knew Too Much* (1956) of the bullet hole in the ballroom window after Louis Bernard has been shot demonstrates this role as enigma. In close-up no less than five pointing fingers surround the hole in spite of the unlikely positions characters would have to assume in order to form this pattern. The shot becomes almost extra-textual, underscoring the question of who shot this innocuous seeming fellow. While pointing fingers can indicate incriminating evidence they often point to deeper levels of meaning. Sebastian's thumb passes along the dates of the bottles in his wine cellar until he pauses at the one bearing the wrong date in *Notorious* (1946), revealing not just evidence the bottles have been tampered with, but exposing the betrayal of his marriage. As Jeff watches through his telephoto lens, Lisa in *Rear Window*, points to the wedding ring on her finger, evidence that Thorwald murdered his wife, but also her signal to Jeff that she has proved herself worthy of marriage. This gesture indicating evidence of both crime and romance, soon transforms into a sign of peril as the camera edges over to reveal Thorwald who also registers Lisa's signal and thereby becomes aware of the role of Jeff, who had felt himself invisible and invulnerable due to his distance and visual apparatus. Most eerie, Madeleine's dark glove fingers point out two positions on the cross section of redwood in *Vertigo* as her off-frame voice says in an otherworldly tone, "Here I was born and there I died, for you it was just a moment, you took no notice." Her gesture points us into the world of the dead, while also serving as a ploy in the plot to embroil Scottie in a murder. In all these instances the pointing finger not only indicates a specific object but opens up another context that redefines the situation.

Undoubtedly the most thorough treatment of the pointing finger and its implied accusation of guilt comes early in Hitchcock's career, in his first sound film, *Blackmail* (1929). Like other critics, I consider *Blackmail*

Hitchcock's first masterpiece. Here the finger of accusation conveys a sense of an undeserved, but equally unshakeable, guilt. The highly symbolic nature of the pointing finger in this film is underscored by the fact that it appears in a painting, as a fixed and highly significant gesture. A court jester, his face convulsed in laughter, points directly in front of him, making anyone who stands before the painting the target of his mockery.

Alice White has ditched her detective boyfriend at a restaurant for a secret date with an artist in his studio. She enters rather warily and glances out the window where she sees a policeman on patrol below. Reassured by this presence of the law, she looks around the studio. Hitchcock cuts to the painting of jester, so closely framed one might take it for an actual person. A rapid track back of the camera reveals it as a canvas propped on an easel. Alice responds with delight and immediately reproduces the gesture. She points off at the painting exclaiming: "I say that's good isn't it?" The doubling of the gesture already indicates the painting's power over Alice; it has already contaminated her actions.

The artist's attempt to seduce Alice turns to rape when she resists, as he pulls her into a bed in a curtained alcove. Hitchcock indicates the hidden struggle through the rustling curtain, until we see Alice's hand emerge from the curtains, flailing. As the camera dollies forward, her hand gropes and grabs a bread knife from a bedside table. Holding the knife, her hand disappears within the curtains and slowly the rustling ceases—until the artist's hand flops into view, obviously dead. Alice emerges slowly from the curtains in her underwear, robot-like, holding the knife in her hand as she stares about her uncomprehendingly.

Shivering, she looks around the studio. Her POV shows her dress draped across the canvas where the artist threw it. She walks to it mechanically. As she lifts the dress from the canvas, Hitchcock cuts to a close view of the painting, its pointing finger seeming to pop out at her (and the viewer). A full face close-up of Alice follows staring directly at the camera, looking startled at first and then enraged as she strikes out at the canvas and its implied accusation. Hitchcock cuts on this action to show her from the back as her fingers tear the canvas. She turns, staring glassy-eyed at the camera and walks towards it as if in a trance. Alice wanders the streets of London until dawn. During her walk Hitchcock blends her traumatized consciousness with the urban environment, frequently intercutting shots of the artist's dead hand. As Alice views an electrical sign advertising Gordon's Gin that proclaims "White for Purity" and shows a moving cocktail shaker, it transforms into a hand stabbing with a knife. As dawn breaks, a close-up of the hand of a tramp sleeping on the sidewalk summons up the artist's hand again to the terrified Alice.

The painting of the jester haunts the remainder of the film, less as evidence in the investigation than as a sign of persistent guilt which moves between Alice and Frank her detective boyfriend. Assigned to investigate the artist's murder Frank notices the torn canvas, but finding

Alice's glove on the scene makes him realize she must have had a hand in the killing. As Frank conceals this incriminating evidence, Hitchcock cuts back to the painting, its accusatory gesture now pointing to him as well. Frank's action setting up the unsavory blackmailer as a primary suspect in the killing forges an ambiguous but strong bond between the couple whose union seemed precarious at the film's opening. Before the blackmailer plunges to his death from the dome of the British Museum he too makes the accusatory gesture, pointing his finger at Frank and telling the pursuing police, "Ask *him!* Why his own..." His accusation, like Alice's attempt at confession in the final scene, is interrupted.

The blackmailer's death during the police pursuit is intercut with Alice writing a confession, unwilling to have someone take the blame for her killing. But at police headquarters Frank keeps her from making a confession that now would help no one. As the film ends the couple try to join in the laughter provoked by the desk sergeant's sexist joke. But Alice's glance off-screen leads to her POV as the jester's pointing finger seems to loom out of nowhere. She is startled, but the following shot reveals that the painting being carried down a corridor by a police officer. The laughter continues hollowly as the film ends.

Enduring the pointed finger of accusation, like the stain of guilt, tests our human being, body and soul. In his dramas of guilt Hitchcock draws on both a Freudian understanding of repression and Catholic doctrines of Original Sin—discourses which both address our bodily being, albeit in seeming contradictory ways. Hitchcock explicitly returns to the theme of overcoming unconscious repression in his last great film *Marnie*. Both of the hand gestures I have dealt with in this essay recur in this film in ways that relate not only to the burden of guilt but to liberation from it.

Marnie is a thief and resists sex, her thievery and frigidity reactions to a repressed trauma of a childhood act of killing. Hitchcock signals the displaced affect of the repressed memory through Marnie's hysterical reaction to a stain of red on a field of white, evoking both the actual killing and the deflowering of a virgin (recall Alice's reaction to the advertisement "White for Purity" or the stained dress in *Stage Fright* (1950)). Flouting conventional psychoanalytical strictures, Marnie's husband Mark attempts to retrieve her traumatic memory. Resembling a detective as much as an analyst, he induces Marnie to participate in Jung's technique of free association. As Mark offers words increasingly swiftly, Marnie loses her cocky attitude and begins to show signs of panic. The word "water" evokes seemingly conventional associations, but ones in which the theme of purity and guilt lurk. "Sex", "Death", and "Black" increases her panic. When Mark suddenly exclaims "Red!" Marnie loses all her defenses proclaiming repeatedly, "White, white!" and collapses crying "Oh God someone please help me!" As eloquent as Jay Presson Allen's dialogue is at this point, I want to stress the visualization of Mark's gesture in medium close-up. As he exclaims "Red" Mark jabs his finger directly at off-screen Marnie. His gesture replicates the jester from *Blackmail* with its imputation of guilt.

However, rather than an unresolved haunting sense of guilt, Mark's gesture opens an uncomfortable process aimed less at assigning guilt than undoing its hold on its victim. Mark plausibly attributes Marnie's compulsive theft to her need for the love that her mother (also out of a sense of guilt) has withheld from her. Hitchcock translates this psychological need into symptom and a gesture: the need to steal displaces a desire to grasp love. Thus in the penultimate scene that leads to the film's denouement, Marnie opens the Rutland safe intending to steal cash before escaping from Mark and her marriage. But, after opening the safe with satisfaction, Marnie's hand becomes paralyzed as she tries to grasp the money—a gesture of impotence underscored by the camera repeatedly zooming in and out on the bundles of cash. Mark appears alongside her and tells her to take the money, that as his wife his cash is hers and she is not stealing. Marnie's hand remains frozen, her grasp unresponsive, even when Mark grabs her arm and tries to force her to take.

This failed grasp does not trigger a literal fall into the abyss. Rather it signals the inability of money to substitute for love, something already indicated by Marnie's repetitive pattern of theft and the failure of her gifts to elicit a loving response from her mother. The following scene where Mark and Marnie confront her mother causes the initial trauma to reemerge for her memory, revealing the primal stain and the truth of Marnie's "guilt." Marnie's final attempt to reconcile with her mother elicits the confession that she was the only thing her mother ever loved. But, as Marnie rests her head on her mother's lap, Mrs. Edwards' hand hovers above her daughter's head, not daring to touch or make contact, another suspended gesture.<sup>32</sup> Marnie is left with her husband, whose love she confesses, as the film ends, is better than going to jail—a bittersweet but oddly touching declaration which could have ended *Blackmail* as well.

Ending a discussion of the hand in Hitchcock is equally hard. Not only are there many more instances that could be discussed, there are many other registers of the haptic in these films, ranging from what McElhaney calls "the light grazing of the hand towards object or bodies" to the violent impact of punches and slaps.<sup>33</sup> Such an investigation becomes impossible to close down. Hitchcock's oeuvre wove together many motifs over his long career, which invite critics to trace not only meanings but intricate patterns of development. He remains perhaps the most bodily and the most enigmatic of film directors, enticing us as viewers to experience the mysteries of the gestures of his character and of his own style, and to speculate on their implications. We do so to the degree that we participate in his films—are drawn in and grasped by them.

32 McElhaney beautifully explores the dynamics of touch between Marnie and her mother, McElhaney 2006, pp. 130-134.

33 Ibid., p. 138.

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# The End of Cinema as We Used to Know It: Or How a Medium Turned From a Promising Graduate Into an Old Folk

Petra Kettl &  
Robert Pfaller

## Abstract:

Many of the features that characterized cinema's heroic period seem to have vanished today. This is, we claim, not due to technological development, but has to be explained by the fact that a couple of side-services provided by cinema have become superfluous due to changes in society. When there has been social progress, increasing economic equality, and upward social mobility, cinema provided people with aspirations and desires, and even with opportunities to fulfill some of them. However, a society of decline and depression does not have any demand for this. And whereas collective celebration at the movie theater allowed experiencing some extravagant behavior of the cinema idols as something sublime that could be at least "homeopathically" appropriated, today's profane isolated viewing leads spectators to despise the transgressive principal performers and to indulge in imaginations of their own innocence and superiority.

## Key words:

Side-functions of a medium, identification and love, disavowal, idols, gods and demons, upward and downward social mobility, exculpation and moral superiority.

*"I estimate that cinema will disappear around 2020."*  
Jean-Pierre Melville<sup>1</sup>

## 01 Who "killed" cinema?

Let us start with a simple observation: cinema has lost what appeared to be its life—i.e., its glamour, its ability to fascinate people, its popularity,<sup>2</sup> its influence, its hegemony amongst the media of popular culture, its ability to bring together members of different classes, as well as levels of "high" and "low" culture.

Cinema's death was proclaimed more than once<sup>3</sup>. It seems that every time a new technological mutation—the talking film, television, video tapes and recorders, DVD-players, streaming services, etc.—came out, somebody called for cinemas last rites. The last couple of times the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the documentary MELVILLE, LE DERNIER SAMOURAI by Cyril Leuthy, accessed 2020-03-24  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btk3FSbDGVg>

<sup>2</sup> The ticket sales in Germany sank between 2015 and 2018 by almost 30%. See <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/kino-dokumentarfilm-scala-adieu-1.4374478>

<sup>3</sup> For a brief summary on how often cinema after all has won its chess matches with death against all foretelling see for instance <https://www.indiewire.com/2012/10/sound-the-death-knell-again-a-brief-history-of-the-death-of-cinema-105354/> accessed 2020-03-29

calls have gotten louder and louder. For David Cronenberg,<sup>4</sup> “cinema is already dead” and according to Quentin Tarantino<sup>5</sup> “digital projection and DCPs<sup>6</sup> is the death of cinema” as he knows it. Peter Greenaway<sup>4</sup> even claimed that it received its death blow by the remote-control zapper on 31 September 1983 and therefore declared cinema as brain dead. Cinema seems to have slowly faded away over the last 20 to 30 years, with not only film scholars trying to find out why<sup>7</sup>.

Yet, as we know—not the least from cinema—not everyone who loses his life can be called dead. While some perish forever, some live on as undead, and some others may just start another life somewhere else. Cultural products “die” in manifold ways. The supersonic aircraft *Concorde*, for example, “died” due to developments that had nothing to do with innovations in airplane technology. While legendary civil airplanes such as the DC-3 ceded their place to more capable newer planes,<sup>8</sup> the *Concorde* was stopped by something completely different. It died not due to limits of its own capacity, but due to changes in external factors that abolished the need for this very capacity. The invention of the internet and the laptop made it unnecessary for CEOs, the usual *Concorde* passengers, to cross the Atlantic faster than the speed of a normal passenger plane. Different media of communication made the need for the fastest means of civil passenger transportation superfluous. The same, we claim, happened to cinema. Some external factors abolished the need for what cinema had hitherto provided.

Yet, as we can observe, cinema, as opposed to the *Concorde*, did not disappear from the skies of culture. Just like the book—a medium whose death had been predicted a hundred times when television started its flight, continued to live under different circumstances and with different social functions—also cinema, having ceded some of its key features, lives on, now focusing on a couple of virtues different from its traditional ones. We would therefore suggest to speak of, instead of cinema’s “death”, rather cinema’s *destitution*. And we would like to roughly outline what made cinema cede its throne; as it were, what “destituted” cinema. Therefore, we first have to reconstruct briefly not only what used to make cinema strong, but in general where the strength of a medium, and the peak of its social impact, stems from.

4 <https://www.screendaily.com/news/cinema-is-already-dead-says-david-cronenberg-/5130906.article>  
accessed: 2020-02-23

5 <https://www.businessinsider.com/quentin-tarantino-declares-cinema-dead-2014-5?r=DE&IR=T>  
accessed: 2020-02-23

6 DCP stands for Digital Cinema Package.

7 A good overview can be found for instance in Gaudreault / Philippe 2015.

8 The DC-3 was replaced by aircrafts such as the Douglas DC-6 and the Lockheed Constellation; yet it continued to “live” in niches of military service up to our days.

## 02 What makes a medium strong

Many media blossom best and reach their peak when their apparent key function is assisted by some seemingly accidental, additional social side function. Many people can for example read books better when sitting somewhere in a public space: reading starts working well precisely when it has a chance to also fulfill its isolating function. And the car had its heroic era not only due to its role as a means of mass mobilization, but equally due to its side function as a medium of sexual self-determination. Many, especially young people in the 1950s and 60s who could not afford their own home or the agreement of their parents, had to make love in cars. Elaine Robinson, the heroine of the movie *THE GRADUATE* (USA 1967, M. Nichols), was, as we learn in the film, procreated around 1950 in the backseat of a Ford. Just the same function was shared with the car by cinema: people went to the pictures not only to watch a movie, but also to be together with someone in the dark.

This practice had its basis in a society where erotic interest blossomed, yet severe restrictions by “good manners” as well as the strict laws of familial monogamy put limits on fulfillment and caused people to search for loopholes. The glowing eroticism especially of the first decades after WWII left its trace in the movies of its era: in particular the music that accompanied the intros—just think of the significant opening tunes as well as the title sequences of the *JAMES BOND* movies and the *PINK PANTHER* series, or of movies like *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH* (USA 1955, B. Wilder), *PRUDENCE AND THE PILL* (GB 1968, F. Cook), and Mario Monicelli’s *CASANOVA 70* (IT 1965), with their charming motion graphics. They had to signal film’s erotic promise of happiness and announce that, at least on the level of fiction, or in the intimate space of the movie theater, a transgression of the predominant rules could be imagined.

Both the car and cinema had their most heroic epoch when they were charged with this erotic function. The peak of this shared feature was obviously the drive-in movie theater that could provide increased intimacy compared to the movie theater alone (or also the car alone). The most glamorous cars as well as the most brilliant movies date from these very decades. And both have lost their bliss at the same time, when they were no longer required for their erotic side-service. A society both more permissive and less erotically interested made those key functions for which mobility and love for movies may only have served as pretexts superfluous and deprived both media of their key source of attraction.

Marshall McLuhan’s clever remark “the medium is the message” has to be read in this sense: what a medium is cannot be understood unless one considers the entirety of the functions, even the funny ones, which it takes on under certain social conditions. The medium cinema, as we find it today, in 2020, is therefore not anymore the same medium as, let us say, in 1967, when *THE GRADUATE* came out.

### 03 Classic Cinema: A Creator of Adulthood

The medium of cinema had its heroic times roughly from the early years up to the last decade of the 20th century. The entirety of the social functions it fulfilled then can maybe be summed up by the formula: *cinema created adulthood*. Of course, also this general function was something that cinema shared with other cultural media and practices, such as smoking, sex, or driving cars. Yet the key role cinema had with this regard can today only be guessed, for example, by watching older movies. Young people had to fight and to pretend to be older in order to be allowed to enter a cinema. Movies had strict limitations of access according to age: some were accessible beyond 18, some beyond 16, etc. This has since changed dramatically. Not only are movies produced for a large audience today always made in such a way that even minors can watch them without harm (while only strictly X- or NC-17-rated movies remain restricted to people over 18<sup>9</sup>), also, society's understanding of adulthood has changed. The "death" of cinema can be explained by the "death" of adulthood.

### 04 The death of adulthood

As can be observed, for example in *THE GRADUATE*, young people in former decades rebelled against their parents will. They did so by attempting to do just the same things as their parents themselves used to do, but which they prohibited to their children: smoking, drinking alcohol, having sex, driving cars, etc. This has changed diametrically: over the years, we can observe a young generation that does either not rebel at all against their parents, or they do so in a very peculiar way. Youngsters do things different from what their parents actually are into, but they do what their parents find right to do: they do not smoke, drink alcohol, have sex, drive cars—or go to the movies. And whereas a while ago young people, despite doing the same "forbidden" things as their parents, were horrified by the idea of becoming like them, young people today, despite not doing the same things, apparently do not have a problem with becoming like them: when their parents give a party, the 17-year olds like to join them and dance amongst their parents' friends. For the "Graduate", Benjamin Braddock, having to attend a party of his parents and their friends, was ultimate torture.

### 05 Cinema of desire & aspiration

At an epoch where the movie theater allowed its visitors to enjoy an otherwise forbidden intimacy, the movies provided images of this intimacy's aim—by dealing with issues of erotic or sexual conquest. Thus

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.filmratings.com/Content/Downloads/rating\\_rules.pdf](https://www.filmratings.com/Content/Downloads/rating_rules.pdf) accessed: 2020-03-15

they schooled young people into feeling adult by conquering sexuality. And for grown-ups, the movies encouraged an aspiration of sexual liberation. *KISS ME, STUPID* by Billy Wilder (USA 1964), or *A GUIDE FOR THE MARRIED MAN* (USA 1967, G. Kelly) opened a perspective of escape from the "cage" of marriage—a desire that was at the time not alone that of male breadwinners, but as well of women, as we can learn from Barbara Ehrenreich's seminal book "The Hearts of Men".<sup>10</sup>

Michelangelo Antonioni's *DESERTO ROSSO* from 1964 shows how a few members of the wealthy bourgeoisie, when, on a walk in the woods, are forced to hide from the rain in a hut, proceed without much explanation to practice group sex. Not only with regard to sex, but also with regard to wealth, cinema gave people something to hope for. The movie heroines and heroes were meeting beautiful people, wearing elegant or fashionable clothes, inhabiting luxurious flats or houses, visiting glamorous restaurants and bars, driving fancy cars, and visiting attractive destinations. Cinema gave young people just as grown-ups something to look forward to. It fostered dreams, expectations, and optimism at a time when, due to social changes in Western societies, a richer sexual life just as a wealthier existence appeared to be imminent.

Cinema was at this time always "bigger than life". In cinema, young people looked up to and forward to being adults; and adults in the post-war decades looked up to and forward to becoming something wealthier (often the US-American way of life served for post-war Europeans as a model). One may feel reminded here of Sigmund Freud's remark,

"The sympathetic witnessing of a dramatic performance fulfills the same function for the adult as does play for the child, whose besetting hope of being able to do what the adult does, it gratifies."<sup>11</sup>

Cinema in its heroic epoch expressed and formed the feelings of a society of desire and aspiration. As can be observed in an exemplary way in *WILL SUCCESS SPOIL ROCK HUNTER?* (USA 1957, F. Tashlin) or in *GOOD NEIGHBOR SAM* (USA 1964, D. Swift), it provided an aspiring audience with images both of immediate improvement and of a remote utopia of wish fulfillment they might not without difficulty want or be able to live up to.

Slavoj Žižek's famous characterization of cinema as "the ultimate pervert art"<sup>12</sup>—since "It doesn't give you what you desire—it tells you how to desire"—relates, as we want to claim, to cinema's bygone heroic decades, as well as to its background, a society of desire and aspiration.

<sup>10</sup> See Ehrenreich 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Freud 1942, p. 303.

<sup>12</sup> Fiennes / Žižek 2006.

## 06 Dusk of divinity: when idols encourage mortal beings

In an epoch of social progress, cinema translated the ongoing change into people's lives. The movies' fiction had a visible impact upon the lived realities. Film aesthetics did not only provide aesthetic pleasure during the performance, but instead allowed people to experience—and to newly “design”—their own lives in many respects; ethical and political as much as aesthetic.<sup>13</sup> This broad influence exerted by cinema raises the question of the precise socio-psychological mechanism at work. In the following, we want to question the primacy often attributed to the notion of “identification” with regard to these issues and open up a few other psychoanalytic perspectives.

The aesthetic pleasure provided by cinema, and its impact upon its spectators, has often been explained by film theorists, just as by spectators themselves, through the psychoanalytic notion of “identification” (with the movie character).<sup>14</sup> The most basic formulation of this idea has been put forward by Gaut:

„[...] ordinary film viewers use the term more than any other to describe their experience. If they like a film, it is because they identify with one or more characters. If they don't like it, it is because they could not identify with any of the characters. For most spectators, films succeed or fail based on whether or not and to what extent they foster identification with characters.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet in order to explain the impact of cinema on its spectators, we have to question this explanation and strive for a better one. In the first place we doubt this explanation, since identification, in its Freudian understanding, describes a *real* process. If you identify with your father, for example, his superego really becomes your own.<sup>16</sup> Spectatorship, on the contrary, is a *playful* activity. As Octave Mannoni has brilliantly pointed out,<sup>17</sup> *spectators act*—together with the actors on stage or on screen—in secret alliance with them (“hands in glove”, as Mannoni writes); they maintain an illusion which is not their own. For example, when spectators burst out

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<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, not something new or typical for cinema alone: in 18th century, people started falling in love when they had read novels. As Niklas Luhman states, love is “coded intimacy” and thus always requires a formatting impact by art (see Luhmann 1996, p.37, p.142).

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Morin (1956) sees the spectator as shifting between “projection” and “identification”; Laura Mulvey (1975) explains visual pleasure as composed of “scopophilia” and a type of identification modelled after Lacan's concept of the “mirror stage”. Cf. Elsaesser /Hagener 2011, p. 52, p. 119. Cf. also Löw-Beer 2004, pp. 104-121. For a different approach that dismisses both the identification paradigm as well as Mulvey's pleasure-hostile strategy, see Friedlander 2008, pp. 49-68.

<sup>15</sup> Gaut 1999, p. 200 as cited in Coplan 2009, p. 101

<sup>16</sup> See Freud 1933, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> See Mannoni 2003, pp. 68-92.

in real tears, this happens due to their acting. Together with the actors they maintain a “naive observer's” belief that this is sad or heart-rending. The adequate psychoanalytic concept for such an acting that follows the script of somebody else's illusion is “counter-transference”.<sup>18</sup>

Otherwise the spectators' tears could not be explained. Let us take an example: somebody cannot hold back his tears when viewing the scene in *CASABLANCA* (USA 1942, M. Curtiz) in which the bar visitors sing the Marseillaise, to baffle the Nazi officers' attempt to sing a German song. This is maybe a heartrending, encouraging scene. But none of the characters in the movie (as, for example “Rick”, played by Humphrey Bogart) are moved to tears, nor would the spectator in his ordinary life easily start crying for such a reason. These tears are disconnected from the reality principle of both characters and spectators. The act of crying thus cannot be explained by *identification*. Instead, it has to be stated that a disconnection from reality has taken place, as it is typical for play and for transference. It is the special condition of play, and the spectators' *clear-sighted knowledge about it being “just” a play* (a consciousness that Freud even attributes to states of hypnosis!<sup>19</sup>) that allows for a higher affective engagement than ordinary life. Only such clear-sighted knowledge about play's illusion allows, as Johan Huizinga has pointed out, for the unique affective commitment—the “sacred seriousness”—proper to play.<sup>20</sup> Spectators do not cry because they mistake the staged illusion for reality—since in their “profane” reality they would not cry. Instead, the consciousness about the nature of play allows them to take on the attitude of “*I know quite well, but still...*”;<sup>21</sup> the only attitude that (in its “but still...” part) allows for a much higher affective decathexis than anything taken for reality can do. Only by this reconstruction one can account for what Aristotle regarded as theatre's “cathartic” function: that in theater, and confronted with what they regard as an illusion, people become able to decathect affects that they were not able to fully decathect in their real life.<sup>22</sup>

A second reason why the idea of an identification of the spectators with the movie characters has to be regarded as misleading lies in the fact that in cinema (unlike in theater), as Walter Benjamin has pointed out, the actors rather *play themselves* than anybody else.<sup>23</sup> This is why

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<sup>18</sup> See for this for example Signer 1997.

<sup>19</sup> See Freud 1921, p 116: “...that in hypnosis [...] some knowledge may have been retained that what is happening is only a game, an untrue reproduction of another situation of far more importance to life.”

<sup>20</sup> See Huizinga 1950; cf. Pfaller 2014, chapter 3.

<sup>21</sup> For this most useful formula see Mannoni 2003.

<sup>22</sup> See Aristotle *Poetics*; Bernays 1979. After all, this principle is what modern psychodrama works with.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin 1935, p. 229: “For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to

cinema creates *idols*. People are deeply impressed and venerate, not the characters, and not the actors alone, but the actors as movie stars that play these characters.<sup>24</sup> The “bigger than life” star is composed of the public figure of the actor (including public statements, appearances, gossip, scandals, etc.) plus the series of their most prominent roles in films: Marilyn Monroe is a fiction assembled of a number of public appearances plus her performances in *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH* (USA 1956, J. Logan), *GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES* (USA 1953, H. Hawks), *HOW TO MARRY A MILLIONAIRE* (USA 1953, J. Negulesco), *SOME LIKE IT HOT* (USA 1959, B. Wilder), *LET’S MAKE LOVE* (USA 1960, G. Cukor), etc. And Steve McQueen’s stardom is, amongst others, composed of flavors from *THE GETAWAY* (USA 1972, S. Peckinpah), *BULLITT* (USA 1968, P. Yates), *LE MANS* (USA 1971, L.H. Katzin), *THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR* (USA 1968, N. Jewison), etc.

This fictional persona of the star is a crucial factor within film business insofar as it strongly influences future castings. For example, it was a challenge for the notorious hero Henry Fonda to play, for the first time, a bad guy in Sergio Leone’s *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST* (IT/USA 1968).<sup>25</sup> The changing spirit of the times can be seen in the fact that Humphrey Bogart, albeit always more or less his same screen persona, was cast as a bad guy or tragic hero in the 1930s, but as a hard-boiled dark hero during and shortly after the war, and turned into a kind of ineducable social misfit again in the restorative 1950s (see, for example, *IN A LONELY PLACE* (USA 1950, N. Ray). In old Europe, Lino Ventura was probably right when explaining why he never worked for Hollywood by stating that he would find it ridiculous seeing himself sitting on a horse.

Whereas a theater actor is almost a kind of blank screen that can take on any role whatsoever, movie actors are moreso determinate components, always marked by their previous roles. For example, can one ever watch Viggo Mortensen playing Sigmund Freud in Cronenberg’s *A DANGEROUS METHOD* (USA 2011) without perceiving in his performance all those more or less psychopathic killers that he had played before, for example in Cronenberg’s *A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE* (USA/GER/CAN, 2005)? Or even *PASSION OF CHRIST* (USA 2004, M. Gibson), without being reminded of James Caviezel’s performance as private Witt, sacrificing himself for his company in Terence Malick’s *THE THIN RED LINE* (USA 1998)? And is it not significant that Judy Dench’s spying performance in *RED JOAN* (GB 2018, T. Nunn) cannot be

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the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else.”

<sup>24</sup> An important clarification for the practice of the theater actor has been made by Mannoni (1985) who states that the theater actor does not so much impersonate a character but rather an actor who plays this character. In the same line of argument, we would claim that the cinema actor does not so much play a character but rather himself who plays that character.

<sup>25</sup> For this problem, cf. Alfred Hitchcock’s opinion about “the problems we face with the star system. Very often the story line is jeopardized because a star cannot be a villain.” (Truffaut 1966, p 43.)

adequately deciphered without taking into account her previous famous appearances as James Bond’s “unflappable spy chief M.”<sup>26</sup>

The relationship crucial for the experience of cinema is therefore not to be found in the relation *spectator – character*, but instead in the relation *spectator – star* (or idol).<sup>27</sup> This relationship can take on manifold forms—not only identification, but certainly also love. It is not necessarily situated on the level of ego-libido, but can also dwell on that of object-libido. And it can well be neither of both.<sup>28</sup>

For, of course, the relationship with the star is only one of the psychoanalytically relevant factors that constitute cinema’s aesthetic pleasure. Other elements may be for example the relation between a movie’s scenes and the spectators’ fantasies, including their daydreams, reveries, “family novels”, etc.<sup>29</sup> Another key issue is the spectators’ relationship to the specific taste that a movie requires in order to be appreciated. Every movie, like every other artwork, suggests a specific taste to which the spectators or observers have to relate; this suggestion can be understood as a kind of interpellation in terms of taste.<sup>30</sup> Only in some cases does a movie simply meet the spectators’ preexisting taste. In most cases, on the contrary, the movie comes up with a new taste that offers itself to the existing taste as a desirable object of exchange, as it were. Spectators are lured to trade in the taste they bring to the cinema for the taste the movie offers them. As a condition, the former taste must appreciate the new taste as a kind of improvement. This acquisition of a new taste can probably be explained in psychoanalytic terms as an instance of identification. In identification one replaces the superego one has (or—as in case of the child—does not possess yet) by someone else’s superego, for example that of a parent. In the same way, it may be called an identification when one replaces the taste one has got (or does not have yet) by someone else’s taste. Liking a movie means therefore not so much to find oneself able to *identify with one of the characters* (as in Gaut’s cited formula) but rather *to identify with its taste*. The pleasure with an artwork is therefore a complicated result. It does not just mean to like the work (by means of one’s taste). Rather it means to like, in the first place, the very taste that allows one to like, in a second step, the artwork. It is as if one would learn a language by the first sentences in

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<sup>26</sup> See <https://apnews.com/dcf6fccb9a1241ce9d1ac97ff2bb65f9> accessed: 2020-04-08

<sup>27</sup> Story goes that Cecil B. DeMille, when casting actors for the role of Jesus for his movie *THE KING OF KINGS* (USA 1927), was particularly careful to find an actor of immaculate reputation – apparently not too simple a task in Hollywood at the time. And it is said that his first choice got caught in a love trap, set up to blackmail DeMille with photographs of his Jesus in compromising situations.

<sup>28</sup> For cinematic libidinal relations that lie before the splitting between ego-libido and object-libido, see Hofstadler 2019.

<sup>29</sup> See Cowie 2007, pp. 356-369.

<sup>30</sup> See Pfaller 2012.

that language that one hears and understand them at the same time.

The relationship between the spectators and the stars however is not only one of the factors that contribute to their aesthetic experience within the movie theater, but also exerts an impact outside; in their everyday life. This is where we want to situate the specific importance of cinema for Western societies in the first decades after WWII. *In cinema's heroic epoch, people shaped their lives according to models they had found in cinema, especially with its stars.* Woody Allen's *PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM* from 1972 shows a lovely and funny depiction of this process, when "Allen" (played by Woody Allen), fascinated by Humphrey Bogart, attempts to design his own life according to what he regards as Bogart principles (or advice). Slavoj Žižek has provided a fine analysis of this process in which Allen proceeds from "imaginary" identification (trying to imitate Bogart's behavior) to "symbolic" identification (taking on an analogous role to Bogart's in the socio-symbolic network).<sup>31</sup> When, instead of imitating Bogart, Allen finally starts "being himself", he does so, Žižek argues, precisely because this is how he can come closest to Bogart.<sup>32</sup> One could generally say that imitating somebody can lead one to the cognition that the imitated person would never imitate anyone else, and thus to imitating precisely that very feature of not imitating anyone. Such a dialectic is certainly a source of comicality in itself. Another particular comical element in Woody Allen's depiction of a cinema-life-relation certainly stems from the fact that Bogart's wartime attitude was perceived as utterly anachronistic at a time when the Hippies' love and peace-mood became hegemonic.

Yet again, we want to argue, that identification is not the only mechanism by which such a cinematic impact on people's lives is exerted. The star can take on a number of different functions in people's imaginary that shapes their real lives; even up to that of the *doublegaenger*, as an agent of "uncastrated" enjoyment who always rushes in where people themselves fear to tread {which can also sometimes be seen in Allen's relationship with Bogart—just as in that of Edward Norton with Brad Pitt in Fincher's *FIGHT CLUB*, (USA 1999)}.<sup>33</sup>

The relationship between the products of cinema and people's real lives can also take on the form of *love*. People also love movie stars. Thus cinema would create what Freud calls a "group" where ordinary members, i.e., the spectators, are linked together by identification, whereas their relationship to the leader, i.e., the star, is a relation of

31 One could describe this process maybe also as follows: While in the beginning Allen puts Bogart's presumed ego into the position of his (ideal) ego, in the end he puts Bogart's ego-ideal (or superego) into the position of his own ego-ideal (superego). One could call the imaginary identification also an "ego-identification", and the symbolic identification a "superego-identification". The former is an identification with an image, the latter an identification with a point of view.

32 See Žižek 1989, p. 109f.

33 See Freud's elaboration on the figure of the *doublegaenger* in his study on the "Uncanny" (1919)

love.<sup>34</sup> In love, as Freud states, people put the object into the place of their ego-ideal (the superego). Love is a case of "replacement of the ego-ideal" (*Ichidealersetzung*).<sup>35</sup> What replaces the loving person's ego-ideal is the object—or, more precisely, the object's ego. Thus they no longer follow their own judgments, but instead the wishes of the beloved leader. One can thus follow the leader; yet imitating him is immediately ridiculed by the other group members, as Freud remarks.<sup>36</sup>

The structure of love for the stars seems to allow most for an explanation for the fact that, under the influence of cinema, people started changing their lives in the post-war decades. After all, this was, as Gilles Deleuze has pointed out, the epoch when the model of Foucauldian "disciplinary society" slowly came to its end,<sup>37</sup> and members of Western societies started replacing their disciplined superegotic standards by some more mild and liberal ones that they appropriated from mass media. People referred to their admired movie icons not by doing *the same things*; but they started to replace some of their own ethical, aesthetic, and maybe even political principles by the lifestyle of the stars; and they set out to do *similar things* to what the stars did, albeit *on a smaller scale*. One could maybe call this a kind of modest, "homoeopathic appropriation". Models for non-monogamous lives (or moments) for example were learned from, films and the movie stars<sup>38</sup>—just think of Pietro Germi's *DIVORZIO ALL'ITALIANA* (IT 1961), Francois Truffaut's *JULES ET JIM* (FR 1962), Michael Gordon's *BOYS' NIGHT OUT* (USA 1962), Robert E. Miller's *ANY WEDNESDAY* (USA 1966), Gene Kelly's *A GUIDE FOR THE MARRIED MAN* (USA 1967), Paul Mazursky's *BOB & CAROL & TED & ALICE* (USA 1969) or Stephanie Rothman's *GROUP MARRIAGE* (USA 1973).<sup>39</sup> A certain polygamous touch had already characterized comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, such as *LIBELED LADY* (USA 1936, J. Conway), *HIS FAVORITE WIFE* (USA 1940, G. Kanin), *I LOVE YOU AGAIN* (USA 1940, W.S. Van Dyke), *DESIGN FOR LIVING* (USA 1933, E. Lubitsch), or *TO BE OR NOT TO BE* (USA 1942, E. Lubitsch).<sup>40</sup>

34 Cf. Freud 1921, p. 116.

35 The difference between "*Ichidealersetzung*" (love) and identification is that in identification one replaces one's own superego by that of someone else; whereas in "*Ichidealersetzung*" (love) one replaces one's superego by the ego of someone else. Instead of doing what the other finds right (as in identification), in love one does what the other likes.

36 See Freud 1921, p. 134.

37 See Deleuze 1992; cf. Foucault 1979.

38 From the stars—or from what, in the public opinion, they embodied (even if the actors themselves often had very different, sometimes most decent lives).

39 For the political controversies around the issue of sexuality in post-war Germany and the role of cinema see Steinbacher 2011.

40 See Pfaller 2014a.

The religious background in the notion of the *idol* is here maybe not without relevance. A kind of divine force entered, through the window of cinema, into people's profane lives and changed them. What people might not have dared to do or to wish following their own standards, they at least started considering under the influence of their idols. Replacing their superego by their beloved idols allowed people to free themselves from feelings of guilt. This is precisely the social function that, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, the Gods had fulfilled in Ancient Greek culture:

'For the longest period of their history, the Greeks used their gods for no other purpose than to keep "bad conscience" at bay, to be able to enjoy the freedom of their soul: thus, in a sense diametrically opposed to that in which Christianity has made use of its God.'<sup>41</sup>

What people reproached themselves for in ancient Greece was, mostly,

"'foolishness', 'lack of judgement', a little 'rush of blood to the head' – the Greeks of the strongest, boldest period have themselves *admitted* as much as the reason for a great deal of what is bad and disastrous—foolishness, *not* sin! ... But even this rush of blood to the head posed a problem—'Yes, how is it possible? What might actually cause it in the case of heads such as *ours*, as men of noble origin, of good fortune, we men of good constitution, of the best society, of nobility, of virtue?' For centuries the refined Greek asked himself such questions when confronted with an incomprehensible atrocity and wanton crime with which one of his own had tainted himself. 'A *god* must have beguiled him', he said to himself finally, shaking his head ... This expedient is *typical* of the Greeks ... thus the gods at that time served to justify man even to a certain extent in wicked actions, they served as the cause of evil—at that time they did not take upon themselves the execution of punishment, but rather, as is *nobler*, the guilt ...'<sup>42</sup>

Admiration for movie idols may have allowed Western societies in the postwar period to start tolerating some foolish behavior in real life, by interpreting it as "beguiled" by, for example, some "film diva". When people had hopes and aspirations, they delighted in looking up to something they regarded as higher, yet less strict with regard to moral standards. Just as ancient religions, also cinema provided people with agencies "bigger than life" that ranked higher than their spectators, but at the same time exculpated them for abandoning their hitherto respected standards. In a society of economic growth and increasing equality,

.....  
41 Nietzsche 1887, p. 74

42 Ibid.

people started striving for a brighter future, by letting themselves get inspired by their venerated movie stars.

In order for this to become possible, it may not be without relevance that stars were watched *collectively*, in what can be called a *ceremonial act* of visiting a cinema. This collective celebration is what idols need in order to be perceived as divine forces. The ancient Gods that are not celebrated anymore, return—as Sigmund Freud explains with reference to Heinrich Heine's novel "Gods in Exile"<sup>43</sup>—in the shape of demons. Divine (or divinely inspired) behavior can appear, when celebrated by a group, glamorous, while in the profane perception of a single person it may appear appalling. This may explain a significant difference in how cinema visitors used to relate to the stars from the way today's isolated media consumers perceive the celebrities they deal with (we will come back to this point later). This can be compared to the way differently kitschy or "campy" issues appear according to how they are received. When for example, a group of people with excellent taste decides to celebrate a party including a viewing of "Eurovision Song Contest", this can become a sublime experience. Any individual of this group, when alone at home, on the contrary, might be disgusted and switch the TV off.

### 07 Death of desire & growth

The fact that these hopes and expectations have been lost is, we want to claim, one of the main reasons for cinema's destitution. Rich Western societies have become what German sociologist Oliver Nachtwey has aptly called "societies of decline" ("Abstiegsgesellschaft").<sup>44</sup>

For about three decades, large parts of Western societies have undergone loss of income and of social status. Even members of the upper middle class have started fearing that their children may not be able to afford the apartment they are living in; or that they themselves may not be able to afford the same kind of car in the future. Even those who have not undergone economic losses, have lost the hope, typical of the early post-war decades, that the future will bring something better to them or to their children. The idea of social advancement, once a kind of obvious assumption for most people, has become so strange that "climbers" appear today as a category of typical sociopaths in TV-series.<sup>45</sup>

As economists like Thomas Piketty and Branko Milanovich have demonstrated,<sup>46</sup> inequality in Western societies has been dramatically rising again since the 1980s. Therefore, for the majority of people (and

.....  
43 See Freud 1919, p. 235

44 See Nachtwey 2016.

45 See Kotsko 2012

46 See Piketty 2014; Milanovich 2016

moviegoers) in Western society, there are good reasons for no longer expecting great things from their future. Yet what counts even more with regard to cinema is the fact that hope has also vanished from the social imaginary. These two things do not always come together: for example, at the time of the Spanish Civil War, with fascism dominating almost all over Europe, many people's real conditions certainly got worse. But at the same time people produced courageous hopes—as can be heard, for example in the songs of the International Brigades.<sup>47</sup> An anecdote from occupied France may illustrate this relationship in a nutshell: a French resistance fighter, when captured by the Gestapo officers, allegedly said to them, “Until today I have lived in fear. From today on, I will live in hope.”<sup>48</sup>

As the philosopher Louis Althusser has pointed out, ideology is a “double relationship”: the “overdetermined unity” of people's real relationship and their imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence.<sup>49</sup> For cinema, we want to argue, the second relationship is the crucial factor. Not only when things are getting bad, but in particular when people imagine that things are getting bad for them, a cinema of desire and aspiration loses its backing. Cinema can well contribute to creating desire and aspirations, but when the entirety of them gets lost in the predominant ideology, cinema finds itself unable to restore them.

Many observers have noted that the social imaginary, or the predominant ideology, has substantially changed in Western societies since the 1980s. Sociologist Alain Ehrenberg has, in his book “The Weariness of the Self”,<sup>50</sup> provided a perspicuous account of this development. Earlier decades, Ehrenberg argues, were marked by “repression” (in the psychoanalytic sense): people wanted many things, but society's strict rules put limits upon them. The subsequent crisis was a crisis of “being allowed to”. Today's society, on the contrary, is a society of “depression”. Society has become permissive in many respects and allows for a couple of hitherto prohibited or accursed things, but people find themselves unable to desire them.<sup>51</sup> The subsequent crisis is a crisis of longing—the typical problem of melancholia, fatigue, and depression.

When people have stopped longing for things they felt not allowed to do, but instead find themselves unable to desire, cinema has got bad

47 See for this for example Wolf Biermann's (1975) Songs on the Album: *Es gibt ein Leben vor dem Tod*.

48 Source unknown. For a similar stance see the quote of UK's Special Operations Executive (SOE) agent Odette Sansom (Kramer 1995, p. 107): “We were starting on this journey together in fear, but all of us hoping for something...”

49 See Althusser 1986, p 240.

50 See Ehrenberg 2010

51 This finding by Ehrenberg corresponds with the famous thesis formulated by philosopher Günther Anders already in 1979: that we belong to an age in which not the goods, but instead the *needs and desires have become scarce*—this is why they have to be produced on an industrial level (see Anders 1988, vol. 2, p. 15f.).

cards. Of course, in its clear-sighted moments, it can reflect about this crisis {as, for instance, a couple of films did with the “sexual crisis” around 2000;<sup>52</sup> or as more recently the movie *THE JOKER* (USA 2019, T. Phillips) did with the general mood in contemporary society}. Yet, as we have tried to show, these reflections can only reach that small part of cinema's public that has remained after people's key reasons for going to a movie theater or a drive-in cinema have fallen away.

## 08 Where cinema goes when we stop going there

Cinema may appear at death's door, but the bastion of the arthouse cinema is kept alive by nostalgics, cinephiles, and high-brow audiences. They still celebrate the art of cinema on the big screen and enjoy the red velvet seats for various reasons—may it be true love for the moving pictures or the cultivation of symbolic capital. Repertory cinema seems to be the last shelter that keeps cinema's admirers from having to deal with today's audiences: they don't switch off mobile phones, they keep chattering during the movie, and they rustle with their crisps wrapping. And without filmic adaptations of popular (teenage) literature, comic superhero franchise, prequels, sequels, and remakes, there wouldn't be much left in movie theatres aside from auteur and indie cinema. What happened to cinema as a once public sphere, a particular collective experience and magic place would be worth a separate investigation.<sup>53</sup>

The devastation of cinema as a social institution appears mirrored by what is screened there these days: dystopias. Pictures like *THE ZERO THEOREM* (GB/RU 2013, T. Gilliam), *THE PURGE* franchise (USA 2013–2018), *ELYSIUM* (USA 2013, N. Blomkamp), the unfinished *DIVERGENT* Series (USA 2014–2016) or the *HUNGER GAMES* Series (USA 2012–2015) show us a future that is hardly worth longing for, and makes our present appear as not so bad. Remarkable is, that for some reason those movies mostly end happily for the main characters. Those filmic dystopias show our feeling towards the future: once we lived in hope, today we live in fear. The future is a threat.

Yet, the question remains: what is the present? And what is today's people's pleasure in imagining such an unpleasant future? For, as always, movies that play in a remote future or in a remote past are most telling— not about the remote times they depict, but about the present time in which they are made. In this sense, these movies function like “imagination”, Spinoza's first “genre of knowledge”—revealing little

52 See, for example: *INTIMACY* (INTIMITE, FR/GB/GER/ESP 2001, P. Chéreau), *ROMANCE XXX* (FR 1999, C. Breillat), *UNE LIAISON PORNOGRAPHIQUE* (FR/LUX/SUI/BEL 1999, F. Fonteyne), *LE PORNOGRAPHE* (FR 2001, B. Bonello).

53 A hint to what happened could be given here with Guiseppe Tornatore's declaration of love to the moving pictures *NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO* (IT/FR, 1988), where the in the end dilapidated cinema is razed to the ground for a parking lot.

about the knowledge's object, but a lot about its subject.<sup>54</sup> The wish-fulfillment these dystopian futures provide for the present appears to lie, in the first place, in the fact that at least they do not stress their spectators with demanding them to hope for something. Whereas movies from the postwar period encouraged spectators with hope, these contemporary products relax their hopeless audience from this effort. And in the second place, a future that is worse than the present allows the present time to appear attractive to itself. In this sense the psychoanalytical function of the (sci-fi) dystopia is precisely that of an *ego-ideal*: it provides a viewpoint from which contemporary people can regard their condition as something loveable—a view that they would not have otherwise; certainly not from their own position.

Not containing any promise of happiness for the future, the dystopian movies do not deliver much erotic or sexual content either. So there is not much necessity to subject these movies to any age restrictions or to use a kind of metaphoric language. The cinema after WWII, on the contrary, was subjected to restrictions as well as the people of those times, and filmmakers had to find loopholes to bypass technical limitations or censorship (for instance the so-called Hays Code). For example, think of the iconic scene in *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* (USA 1959), when the phallic train enters the tunnel—a scene that Hitchcock declared to be probably the most “impudent”<sup>55</sup> one he had ever done. Could one image a movie stuffed with sexual innuendo and lustful play between men and women like Federico Fellini's *LA CITTA DELLE DONNE* from 1980 being made today? Probably not, although one could actually read it as an ingenious picture about emancipation, worshiping women of all ages, sizes, sexual preferences, and professions. The problems that are on women's minds are portrayed in a humorous way, and due to their solidary cooperation, Marcello finally learns his lesson in the end. Back in the old times sex in movies used to be somehow easier and without significant problems (and if there were some, they were solved in a comical way). And for a long time, no one could have ever imagined that the typical ritual ending of suggested lovemaking in James Bond movies would once disappear. Today, apparently, lovemaking is not any more an issue that can be perceived as an image of final happiness by everybody.

But is sex in movies disappearing after all? No, there is still some of it, for instance in *ELLE* (FR/GER 2016, P. Verhoeven) or in the praised-by-critics movie *LOVE* (FR/BEL 2015, G. Noé). Yet the sexual activities there are often explicit, problematic, and/or repugnant and probably not something one would usually dream of. And then there are the *50 SHADES OF GREY* (USA 2015–2018) series, where BDSM-inspired sex happens

54 See Spinoza 1955, p. 192: “For imagination is an idea which indicates rather the present disposition of the human body than the nature of the external body; not indeed distinctly, but confusedly.”; cf. *ibid.* p. 111; p. 108f.

55 Truffaut 1966, p. 150

in a sterile and clinical appearing surrounding where every detail is negotiated and fixed in advance by contract<sup>56</sup> (including when to shower and how to get rid of body hair).

Of course, contracts play an important role in masochist relationships.<sup>57</sup> Yet *50 SHADES* does not really appear as dealing with such an odd thing. Instead, it has rather to be read as a grotesque depiction of the usual and traditional heterosexual deal, seen under a contemporary, “sex-negative” perspective: the “sexual-economic exchange”, in the terms of feminist theorist Paola Tabet,<sup>58</sup> where women, for sexual favors, trade in wealth, status, elegance, and security. “*50 Shades*” does not, as Eva Illouz argues,<sup>59</sup> present a feasible erotic solution for the “structural instability” of the contemporary heterosexual couple. Instead it attempts a contemporary solution for presenting a romantic love story in cinema: By “modernizing” its sexual part and presenting a kind of state-of-the-art “neosexual”<sup>60</sup> awareness, while at the same time “post-sexually” demonizing this part, *50 SHADES* can indulge in the otherwise kitschy romantic fantasy of Prince Charming who, by some mysterious powers, can make the heroine happy. *50 SHADES* ends with Christian fully committing to Ana, being happily married and a father. Sexual freedom and social upward mobility are miraculously reconciled with family life as a guarantee for social and economic stability. Instead of making their own sex life hum again by bureaucracy, fans of the Series bought plenty of *50 SHADES* merchandise from shower gel and fabric softeners up to feathers and leather straps labelled *50 SHADES*, just to name a view. This is another version of cinema as the ultimate “pervert art”, as Žižek calls it.

If you want to see sex portrayed in a less troubled way nowadays, you probably have to turn your back on cinema and start watching series like *MAD MEN* (USA 2007–2015). In the exciting setting of an advertising agency in the 60s, people smoke and drink without inhibition in their offices and beyond, the clothes are elegant, the pill is available, and the colleagues cultivate their little hanky-pankies among each other. For Kotsko<sup>61</sup>, the main reason why *MAD MEN* is so popular might not be its

56 This reminds us of Slavoj Žižek's remarks on how to overcome sexual impotence: “He [a sex adviser] told me one way to do it is to tell them to imitate a purely externalized bureaucratic procedure. Like, you want to make love, okay, sit down with your partner and make a Stalinist plan.” <https://thebaffler.com/latest/zizek-on-seduction>, accessed 2020-03-31

57 This has been emphasized by Gilles Deleuze (1991) in his study on Sacher-Masoch.

58 See Tabet 2012, <http://books.openedition.org/iheid/6338>, accessed 2020-03-29

59 See Illouz 2013. Illouz is still right in stating that a popular work like “*50 Shades*” must tell something not only about a sexual minority but instead about some basic, “asymmetrical” features of contemporary heterosexual relationships: for example, the man being older, more experienced than the woman; reluctant to enter a steady relationship, while she immediately thinks of marriage, etc.

60 For this term see Sigusch 2005.

61 See Kotsko 2012, p. 2, p. 97

minutest details in production design,<sup>62</sup> but Don Draper's and Peggy Olson's sociopathic traits. It is the "combination of evil behavior and upward social mobility..."<sup>63</sup>. The contemporary fantasy sociopath of the category of the climber, where Draper and Olson belong to, is so appealing and serves identification because we wish to be like them, to be capable of their social mastery, their willingness to take risks, their being in control of their actions, their ability to create and follow long-term plans with clear and reasonable goals to fulfill their own ambitions.

But there is another thing that makes *MAD MEN* so pleasing: the mode of nostalgia, or more precisely to dream of a time when people still dreamed of something that might be fulfilled one day. This seems to be the structure of the general nostalgic mood in contemporary society, massively exploited, for example by the car industry, that provided us in the last decades with a number of remakes of models from car's heroic times, such as the Mini, the Fiat 500, the Volkswagen Beetle, and also the Ford GT40. What people dream of is a past that still had a future to dream of.

In disguise of "historic lifestyle", in *MAD MEN* two things are brought together: on the one hand upward social mobility, appeal and glam of the 1960s and on the other hand today's mantra of uncompromising self-centeredness where everyone is the architect of their own future. This seems to provide a utopia in particular for the depressives who, like all narcissists, highly depend on the appreciation of others. For them the appealing idea is, as Kotsko puts it: "What if I really and truly did not give a fuck about anyone?"<sup>64</sup> Yet it is completely clear for today's spectators that the upward social mobility, the glam, the light-hearted and cheerful sexual activity in *MAD MEN* is lost. The nostalgic mood seems to, at the same time, *create* and *disavow* the belief that everything was better in the past<sup>65</sup>. By largely indulging in what is presented as the past's advantages but disavowing and denouncing them as pertaining to an unemancipated and unenlightened bygone past, it makes all those amoral, ruthless, patriarchal, and unhealthy behaviors consumable and prevents them from being unwatchable for some kind of spectators. Following the double operation of disavowal, pleasure can today apparently only be imagined of as a "sinful" uncastrated enjoyment, and for this to become digestible

62 The same environment of an advertising agency in its historical cinematic appearance can be observed and nicely compared to *MAD MEN* in *GOOD NEIGHBOR SAM*.

63 Kotsko 2012, p. 47

64 Kotsko 2012, p. 4.

65 Not only Series operate with nostalgia. Hollywood relies on the audience's nostalgic feelings for instance in *Star Wars*, the filmic adaption of well-known Comics or other remakes and sequels, like for instance, *BLADE RUNNER 2049* (USA 2017, D. Villeneuve), *BEN HUR* (USA 2016, T. Bekmambetov), Gus van Sant's remake of *PSYCHO* (USA 1998), or the remakes of classic Westerns like *THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN* (USA 2016, A. Fuqua) or *3:10 TO YUMA* (USA 2007, J. Mangold) by bringing well-liked material and the darlings of the audience back to screen.

for castrated spectators, it has to be located in the place of some other—preferably a bygone other from the past.

People who have largely stopped going to the pictures today indulge in what can probably be seen as the most important part of cinema's afterlives: series and streaming platforms. Technical innovation appears here to meet the needs of two kinds of newly emerged spectators in the age of downward social mobility and crisis of longing: the ascetic and the depressed spectator.

The depressed spectator, barely able to deal with basic tasks of everyday life, is for some curious reasons still able to watch series. Due to the internet and streaming platforms, they can watch one season after the other without having to wait for next week's episode, as it used to be in the era of television. The inability to wait, and to experience this waiting with excited expectation, with Freudian "fore-pleasure"<sup>66</sup>, may indicate an incapacity to desire. The depressive spectator wants to desire but is not able to. The practice of binge watching can be regarded as an answer to this problem, driven by the desperate wish to gain back desire. The pulling force of the series' narrative, and the availability of the next episode, may allow a stalled libido to attach and get into motion again. Yet at the same time binge watching fulfills another need. Wasting huge amounts of the spectator's time and sleep, it is also a punishment. This may be seen as the key reason of the astonishing attractiveness of series for depressive spectators: it satisfies their need for punishment and thus relieves them temporarily of the pressure exerted by their merciless superegos. For the depressive spectator, binge watching has the same function as Freud discovered that gambling addiction had for Dostoevsky: "For him gambling was a method of self-punishment as well."<sup>67</sup> This overdetermination of reward and punishment, or of defense and breakthrough of what is to be fended off, is typical for obsessional neurosis as well as for addiction. Thus, the initial stalling of desire gets reestablished again. Some binge watchers are even unable to cope with the abundance of choices they find on their streaming platforms. The only way they can fulfill their need to watch series is to step back in time and watch series they love and know over and over again, a phenomenon that is called comfort binge.

Then there are the ascetic viewers. They watch Series like *MAD MEN* with a mixture of disgust and moral superiority—an ego-libidinal cathexis that allows them to derive enjoyment from indignation. The more disgusted they can act, the morally better they feel. The break that separates them from the imagined past appears unbridgeable: there is no drinking or smoking in offices today, quite often you have to clock out for a cigarette, and to behave like the staff of Sterling Cooper today would

66 Cf. Freud 1905, p. 208

67 Freud 1928, p. 191

be unthinkable and inappropriate. MAD MEN'S audience can look at that decade with an incredulous fascination, wondering and shaking heads about all those things that were possible during that time, considering today and their own convictions as far more sensible and enlightened.

Yet don't they use their asceticism to defend themselves from their own hidden phantasies they might find triggered or fulfilled in one or another episode? In secret, isn't it fantastic that Don is immoral, lies to, cheats on his wife, and steals somebody's identity to flee from his own past? And there's probably something similar at stake in talk shows and reality-TV like BIG BROTHER, THE BACHELOR(-ETTE), or I'M A CELEBRITY ...GET ME OUT OF HERE! B-celebrities are despised by the audience because of their distasteful, shameless behavior, lowering themselves to bug-eating freakshow-attractions on TV. Those celebrities take the position of the black sheep voluntarily, while spectators can bath themselves in purity and innocence.

Yet there is of course something dubious about this morality that needs a sinner in order to establish a saint. Whereas a true saint is happy with his or her purity or saintliness, independently of other people's mistakes, postmodern moralists always "reactively" require the existence or presence of sinful mortals.<sup>68</sup> The key to MAD MEN'S success is that the ascetic spectators need the enjoyment of the other in order to enjoy its absence for themselves. Don Draper's role or the role of B-celebrities in the jungle or a container is therefore similar to the role of the criminal in Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov. In a famous scene of the novel, the Elder Zossima, having learned about Dimitri's readiness to commit parricide, bows down at Dimitri's feet. Sigmund Freud explains this with precision:

"A criminal is to him almost a Redeemer, who has taken on himself the guilt which must else have been borne by others. There is no longer any need for one to murder, since *he* has already murdered; and one must be grateful to him, for, except for him, one would have been obliged oneself to murder."<sup>69</sup>

Draper, just as the stars of "reality-TV", takes the place of the redeemer, taking the blame for filthy desires that the spectators otherwise would have had to carry themselves. Yet, as a difference to the saintly Zossima,

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68 Their ascetism is, as Slavoj Žižek (2002, p. 156) has pointed out with reference to Nietzsche, secretly grounded in envy. This envy's aggression appears then transformed, as it is typical for *ressentiment*, into the claim for moral superiority.

69 Freud 1928, p. 190. Freud's own attempt to explain this relationship by the concepts of "identification" and "displaced narcissism" is misleading. The object's crucial feature is not shared or appropriated, as in identification; and the other person is not loved, as in "displaced narcissism", or love. See Pfaller 2017.

today's postmodern ascetics show no gratefulness to their transgressive avatars. The idea that they may owe their felt morality to the displayed misconduct of others is here repressed. Although they have to watch, they believe that they don't have to desire, but can stay pure and maintain the picture of themselves as utterly good people. With abhorrence and satisfaction, the ascetic in his post-cinema-consumption assures himself: "Thanks God I am not such a dirty low-life."<sup>70</sup>

While in the era of social improvement and aspiration, people related to the movie stars and to its characters with desire, love, and attempts of homoeopathic appropriation, today, in a society of decline, cinema's afterlife provides people with imaginary self-elevation by debasement of the other, based on the repression of their own desire.

By this condition, one may be reminded of Aristotle's remark about tragedy displaying better (i.e., socially higher-ranking) people than the spectators, while comedy presents characters lower than those who observe them. Today's condition presents a paradoxical twist to this rule: in the heroic decades of cinema, however funny the movies were, people yet looked up to characters and stars with admiration and love and attempted to gain some of their bliss for their own lives. In our epoch of cinema's destitution, on the contrary, however sad the scenes on the (film-, TV- or computer-) screen may be, people look down upon stars and characters with contempt and thrive on their imagined difference from them. While earlier generations let themselves be exculpated for audacious behavior by their venerated idols, contemporary people create their abstinence and imaginary innocence by means of their despised medial black sheep.

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70 For a further elaboration on this typically postmodern relation see Pfaller 2011, pp. 51-59.

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# In Defense of Happy Endings, or, Where Lies the Trap of Never-Ending Stories

Jela Krečič

**Abstract:** The prevailing form in popular culture has for some time been TV-series. The question is why, at a certain historical moment, we are witnessing works of fiction that renounce their own ending. In this context, one has to take a closer look at film as the narrative with a closure, and especially at the Hollywood happy endings. This production standard was never respected as it was considered artificial, unrealistic, and ideological. However, one can argue that happy endings are more ambiguous and have far more interesting implications. Serial logic, on the other hand, has crept into all the pores of contemporary popular culture: it is imposed on the film industry with franchises and it dictates consumption of video content today, known as binge-watching; especially with the rise of streaming services such as Netflix. This new attitude toward fictional ending demands also an analysis of the current political context which is characterized by the end of endings.

**Keywords:** TV-series, happy end, the end of endings, Netflix, *Casablanca*, *Game of Thrones*, *Handmaid's Tale*

It seems obvious that we live in an age of series. We call them TV-series although the mode of producing, distributing, and watching them has far less to do with television than with the so-called digital revolution. However, what is really interesting about this dominating cultural form is its logic of endlessly prolonged narrative; of limitless continuation.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it seems the logic of series is not bound only to popular culture and entertainment business but goes hand in hand with our current political predicament.

One of Gérard Wajcman's latest works, *Les séries, le monde, la crise, les femmes*, suggests just that. He recognizes TV-series as a new form of narration in this century; a form intrinsically linked to political and social symptoms of our era: he exposes the connection between the laws of serial narrative and global political changes in our century.

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 inaugurated a permanent crisis (state of exception, more rigorous state control, the war against terrorism and new permanent wars) that spread from the United States to the entire world.<sup>2</sup> Series in the 21st century are often dedicated to crises and catastrophes which can happen anywhere. The crisis is serial, so we cannot be surprised that crisis becomes the predominant subject of

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<sup>1</sup> When speaking of TV-series today one is tempted to recall an old joke about socialism as the synthesis of the highest achievements of the whole human history to date: from prehistoric societies it took primitivism; from the Ancient world it took slavery; from medieval society brutal domination; from capitalism exploitation; and from socialism the name. If we proclaim TV-series to be the highest achievement of the entertainment industry to date, we could paraphrase the joke in this way; from feuilleton TV-series took the continuous form; from movies they took all the creative genius; from the digital revolution they took the new modes of distribution, and from television they took the name.

<sup>2</sup> Wajcman 2018, p. 15–22

many series.<sup>3</sup> A key dimension of the critical scenarios that established TV-series as a predominant form of our century (a form of serial crisis) is in Wajcman's view globalization: "The crisis is serial, but the world is serial as well."<sup>4</sup> Series has become a specific narrative for the serial crisis which became globalized in the 21st century. The globalization of serial crisis at the same time deals with multiplicity (the diversity, fragmentation, and discontinuity). Series is a form of a limitless world—on the one hand, it addresses global audiences, and, on the other hand, it represents the breakdown of a coherent, comprehensible, functioning whole. This is true for its form—which is endless; limitless—as well as for its content that similarly has no constraints when it comes to plots, types of heroes, etc.<sup>5</sup>

While following a similar thread of thought as Wajcman—a series is the prevailing form of this century—I will focus on its limitlessness, the lack of ending, or delegating the ending to eternity. However, I will address the problem of ending (or the lack of it) in quite a different way as Wajcman, which will lead us to a different emphasis and conclusions. Firstly, I will examine the lack of endings, the resistance to conclude (to totalize or to quilt a narrative), with regard to film as an art of ending. In an attempt to defend this aspect of cinema, I will focus on happy endings in classical Hollywood, using some best-known examples. Secondly, I will deal with a question: how can we understand the openness of TV-series as a dominant narrative today? I will try to interpret the palpable aversion to endings detectable on so many levels of popular culture in a wider political context that Alenka Zupančič conceptualized in her new book *The End* as the end of endings.

How Happy Are Happy Endings?

Happy ending was one of the key elements of the Hollywood film industry, especially in its classical period, i.e., from the time of institutionalization of continuity editing in the twenties until the sixties in the previous century. This editing is intrinsically linked to classical Hollywood narrative in which all the plotlines are resolved and combined into a coherent whole.

The classical narrative does not enjoy great respect among film critics and theorists, mostly because of its happy ending. Let's take a look at the Wikipedia definition of happy ending. "A happy ending is an ending of the plot of a work of fiction in which almost everything turns out for the best for the protagonists, their sidekicks, and almost everyone except

3 Ibid., p.25  
4 Ibid., p.27  
5 Ibid., p.30

the villains."<sup>6</sup> A happy ending is therefore synonymous with an idealist resolution of the plot for all involved parties. We can already sense how the ending—understood in this way—may seem unrealistic, artificial, and therefore unconvincing.

Our first naive response to such condemnations of a happy ending is: why shouldn't a happy ending be artificial or fake? After all, a movie is a work of fiction; it is not trying to pass itself as something else or something real. However, it is more productive to continue with the thesis that James McDowell develops in his book *Happy Endings in Hollywood: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple*. He quite convincingly argues that happy ending, understood as a satisfactory resolution of all plotlines with the constitution of a love couple, is a fantasy of film critics and theorists.<sup>7</sup> A detailed examination of the classic or romantic Hollywood comedies—if we leave out the genre of melodramas—shows that we can rarely find an unambiguously happy ending. What are the criteria for a happy ending? Do we measure it by the happiness of the main protagonist(s) or by the feeling of satisfaction on the side of a viewer? Why do we consider *Casablanca* (1942) a movie with a happy ending although the main film couple remains separated?<sup>8</sup> The same goes for the ending of one of the most notorious classics, *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

The prevailing notion of Hollywood is that it is obsessed with creating a couple, but MacDowell argues that we have to measure the film's ending and its "happiness" by the movie's own intent: does the movie's end follow what it is striving for as a movie? We must therefore measure the film's ending by the aim of a movie's narrative and its direction. The final couple in the movie is not always where the narrative is leading to.<sup>9</sup> Almost all films that deal with illicit affairs—at least while *Hays' code* was still enforced in Hollywood—in the end affirm the sanctity of marriage. So the question is: does a return of promiscuous partner to his wife (or husband) necessarily constitute a happy ending?<sup>10</sup>

6 Searching for definitions of "happy ending" on the web proves to be quite insightful: most sites on this term refer to a different kind of happy ending, to an ending connected with sexual gratification. I am tempted to say that Hollywood endings always provide a certain surplus which cannot be unambiguously related to happiness or contentment. Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy\\_ending#References](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_ending#References)

7 Cf. MacDowell 2012. We are referring to the Kindle version of this book, which has a specific enumeration: it is not divided into pages, but has a designation "loc".

8 I will give a more thorough analysis of this film later on.

9 MacDowell for example questions the ending of *The Graduate* (1969): in his view, the final couple in this movie doesn't necessarily constitute a happy couple or bring about a happy ending (MacDowell 2012).

10 MacDowell mentions *Intermezzo* (1939), where the mistress Ingrid Bergman is erased from the movie so that her illicit partner Leslie Howard can return to his family. The return of a cheating husband to his wife in *September Affair* (1950) functions somewhat more ambiguously. Even more subversive is the return of the cheating husband to his estranged wife in *There's Always Tomorrow* (1955) directed by Douglas Sirk. In this last case, the commitment to the rules of *Hays' Code* appears

Happy ending with its promise of “happily ever after” is often subject to severe criticism since it is dismissed as unrealistic and therefore ideological. Happy couple in Hollywood movies is usually perceived as an embodiment of the ideology in which a couple constitutes the core of a family unit, which in consequence legitimizes the predominant order, the *status quo*. The idea of couple as a fusion into a harmonious One is indeed problematic—it is an ideological construction, to be precise: a premodern construction with questionable epistemological implications.<sup>11</sup> However, we rarely find such endings in Hollywood. Several classic comedies attest to this. Let’s take a look at some examples which prove that the best products of this genre never simply comply with the notion of a couple as a harmonious One.

The master of classical comedy Ernst Lubitsch very rarely provided a standard happy ending (though after seeing his movies, audiences seem to be satisfied and more than happy). His *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) depicts how, at the beginning of the World War II, a group of Polish actors successfully spoils the plans of Nazi occupiers in Warsaw. As far as the war is concerned, the movie implies that even stupid, conceited and clumsy people can defeat the Nazi machine. It is worth mentioning that Lubitsch’s happy ending at that particular moment appeared unrealistic, but the fiction of a successful resistance against—until then—undefeated German army created a horizon that enabled people to imagine such an outcome of a terrifying war.<sup>12</sup>

However, *To Be or Not to Be* is as much a movie about fighting Nazis as a love story, and it seems that the true aim of the activity of the Polish theatre group is to reassert the unity of the main couple, Joseph (Jack Benny) and Maria Tura (Carol Lombard). In his dealing with this married couple, Lubitsch harbours no fairy-tale illusions. In his view, the life that follows the wedding isn’t an ideal coexistence of the two partners in everlasting happiness. In the context of war, when the group of actors is confronted with great perils of fighting the Nazis, one can acknowledge Maria and Joseph’s devotion to each other, but when they are finally rescued and brought to England, little cracks in their relationship—hinted at the beginning of the movie—become yet again visible. Their less than perfect union is above all comical. For example, while in the last scene Joseph recites Hamlet monologue “To be or not to be” on a British stage,

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to be in total contradiction with the main characters’ happiness: the illicit couple (Barbara Stanwyck in Fred MacMurray) seem to be happy together, while their separation and return to family life is considered by both of them as a return to prison. (Ibid, Loc 3667–3985).

11 Here we are aiming at Jacques Lacan thesis, from his seminar *Encore*, that premodern science perceives universe of structured by complementing oppositions (form-matter, light-darkness, active-passive) which all refer to the fantasy of a successful sexual rapport between a man and a woman. Cf. Lacan 1999.

12 The political empowerment arising from Lubitsch’s unyielding fidelity to comic principals was more thoroughly developed by Mladen Dolar. Cf. Dolar 2014, p. 111–131.

a man stands up from his seat and leaves the theatre hall—suggesting Maria found yet another fan and possibly a lover. Here it becomes clear that the love between Maria and Joseph exists and thrives on such little lapses in their relationship. If this kind of ending appears as happy, it is not because we are dealing with a perfect and devoted couple but because this couple is connected exactly by their unwillingness to fuse into a harmonious One.

*Design for Living* (1933), made before the implementation of *Hay’s Code*, is worth mentioning due to the fact that Lubitsch doesn’t focus on a happy couple but a happy threesome. In this movie, marriage is depicted as a prison for the main protagonist Gilda (Miriam Hopkins), so at the end she gets another chance to try and build a romantic relationship with two young artists. *Ninotchka* (1939) is a story of a Stalinist bureaucrat who comes to Paris to get hold of nationalized jewellery to prevent starvation in her country. But in the process of achieving this, she falls in love with a French gigolo. In the end, he lures her out of the Soviet Union and they reunite. However, in the last scene, Lubitsch shows Ninotchka’s three friends who left Soviet Union and reinvented themselves as small businessmen in Constantinople: their common capitalist endeavour is already decaying under their internal fights and exploitation. The message of this conclusion is that Ninotchka had to sacrifice her country to reunite with her love, but her unspoiled happiness in capitalism isn’t at all guaranteed. A movie about two systems, capitalism and communism, competing for the sympathies of the main character does not univocally turn in favor of capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

There are more examples of this kind of endings. The best screwball comedies also end with the constitution of a happy couple; however, its unity is always already compromised. In Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) Susan (Katherine Hepburn) and David (Cary Grant) become a couple at the end, but their love is constantly threatened by some commotion. The victim of their “happy union” is David’s life project: the skeleton of a big dinosaur, which in the end collapses under the weight of lovers’ kiss.

With regard to happy endings, one cannot overlook the most obvious and notorious one: the ending of Billy Wilder’s *Some Like it Hot* (1959). As many have pointed out,<sup>14</sup> the film concludes with a somewhat unexpected twist. The story juggles with several potential romantic couples. The main characters Jerry (Jack Lemmon) in Joseph (Tony Curtis)—two musicians dressed up as women in order to hide from Chicago mob—form the first couple. They are best friends, but in many ways they function as an old married couple: they live together, share

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13 Aaron Schuster convincingly proves that *Ninotchka* never gives up on communism. Cf. Schuster 2019, p. 189–223.

14 Cf. Zupančič 2008.

their resources, take care of each other, but most importantly they quarrel as married people do. On their run from the mafia, they both encounter new love prospects. Joe starts to seduce Sugar (Marilyn Monroe), and Jerry becomes the love object of a millionaire Osgood (Joe E. Brown). The fate of Sugar and Joe comes the closest to conventional Hollywood happy end (although we can already anticipate the fractures in their relationship, as Sugar intelligently predicts in the last scene), but most importantly we get an unexpected pair of Jerry and Osgood.

It's worth to recall the ending of this famous scene. Jerry, still dressed up as Daphne, states reasons why they cannot get married and starts pointing out all his shortcomings: "In the first place, I'm not a natural blonde.", "I smoke. I smoke all the time.", "I have a terrible past. For three years I've been living with a saxophone player." "I can never have children." Osgood doesn't seem to be bothered by any of these flaws. His attitude so far fits the frame of the traditional love paradigm where the idea of fusion with the loved one can overcome all partner's deficiencies.

So the desperate Jerry pulls off his wig and says in a man's voice: "I'm a man!" This disclosure should destroy any prospect of their life as a couple, but Osgood unexpectedly responds: "Nobody's perfect!" This last exchange brings their relationship into the vicinity of the comic paradigm of love: one of the partners reveals all his faults and most significantly the one thing that eradicates the possibility of their rapport, but the other doesn't except this impossibility as impossibility. Incidentally, Osgood's answer is comical on several levels. We can understand it as a response to the fact his partner is not of a "correct gender", at least not at the time movie takes place (at the end of the twenties) and not at the time movie was made in (at the end of the fifties). However, we can also understand this ending as a comment on manhood as an imperfect form of existence. In any case, the ending of this movie functions as a happy end because it promises that the comic love between the two desperately unmatched partners will go on.<sup>15</sup> Hollywood comedy therefore rarely abides by the fantasy of a happy ending. Moreover, if anything this type of comedy redefines the concept of happiness as such—it provides happiness (for the characters and the audience) exactly where something constantly keeps disintegrating and collapsing, or where the pair constantly produces an untamed excess.

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15 Once we start to think of the best Hollywood comedies, it seems they all negate or subvert the idea of a classical happy ending. Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) concludes with the main character's decision to direct comedies for fun, realizing that filming documentaries about the poor is the ultimate fakery. Sturges' romantic comedy *Lady Eve* (1941) is likewise a masterpiece that concludes with a happy couple, although the main character Charles (Henry Fonda) remains oblivious of what happened to him and still doesn't realize he was not seduced by two women, but by one posing as two (Barbara Stanwyck). The final couple in this movie will be happy because he will remain ignorant about the maneuvers of his extraordinary partner.

We should, however, consider a more important point that MacDowell makes in his book: "If anything has the power to make the final couple happy ending appear innately unrealistic, it is not, I think, the fact that it is 'happy', but rather the fact it is an ending." (MacDowell, loc 2640). The mere fact that something ends seems fake and artificial. The problem many critics and theoreticians sense in Hollywood is its incompatibility with so-called real life. In real life the happiness of the union of two people who are madly in love with each other is bound to fade, to succumb to everyday tediousness. The happy ending concludes the story of the couple at the point where—according to a certain perception of realism or authenticity—it should only just begin. This is why a happy end appears as a conspicuously artificial construction: it offers happiness where there should only be misery or at least the monotony of everyday life.

Happy end—by quilting all the missing pieces in the narrative and by delivering a clear concluded story—feels unrealistic. The artifice of classic narration which always seems to aim at a happy ending also affirms a key American ideological agenda. The happy ending appears as artificial because it enables a certain narrative material to conclude, and by concluding, it provides a definite meaning of what we have seen. The ideological function resides in the conception of an ending, of the totalization of narrative material, and in the finality of the story—story as a whole. The ending proves that the narrative was fictitious and therefore necessarily untrue, false: it provides the audience with fantasies instead of pointing to something more real—for example, the impossibility of a smooth functioning of a relationship.

It seems that the psychoanalytic approach to movies as developed by Pascal Bonitzer points to a similar conclusion.<sup>16</sup> Bonitzer argues that film is a distorted material which can only gain significance or meaning through direction and editing. The visual field of a movie is redoubled with a blind field. The basic unit of a film—shot (cadre)—is defined by what is in it, but even more by what remains cut out of it. The main feature of a shot is that it reveals as much as it conceals (it is *cadre-cache*). A shot refers to its exterior, it points to a new shot or counter-shot. A shot, the signifying unit of a movie, is defined by a lack, so its meaning can be attained in the next shot or the sequence of shots. Partial vision, as Bonitzer calls it, is inscribed into the basic logic of film and it addresses a subject of desire, always striving to see beyond, always seeking more than the one-frame-shot provides. The blind field is exactly the generator of a movie narrative and at the same time also a generator of (viewer's) desire. The paradox of film fiction lies in the fact that a movie is full of lacks—a film structure is a structure with inherent voids—but a classical movie carefully fills these voids and glues its parts into a coherent whole:

.....  
16 Cf. Bonitzer 1982.

the shot-and-counter-shot structure of a cinematic space shows that this space is a space of lacks which are systematically sutured, 'quilted'. This is why there is such an effort in classical cinema to cover up all the signs of cinematic apparatus (camera, microphones, etc.) which would dismantle its fictional universe.<sup>17</sup>

The ultimate example of such careful stitching of the film material is the Hollywood film industry, more precisely, its continuity editing which covers up all the signs of movie-making machines. The ending is, therefore, the point at which all the lacks and voids are fulfilled, and it therefore provides a coherent meaning of the chain of shots. In this sense, the classical happy end should be considered fake since it quilts the shots and provides a coherent meaning where there should be the inherent lack of it. The production of complete, clear and unambiguous symbolization is in contradiction with the film's essential ingredient. In other words, the full coherent meaning contradicts the nature of the film signifier.

A film's artifice therefore lies in the fact that it can retroactively conceal cuts, voids, incoherencies of its fictitious universe. However, Bonitzer's notion of the Hollywood machinery cannot be reduced to this simple critical point: his main point is that movie directing—in documentaries or realistic dramas—is always artificial, and he firmly states that film is not a representation of reality but it's creation.

With this digression to Bonitzer's elaboration I wanted to illustrate how the notion of movie structure as lacking, full of voids, may seem to support the thesis that Hollywood movies—aimed at covering this lack and filling the void with a happy ending—form a paradigmatic ideological apparatus.<sup>18</sup> But I must again emphasize how difficult it is to find Hollywood endings that would attest to the fantasy of an unambiguous meaningful ending. If we take the concept of the *point du caption* seriously,<sup>19</sup> i.e., as a point that gives a univocal meaning to the chain of film's shots, then a film's ending affects the narration in such a way that it retroactively stops the fleeing of film signifiers and consolidates their meaning. However, a more precise investigation shows that the ending is not a finalization of meaning but leaves an open space for imagination. Its function is not only to close up a narrative but to point beyond its stable

17 Especially European post-war movies are often aimed at destroying classic Hollywood narration: they try to reveal the conditions of the movie-making and thereby offer a proof that we are witnessing an artificial material. One of the strategies was to break the most sacred Hollywood taboo (the forbidden gaze into the camera)—just recall the ending of Jean-Luc Godard's *Au Bout du souffle* (1960).

18 MacDowell convincingly interprets a series of movies (the classic and the more recent ones) and shows that the endings in Hollywood are somewhat more complex. The conclusions of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1955), or *The Graduate* (1967) are more ambiguous, in many cases more radical, exactly by introducing an alleged happy ending.

19 Jean-Pierre Oudart introduced the concept of suture to film theory in his text »La Suture«. Cf. Oudart 1969.

determinate meaning. Many endings which are considered as happy don't unambiguously assert a definite meaning or understanding nor do they completely erase all lacks and voids inherent to a film universe (as we tried to demonstrate with our examples of Hollywood comedies). This kind of assertion never completely succeeds—a certain ambiguity lingers upon a movie.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, it is not at all necessary that an ending which supposedly fills in the lacks and voids univocally functions as a happy end.<sup>21</sup> Certain endings, although they offer a seemingly univocal symbolization, are more complex, they suggest a logic that is not simply false or artificial.

There is another important dimension of a happy ending that MacDowell emphasizes. Creation of a happy couple is indeed a prevailing intent of a movie narrative; however, the movie is not oriented towards the closure of narrative but gives the audience the promise of a continuation of the couple, the promise of their life together after the end of the movie. Many Hollywood movies conclude with the fairy-tale "happily ever after". The promise of the main characters' life after the movie had ended is crucial for the sense of happiness.<sup>22</sup> The ending as a signifier that concludes or quilts the narrative is a signifier that points beyond itself: it signifies also a new beginning, an unknown future. In other words, the suture of meaning is only temporary—it is a point in a narrative that directs the audience to a new story. The promise of a new beginning anticipated by Hollywood happy end deserves a more thorough elaboration.

### End of Love and the Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

We should take a look at one of the most famous and most debated Hollywood classics, Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*. The movie deserves a careful inspection not only because the main couple Bogart-Bergman has to separate in the end, but because the movie offers an ending which is much more interesting than the romantic cliché it appears to follow.

The story takes place in occupied Europe and North Africa during the World War II. Casablanca is a city under French jurisdiction from

20 Let us just take a quick view of Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941) which—contrary to the novel—ends happily. The main character Lina (Joan Fontaine) suspects that her husband Johnnie Aysgarth (Cary Grant) is a killer, but it turns out in the end that all the dark premonitions were only in her head. As Mladen Dolar showed, this Hollywood ending cannot eradicate the suspense that was built up in the movie. If the suspicions of the main character are unfounded, if her paranoia is her own construct, if the husband is indeed innocent, the source of her wariness must be in her alone. In other words, this sort of narrative cannot end happily, the stain of paranoia and suspicion cannot be eliminated. Dolar 1999, p. 143-151.

21 Among the recent works dedicated to psychoanalytic cinema theory, one should mention *Cinematic Cuts: Theorizing Film Ending*, an anthology mostly dedicated to those endings that subvert the logic of fantasy and suture allegedly endorsed by the classic ending. Cf. Kunkle, 2016.

22 MacDowell 2011, loc 1508-1525

where thousands of immigrants try to flee to the USA (via Lisbon). Most of them are stuck in the city, for months waiting for a visa. Rick (Humphrey Bogart) is the owner of a club (Rick's), where the immigrants from different countries meet in the evenings along with French military and police. Louis Renault (Claude Rains) plays a significant role as the man in charge of police and immigrant administration. Also, Nazi officers led by Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt) come to Rick's bar: they are trying to solve the murder of two Nazi soldiers who possessed the much desired exit visas. The film thus first takes us to this transition city where different cultures create an interesting exotic mixture, and then it focuses on Rick's bar, a micro-representation of what is going on in the city as a whole, including the tensions between the Nazi officers and the people sympathetic to French resistance. Rick's is the place where the fates of natives, fugitives, and officers play out. We soon find out that the main character is a cynical American who likes to point out: "I stick my neck for no one". When Ugarte (Peter Lorre), an immigrant trafficker who is also a member of the resistance and the one who killed the two soldiers, gets arrested, Rick doesn't intervene—he only promises to hide the visas that Ugarte obviously stole from the killed soldiers. This is as far as Rick goes.

Things get complicated when a key figure of European resistance, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), comes to town. This man escaped from a concentration camp and is now trying to find a transit to the USA. Rick doesn't pay much attention to him until he comes into his club with his wife Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). Rick (who otherwise prefers to avoid contacts with his customers) is in this case lured by a song "As Time Goes By" played by his employee Sam (Dooley Wilson). It turns out that Ilsa recognized Sam and persuaded him to play her beloved song. Rick's aversion to it suggests that the two have met before and didn't part on the best of terms. When the club closes, Rick is drinking whiskey, expecting her to come. He asks Sam to play the song he resented so much until she came ("If she can stand it, I can too", he explains). The melody evokes Rick's memories of the affair he had with Ilsa, and a long flashback takes us to Paris, just before the Nazi invasion, where Rick and Ilsa fell in love. We can see the scenes of the lovers wandering around the city, exchanging kisses and other tenderness. The shots of their romance are interrupted by scarce dialogues from which we learn that they have been meeting only for a short while and are deeply committed to one another although they don't know much about each other. He asks her about other men in her life and she hints at a beloved who is now part of her past. It also becomes clear that Rick, involved in the resistance, is the target of Gestapo, and since the German army is getting closer and closer to the French capital, the two lovers decide to flee the city. Before their departure, Ilsa seems more melancholic than usual. She asks Rick to kiss her as it were the last time—a hint that things will not go as planned. On the day of departure, Rick is waiting for her at the railway station in vain. The train is about to depart when he

receives her letter. In it, she declares her undying love for him but states that they can never see each other again.<sup>23</sup>

With main character jumping on a train from Paris the flashback ends and we come back to drunk Rick at the bar. One could argue that Rick's memory, his flashback—differentiated from the other part of movie by the grainy quality of the film's cinematography—can be interpreted as a movie within a movie. The flashback is a Hollywood melodrama of a couple immortally in love but abruptly separated without an explanation. It is obvious that this event crucially affected Rick: the failed romance is the reason why he gave up his heroic endeavors against the Nazis (although he had always fought on the side of the repressed, as Victor will later acknowledge) and retreated into the cynical existence of a club owner in Casablanca.

The main question of the movie from here on is: will an opportunistic, pragmatic Rick transform and help Victor and his wife to escape Casablanca? At first, he is determined that he will remain neutral, not stand out and provoke the Germans, but when Ilsa comes one night to explain what happened in Paris (her presumably dead husband turned up ill on the outskirts of Paris), Rick's attitude changes. He promises Ilsa that he will "think for both of us" and come up with a plan to save all the involved parties. At first, it seems Rick will remain in Casablanca with Ilsa and help Victor to migrate to the USA. Then he reveals another plan to Renault: Rick will run away with Ilsa and incriminate Victor so that Renault—always worried about an impression he makes on the Nazis and major Strasser—will be able to arrest Victor as a criminal. But it turns out that Rick had a third plan in mind: Victor and Ilsa are to flee, while he will remain in Casablanca. So the main protagonist is considering what kind of ending he will provide for the film's story. His juggling between three outcomes is a film's way of suggesting that it could end differently, that there are alternate worlds in which Ilsa and Rick would remain a couple or in which Victor Laszlo would end up in jail. In the background of these potential outcomes, which do not actualize, the film's last scenes gain all their (emotional and political) weight.

The moment where Rick (again) has to leave Ilsa is essential to film's understanding. The notorious sentence "We'll always have Paris" testifies to the fact that Rick always strived to provide his Paris romance a real epilogue. What was missing was his understanding of why Ilsa didn't join him to leave Paris, and this story is successfully concluded when the repentant Ilsa explains to him what had happened. In this way, his Paris romance can remain an ideal, although he has to sacrifice a beloved woman for it.<sup>24</sup>

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23 In this famous scene Rick utters the legendary sentence: "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine."

24 With a reference to Lacan, one can say with the separation of lovers enables their love to remain a romantic ideal.

Now, at the end of *Casablanca*, Rick has to explain the conclusion of the film's narrative to all involved parties.<sup>25</sup> To Ilsa he gives numerous reasons why she has to depart with Victor: she is crucial for the resistance; if she stayed with Rick, she would regret it and sooner or later start to long for her husband... When Rick speaks to Victor, who suspects that his wife had gotten involved with the American, he defends Ilsa's honor by saying how she tried to seduce Rick only to gain the visas.

But this is not the end of the movie. After Victor and Ilsa board the plane for Lisbon, Major Strasser arrives and tries to stop the plane, which is why Rick shoots him in front of Renault. When a French police unit appears at the airport because of the shooting, Renault tells them to round up "the usual suspects." Renault, who until now was a typical opportunist, a person who declared himself to unscrupulously submit to any authority, goes against his nature. Moreover, now that Strasser is dead and the plane with Victor and Ilsa on board successfully took off, he discusses with Rick what their future holds: they will join the resistance in North Africa. Finally we see the two men in a long shot walking from the airport when Rick utters the most famous sentence of the movie: "This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." We hear the sound of *La Marseillaise* and the title "The End" wraps the movie up.

The end of the movie unfolds in an entirely another atmosphere than the love story with Ilsa. The main agenda is no longer the fate of lovers but the fate of humanity in a dire historical moment—at the beginning of the World War II. The main issue of the movie is how to get the two greatest cynics to join the resistance. The movie hints at this ending all along: from the establishing shot with waves of immigrants coming to Casablanca, to several episodes with the migrants, the singing *La Marseillaise* in Rick's club, and Rick's lamenting about America sleeping in the year of 1941—an obvious call out to the USA to join the fight against Hitler. From the film's structure it is obvious that the main protagonist has to recognize his calling and act accordingly: separation with Ilsa, helping Victor and joining the resistance are therefore a logical conclusion of the story.

Or so it seems—it is more appropriate to posit that *Casablanca* has two endings since it consists of two films: one dedicated to a love story, the other addressing WWII. The first movie (separated also by a distinctive production quality of the flashback) ends with Ilsa explaining why she failed to join Rick in their escape from Paris; the other one ends with a realization that no one can remain a calculating cynic when facing the threat of Nazism. This other ending—accompanied by the sounds of *La Marseillaise*—functions as a propagandistic call to all of us (especially the Americans) to join the allied forces against Nazism. If the ending of *Casablanca* appears to be happy, it is not because it reunites the two lovers or promises their "happily ever after", but because it asserts

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<sup>25</sup> It seems the movie has to justify (to the audience) why the hero has chosen just that ending and not another one.

the idea of resistance. "This is a beginning of a beautiful friendship" suggests that after the movie's ending something else, something very different from love, is about to start. The film's ending proposes a friendship of combatants in a united front. The love story that comes to a conclusion is here more or less a diversion that enables the main character and the audience to confront the new challenge (if Bogart gave up Bergman for the brutal combat, then so should we the audience sacrifice our striving for a happy couple).<sup>26</sup> Following MacDowell, one can see that the function of a happy ending is not to resolve all the plotlines or totalize the narrative material and present it as a coherent whole, but to anticipate something different, another fight, another scene—the real scene of the war. *Casablanca* has to end for the resistance to start. Today we might consider this ending pathetic, but we can imagine how in given circumstances when Hitler was still undefeated,<sup>27</sup> the movie functioned as a significant encouragement to fight Nazi terror.

The end of *Casablanca* deserves attention because of how the main character is engaged in playing with different possible outcomes of his story. This is a moment of film's self-reflexivity—it turns attention to itself and reveals something about its structure and its procedures. It suggests that every story is open to different conclusions and is therefore an artificial creation. The movie implies that every ending is an arbitrary creation, but only until it is actualized: any sort of ending could take place, but when a particular ending materializes, it becomes the necessary one—the one and only. When the end ends there is no way back. The story has evolved as it has and usually (if its conclusion is plausible) it appears as an organic, natural part of the narrative that could not have unfolded in any other manner.

Secondly, the ending is the part of the narrative which refers to everything that comes before it, to the fictional material that leads up to it. It retroactively connects elements of the narrative and delivers it as a whole (story). On the other hand, the ending proposes something else beyond the story it concludes. When the potentiality of a narrative is realized, it opens up the possibility of another story. The ending is a limit that stretches in two directions. Firstly, it completes a story—it closes up its own fictional universe. It is a point toward which the narrative is directed, a point where a story reaches its completion, its full realization. However, secondly, the ending also implies another story after the ending.

We can understand such a status of the ending in two ways. The ending is on the edge of imagining something else, another story; a work of fiction. But at the same time, the ending is a limit between fiction and non-fiction, and it therefore always appears as an element of self-

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<sup>26</sup> The usual structure of a Hollywood movie is usually the opposite one: a hero has to take on a political, social or another challenge in order to gain true love.

<sup>27</sup> *Casablanca* was made after the USA entered the war, but the story goes on a little bit before that.

referencing or self-reflexivity. When the movie ends, it suggests to the viewer something like this: “I am the end of the story. I stand at the end of the fictional world, now it is time to exit it.” This function of an ending—that always points to the fictional character of a movie we have been watching, and to a reality beyond the fictional dimension—is in classical films marked with the end title: “The End”.

The question is: why do movies which are directed towards their finale need yet another sign of their ending? My thesis would be that the title “The End” is a signifier of the limit that separates the world of cinema or immersion into a movie from the reality outside of it. This is especially interesting given the evolution of the end titles in Hollywood. “The End” was part of a classical movie for a long time.<sup>28</sup> With the disintegration of the classical studio system in Hollywood, the convention of beginning and ending changed. The opening titles became shorter and shorter (many movies begin with only discretely inserted title and names of cast members), while end titles got longer and longer. In the last few decades, the end titles became a medium for different experiments. Sometimes directors insert the scenes that were cut from the movie in the end titles, sometimes the story continues after the film has concluded or the end titles provide other ways of prolonging a movie experience. It seems that it gradually became harder and harder to end a movie, although—paradoxically—a movie is an art that presupposes the closure of a narrative.

To sum up, Hollywood’s happy endings are much more ambiguous than the movie historians and theoreticians gave it credit for. The ending is always an artificial construction that completes film material but at the same time aims beyond it. It inaugurates a new beginning; it is a promise of something new or different. It is crucial that the ending is at the same time a declaration that the fictitious material has reached its conclusion; as such, it marks the entrance into reality outside the movie theatre—it lets the viewer know that he or she participated in something made up and artificial.<sup>29</sup> This brings us to another thesis: the open narrative, the never-ending stories are no more real or authentic than the classic films with a clear ending.

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28 According to Wikipedia, early exceptions in regard to beginning and ending a movie were the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Mary Poppins* (1964). In both of these cases, the end titles were prolonged and all the contributors of the movie team were named there. *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956) and *The West Side Story* (1961) also began only with the movie’s title, while all the other data was put in the ending titles.

29 Every time we encounter a firm statement that what we witnessed was “only” fiction we should be doubtful. In his *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan claims that fiction is deceiving about its fictitiousness, while its fake strategies can come closer to the truth than any authentic “reality”. (Lacan 1998, p. 112).

## An Endless Universe

Let’s begin with a simple question: what happened with endings since the serial form became dominant? First of all, one must recognize how the logic of a serial has indeed entered all the pores of our culture. It is not only that many movie-makers, stars, screenplay-writers, etc., migrated to television, the serial logic also penetrated the movie industry itself: a typical Hollywood movie is today a movie-series. The majority of films are created with the prospect of a possible sequel, of franchising and of maximum capitalization of an idea. This is true for the superhero genre as it is for other big adventure (sci-fi) movies (*Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Hunger Games*), or action thrillers (from *James Bond* to *Jason Bourne*), or even comedies (*Hangover*, *Horrible Bosses*, etc.) and cartoons (*Finding Nemo*, *Shrek*, *Frozen*), to mention just the most notorious box office hits.

Serialization, the possibility of an endless span of episodes, is today a fundamental cultural form. This brings us to the question: what does this attitude towards open narrative bring about, what does it tell us? Why do stories need a serial form, a possibility of continuation? Why do they need an open structure that can go on forever? Why can stories no longer end?

We can approach this problem from different angles. A serial narrative is, first of all, based on a certain economic calculation. Classical television developed its programs according to the ratings: TV series remained on the program if it attracted enough viewers. A series that didn’t have satisfactory ratings got cancelled. This known fact—exterior to the series’ content—is important because it dictated and still dictates the content, and also the fate of different characters and their “survival”.

The shift in the logic of ending can be better explained in relationship to movies. Classical movies in Hollywood were also made with an unmistakable agenda: making money. The existence of genres can be ascribed to shameless business pursuits; however, a film with an ending was always accompanied by a risk. Although the templates for movie hits were known, repetition of the same pattern (of an ending) never guaranteed a film’s success. It is known that Hollywood producers very early on resorted to movie testing in order to figure out which ending would be most popular and therefore more lucrative; however, all that testing couldn’t assure the profits. When the film was concluded, when it was distributed through movie theaters, its story was fixed—there was no way of remaking it. The ending—even if it was carefully calculated—resumed the narrative and it was not possible to change it. At a given moment, a film came before its audiences as a completed product and put to the final test: the box office.<sup>30</sup>

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30 Of course, there are known movies that got another edition, the so-called director’s cut. A movie can also be re-edited against the will of its director—the best known example is here Orson Welles’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). However, this doesn’t contradict our basic thesis that ending a

Today, the narratives in movies and TV-series are more and more open and also more prone to different narrative interventions introduced by the market conditions or due to rating and testing. The logic of continuation—i.e., of the endlessly prolonged ending—also works when a TV-series is concluded: reboots and remakes of old series are striving today. Think only of the remake of *MacGyver* (2016-) and *Dynasty* (2017-) or the reboots of *Will in Grace* (2017-) and *Fuller House* (2016-). The idea of a reboot of *Friends* (1994-2004) is all the time lingering in the air with thousands of fans cheering for its continuation. Obviously, neither the time distance nor the change of the cast can prevent a story to continue. *Game of Thrones* (2012-2019) indeed ended last year, but the ending of the popular saga is open enough to entail several prequels or sequels or at least spin-offs. There's no doubt that sooner or later a popular series will get some kind of continuation.

The same goes for movies and movie franchises. The final part of *Avengers* (2019), significantly entitled *Endgame*, was supposed to conclude this movie-series. However, it is again clear that particular heroes from the Marvel universe will get (or remain in) their movie franchises and, besides that, we can easily imagine that in a decade or so a new incarnation of *Avengers* with perhaps a different cast will come to life. To sum up, no end today can be considered as final, as a true end. Every ending in popular culture—at least in really popular products—can be seen as provisional, as temporary.

There's yet another way of looking at the aversion towards endings today: with regard to the consumption of popular culture (especially TV-series today). This aspect, also strongly connected to the expectation of profit, became evident with the rise of Netflix. In 2013 this important player from Silicon Valley introduced a new way of distribution and consumption of popular video material (especially series); this new type of viewer experience was soon to be called binge-watching. The first season of the series *House of Cards* (2013-2018) was—immediately and as a whole (of thirteen parts)—made available to Netflix subscribers.<sup>31</sup> Netflix institutionalized what was already happening in the era of digitalization and downloading—consumers watching their favorite TV products instantly, not waiting for separate episodes from week to week. So Netflix

movie was at least for the time being an irreversible act. Another exception was this year's fiasco of *Cats* (2019): producers pulled the movie out of distribution, made some digital repairs and sent it back; however even this stunning move didn't contribute to improvement in the box office.

31 The *New York Times* put the news of Netflix's new mode of distribution on its first page, which gave even more weight to Netflix. A retroactive look indicates that the editorial decision was in place. With its production and distribution model, Netflix has quite significantly rattled Hollywood establishment, so that today there are many related platforms and libraries of this type. Moreover, a new way of distributing content is becoming a key factor in the Hollywood industry in which the fight between Silicon Valley companies and traditional Hollywood studios even got a dramatic name: the streaming wars. Netflix, Disney +, AppleTV +, Amazon Prime and HBO Max are the most important players in this fight so far.

only adapted to a certain transformation in viewers' experience and developed it into a new business model.

And not only that: Netflix upgraded the already existing viewing patterns. After binge-watching a series the Netflix's algorithm redirects us to another one, the one that is allegedly in sync with our taste or previous choices. TV-series therefore introduce serial watching or watching in a sequence, where the end of a certain content instantly shifts into the beginning of watching another.<sup>32</sup> Serial watching involves a specific logic that can (at least theoretically) go on forever. Netflix's universe—if we can use this term—is exactly the universe of never-ending watching where one series opens the door into another and so on and so on. Moreover, Netflix enables its subscribers to watch their shows on different platforms (TV, laptop, smartphone), which means that the consumption of series is not even localized anymore: one can watch it anytime anywhere. Perhaps some of Adorno's and Horkheimer's insights about popular culture, its logic of commodification, as developed in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* become relevant with the never-ending flow of video content and with a possibility of a viewer's immersion into the world of never-ending fiction which quite literally prevents the viewer from reflecting what he or she had been consuming.<sup>33</sup>

With its insistent production, with direct distribution to individual subscribers, and with the new type of consumption, Netflix became a true game-changer in Hollywood and radically influenced the industry. Its business model is quite different from classical TV networks or traditional movie studios. Subscription from 169 million entails a different type of production that enables the creators more freedom but also presents them with some traps.<sup>34</sup> Netflix selects and produces new series without first making and showing the pilot; binge-watching changed also the series' narrative, no longer adjusting the storylines to the interruption of advertisements, and without vigorously exploiting cliff-hangers. With Netflix, many imperatives that reigned over traditional TV-production became obsolete.<sup>35</sup>

32 The way of consuming series, the compulsion to repeat in conjunction with the consumer logic, is also addressed by Wajcman who points out that the popular topic of many series is precisely the issue of drugs. The treatment of drug gangs in *The Wire* (2002 - 2008) should thus be seen as a specific reflection of consumption as it is dictated by the series - namely, as a modern form of the drug. (Wajcman 2018, p. 88-98).

33 Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 94-137.

34 Speaking of traps I am most of all aiming at the fact that Netflix' huge production without pre-selection often results in some questionable series, movies and documentaries. If it was bound to the logic of testing a series by shooting a pilot first, some of those shows would never see the light of day.

35 It's worth noting that video on-demand enables Netflix to monitor viewing habits very closely. The Silicon Valley company has seen a lot of protests mainly because it is reluctant to share those numbers with the public - thus again contradicting the foundations of the Hollywood industry which relied on box office sales and TV ratings.

That said, one must point out that the logic of profit does not entirely explain why we leave in an era in which popular narratives cannot end, and why we observe on so many levels the end of endings. The endlessness of series also concerns its structure, that is, its inner nature. David Bordwell dealt with this issue years ago in a blog explaining, among other things, his reservations about the world of (quality) TV series:

Once you're committed, however, there is trouble on the horizon. There are two possible outcomes. The series keeps up its quality and maintains your loyalty and offers you years of enjoyment. Then it is cancelled. This is outrageous. You have lost some friends. Alternatively, the series declines in quality, and this makes you unhappy. You may drift away. Either way, your devotion has been spit upon. There is indeed a third possibility. You might die before the series ends. How comforting is that? With film, you're in and you're out and you go on with your life. The TV is like a long relationship that ends abruptly or wistfully. One way or another, the TV will break your heart. (Bordwell 2010).

This passage points to an inherent impossibility of ending a TV series. It either ends prematurely—when we still love it, when we are emotionally attached to the characters, but in the eyes of the producers it does not achieve expected results so it is cancelled. Or it ends too late—it becomes unconvincing, we are no longer interested in its heroes, the story leaves us disappointed. In other words, there is no right time to end a series. All its essence is lingering between a “not-yet” and “always-already”.<sup>36</sup> If we say—following Bordwell—that the production of TV-series is based on the intimate liaison between the viewer and his or her popular material, it is impossible to reach a perfect ending, a satisfactory conclusion. This psychological dimension of television experience is therefore not to be neglected.

The claim that a narrative is defined primarily by the impossibility of ending seems contradicted by the great classics of quality television, from *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *The Wire* (2002–2008) to *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) and *Mad Men* (2008–2015). All these series were made with a clear vision of a finite number of seasons and episodes, including the ending. Most of them left the impression that they really ended and could hardly go on or reboot. How do we explain that the most paradigmatic TV-series have ended? One answer could be that the inaugural quality TV-series were created with a pre-planned ending and that, in this sense, quality television classics echo the logic of the film which offers a completed narrative, so that, in these cases we can speak of movies that are tens of hours long. Furthermore, there is a part of the production of TV that resists the incompleteness—mini-series based on famous novels

36 As for the hearts that are easily broken by a TV series, Bordwell attributes this to the temporality of the series which allows the viewer to have more lasting and committed relationship with the characters. If the series is a form that addresses emotions, the film, with its limited structure, appeals to human reason.

can be seen in this way.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, however, one is tempted to say that the cult classics fully fit the context of the universe without end: we cannot be sure that they are forever finished, that they may not be the subject of remakes and spin-offs, just as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* was restarted after its first conclusion in 2011.

All these aspects of the rise of TV-series still raise the question of why, at a certain historical moment—since the beginning of the 21st century, to be more precise—endless form became so popular, and why doubts about the appropriateness of endings emerged. The answer may be found in a political and ideological shift already identified by Fredric Jameson in his elaboration of postmodernism, and extensively investigated by Alenka Zupančič's latest work which is dedicated to the concept of the end of endings.

### The Ideology of an Open Narrative

At first glance, the postmodern era was the one that announced several endings (or deaths): from Lyotard proclaiming the end of grand narratives to the death of the author (Barthes) and the man (Foucault). One of the most celebrated and debated ends, however, is the one proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama: the end of history. And it is precisely this slogan that may offer the best insight into the nature of the endings that the postmodern era inaugurated. Here, one should turn to the intriguing analysis of Alenka Zupančič in her book *The End*.

With his slogan of the end of history, Fukuyama sought to conceptualize the geopolitical situation after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The collapse of the Communist bloc brought about the global domination of neoliberal capitalism and democracy which was at least in Fukuyama's eyes a culmination of all greatest achievements of human history. While Fukuyama provoked many critics who accused him of too hastily embracing a certain historical moment as an unproblematic accomplishment, many authors recognized the hidden truth of his proclamation, namely, that he recognized the moment when capitalism appeared as the ultimate horizon of a global social order. Capitalism is, from this point of view, a point of incompleteness, of non-historicity. History, of course, goes on, but it is stuck in this moment, in a system that cannot end since it allows only constant perpetuation.<sup>38</sup> This perpetuation is grounded in above all the ability of capitalism to “redeem, absorb, neutralize radical ideas, and, on the other hand, the ability to

37 One of the famous exceptions is certainly *Big Little Lies* (2017–), the mini-series is based on a novel by Liane Moriarty. After the success of the first season, they decided to continue the mini-series, by which it got transformed into TV-series.

38 Zupančič 2019, p.12

revolutionize itself through its crises and in its neuralgic points (...)”.<sup>39</sup>

Zupančič describes this constellation as a bizarre temporality “which modern Western societies are stuck in; (...) the things we do—especially in politics and the arts—have no real consequences or impact, they can’t scare anyone and change anything, as if they can’t really touch the real, which calmly and indifferently persists on its path.” (Ibid.) In other words, this means that we are embedded in a historical structure which is by its logic prehistoric. No breakthrough is possible in it. It is a “(...) structure that is full of events and even demands that something must be happening all the time, but at the same time, nothing can happen in it. Whatever we do (critical, subversive) is quickly assimilated into existing relationships of domination.”<sup>40</sup> The end of history paradoxically means being stuck in the mode of the impossibility of the end or in the mode of endlessly repeating the end. The problem, again, is not that we are at the end, but the end is the precise name for something (capitalism) that cannot end.

And is a similar logic of ending which inaugurates the impossibility of ending also not present in contemporary popular culture? Lyotard’s notorious announcement of the end of grand narratives—which proclaimed that there is no longer one (scientific, artistic, philosophical) Truth since there exists a multiplicity of equivalent particular/individual truths—can be taken more literally in the context of our discussion. When a grand narrative dies, when grand stories are understood as just another deception, mystification, an ideology *par excellence*, or at least something that we must question from the standpoint of postmodernist relativization of all truth or hierarchies (of knowledge), the possibility of a real ending also dies. The “classic” story dedicated to producing a certain truth (of time, spirit, *Zeitgeist*) was limited, it was totalized, it was conveyed as a completed whole. The postmodern story (the story of the end of the grand narratives), although prolonged in hundreds of parts of the series (and maybe even greater in scope than previous grand narratives), does not offer this kind of conclusion of a narrative or this kind of totalization any more. The end of the grand narratives must, therefore, be understood primarily as the end of the stories with an ending.

The contemporary openness of narrative is linked to the (postmodern) fear of the falsehood of a closed fictional universe, of determinate meaning and of the totality of the whole as such. The series is not the form of great stories but above all the form of great endless and unfinished stories. Opposing the end, whether on account of external circumstances or inherent to the series’ “story” itself, carries a different kind of promise than the one a film gave with its ending. The openness of the series promises above all that the narrative will not be concluded, that

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.13

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.14

no meaning will be fixed, or that the meaning of the series may change in every moment. Everything is possible in a series: characters can be reinvented or transformed; the story can evolve in any possible direction. If the series ends, then it is usually due to external circumstances (decreased viewership and the consequent lack of funding), and, of course, this ending rarely appears as the closure of a narrative—it usually works just as a part that is somewhat mechanically attached to the series.

From the perspective of the predominance of TV series, we can observe how the attitude toward endings changed in the new century. Now we retroactively perceive Agatha Christie’s novels about Hercule Poirot, comics about (super)heroes, and even the newspaper feuilletons, as series. The 20th century was a century when cultural artifacts were still viewed from the point of their closure. Even though TV-series and serial narratives existed then, the paradigm of the end seemed to prevail, so that the fragmentation of the story into many parts was still perceived as a division of material that could form a whole and was destined to end at some point. In the new millennium, the TV-series inaugurates the opposite logic, the logic of progressing from part to part (from episode to episode) where the end remains some distant limit that can never be fully reached. In the 21st century and with the predominance of serial logic, the end becomes the Kantian transcendental idea—an idea that can only be approached infinitely but can never be attained.

That being said, one must emphasize that there is nothing subversive, bold, or liberating in this openness of narrative. The change in attitude towards the end in our era must be seen in the context of the postmodern turn. Modern fiction or narration tells us that today, within the framework of fiction, everything is possible: different fates of heroes, representation of various identities, impossible twists, all kinds of transgressions (direct depictions of violence and sex, etc.). But the greater the possibilities of developing characters and showing digressions or excesses of all kinds, the more this kind of fiction seems ideologically quilted—much more than the classic Hollywood happy end. Everything is possible, only the impossibility itself is no longer possible—it is not possible to conclude a narrative. The ending which can, after all, hint at a new beginning or suggest an alternate paradigm, a new hope, a new idea, or merely offer the exit from the world of fiction, belongs to the film, and the series belongs to an endless continuation of all things possible—except the impossible.

The fact that TV-series is structurally defined by the impossibility of the end, and also by the inability to exit a certain fictional universe or its political paradigm (late capitalism), goes hand in hand with contemporary stories which rarely present a vision of an alternate world, a world that doesn’t end in a great catastrophe or simply embodies a dystopia. One should only look at two maybe most notorious examples of successful and popular series of recent years, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) and *Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–), especially since the first one is a

fantasy adventure and the other a work of science-fiction.

*Game of Thrones* takes place in a fantasy medieval-like world ruled by various royal houses. For seven seasons we were able to follow the struggles between aristocratic dynasties and their inner conflicts. The series was famous for its unsentimental attitude towards main characters; it prematurely finishes off key figures (for example, to the surprise of the viewers, Ned, the father of the Stark family played by Sean Bean, dies at the end of the first season); it doesn't spare audience the scenes of violence, sexual abuse of all kinds, outrageous acts and incest, etc. The fantasy frame sustained by a brilliant production (beautifully crafted ambiances, costumes, etc.) and a dark atmosphere, was thus primarily intended to illustrate an extremely cruel, relentless world, on some level far more merciless than (our Western) reality.

It is surprising how this narrative which deals with problems of politics, family, sexuality, etc., concludes. The first episodes of last season depicts the resistance of the Starks and other aristocratic families against a common external enemy: the dead from the Kingdom of the Dead in the North. When they are done with these creatures, they are left to fight with the vicious Cersei Lannister—the ruler of King's Landing who has left the rest of dynasties to perish in the fight with the invincible creatures from the North. She now rules her capital and believes she will win the last battle for world domination. Another powerful queen, Daenerys Targaryen, is at first depicted as an enlightened ruler who envisions the liberation of oppressed peoples, including those who live in King's Landing. However, when Cersei doesn't yield power, Daenerys orders a genocide of Cersei's people and ruthlessly liquidates her opponents. In consequence the other members of world aristocracy kill her as a savage Stalin-like totalitarian ruler who has gone too far.

Once the two extreme queens have been successfully defeated, the rest of the families start to build a new world order, dividing the lands and appointing new rulers, so that, at the end, the old aristocratic regime is restored. The ending of the series could thus be seen as a resounding portrayal of the aristocracy back in power which quickly gets rid of anyone who threatens the “natural order” of its established rights and privileges.

The series indeed hints at such an interpretation when it shows the ruling parties discussing the first measures to be taken to restore order—to rebuild whore houses and the armed forces. But it is precisely such a cynical-ironic ending which should make us think: although we are in a fantasy world where all scenarios are possible, the creators chose to end a seemingly bold story with the restoration of the old order.

Moreover, the screenwriters do everything to portray Daenerys as a bewildered fanatic so they can justify the rule of the Starks. A much more interesting dramatic plot (and also much more political, albeit pessimistic) would be to portray Daenerys as a benevolent ruler with the idea of a new, more just political system, but the rest of the families would plot against her to keep their previous power. Incidentally, it is

symptomatic that in the series the role of the ruler is finally entrusted to the handicapped Bran Stark, while the northern kingdom falls under the reign of his sister. These roles, appointed in the spirit of political correctness, are a way the series' creators try to compensate for the political compromise of their ending; viewers should be pleased that the series has addressed the sensibilities of “minorities” (handicapped, women), overlooking how this solution only legitimizes the continuation of systematic exploitation: aristocratic authority over the (poor) masses. But the final message of the series is clear: even in the fantasy world you cannot imagine a new world order—even in a completely made-up world, there is no possibility for a radical change.

The problem with *The Handmaid's Tale* is similar. This dystopian series, an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's famous novel, takes place in Gilead—a country devastated by a major ecological cataclysm which brought the power to radically conservative fundamentalist forces. The rulers of Gilead base their government on all kinds of humiliation, exploitation, and abuse of women. Handmaids are abused the most: being the only fertile women left, they are systematically raped in order to provide the Gilead's establishment with babies. The series follows the novel to some extent, but already in the first season, most faithful to the literary proposition, the story is interrupted by the main character's (June) flashbacks depicting her life before she was forced to abide to the new totalitarianism.

The depiction of the terrible system in Gilead has been seen by many as an allegory of Donald Trump's reign in USA: conservative with hints of totalitarianism, especially when it comes to women and pro-life politics. Angela Nagle nicely points out (in her article “MarketTheology”) that the problem of American women today is not that they are forced to give birth but rather that they cannot afford to have as many children as they want.<sup>41</sup> In Nagle's view, the reason so many liberals were content to recognize in this series a depiction of Trump's rule lies in the fact that it is much easier to see simple struggles in such “reassuring fiction,” and much more difficult to deal with the anomalies and antagonism of existing economic system that subordinates everything and everyone to the market logic.

If the series has become, in the eyes of many, an illustration of Donald Trump's reign, then June's flashbacks depict a dreamy liberal society of Western present (before Trump). Gilead—a caricature of the right-wing dictatorship—is here opposed to the world of our age,<sup>42</sup> providing a kind of idealized image of modern liberal democracies where racially mixed couples coexist in harmony, where women obtain once

41 Cf. Nagle 2017.

42 In light of a current coronavirus pandemic one should be nevertheless careful here. I am referring to the age before the pandemic and its not yet visible global consequences.

male-dominated professions (for example, in science and medicine), where free love of the LGBTQ+ communities is celebrated, etc. Our era is therefore presented as a kind of paradise of identity politics, as a historical period without serious systemic problems and antagonisms where everyone lives peacefully and freely in accordance with their chosen identity.

From the perspective of main character's memories, Gilead can only be understood as an extremely evil phenomenon, born out of thin air, established by pure evil forces, not because of the previous system was beset by ecological and other structural problems. If we put aside the obvious obscene pleasure provided by the detailed depiction of the horrors of the life in Gilead, what strikes the eye is the phantasmatic representation of our present: Jameson's notion of nostalgia for the present gets an exemplary illustration in *Handmaid's Tale*. From the perspective of Gilead's monstrous rule, the liberal modernity of the last thirty years in the West is represented as an idealized past of the peaceful coexistence of diverse identities. The series uses a dystopian vision to reassure us of the unproblematic present, and is in that sense far more ideological than Gilead with all its religious fundamentalism and cruelty.

The message that the two great narratives of our time, *Game of Thrones* and *Handmaid's Tale*, convey is, above all, that we can imagine major dystopias, catastrophic events in the future, horrific governments, etc., but we always see them against the backdrop of our unproblematic and idealized historical moment. The future serves as a vehicle for the nostalgia for the present.

Fantastic narratives in contemporary popular culture thus confirm Jameson's well-known thesis that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to envision a radical change of the existing economic and political system. A real political project might therefore be simply to replace the nostalgia for the present with imagining an alternate future that is not merely catastrophic and dystopian. However, to do this, one should first find the courage to imagine something like the end of the story. If a story can end, so might a history.

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# *Parasite* and the Parallax of Social Relations Under Capitalism

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a psychoanalytic film analysis of director Bong Joon-ho's 2019 film *Parasite*, which engages Slavoj Žižek's concept of a "political parallax." The analysis reveals how social (class) relations under Capitalism are anamorphically distorted and structured by way of an unsymbolizable gap. Ultimately, achieving a parallax view allows us to see that it's not capitalism that breeds parasites; rather parasitism is already there, inherently built into capitalism in the form of an internal excess. Thus, capitalism itself becomes the parasitic system that perpetuates both the fantasy of freedom and the fetishization of class difference, which, paradoxically obfuscates class struggle itself.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytic film analysis, Parallax, Class Relations, Capitalism

One of the most difficult concepts for students of psychoanalytic film theory to grasp is that of the subject. When students are unable to discern the complexity of the paradoxes through which the subject emerges, they usually default to the notion of a person, which allows them ready references to the symbolic meanings and imaginary identities they see on the screen. That is, they take representation as unproblematic and immediate, and as such they are ready to apply the various sociological categories of race, class, sex, and gender; to evaluate how a film does or does not portray reality accurately and decide whether it esteems or denigrates the under-represented of identity politics. Analyzing films in this way and according to these categories reveals the way ideology works; it holds out the idea that we are free to determine our identities and that film as a representation of life requires our vigilant critique,

Yet, what psychoanalytic film theory asks students to do is to begin to detect not what is represented on screen in a positivized way, but how what we see on the screen is configured paradoxically by way of what is not there and simultaneously, by what is "too much" there. We are concerned in psychoanalytic film theory to discern how failure, lack, excess, distortions, and impasse, reveal a reality that is itself ontologically incomplete. The subject, "far from totalizing reality," according to Slavoj Žižek, "can occur only when there is a radical rip in the texture of reality, when reality is not a 'flat' collection of objects but implies a radical crack" so that ultimately, "the subject itself is the rip in reality, what tears its seamless texture apart."<sup>1</sup> The subject is not an empirical entity, but rather, like the *object a*, a purely formal category; the lack of the subject correlates to the *object a* as that which remains of the Real after it goes through symbolization.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, 2017, p. 43

<sup>2</sup> Or yet another way to convey the category of the subject comes from Alenka Zupančič: "reality as it

With Lacanian psychoanalysis we can trace the lack that launches desire and frames our fantasies, the hole around which drive repeats its circuit, and the enjoyment elicited through these movements. We see, for example, the excess enjoyment of racial hatreds in Spike Lee's montages; the excess and impasse of Quentin Tarantino's revenge fantasies; the way the love relation confronts an obstacle in the romantic couple film; or the more subtle yet striking way fantasies are decentered in director Ernst Lubitsch's masterful use of comedy. Film fantasies work to fill in the gaps that ideology attempts to cover over, and simultaneously offer us ways to envision the possibility of an object that would fulfill our desire. But psychoanalytic film theory asks us to see the way these fantasies and representations on screen are only possible by screening off the constitutive nothing, the cracks in the symbolic, the obstacle of the sexual relation, or the impasses of desire. When films present spectators a traumatic encounter with the Real, it offers them a way to see themselves (as subjects) and the symbolic order "from the perspective of a void."<sup>3</sup>

As such, the radicality of psychoanalytic film theory lies in its potential, according to Todd McGowan, to counter the way film fantasies perpetuate a "docile subject," one who "pays the price for meaning with its freedom."<sup>4</sup> Further, as he writes, "Our ability to contest an ideological structure depends on our ability to recognize the real point at which it breaks down, the point at which the void that ideology conceals manifests itself."<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalytic film theorists are concerned with discerning the way the *object a*, as gaze or voice, is deployed in film to elicit our (often traumatic) enjoyment, and there are a myriad of ways films can do this, including, anamorphic distortions of form and content, the use of mixed genres, uncanny juxtapositions, spectral voices and ambient sound, the expected surprise of comedy, disruptions of linear causality and temporality, or the unexpected film ending, just to name a few. As Žižek maintains, cinema is at its best when "through subtleties of *mise-en-scene*, it makes the spectator experience reality itself as something fantasmatic."<sup>6</sup>

The wager of psychoanalytic film theory, then, is that it offers us a unique opportunity to discern how our world, our reality is framed through something fantasmatic, how it has no ontologically complete status on its own; how we, as subjects are singular beings posited only

is independently of ourselves appears (comes into view) only 'dependently on us' as subjects – not in the sense of being caused or constituted by us, but in the sense that reality's own inherent negativity/contradiction appears as part of this reality precisely in the form of the subject." Zupančič, 2017, p. 121.

3 McGowan, 2007, p. 20

4 McGowan, 2007, pp. 16 -17

5 McGowan, 2007, p. 17

6 Žižek, 2012, p. 317

retroactively; and how our enjoyment is, as *jouissance*, always excessive. If we can detect the way ideology works according to the positivized nothing around which desire, fantasy, and enjoyment all circulate, and the impasses we confront in our symbolic and imaginary identities, then we'll begin to see that freedom is not simply something "out there" but inheres in the very way we experience our predicament and realize the contours of our world. Psychoanalytic film theory and its unique way of analyzing films promises a way to re-politicize "the political"; not through resisting the dominant ideology, but in its ability to help us fathom and give form to its cracks and fissures, and the way this orients us (as subjects) to authority.<sup>7</sup>

It's important here not to conflate McGowan's "docile subject," with a "neutral subject," and Alenka Zupančič's thinking helps us understand the difference. Turning Althusser's formulation of the subject's interpellation around, she writes that while ideology interpellates subjects into different identities, by answering authority's call of "Hey, you!" this is not the complete story: "not only is the subject in this sense a condition of ideology, it also constitutes its inner limit, its possible breaking point, its ceasing to function and losing its grip on us." And further, "we are, or become, emancipatory subjects by a second identification which is only made possible within the ideological parallax.... The subject is both the problem and the possible (emancipatory) solution," and this is so "because the subject is not a neutral substrate to be molded into this or that ideological figure or shape, but a negativity, a crack," which is "not simply eliminated when an ideological identification/recognition takes place, but becomes part of it."<sup>8</sup> The subject's freedom is connected not to the idea that it can create its own identity, but to the realization that identity is grounded in an ontology that can never be complete. And this logic is mirrored in the way political movement do or do not work towards emancipation. If oppositional groups like American feminism or the LGBTQ+ movement become caught up in endless resistance, the political struggle is limited to a struggle for recognition, but if movements work for complete social transformation, they can redefine the coordinates of authority itself.

It is this idea of "ideological parallax" and taking a "parallax view," in Žižek's meaning, that becomes an important analytical concept for psychoanalytic film theory. The parallax Real is, as Žižek writes: "that which accounts for the very multiplicity of appearances of the same underlying Real...it is not the hard core which persists as the Same, but the hard bone of contention which pulverizes the sameness into the

7 For example, in his *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and 'The Rules of the Game'*, Todd McGowan's analysis of Jean Renoir's 1939 classic film "disturbs spectators by revealing to them the extent of their fealty to the authority that they believe themselves to have escaped." McGowan, 2015, p. 13.

8 Hamza, 2019, p. 447

multitude of appearances.”<sup>9</sup> And the “political parallax” allows us to realize that “the social antagonism which allows for no common ground between the conflicting agents” also known as ‘class struggle’ requires us to “think the gap in a materialist way”: not only do we have to see the “reality” of objective socioeconomic forces, but also the real (parallax real) of class differences, or social relations under capitalism. “In other words, the gap between the individual and the ‘impersonal’ social dimension is to be inscribed back within the individual himself: this ‘objective’ order of the social Substance exists only insofar as individuals treat it as such, relate to it as such.”<sup>10</sup>

Director Bong Joon-ho’s 2019 film *Parasite* offers us the rare opportunity, not only to discern how the lack circulates in terms of fantasy and desire, but also to see how class relations under capitalism are sustained and perpetuated by an unsymbolizable gap. The film offers us another way to see how capitalism veils its continual generation and re-appropriation of an excess, one that paradoxically both connects and dismantles the link between surplus value and surplus enjoyment. We realize that it’s not an objective reality that sustains this system, but rather the antagonism of a real, the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly and which cannot be apprehended through symbolic fictions or virtual formations.<sup>11</sup> Through a psychoanalytic film analysis we are given the means to “look awry” at our world, to see by way of a parallax view; to discern the structure of an antagonism that was heretofore concealed. And a psychoanalysis of the film *Parasite* offers us a parallax view of the way social relations under capitalism are anamorphically distorted. Ultimately, we come to see that it’s not capitalism that breeds parasites, rather parasitism is already there, inherently built into it in the form of an internal excess. From a parallax view, capitalism becomes the parasitic system that perpetuates both the fantasy of freedom (neoliberalist ideology), and the fetishization of class difference, which obfuscates class struggle itself.

In various of his works Žižek considers the importance of Levi-Strauss’s famous account in *Structural Anthropology* of the ways that two group within the native American tribe, the Winnebago, perceived the spatial coordinates of their village. The first more powerful group conceived of the village as a circle within a circle, while the second group, which Žižek labels “revolutionary-antagonistic” conceived the cottages of their village separated by an invisible frontier.<sup>12</sup> The crucial point here, as Žižek relates, is not that the two groups have their own misperception

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9 Žižek, 2006, p. 26

10 Žižek, 2006, p. 6.

11 Žižek, 2006, p 26

12 Žižek, 2006, p. 25; and Žižek, 2017, p. 113

of the same objective reality, but that each group’s perception is formulated through a traumatic kernel, a “fundamental antagonism that the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize,” thus revealing “an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole...it is here that one can see in what precise sense the Real intervenes through anamorphosis.”<sup>13</sup>

In the film *Parasite* we detect the same phenomenon between the world of the abjectly poor Kim family and the wealthy Park family living in Seoul, South Korea. The way the two families live is distilled in the *mise-en-scene* of their very different living spaces. The Kims live in the bug-infested squalor of a *banjiha*, a semi-basement apartment, where the primary view from their window looks out onto a dirty alleyway. From the darkly comedic opening of the film it is clear that the Kims are the excess cast-offs of society; living like vermin, subject to fumigations, urinations, and the smells, sights, and sounds of the dirty city streets. In contrast, the wealthy Parks live in an elegant, spacious, architecturally designed home, and from the intimacy of their living room, they look out through floor-to-ceiling windows onto a green, lush and private yard.

Briefly, the relationship between these two families follows that of a deceptive parasite to its host. Each member of the Kim family cunningly finds ways to oust the servants of the Park family and insert themselves into their positions. The father (Kang-ho Song) becomes the family’s driver, the mother (Jeong-eun Lee) takes over as housekeeper, the daughter (So-dam Park) is hired as an art therapist to the Park’s young son, and the son (Woo-sik Choi) becomes an English tutor to the Parks’ teenage daughter. All goes well until a third family (a couple) surfaces, the previously employed housekeeper (Hye-jin Jang) and her husband (Myeon-hoon Park), who has secretly been living in the bomb shelter deep beneath the basement for over 4 years in order to escape unemployment, homelessness and threats from creditors. He was kept alive by his wife who had been stealing the Park family’s food. Appearances on the surface hid the obscenity of poverty existing in the inner depths of the affluent home.

In the first half of the film Bong deceptively lures us, the spectators, into thinking the Kim family has out-smarted the Parks through its own craft and subterfuge, and that the two families are existing in some sense as a “harmonious whole.” So, we are caught off-guard when in the second half of the film, things seem to spiral out of control and end in tragedy for all three families. Yet the signs of a disturbance are already found in the first half of the film, where here and there we get the sense of something not quite right, the feeling that at any moment something might shatter the delicate parasitic balance. An anamorphic distortion where a parallax shift begins is detected in the way the two families are presented

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13 Žižek, 2006, pp. 26-27

vis-à-vis each other. The mother (Yeo-jeong Jo) and father (Sun-kyun Lee) of the Park family are barely seen in the same room together; their affluence, however, allows them to buy everything their children might desire, including tents and toys from the U.S., walkie-talkies, tutors, and art therapists. The Parks maintain the fantasy of a bright future to ensure their children's happiness and success in the capitalist system. The Kim family, in contrast, have no sense of this future; they are not interested in finding gainful employment, or putting money away for a future health crisis or ensuring college tuition for their children; instead they use their wits to secure positions within the Parks' household, which gives them a chance to survive in the moment. In contrast to the Parks, the four members of the Kim family are often in the same room, huddled together; they share a closeness and camaraderie, but they appear more like rats that travel in a pack. In a haunting scene where the father, daughter, and son have just barely escaped detection by the Parks, they are seen running through a heavy rainstorm in the middle of the night like rats looking for shelter. When they arrive back at their own semi-basement apartment, they find it and the streets flooded with sewage water and are forced to sleep in a public shelter alongside hundreds of other refugees.

Other clues of the Kim family's status as outcasts comes through in the dialogue, for example, when the son, looking out of the Park's window at the very wealthy seemingly happy people gathered in the private yard below, asks their teenage daughter: "Do you think I fit in here?" And previously, the night before, when he saw his sister luxuriating in the bathtub of the Parks while they were away, he tells her that she looks good as a rich girl, and that she "fit well" in that scene. His quest to find a place to "fit in" is matched by the father's philosophy of life (told to his son and daughter) while in the public shelter. When they ask him what to do next, what his plan is, he replies that the plan is not to have a plan, because that way you can never fail. This is in stark contrast to the positivization of a "no," for example that we find in Žižek's account of Melville's *Bartleby* – instead of "I would prefer not to," the father remains in the place of the docile subject, living a life of contingent survival.<sup>14</sup>

The Kims and their class function both as *object a* (as object lacking its place) and as the excess Thing that threatens to overflow and "cross a line." In a memorable scene of the film, while the Kims are silently hiding under a coffee table just feet away from Mr. and Mrs. Kim lying on the couch nearby, they are forced to listen to the latter's fantasy of using an imagined "heroin-addict whore's" panties to elicit sexual passion. The panties were actually left by the Kims' daughter in the Parks' car to implicate the driver in debaucherous acts and ensure his firing. Later, however, it is the stain of their status that marks the Kims when the Parks locate in them something in them more than themselves, their odor. It is

14 Žižek, 2006, pp. 381-382

something the Kim family themselves are only made aware of when the Parks' young son announces that each one of them "smells the same." Mr. Park tells his wife that Mr. Kim's odor reminds him of "the smells on the subway," or the smell of "old radishes"; it is this excess odor that threatens to "cross the line," according to Mr. Park.<sup>15</sup>

The anamorphic object that functions like the skull in Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors* is located in the doorway that marks the unsymbolizable divide between the above-ground affluence and the below-ground basement-dwellers, a place the former architect-owner was too ashamed to reveal to the Parks, a place hidden out of sight. The doorway, framed on either side by dimly lit showcases of expensive figurines, often appears as a depthless void without contour. When figures walk into the doorway they visually disappear from view, and we find them in the next scene already in the basement below. With the discovery of the bunker deep below the basement, the long winding staircase functions in the same way as the basement doorway, as the disorienting pathway leading down into a deeper abyss.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the film Bong's formal film elements often work like punctuation marks, unexpectedly alerting us, the spectators, to something being truncated, while simultaneously announcing another anamorphic displacement. This occurs, for example when the Parks go on a camping trip and the Kim family parties in their living room, drinking their hosts' alcohol, celebrating their good fortune late at night, when the doorbell abruptly rings. It is the former housekeeper who with a nervous laugh tells them she has left something behind in the basement when she was so unexpectedly fired. It also occurs when soon after this, while the Kim family is attempting to subdue the former housekeeper and her husband, the phone suddenly rings; it is the Parks announcing that they have abandoned their camping trip and will be arriving home in 8 minutes. Bong's use of a long series of cross-cutting scenes between the two underground spaces of the bunker and the semi-basement of the Kim family, depicts scenes of utter desperation and dejection. We watch while the former housekeeper who has sustained a serious concussion and is slowly dying, tries to free her bound husband by pulling off the duct tape with her teeth; we also watch as the Kims scramble to seek refuge in their semi-basement apartment, now flooded by sewage water, rendering

15 It is this logic of the "other" depicted as both object of fantasy and as abject Thing that we find also in director Jordan Peele's 2018 film *Get Out*, not in terms of class, but in terms of race, where black bodies are both the source of fantasy and the Thing that is appropriated as Real by white liberals. As Sheldon George writes in his study of the trauma of African-Americans, "...the other's jouissance, bound to fantasy, actively oscillates between subjective imaginings that designate it alternately as alien and as excessive" George, 2016, p. 9,

16 In Bong's 2013 film *Snowpiercer* the constant fast-paced circuit of the train containing the wealthy and abject poor in different compartments might be said to play a similar role, denoting the unsymbolizable real (the incessant race) underneath the never-ending capitalist mode of production and consumption.

them homeless and destitute. It's as if the two parasitic families struggle to survive against each other in order to retain hooks in their wealthy hosts. Yet this misery is displaced by the end of the film with a tragedy of even greater magnitude.

In a rapid series of events filmed in slow motion, we witness the violent rage of parasites against each other and then against their hosts. In the setting of an elegant party on the lush green lawn of the Parks, a series of stabbings ensues leaving the Kims' daughter, the former housekeeper's husband, and Mr. Park all dead. The latter is stabbed by Mr. Kim after he sees Mr. Park grimace at the bad odor of a dead body, which instantly registers as a moment of rage against the stain attached to his own being, the thing in him more than himself. The act of violence against Mr. Park is also directed inward because the stabbing becomes also a suicidal gesture for Mr. Kim, *a passage à l'acte*, which in a moment of impotence is a strike against his own miserable fate. Later, when Mr. Kim takes refuge in the bunker, we see him apologizing to Mr. Park's picture, as he held no ill will against him.

The antagonism exposed in the film *Parasite* reveals that there is no "harmonious whole" possible under Capitalism, yet what's also revealed is that all deceptions are not the same. As an example and in comparison, we find deceptions of a different kind among citizens of the former Soviet Union who during the Cold War were fond of the saying: "We pretend to work, and they [the government] pretend to pay us." Their parasitic underground existed in the vast "second economy" of illicit trades, bargains, and private production, which secretly sustained the stultifying surface economy of the centralized plans. In *Parasite*, however, the deceptions (the performances) of the Kim family, which secured their employment in the Park's household, did not sustain the economic activity "on the surface." That is, while the Kims were well aware of their deceptions, the Park family held the illusion that their status was merited, that their wealth was earned, and that they had a special entitlement to it, which is the founding lie of the Other under Capitalism. As servants who worked under willful false pretense, the Kims' deceptions veiled not pride or commitment of service, as we find, for example, in the servants of the PBS television series *Downton Abbey*, but the reality that capitalism is possible only by way of the ultimate masquerade of entitlement.

By the end of the film, the deceptions of the Kim family are traded in for the founding deception and fantasy of capitalism, but with a twist. Realizing that his father, now a wanted killer, has taken refuge in the bunker of the house that his family once worked for, the Kim's son fantasizes that he will one day become wealthy enough to buy the house and free his father. The fantasy of capitalist wealth is restored and symbolized in the son's act of placing the large rock given to him by a friend to secure his luck and good fortune, back in a river where it becomes indistinguishable among other rocks; it is now back "in its place." Yet even in the last part of the film Bong continues to let us

know that something remains out of joint, anamorphically distorted and unsymbolizable, and he does this by inserting an "out of place" humor in the tragic aftermath of the killings. After the son who sustained a serious brain injury awakes from surgery, he appears with a bemused smile and an uncontrollable laugh, even while looking at the picture of his now-dead sister. The son's happy countenance is juxtaposed to his sorrow at the discovery that his father has taken refuge in the bomb shelter and is tapping out a letter to him in Morse code via a porch light.

The portrayals of class difference belie the anamorphic distortions, antagonisms, and gaps which prop up and make possible the identities of wealth and class privilege on the surface. Each wealthy family in their succession will live above ground and hire servants from the lower class to care for their needs, while the lowest of classes, the parasites, will continue to live out of sight, like ghosts.<sup>17</sup> They have no way to resist and no way to go back to the usual deceptions of life under capitalism on the surface. The only place for the parasite is among the living dead, unseen, reduced to sending out signals to an Other that may or may not exist. The Kim family, themselves, ultimately stand for the excess, and as such they are symptomatic of the antagonism of social relations under capitalism. The parasites who dwell as invisibles in the core of capitalist wealth are akin to "the wandering excess" in Žižek's words, Ranciere's "part-of-no-part," Hegel's rabble, or Badiou's *sans-papiers*. They are paradoxically at once both excluded from and immanent to capitalism; since they have no recognition on the surface, their symbolic status is foreclosed and threatens to return in the form of a real, such as in inexplicable acts of rage and violence.

A parallax shift allows us to see what's on the other side of the proverbial coin, or where the turn in the Mobius strip is occurring; it is a perspective from the place of a void, an impossible place. Such a view allows us to see that the wealthiest class is also subject to the parasitic structure, as they are bound to the belief of capitalism's ultimate promises. As McGowan writes: "The capitalist regime produces subjects who cling feverishly to the image of their own dissatisfaction and thus to the promise, constantly made explicit in capitalist society, of a way to escape this dissatisfaction through either the accumulation of capitalism or the acquisition of the commodity."<sup>18</sup> Capitalism generates its own internal excess, what it both excludes and depends on, but the enjoyment once realized as surplus enjoyment and attached to surplus-value becomes displaced. As the son takes over the father's contingent existence, he trades in the enjoyment of dissatisfaction generated by capitalism's demand of accumulation and acquisition, for an existence

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17 Today in Seoul, hundreds of thousands of poor live in semi-basement apartments or worse, in "goswan" or Jjokbang" flop houses with daily or weekly rents, where they often wait for a lonely death. Choe and Lam, 2020, p. 5

18 McGowan, 2016, p. 11

tied to compulsory freedom, that is, of acquiring wealth to extricate another parasitic ghost. As Žižek writes, the move from contingency to necessity entails “the suspension of all strategic considerations based upon hope for a better future,” and it is this very move that is foreclosed to the son and indeed to all parasites who live under capitalism, as they are forced to live by hope alone.<sup>19</sup>

Returning to the consideration of the “harmonious whole” in Levi-Strauss’s meaning, we find that achieving a parallax shift reorients reality in a radical way. That is, instead of seeking to find ways to distribute the wealth or ensure access to the riches of capitalism in a more just way, we look for what can “cut across” both groups’ (both classes’) perception of their village, unveiling an antagonism that was heretofore concealed. Or, as Žižek puts it, “the tension between the hegemonic order and its symptoms (parts of no-part, wandering excesses) cannot be properly understood without locating it with regard to the basic antagonism that cuts across the social Whole and makes it non-All (‘class struggle’).”<sup>20</sup> The paradox that emerges here is a Hegelian one, for as Žižek further writes: “In Hegelese, class struggle necessarily encounters itself in its oppositional determination....class difference can serve as its own best mask.”<sup>21</sup> The calls for equal wealth, or social balance are abstractions that obfuscate the gap that keeps the dynamic of class relations firmly in place.

The end of Bong Joon-ho’s film brings to mind one of economist Thomas Picketty’s major findings in his work, *Capital in the 21st Century*, which reveals that capitalism will never be able to offer anything close to equal wealth and power (in our words “a harmonious whole”). Picketty discovered a sort of “proof” or metric that measured the exponential growth of dynastic and inherited wealth, which continues and will, in the future, far outpace the growth of the economy at large, that is the majority of people’s (workers’) efforts to earn a livable wage.<sup>22</sup> If psychoanalysis allows us a similar “proof” about the situation of social relations under capitalism, it might be the following, which is found in Samo Tomič’s *The Capitalist Unconscious*. Referring to Marx’s analysis of the extraction of surplus-value from the consumption of labor-power, Tomšič writes: “The same asymmetry is reflected in the broader social context: the accumulation of wealth accompanied by the accumulation of misery, the

19 Žižek, 2017, p. 249

20 Žižek, 2017, p. 24. The notion of class antagonism, as such, “is thus not the ultimate referent-signified, the hidden meaning, of all other struggles but a measure of the ‘(non-)authenticity’ of all other struggles...” (Žižek, 2017, p. 235).

21 Žižek 2017, p. 245.

22. Picketty believes that we will look back with nostalgia at the day when we could still detect where the wealth was located in an era of “self-made men”; that wealth in our day is so concentrated that a large segment of society is virtually unaware of its existence.

revolution of the means of production combined with the production of surplus population. The capitalist social link is structured like entropy.”<sup>23</sup>

Taking a parallax view of social relations under Capitalism allows us to see both the curse and the opportunity at hand. A simple definition of “entropy” refers to two elements: “The entropy of an object is a measure of the amount of energy which is unavailable to do work. Entropy is also a measure of the number of possible arrangements the atoms in a system can have. In this sense, entropy is a measure of uncertainty of randomness.”<sup>24</sup> If we combine these two elements of the phenomenon of entropy, we can see how capitalism might either continue to generate its own excess (under a masculine logic of exclusion), or how new social arrangements might lead to the system’s complete collapse and replacement (Lacan’s feminine logic of the non-All). A parallax shift would open the space for a radical (internal) shift in the very structure of our reality under capitalism. According to McGowan, “the measuring stick for critique is not the promise of a better future but capitalism’s underlying structure....Capitalism’s hold over us depends on our failure to recognize the nature of its power.”<sup>25</sup> And Žižek writes something similar when he makes the case that when we push certain categories of people to the bottom of the class structure and blame it on the “natural outcome of (free) markets,” we encounter: “Class difference itself as a fetish which obfuscates class struggle.”<sup>26</sup> The film *Parasite* allows us to see this contradictory logic at work in capitalist social relations, and provokes us into realizing that it’s the Real of our antagonisms, the stain of our status, the deceptions we are called to enact, that all work to service and perpetuate the parasitic demands of Capitalism itself.

23 Tomšič, 2015, p. 70.

24 Simple English Wikipedia. Available online at: <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entropy>

25 McGowan, 2016, p. 14. In *Emancipation after Hegel*, he writes: “For Hegel, not only are entities unable to coexist peacefully with each other, but they cannot coexist peacefully with themselves,” a failure that “animates them at the same time as it ultimately destroys them” (McGowan, 2019, p. 125).

26 Žižek, 2017, p. 247.

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# Industry of Boredom: On the Discord between Cinematic Telos and Ethos

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we consider the problem of boredom experienced in the cinema halls. We try to reassess it and accord to it a “positive” meaning: the very conditions of the movie viewing predispose to boredom (cinematic *ethos*). This, however, contradicts the proclaimed goal of the cinema: to entertain (cinematic *telos*). We argue that the ontology of cinema is based on the discord between its telos and its ethos. The general line of the evolution of cinema consists in the development of the means of entertaining. Films that deviate from this line are called “boring”. Thus, we find a non-sociological criterion for delineating so-called “popular” movies from so-called “indie”: this is the attitude of filmmakers towards boredom. The pervasiveness of boredom in the cinema halls is explained by the historical and metaphysical connection of boredom with Modern industrial technology. Cinema, being the first institution and art born of industrial technology, is phenomenologically constituted by the experience of boredom. In the end we briefly discuss various methods that the filmmakers use to induce boredom in the spectator. “Boring” films paradoxically appear to be the only ones capable to “heal” from boredom, while the “entertaining” films just divert from it.

**Keywords:** boredom, entertainment, cinematic experience, Edgar Morin, Martin Heidegger, ontology of film, slow cinema.

“A boring movie” is a verdict. The characteristic “boring” is usually what a conversation ends with, but we will try to start from this place. In the course of our speculation, we will discover that cinema, being the flagship of the entertainment industry, has actually become an industry of boredom or, if you look from the other side, a unique laboratory of boredom.

Boredom is difficult to formalize: it cannot be measured by heart rate, like fear, and it can take hidden forms that elude deep interviews and sociological surveys. Therefore, the most appropriate approach for dealing with boredom would be “phenomenological naivety”: when a spectator says “I’m bored”, in the cinema hall or after leaving it, it is not necessary to immediately subject his experiences to vivisection. This simple testimony is enough for a start.

Obviously, cinema is not a place where people come to get bored. “...One goes to the cinema because one wants to and not because one has to force oneself, in the hope that the film will please and not that it will displease”,<sup>1</sup> Christian Metz writes. The uniqueness of cinema as a technical invention is that, since its inception, it was right away put

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<sup>1</sup> Metz 1983, p. 7.

at the service of entertainment, while leaving aside the other benefits that were promised by the means for the motion registration (only later they guessed to use it for biological experiments and military mapping). Entertainment is *telos* of cinema as social and cultural institution. So, if we say that the boredom experienced in the cinema means just “a failure of the institution” (Christian Metz) in its effort to entertain us, the strange peculiarity of the very situation of the film birth will slip away.

What is peculiar in this situation is the need for entertainment as such. But if cinema emerged when this need became urgent, isn't it because people began to get more bored at some moment? Historical research shows that in different periods people got bored to different extents.<sup>2</sup> There were times that didn't seem to know boredom at all. The ancient Greeks lacked both the word “boredom” and the description of the corresponding symptoms. We neither can say that the “bored” inhabitants of ancient Rome, like noble and rich characters of Petronius' “Satyricon”, are bored in the modern sense: they clearly felt some deficiency of being, however, this deficiency was made up by the slave system and the resources of the Empire, which were abundant. At that epoch, boredom was still bearable for those who were bored, and only those were, properly speaking, bored who could bear boredom, that is, the aristocratic class.

Modern boredom still had predecessors. Medieval *acedia*, coming closer to what we mean by boredom today, is, nonetheless, a moral and theological concept. It expressed a fall from God: those who suffer from acedia get into one of the circles of Dante's hell. The prescribed cure for acedia is located outside the earthly world. By contrast, *melancholy*, the Renaissance predecessor of boredom, is a physical illness cured by physical means. Unlike acedia and boredom, displeasure (pain) in melancholy is fused with wisdom (what has got a symbolic expression in the famous Dürer's painting). The word “boredom” appears in European languages only in the 17th century, firstly in French: there were cases when the word *ennui* was translated into German by a lengthy retelling. Blaise Pascal was maybe the first to conceptualize this notion, and Romantic authors were first to describe the phenomenon in detail. After René, Childe Harold and Eugene Onegin, complaints about boredom become omnipresent.

The cure of boredom has come into being in the same time as the word denoting boredom: this is entertainment. Pascal explicitly opposes *ennui* to *divertissement* and defines the latter as a result of incapability “to stay quietly in their own chamber”. The abolition of the slave system in the Middle Ages and the euphemization of violence in Modern times forced the aristocracy to search for alternative antidotes to boredom, which were, in case of Pascal, socializing in salons.

2 See: Svendsen 2009.

So, boredom is a historical phenomenon. The historical change in the nature of entertainment appears to be more covered in scholarly literature: being just a “child play” (*he paidia*) in Aristotle's times, a sort of excess of repose, in the industrial epoch it was described as “the habituation to work”<sup>3</sup> (Nietzsche) or as prolongation of labor under the late industrial capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer). But entertainment could not be put to the assembly line, “industrialized”, in recent ages, until boredom became manifest and global.

How can boredom in cinema be possible since cinema is aimed at entertainment? The first moviegoers, in the 1920s and 1930s, often depicted the ritual of visiting the cinema as an attempt of escaping boredom. But this is more than just a fact that people go to the cinema for the sake of entertainment; that is, trying to run away from boredom (which they bring with them to the cinema). The cinema itself is a place for boredom. A popular myth claims that the Lumière brothers invented cinema in 1895, but this is not quite the case: a movie camera functionally identical to Lumière's (*le cinématographe*) had been designed and patented by Léon Bouly two years before the “official” birth of movie. The merit of the Lumière brothers consisted in the invention of the commercial exploitation of a movie camera in the halls, *les cinémas* (camera was used, then, both for shooting and projecting): the birth of cinema is, mainly, the birth of the conditions of film viewing. And these conditions predispose boredom.

The scientific, psychological understanding of boredom coincides with the common wisdom: “boring” means that the level of stimulation is below optimal. Yet, it is precisely the lack of stimulation that the conditions of film viewing are virtually tooled for. These conditions have always remained more or less invariant: spectator's isolation and immobility, complete blackout, social codes prescribing motor and verbal restrictions (don't talk, don't applaud before the end, don't leave the hall until the end of the performance...). All derivative forms of the cinema viewing conditions, like TV home watching, include these elements to one degree or another. However, it would be wrong to consider all derivative forms as forms of film viewing: a movie shown on the screen of a mobile phone is not, rigorously speaking, a movie (at least, it can be argued that if the conditions of the film viewing were initially different, films would not be such as we know it today). To confirm the significance of the conditions of film viewing that predispose motor atrophy, one can recall the fact that interactivity (participatory practices) in the movie did not take root, despite all the opportunities for this: the first interactive film was made only in 1967.

The restrictions of spectator's sensorium in the cinema, the sensory starvation that a spectator experiences in cinema hall, have

3 Nietzsche, §611.

brought to life the famous metaphor of cinema (first proposed by the early film theorist Lionel Landry, in the 1920s, and later elaborated by Jean Louis Baudry in the 1970s<sup>4</sup>): cinema as Platonic cave; spectator as a prisoner. Jean-Luc Godard argued in his “Histoire(s) du cinéma” series that the idea of cinema stemmed from a prison situation (in 1812–1814, French mathematician Jean-Victor Poncelet wrote in the Saratov prison his “Treatise on the Projective Properties of Figures”). Paradoxically, an individual incapable, because of feeling boredom, “to stay quietly in their own chamber” voluntarily moves to another, even more prison-like chamber.

Compared to other works of art, nothing is so often endowed with the characteristic “boring” as movies (somehow, we don’t hear complaints about “boring songs” or “boring exhibitions”). But is it boring only in cinema? We claim that cinema, in comparison with other arts and areas of entertainment, really has a kind of priority in the relation to the boredom experience. For example, unlike in cinema, in the museum we are free both in time and in space; in a literary text, we read it in leaps and bounds: we are free to skip or to skim boring places in the book or put it off altogether. The differences between film viewing and the musical concert are more subtle. The first one consists in the fact that films are more semantically loaded than musical works: inattention and skipping a fragment at the concert does not lead to misunderstanding and, as a result, to the growth of boredom (a listener who has left the concert hall for a short time does not ask the people sitting nearby whether he missed anything, unlike a moviegoer). The second difference is the same as between the movie showing and the theatrical performance: this is the “irresponsiveness” of the movie spectacle; the impossibility of spectator’s active participation. As André Bazin wrote, the actor and the spectator in the theater must be aware of each other’s presence, both doing this in the interests of the play, while the cinema screen ignores us.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the concert, like the theatrical performance, does not impose such strict requirements on the attention of the audience. Note also the increased concern for the comfort of moviegoers, which contributes to their anesthesia: for instance, it’s impossible to imagine theater boxes akin to “love seats” in cinema.

So, boredom is *ethos* (literally “habitual disposition, an accustomed place”) of cinema. Cinematic ethos contradicts its telos: the institution is aimed at entertainment, but the very place, experienced from the point of view of “phenomenological naivety”, is aimed at boredom. The ontology of film is based on this uncancellable discord.

From the controversial claim that cinema is more boring than other cultural media and institutions, we can move on to the question: how

4 Baudry 1978, p. 30.

5 Bazin 1959, p. 96.

is entertainment in the cinema possible at all? Social anthropologist Edgar Morin stated that the structural basis of the movie show is the processes of identification—projection, or, in other words, the affective participation.<sup>6</sup> Having always existed in the psychic reality, only in the conditions of a cinema hall did these processes gain incredible volume and strength. The affective participation constitutes the fundamental difference between cinema and theater: according to Bazin, “Tarzan is conceivable only in cinema”,<sup>7</sup> since his half-naked girlfriend would have caused in the (male) playgoer not a desire to identify with the hero but jealousy or envy.

However, this is not with the invention of the movie camera that the processes of identification—projection have been fully actualized in spectator’s psyche. For this, George Méliès was needed. It was Méliès who turned the projection of reality into a trick, into something that captures us; affectively involves us in the spectacle. Whereas the audience of the Lumière films—the first subjects of so-called photogeny—was amazed at the movement of the train or at the trembling foliage, the movie audience after Méliès could already experience the whole range of feelings.

What we call entertainment is essentially affective participation. But the latter is provided only in the conditions of motor atrophy. As Morin puts it, “The absence or atrophy of motor—either practical or active...— participation is closely related to mental and affective participation. The participation of the spectator, who cannot express himself in action, becomes internal, sensed. Spectacular kinesthesia collapses into spectacular coenesthesia, that is, into subjectivity, and causes projection—identification.”<sup>8</sup> This means that entertainment in the cinema is possible insofar as it is surrounded by a prison wall of boredom. Or, in our terms, cinematic telos is pre-conditioned by cinematic ethos.

Contemporary feature film, such as we are used to it (having certain duration, form, and content), as well as the conditions of film viewing, are not accidental: remaining the institutional standard since the industrialization of cinema, it still serves as a response to the challenge posed to it by the invariant viewing conditions. Contemporary feature film was formed as a result of discord between the disposition of the institutional film standard toward entertainment (cinematic telos) and the film viewing conditions causing boredom (cinematic ethos). The stabilization of the institutional standard of the movie spectacle in the early 1930s has occurred after seemingly optimal balance between cinema’s telos and ethos had been discovered.

6 Morin 2007, p. 104.

7 Bazin 1959, p. 94.

8 Morin 2007, p. 101.

In light of these theses, the whole evolution of cinema art can be regarded as an evolution of means of “affecting” (that is, of the organization of the affective participation): as Morin writes, “the technique of cinema consists in challenging, accelerating and intensifying the projection—identification”<sup>9</sup>. From Méliès’ tricks and Eisenstein’s “montage of attractions” through the Hollywood principle of “central conflict theory” and Hitchcock’s “suspense” to contemporary CGI—all those devices seek to win over the boredom-inducing conditions of the cinema hall. Movies that deviate from this general line are rightly called boring. Boring are those films that refuse to organize the affective participation and push the spectator into the anaesthetic conditions of the film viewing. A thin line separates “boring” films from “unsuccessful” ones; those that seek to entertain but fail to organize the affective participation.

The reputation of boring is strongly attached to the directors, who are usually referred to as the creators of the so-called non-mainstream cinema: we can watch the most stupid entertaining film to the end without ever experiencing boredom (the first moviegoers already noticed this fact when it came to comparing cinematic experience with reading experience<sup>10</sup>), boredom that tortures us, say, Robert Bresson’s late movies.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, perhaps the most natural watershed between the so-called “popular” movies and “indie” movies lies in the attitude, conscious or unconscious, of their creators towards boredom: it is either a fear of boredom, or neutrality or indulgence in relation to it. This can serve as a non-sociological criterion for delineating these two sorts of films: “popular” movies are marked by the divergence of cinematic telos and cinematic ethos, while “indie” movies are marked by their convergence.

Insightful moviegoers and thoughtful filmmakers tend to rehabilitate the experience of boredom in cinema. Bazin confessed that he was bored watching his favorite movie by Chaplin, and boredom didn’t displease him, and director Raúl Ruiz wrote that what he values in Ozu, Tarkovsky, and Straub–Huillet is “the quality of high boredom” above all<sup>12</sup>. These opinions, taken seriously, suggest that boredom in cinema deserves, perhaps, if not apologia, then at least reassessment. Maybe it seems that this doesn’t need a proof after the rise of the so-called “slow cinema” movement<sup>13</sup>. Yet, as we will say further, the rhythm and length of the shot is not the only thing that causes boredom (slowness implies boringness, but boringness does not necessarily imply slowness).

9 Morin 2007, p. 104.

10 Morin 2007, p. 108.

11 This observation is true at least from the point of view of “phenomenological naivety”, that is, regardless of the aesthetic preferences or the specific habits of a moviegoer.

12 Ruiz 1995, p. 18.

13 See, e.g.: Çağlayan 2018.

Why exactly does boredom take on such importance in cinema? An explanation we would like to provide for this is both anthropological and metaphysical: we argue that cinema is connected with boredom due to its technical basis. Cinema is the first institutionalized form of entertainment and, at the same time, the first art form born of industrial technology. In cinema, aesthetic changes have always followed technological ones. This double legacy was caught in the definition of cinema given in 1911 by Ricciotto Canudo (who is often considered to be the first film theorist): “the son of Machine and Feeling.”<sup>14</sup>

While, today, the key question regarding cinema is formulated as “art or entertainment?”, at the very beginning of film history it was posed the other way around: “art or technology?”. The then-found answer no longer surprises anyone: “The point, apparently, is not so much that cinema is a technology, but that cinema is an art,”<sup>15</sup> wrote Yury Tynyanov, one of the key members of the Russian Formalist School, in the 1920s. But the very formulation of the question, now forgotten, is more interesting than the answer to it. The first moviegoers didn’t cease being aware that they had a machine in front of them. To share their amazement, we must reverse the phrase of Tynyanov: let us assume that cinema is primarily a technology. The assertion that cinema is a technology does not in any way detract from the significance of cinema as Feeling, on the contrary, if cinema is both Feeling and Machine, doesn’t it have such great significance for our sensibility just because it belongs to Machine?

But then again, in what sense is cinema a technology? It would not be enough to point out that cinema consists in mechanical fixation and reproduction of reality. This Machine legacy must somehow be embodied in the spectator’s Feeling. The form by which the technical as such gets into the human experience in cinema was called by Jean-Louis Baudry “primary identification”: “The spectator is identified to a lesser extent with the represented, with the spectacle itself, than with what brings the spectacle into play or puts it on stage, what is invisible but what allows to see...”<sup>16</sup> This form implies the entire technological process related to the film projection, yet, for simplicity, we may understand by it the movie camera. “Primary identification” (occurring prior to the “secondary” identification with the characters of the film, which Morin calls “affective participation”) has a coercive character: “the spectator, coming in contact with reality through the camera as an intermediary, experiences a kind of submission to it.”<sup>17</sup> This is a necessary condition for the perception of a movie spectacle. Moreover, the design of the movie camera and the

14 Canudo 1926, p. 5.

15 Tynyanov 1977, p. 326.

16 Baudry 1978, p. 25.

17 Izvolov 2005, p. 25.

design of the cinema hall are identical: both here and there, the same principle of projection of the image through the lens onto the opposite wall is implemented. Thus, during a film show, the spectator functions like a machine: human being becomes “technified”. We can conclude that it is precisely at the moment of identifying a human being with the machine that boredom finds way to cinema.

In the 20th century, many wrote about the connection of technology with boredom (in particular, Friedrich and Ernst Jünger, Lewis Mumford, and Robert Musil). No one was so engrossed in technology and, at the same time, no one was so laden with boredom in Russian literature as the heroes of Andrei Platonov. Martin Heidegger has interpreted this connection perhaps most radically: “Probably these belong together: the alienation of the technological world and the deep boredom that is the hidden pull of a sought-for homeland.”<sup>18</sup> Heidegger is known as one of the greatest philosophers of technology and as the greatest philosopher of boredom. The latter, in his expression, is the “hidden destiny”<sup>19</sup> of modernity.

According to Heidegger, modern technology, rooted in Antiquity, emerges in Europe in the 17th century<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, the word “boredom” appears in European languages. Technology, says Heidegger, is not only and not so much machines, but a certain attitude to the world, which he called *Enframing* (*Gestell*). Technology is what reveals the truth, or, in Heidegger’s terms, “enframes” the “unconcealed”, like machines extracting ore in a coal mine. Along with Enframing, there is another way of “unconcealment”: *bringing-forth*, or *poiesis*—an attitude proper to the art. In the ancient Greek world, *techne* and *poiesis* were one (as a way of dealing with the truth), but then disintegrated. *Poiesis*, according to Heidegger, has a kind of ontological superiority over Enframing, because it carefully sustains the life of the mystery, while technology, trying to organize the mystery, condemns it to oblivion. By transforming the mystery exclusively into material for supply and management, technology alienates the human being from himself. In his lectures on boredom, Heidegger comes to the idea of the need for mystery for the first time: in boredom, he says, we are most oppressed by the very absence of any oppressiveness, we lack mystery with its “inner terror”<sup>21</sup> which gives to the human being (*Dasein*) its greatness.

One of the resources of technical organization is *time*. Since the essence of technical activity is efficiency, time begins to be perceived as an obstacle. And while the goal of scientific and technological progress

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18 Heidegger 1973, pp. 50–51. Quoted in: Thiele 1997, p. 507.

19 Heidegger 1995, p. XX.

20 See: Heidegger 1977.

21 Heidegger 1995, p. 164.

was initially proclaimed as saving time, in the end technology has become an attempt to conquer and subjugate time: time spent inefficiently is experienced as boring. Thus, the spread of boredom is the flip side of technological progress. Boredom is the blind spot of technology.

Heidegger sees the salvation from boredom not in relentless activity or in entertainment, which modern technology indulges in every way, but in tuning to even deeper boredom. Normally, boredom is in a dormant state, and by indefatigable activity and entertainment we only put it to sleep even more. The deeper the boredom, the more hidden it is. Displeasure arising from boredom pushes us from its depth (the third type of boredom, according to Heidegger) to its surface, to a light, superficial boredom (the first and second types of boredom). Yet, only by reaching the very bottom of boredom, by making latent boredom manifest, we can get out of it. Getting out of boredom would mean not only alleviating sufferance: since deep boredom is what locks us, it can also tell us what exactly is locked and what should be unlocked (Heidegger, very cinematically, calls the moment of such unlocking *Augenblick*, “glance of the eye”<sup>22</sup>). It is in this sense that boredom is “the hidden pull of a sought-for homeland”, that is, a craving for disclosure of our ultimate abilities. Therefore, one who is bored is required to wake up boredom and—what is harder—to keep it from falling asleep. For this, however, we do not need to do anything, because “we always do too much”: we need to wait. Isn’t it what a good spectator does during a “boring” movie? And isn’t it cinema today that teaches us waiting above all other arts?

It is clear what kind of reproach Heidegger could make to cinema.<sup>23</sup> First, in Heidegger’s perspective, the entertainment itself is a kind of Enframing—“putting” affects “together”. Second, cinema is Enframing inasmuch as it mechanically pulls the physical world out of the “unconcealed”, “enframes” it through framing, and then organizes it according to the rules of affective participation through editing, composition, and so on. The trembling foliage on the screen, which fascinated the first moviegoers, no longer satisfies us; we demand an entertaining plot and special effects.

According to Morin, cinema is a system that seeks to integrate the filmic stream into the spectator’s stream of consciousness, and vice versa.<sup>24</sup> Cinema, “the son of Machine and Feeling,” is Machine in the sense that it organizes the psyche of the viewer, and Feeling in the sense that it is being saturated with the psyche of the viewer. As a result of the identification—projection, the spectator sees himself on the screen, sees his Feeling, and stops noticing the Machine. Identification

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22 Heidegger 1995, p. 151.

23 Heidegger discussed the cinema in his “Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer”, although more in the context of the problems of the New European subject.

24 Morin 2007, p. 107.

in Morin's sense ("secondary") eclipses identification in Baudry's sense ("primary"). Today, only those who are not culturally trained to understand "the language of cinema", that is, the rules of affective participation—such as children, primitives, or animals—are able to freely dissociate the images on the screen into abstract movements or singular objects: they see the Machine not yet the Feeling.

Entertaining movies strive to comply with all the found rules of the affective participation—from techniques that are designed to create a smooth flow of images, such as the 180-degree rule, to dramatic devices. Thus, entertaining movies hide the Machine that organizes the affective participation: on the screen, there is an allegedly pure Feeling, our subjectivity, "we ourselves." Refusal to organize affective participation uncovers the Machine, and with this refusal the "deep" boredom is aroused.

There are several ways to uncover Machine in cinema, that is, to make the spectator feel boredom. First of all, it is "detheatralization" (term used by C. T. Dreyer<sup>25</sup>) and depsychologization of the movie spectacle, that is, a direct removal of Feeling from the show: presenting the actors as "mummies" (Dreyer)<sup>26</sup>, "models" (Bresson)<sup>27</sup>, "spiritual automata" (Jancsó, Malick), "puppets" (Rohmer)<sup>28</sup>, galvanized bodies (Godard), somnambulists (Herzog), "zombies" (Pedro Costa), etc. An apotheosis of such "machinal" acting was, maybe, Herzog's "Glass Heart", where all the actors, relying on the director's words, were put under hypnosis. Second, it is a violation of standard filmic rhythm—a deviation from smoothness (Godard) or, conversely, discontinuity (Straub–Huillet, M. Snow). Third, it is a violation of standard filmic tempo, a demonstration of superhuman, that is, essentially machine-based, capabilities of perception (Morin remarked that "if the language of the film is too slow or too fast, it detaches from affective participation and becomes, in both cases, abstract"<sup>29</sup>): excessively lengthy shots in Tarkovsky, Angelopoulos, Antonioni, Dreyer, Ackerman, Michael Snow, Lisandro Alonso, Albert Serra, Lav Diaz, Weerasethakul, etc. Probably, an apotheosis of such technique was a static eight-hour sequence in Warhol's "Empire". Today, the dominant way to induce boredom in spectator is slowing down the tempo and deviating from the standard discontinuity (as a response to more and more accelerating sequences in "popular" movies), but the influence of Bressonian "models" is also present (e.g. in films of Serge Bozon or Pierre Léon).

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25 Dreyer 1998, p. 71.

26 Deleuze 1985, p. 217.

27 See: Bresson 2008.

28 Deleuze 1985, p. 233.

29 Dreyer 1998, p. 198.

The entertaining movies don't eliminate boredom, as it is inscribed into the very cinematic medium. These films only lull boredom by organizing affective participation: the viewer feels entertained because of a shift in mood (by passing, in Heidegger's terms, from the second type of boredom to the first one; from a more deep to a more superficial one), but continues to be bored unknowingly. Boredom, which drives people to the cinema, takes there merely lighter forms, and precisely this gives them a feeling of "relaxation". Only those films that deliberately deepen boredom, at the cost of viewers' displeasure, can heal from it.

It is paradoxical that the Machine, being a source of boredom, seeks to dispel it. Machine is able to dispel boredom only by subjugating the viewer to itself in a hidden way. To make unconscious submission to the screen conscious would be to uncover a Machine behind it: only when we realize that in the movie hall we function like a machine, that in the cinema the machine operates as a natural part of ourselves, can we go *through* boredom (Joseph Brodsky quotes Robert Frost in his essay "In Praise of Boredom": "The best way out is always through"). From the point of view of the history of cinema, this will be a return to the experience of the first moviegoers, to the cinema before Méliès (similar to Heidegger's return to pre-Socratic philosophers). A distinct desire for this return can be found, for example, in Straub–Huillet.

As in a detective novel, a key to a puzzle of boredom in cinema was given at the very beginning of its history—in the films of Lumière brothers. In the conventionally first movie—"The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat"—one machine (camera) meets another (train) at the station, like a lover weary of waiting for his beloved. The joy of a first moviegoer was the joy of their encounter after the long separation: their meeting symbolized a hope for the end of the alienation of the human being from himself. Movies seem to have been delegated from the world of industrial technology, several centuries after its occurrence, in order to return to the human being the mystery that the technology concealed. In cinema, techne and poiesis can become one again.

Cinema, being the first art born of Modern industrial technology, is phenomenologically constituted by the experience of boredom. Therefore, to the extent that boredom is the "hidden destiny" of modernity, cinema has a privilege over other arts in revealing this destiny. Today, in the face of new media and TV series, which disperse our attention and tend to lull boredom, this mission of cinema is as relevant as never before.

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# Anger, Grief, and Dark Humour: Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri as an 'Emotional Hybrid'

Tarja Laine

**Abstract:** This article approaches Martin McDonagh's *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) as an emotional hybrid, of which the aesthetic strategies convey and embody three inextricably intertwined affects: anger, grief, and dark humour. It argues that the emotions of the protagonists are all consuming, because these are entangled in such a way that it enlarges their personal traumas and prevents them from working through their grief and anger. It analyses anger, grief, and dark humour in the film to demonstrate that these affects are not separate, but intertwined throughout the narrative trajectory of the film in an aesthetically coherent and concise manner. The article hopes to show that this hybrid affective quality does not function as a marker of tension between different emotions. Rather, it facilitates dynamic fluctuation between these emotions, thus opening up avenues for different courses of action by the characters, which in turn are affectively recognised by the spectator. In this way the hybrid emotions function as an organising principle of the film's aesthetic structure organically from within, rather than as elements attached to the film externally. This operational logic makes *Three Billboards* a remarkable film in its affective-aesthetic orientation, both towards its own world and towards its spectator.

**Keywords:** *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*; anger, grief, dark humour, cinematic emotions

*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (Martin McDonagh, 2017) stars Frances McDormand in an Oscar-winning performance as grief-stricken Mildred Hayes, whose teenage daughter Angela was raped and murdered in an extremely cruel way by unknown perpetrators, who got away without a trace. The three billboards in the title refer to the large, abandoned signboards along the old, unused highway leading up to Mildred's house, which she rents in order to demand publicly why the town's police chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) has achieved nothing towards solving the heinous crime. Willoughby, who is suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer, will not be provoked by the billboards though, but his incompetent, openly racist deputy sheriff Dixon (another Oscar-winning performance by Sam Rockwell) has strongly different feelings about the situation. The triangular relationship between Mildred, Willoughby, and Dixon makes the film best categorised as a character-driven revenge drama. It lends itself particularly well to research into shifting strategies of character engagement, fluctuating between sympathy and antipathy, as well as between moral and perverse allegiance, among other approaches.<sup>1</sup> Another

<sup>1</sup> Moral and perverse allegiance are notions by Murray Smith that define our emotional engagement with film characters in ethical terms. They refer to cinematic strategies that invite the spectators to become allied with a character through an evaluation of this character either as morally desirable or

rewarding approach would be to study the physical performance of the actors, and especially that of the strong female lead of the film, in order to understand how the spectator grasps the attributes and the affects of a character. As Vivian Sobchack argues, “it is the actor’s lived body that makes the character intelligible, because the character’s ‘inner’ experience is only manifest through the actor’s ‘outer’ performance.”<sup>2</sup>

But instead of analysing *Three Billboards* either on the basis of character engagement or acting performance, this article strikes another note. It approaches the film as an emotional hybrid, of which the aesthetic strategies convey and embody three inextricably intertwined affects: anger, grief, and dark humour. I argue that the emotions of the protagonists are all-consuming, because these are entangled in such a way that it enlarges their personal traumas and prevents them from working through their grief and anger. All three protagonists remain highly damaged characters, who are able to exit the narrative either through suicide (Willoughby) or through an open-ended revenge mission (Mildred and Dixon), which does not really bode well for them, regardless the rather mellow tone of the ending. My analysis starts with anger, then moves on to grief, and finally to dark humour in a way which hopefully demonstrates that these affects are not separate, but intertwined throughout the narrative trajectory of the film in an aesthetically coherent and concise manner. Furthermore, I hope to show that this hybrid affective quality does not function as a marker of tension between different emotions. Rather, it facilitates dynamic fluctuation between these emotions, thus opening up avenues for different courses of action by the characters, which in turn are affectively recognised by the spectator. In this way the hybrid emotions function as an organising principle of the film’s aesthetic structure organically from within, rather than as elements attached to the film externally.

**Anger**

In her *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum tells us that “anger is sometimes justified and right. It is an appropriate response to injustice and serious wrongdoing.”<sup>3</sup>The scene in which Mildred is interviewed by the regional television news reports at the location of the billboards is an example of such an appropriate response. It both acknowledges that serious wrongdoing has taken place, and addresses it in a way that combats injustice. The scene starts with a circular pan that frames Mildred within an extreme long shot in such a way that two of the three billboards stay behind her in a diagonal line. Mildred stands as firmly before the camera

as amorally fascinating. Smith 1995, p. 142-156; Smith 1999, p. 225-233.

2 Sobchack 2012, p. 434.

3 Nussbaum 2001, p. 394.

as the billboards are founded in the ground, thus turning into a living embodiment of the message that the billboards communicate. The billboards themselves show a bright red background with the message written in a heavy, black uppercase font with an in-your-face effect. The scene is cross-cut to Dixon watching the live transmission with his mother from his living room, while the diegetic, simultaneous voice-over by Mildred recounts the dreadful events of her daughter’s death in a remarkably calm and composed fashion, which ties the scenes together.

The outwardly calm affective quality of Mildred’s voice-over, both in conflict both with her inner reality and with the content of the story she is recounting, is significant in many ways. First, the voice-over makes her author of a narrative in a situation she hardly controls. Her “cool anger” functions as “a way of regaining control or asserting dignity in a situation of helplessness.”<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the voice-over assumes the function of what Michel Chion has termed “acousmatization”, leaving us only with the sound to imagine what has happened at a crucial moment in the story.<sup>5</sup> In her *Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman has pointed out that especially in classical Hollywood cinema, where men speak and women are spoken of, the female voice is hardly ever heard in an acousmatized form.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the saliency of Mildred’s voice-over in this scene functions as a powerful reclaiming of female voice, enunciating the story with direct effect on Dixon as well as on Willoughby, who also is watching. And in the third place, the voice-over articulates moral conscience, effectively putting the blame for the unsolved crime on Willoughby and his associates, who consequently feel guilty after being addressed by Mildred in this way. Bernard Williams has proposed that guilt is rooted in the sense of hearing, as in listening to the voice of judgment<sup>7</sup>, which in the interview scene results in Willoughby’s being emotionally upset. This is clear from the shot following Mildred’s television interview, which shows Willoughby seeking solace from his horses, accompanied by the melancholy guitar tune that functions as a musical motif in the film, signifying loss.

In one crosscut shot to Dixon’s house there is a close-up of his television set with Mildred looking directly at the camera—against the explicit instructions given earlier by the television crew—while accusing the local police of being “too busy going around torturing black folks” instead of spending their time solving crimes. The provocation works, which is evident

4 Nussbaum 2016, p. 47.

5 Chion 2009, p. 465. At some point of the film we see a glance of a forensic photo in Angela’s case file, depicting her burned body. The picture of the body is shown only very briefly and partially, as though this kind of heinously violated corpse cannot be shown. Therefore, it also stands for horror and abjection in Julia Kristeva’s sense, the collapse of meaning in a state between life and death, good and evil. Kristeva 1982, p. 19.

6 Silverman 1988, p. 75-76.

7 Williams 1993, p. 89.

from the reaction shots of both Dixon and Willoughby. Mildred's anger conveyed in the interview scene demonstrates that this emotion does not only include pain caused by serious injustice, but also a desire for the wrongdoer's true suffering for causing it. Throughout *Three Billboards* the focus of Mildred's anger is on the wrongful act committed to her daughter, which is an appropriate response. But since the person who committed the crime is untraceable, the target of her anger is Willoughby and his subordinates by proxy, which makes things more complicated as regards appropriateness. Furthermore, Mildred's anger clearly takes what Nussbaum calls the "road of payback". According to her later work on *Anger and Forgiveness*, anger would qualify as "always normatively problematic", since it implies that payback, imagined or not, somehow cancels pain and makes good for wrongdoing. The idea of payback explains why we sometimes experience "intense aesthetic pleasure [in fictional] narratives in which the [wrongdoer] suffers, purportedly balancing the horrible act that occurred."<sup>8</sup> At least in the world of fiction, we can still witness what Nussbaum calls restoring the "cosmic balance" by the suffering of wrongdoers, which could explain the recent popularity of "revenge films" such as the *John Wick* franchise (2014-).

In *Three Billboards* there is no such cosmic balance though. Even if the focus of Mildred's anger is both rational and appropriate, its target is irrational and inappropriate, since it is too self-contained, too much saturated by her personal trauma, and almost entirely motivated by revenge. For Nussbaum revenge is an "especially unsatisfactory, costly way to effect the punishment of offenders, one that usually simply ensures that the exchange of damages will perpetuate itself without limit."<sup>9</sup> In *Three Billboards*, the whole narrative is driven by such an exchange of damages, resulting from the offended parties repeatedly seeking payback from one another. First Dixon arrests Mildred's friend Denise (Amanda Warren) for the possession of two marijuana cigarettes without a possibility for bail hearing. Then Willoughby anonymously donates five thousand dollars for the purpose of keeping Mildred's billboards up for another month, right before he commits suicide. This results in an upsurge of antagonism against her amongst the townspeople. Finally, Mildred launches a nightly arson attack on the police station after her billboards have been destroyed by fire, unaware of the fact that Dixon is still inside. To the melody of the traditional Celtic tune "The Last Rose of Summer", sung by American soprano Renée Fleming, the darkly lit scene starts out with Dixon breaking and entering into the unoccupied station. He is in search of the letter that Willoughby wrote him as a personal suicide note, which he then finds next to Angela Hayes' file. At the same time we witness Mildred crossing the street and entering the building opposite the station, hesitatingly preparing her throwing of Molotov cocktails.

8 Nussbaum 2016, p. 25.

9 Nussbaum 2001, p. 396.

Visually the scene is dominated by crosscuts between the action in the two locations, which are simultaneously separated and connected, but it is the soundtrack and especially the music that makes this scene interesting. First of all, the tune—which we are already familiar with from the opening sequence of the film—seems to emerge somewhere between the diegesis and the nondiegesis. To the audience it is unclear whether Dixon is listening to the same song through his headphones, which prevents him from hearing the telephone call placed by Mildred to ensure that the building is empty of people. The high volume sound dominates the soundscape, thus conveying that we would not pay attention to the ringing either, were it not for the red light indicator flashing the incoming call on the telephone. Yet the same song is on the soundtrack in the crosscuts to Mildred, signifying that the song might have diegetic status after all.

Secondly, in the same scene Willoughby's voice-over narrating the contents of his suicide note is diegetically ambivalent as well, since it occurs from beyond the event of his death. Then we witness the station catching fire, which Dixon does not notice until he reaches the end of the letter simultaneously with one of Mildred's Molotov cocktails breaking a window, which throws Dixon back on the ground because of the impact of flames. The sense of urgency in the crosscut scene accompanied by the layered soundscape epitomizes the extent to which Mildred and Dixon's personal traumas are intertwined, showing their anger and grief to be connected somehow. Willoughby's letter has revealed to us that Dixon suffers from his own trauma. This originates from the loss of his father, which results in an unhealthy relationship with his manipulative mother, and culminates in his sensed inability to take control of his own life, his own emotions.

Therefore, the act of arson by which Mildred aims at the pain of the offender (the police) in order to compensate for her own pain is hardly successful, because it is based on her obsessive fixation on the suffering of the other, which merely deepens involvement in her own ongoing, unbridled anger. Furthermore, the torched police station does not remove her suffering, but contributes to her feelings of guilt about her daughter's death. At approximately the thirty-minute mark of the film Mildred is outside her daughter's room. A children's red sign on the door says 'danger', now signifying that it could be dangerous for Mildred to enter the room and be confronted by her own emotions, her own guilt. Then, without turning on the lights, she goes in and sits on her daughter's bed, surrounded by rock posters, while by now familiar, melancholy guitar motif plays on the soundtrack. Then her daughter's voice shouting "mom" serves as a sound bridge linking the past with the present. Next, we witness a flashback scene where they are in the middle of a fight about the daughter borrowing the family car, which ends with the following, upsetting exchange:

Angela: I will walk! And you know what else? I hope I get raped on the way!

Mildred: Yeah, well, I hope you get raped on the way too!

After this flashback, we gaze across Mildred's shoulder into the room, while she is in the doorway, an image that clashes graphically with the shot just before the flashback, in which Mildred was on the bed (figure 1 and 2). Again, there is doubt about the diegetic status of the image: did Mildred actually enter the room or did she only do so in her imagination? In any case, the scene is full of self-inflicted pain, which for Nussbaum is the result of guilt and anger directed at the self, the result of a wrongful act that one thinks one has caused.<sup>10</sup> The flashback scene functions as the explanation of the violent quality of Mildred's anger, suggesting that it is saturated by guilt.



Figure 1: The shot right before the flashback (screen capture).

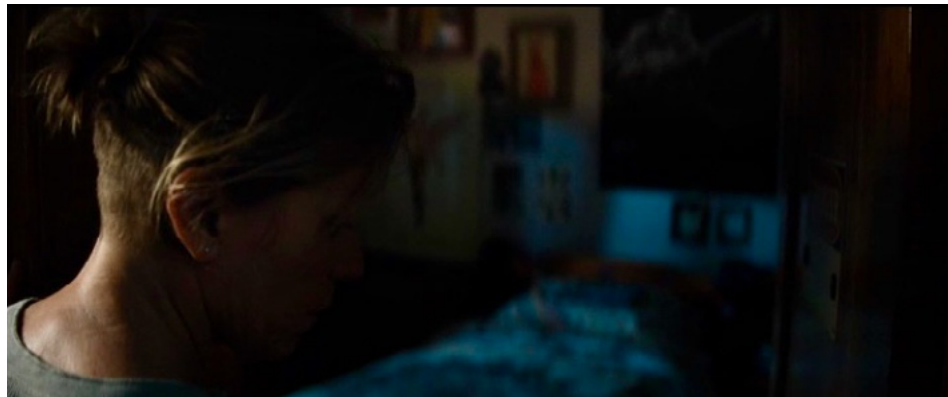


Figure 2: The shot right after the flashback (screen capture).

<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum 2016, p. 128.

This means that Mildred's desire for punishment is not only a desire for cosmic balance but also for "punishment by proxy", as if punishing the perpetrators would fulfil the punishment that Mildred feels she deserves herself. According to Nussbaum, the self-inflicted pain that accompanies anger at self is a form of payback, the intentionality of which is to cancel out the wrongful act. But this "retributive wish" does not make any sense, insofar as payback does not undo whatever wrongful damage one has caused.<sup>11</sup> In *Three Billboards*, Mildred's retributive wish is not only directed at the unknown perpetrators and the inefficient police officers, but also at herself, caused by the events that are revealed to us in the said flashback. Mildred experiences guilt for the wrongful act that has been committed by someone else and wishes for this wrongdoer's suffering, hoping that such suffering would cancel out her own pain. In the absence of any recognizable wrongdoer, Mildred wishes for the suffering of secondary wrongdoers, which explains why she is so eager to take matters into her own hands. This does not result in redemption though, but inflicts even more unproductive hostility and suffering onto herself. Mildred's emotionally charged facial expression as she watches Dixon almost burning alive during her arson attack, testifies to a woman imprisoned within her own anger, pain, and guilt. In addition, Dixon's burn wounds draw a parallel between him and her daughter Angela, whose body was also burned after her ghastly rape and murder.

Yet at a certain point in this zero-sum game of self/other directed anger and guilt, Mildred's desire for payback becomes a desire shared by Dixon, and the film ends with Mildred and Dixon getting into a car and heading towards Idaho, acting on their silent agreement to kill a suspect. This turns out to be some passer-through, whom earlier in the film we witnessed threatening Mildred in the gift shop where she works. It is the same stranger Dixon provoked into a fight in order to obtain his DNA sample, after eavesdropping on him during a sinister conversation in a saloon. The three billboards watch over them as they drive towards the rising sun behind the green hills, accompanied by a bittersweet Americana song. The mood of this ending is strangely hopeful, epitomizing comradeship between the two former enemies Mildred and Dixon, which gives new purpose to their lives. This purpose is the reason Dixon does not commit suicide in a previous scene, in which his handling of a shotgun strongly suggests such intentions (figure 3).

<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum 2016, p. 129.



Figure 3: Suicidal thoughts (screen capture).

Their new purpose in life seems to express desire not only for payback, but also desire for dignitary punishment of the person who has offended them. Nussbaum calls this the “road of status” as it is based on inappropriate and narcissistic desire for dignitary punishment. Mildred and Dixon’s mission to kill a conceivable, but impossible killer is not intended to undo their shared pain, but to take away the dignity of the offender in order to boost their own. For what had happened to Mildred in the gift shop and to Dixon in the saloon scene, is not merely psychological and physical violence, but constitutes violation of their dignity as well. The way in which the offender is framed in low angle both when threatening Mildred and assaulting Dixon conveys this sense of humiliation that is inherent to both scenes. Thus, the revenge pact that Mildred and Dixon agree on at the end of *Three Billboards* can be seen as triggered by status-focused anger that follows injured self-esteem, and as motivated by an attempt to retrieve personal dignity, which would heal the wounded ego.

At the same time, the ending offers what Rick Altman has termed “narrative crossroads” of two storyline paths, each representing a different type of pleasure for the spectator: morally sanctioned pleasure and generic pleasure that departs from moral norms.<sup>12</sup> In *Three Billboards* the latter might include story elements as: the gift shop offender turning out to be Angela’s murderer after all, and Mildred getting her revenge with Dixon’s help. The morally sanctioned path of narrative development would include Mildred and Dixon overcoming their desire for revenge and seeking therapy, perhaps. However, it seems safe to assume that such anti-climax would have left the spectators brimming with disappointment. Yet the ending of *Three Billboards* fails to be an ending proper, since it leaves the spectator without any narrative resolution. It is impossible to ascertain what the ensuing actions of the two characters will be, while they remain angry and morally confused. We are left to hope that things

<sup>12</sup> Altman 1999, p. 145-152.

will go well for both of them, but this is a form of hope against hope, since hardly any aesthetic elements throughout the film are oriented towards a ‘happy end’. In this context Yvette Biro argues that the ending of a film often “has the charge to sum up the whole”.<sup>13</sup> I think that the final scenes of *Three Billboards* deliberately refuse to sum up the previous elements of the film, which partly explains why the film stays with us for a long time after it has actually finished.

### Grief

With “The Last Rose of Summer” on the soundtrack, *Three Billboards* opens with a black screen on which the production/direction credits appear. The very first shot of the film, which is an establishing shot the dilapidated billboards in a misty field, evokes a melancholy mood. This mood is enhanced by a second shot from the opposite perspective, in which the camera is positioned within the frame of the closest billboard looking out over at the other two further away (figure 4). The image is simultaneously deep and shallow, with all the planes in the image in focus, while the scenery appears flatten because of the fog. The total opening, all in all eight establishing shots of the field with the billboards from different perspectives, functions as a prologue to the film. Or rather, an overture, which in cinema is used as a strategy to set the mood of the film before, during, or instead of the opening credits. Examples abound with such prominent textbook titles as *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco, 1953), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979). Some establishing shots emphasize the skeleton silhouette of the billboards surrounded by high grass. Sun-bleached panels still attached to the frame show parts of slogans meant to entice passers-through to visit the imaginary town of Ebbing (“worth stopping for”). Another shot draws closer, showing a panel with the face of a baby. The final overture shot covers a larger area, with the farthest billboard hardly visible due to the extreme distance and the foggy mist. The overture is cut to a black screen while the title of the film fades in and out and then the story starts unfolding from the very same location, the billboards, now bathing in bright sunlight, as we notice a car approaching. In this overture, the song “The Last Rose of Summer” that contains such lines as “left blooming alone” while “all her lovely companions are faded and gone” refers by association to the dilapidated billboards “blooming alone” in high grass. The billboards thus clearly function as emotion metaphor for (the memory of) Angela. In other words, the billboards are a headstone for Angela, metaphorically replacing or doubling her deceased body, which explains why Mildred places flowers underneath the billboards as a sign of remembrance.

<sup>13</sup> Biro 2008, p. 204.



Figure 4: A frame within a frame (screen capture).

Therefore, this cinematic overture does not merely illustrate the title of the film, but it establishes the cinematic moor, or rather it functions to “prepare the stage for story comprehension and spectator involvement”, as Thomas Elsaesser put this.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of the centrality of anger in the film’s narrative, the overture is not about anger but about grief, which suggests that this is the most important emotion as regards “understanding how [the film] wants to be read and how it needs to be understood”.<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum has defined grief as repeatedly experienced affective frustration, thoroughly intertwined with the grieving person’s bodily and cognitive fabric. It is this reverberating, repetitive logic of grief that is embedded in the overture of *Three Billboards*, providing the film with an affective quality that directly affects the spectator. One important element to achieve this is Carter Burwell’s atmospheric, haunting, delicate score. It reoccurs arranged for piano, clarinet, and mandolin in the scene with the deer, starting off as a sound bridge from the previous scene of Willoughby and family by the lake. A shot of the lake scenery with its surrounding hills dissolves into a shot of the field with the billboards and Mildred about to place baskets of flowers underneath them. The minor-key melody is slow, intimate, and harmoniously attuned to Mildred’s sadness and loneliness, as she is arranging the flowers, which are colour-matched to the intense, fire engine red background of the billboards. Suddenly as if from nowhere a deer appears in the scene, and an astonished Mildred greets the animal with affection, before plunging into an emotional monologue, while the unperturbed animal continues its grazing. The scene ends with a sobbing Mildred shot from behind, dissolving into the twilight scenery of an eerie sunset. All the elements in the scene—the score, the deer, the flowers, and the landscape, as well as Frances McDormand’s performance—combine to communicate the depth of her grief, but simul-

<sup>14</sup> Elsaesser 2012, p. 114.

<sup>15</sup> Elsaesser 2012, p. 115.

taneously our realization dawns that ultimately her was with the police will prove useless, and nobody’s arrest will ever take away her emotional damage.

Landscape plays an important part in the film, especially the field with the billboards, epitomizing John Wiley’s idea that places are not merely reminiscent of the past, but that they form a continuum between the past and the present in which (traumatic) memories are continuously stored.<sup>16</sup> There seems to be an allegorical relationship between this landscape and Mildred’s inner feelings, when she moves around in it. This means that the exterior, physical landscape conveys the significance of her interior, affective landscape in so much as that it becomes a shared “tangible territory”, as Giuliana Bruno describes this.<sup>17</sup> First there is the misty, fog-filled valley of the overture sequence reflecting Mildred’s trauma of loss without resolution, and evoking a sense of being immersed in cold, opaque, and static matter, which is what grief would feel like. Denise Riley writes that grief is experienced as “freezing of time” functioning to “erect a shield against the reality of death.”<sup>18</sup> It is this idea that is embodied in the opening scenes full of thick fog. There is also the same valley in dim evening light, after all the vivid colours of nature have vanished with the last light of day. Gloom prevails, except for the bright red glow emitted by the billboards, epitomizing Mildred’s affective landscape, in which anger penetrates her grief (figure 5). Then there is the nightly scenery with the billboards in flames, an all-consuming destruction referring to the gap in Mildred’s sense of self.<sup>19</sup> Finally, there are numerous close-ups of Mildred’s face, which consequently becomes a landscape in itself: full of life when enraged, but barren and defeated when in grief.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Wiley 2007, p. 173.

<sup>17</sup> Bruno 2002, p. 207.

<sup>18</sup> Riley 2012, p. 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> The scene with the flaming billboards also evokes an association with the Ku Klux Klan’s cross burning practice, intended primarily to intimidate and terrorize people of colour.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have made this association between face and landscape in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*: “The face is a surface: facial traits, lines, wrinkles. [...] The face is a map. [...] The face has a correlate of great importance: the landscape.” Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 170.



Figure 5: A billboard in a dim evening light (screen capture).

There seems to be an inherent paradox in the experience of grief that manifests itself in dichotomies. Donald Gustafson argues that grief is conditioned by a “counter-belief desire”, which involves belief that a loved one is dead and the (irrational) desire that this may not be the case.<sup>21</sup> Laura Tanner speaks of grief as entrapment in the urgent bodily experience of pain on the one hand, and a sense of bodily separation from the world in which one is located on the other. As one simultaneously lacks the agency to participate in this same world, she calls this experience “intimate detachment”.<sup>22</sup> And Riley describes grief as an altered condition of life that is experienced as arrested, frozen time. To her grief is a feeling of being cut off from the flow of time, resulting from an act of dissociation that shields one from the reality of the death of a loved one. Writing about the death of her own child, she writes how she experienced this painful event so intensely that she sensed that part of her died instantly: “So you are both partly dead, and yet more alive. You are cut down, and yet you burn in life.”<sup>23</sup> Grief involves knowing and not knowing that the loved one is dead, a sense of sameness with and separation from.

This sense of sameness with and separation from her daughter Angela is the motivation for Mildred’s actions. It also shows why her anger is thoroughly intertwined with her grief, so much so that there will be no solution for this deadlock within the course of the narrative.

Mildred’s anger, expressed in and through the billboards, is her way of being with Angela, even though the very same billboards signify Mildred’s eternal separation from her. In *Three Billboards* Mildred is under the illusion that she needs her anger to preserve the love for her daughter, while at the same time this anger prevents her from working through

<sup>21</sup> Gustafson 1989, p. 457.

<sup>22</sup> Tanner 2007, p. 243.

<sup>23</sup> Riley 2012, p. 14.

her grief. This is why her grief is pathological, enhanced by her feelings of guilt. Nussbaum writes that a grieving person turning to anger “may function psychically as a way of restoring the lost person or object. In such cases, grief can be deflected into an unusual intense anger, in which all the energy of love and loss is turned toward persecution.”<sup>24</sup> The recurring element of the billboards, with their aggressive red background and confronting black font, functions as a visible manifestation of Mildred’s obsessive anger that keeps her imprisoned in her excessive grief.

Actually, apart from the billboards, red as a colour motif is frequently used throughout the film. It noticeably appears as the colour of numerous props in the advertising agency, which is managed by a man by the name of “Red” Welby (Caleb Landry Jones). Red is also the colour of Mildred’s t-shirt under her coveralls, as of the garment her daughter was wearing on the night of the murder. There is red in schoolgirls’ backpacks, coffee mugs, cornflake packages, picnic clothes, telephones, and other everyday objects. The gerberas that Mildred plants under the billboards are of the same bright red as the carnations on the table where which Wiloughby writes his suicide note. Mildred’s name itself contains the letter group “red” its etymological origin signifying “mild strength”. In addition there are various forms of red blood in the film: blood caused by illness, blood resulting from violence, blood as evidence, and family bloodlines.

It is important to notice that by using both blood and the colour red the film pays direct homage to Nicholas Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now* (1973), the thriller that Dixon and his mother are watching at some point in the film. In Roeg’s film, colour symbolism is used as a cue for the emotions of a mourning couple working through grief after their daughter’s death. Even though used in this way in cinema, the colour red is often understood to signify anger and aggression, in *Three Billboards* it also indicates pain brought about by the loss of a loved one. In this context Nussbaum (2001) describes grief as rapid feelings of pain and tumult “coloured by the kinetic properties of the bloodstream” (45). Indeed, in many images in *Three Billboards* red colour areas stand out in a way that indicates sudden moments of pain. This is brought home to us by the movement of this colour, its unique kinetic properties, resulting from a combination of the lowest frequency and the longest wavelength within the visible spectrum. Yet, the colour red is noticeably missing from the final shots of the film, suggesting perhaps that the protagonists’ revenge mission functions as a means to work through grief. But as I hope to have shown, when all is said and told this is not a plausible interpretation due to the open-ended nature of the final scene.

<sup>24</sup> Nussbaum 2016, p. 47.

## Dark Humour

Regardless of the saliency of grief and anger, *Three Billboards* does not show an overload of negative emotion. This is due to the elements of dark humour that occur throughout the film. Even though at first glance humour seem to would undermine the gloomy and serious subject matter, here it does not detract but contributes to the coherence of the film. This type of humour is no detached, added-on ingredient, but it functions organically from within, interacting with the other affective elements. Yet, this coherence is not based on the intimate relation between horror and humour as conceived by Noel Carroll for instance.<sup>25</sup> Rather, it is based on discrepancy, incongruity, and a-synchronicity between two affects, which mutually enhances positive and negative emotions. In the context of horror-comedy, Carroll writes that even though pain and death can be elements of joking, in the comedy genre “we are not supposed to dwell upon them, especially in terms of their moral or human weight or consequences.” While in horror the negative emotion “disappears when the comic frame causes the burden of moral concern for life [...] to evaporate.”<sup>26</sup> By contrast, I argue that in *Three Billboards* negative emotions and comic elements do not cancel each other out, but reinforce each other in a way that results in a coherent whole. How does the film achieve this?

Already in the scenes immediately following the opening overture, there is a comic undercurrent. At first the music functions as a vehicle for the grief-stricken mood from the opening shots, when the soprano reaches the lines “to reflect back her blushes” and the film cuts to an interior shot showing Mildred’s eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror of her car. But then the music fades out as Mildred passes the dilapidated billboards, only to stop the car in order to take a closer look at the one with still intact advertising panels showing part of a baby. A reaction shot expresses Mildred getting an idea that is likely going to be outside the ordinary, while a track starts off from Burwell’s original score, entitled “Mildred Goes to War.” This is a track that one reviewer accurately described as a “mix of ironic Americana and sarcastic darkness that doesn’t announce anything good.”<sup>27</sup> There is also a medium close-up that shows the rusty brass name plate of “Ebbing Advertisement Company”, which is the same name on a sign that the following scene begins with, shot from behind a glass door. The camera tilts downwards to an out-of-focus Mildred resolutely walking in slow motion towards this glass door to the rhythm of clapping hands in the score of her very own marching music, the Ebbing Police Department building ominously looming in the background. The next shot is taken over Red Welby’s shoulder, who is reading a book with his feet on the table. The reaction shot reveals that the book is Flan-

<sup>25</sup> Carroll 1999, p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> Carroll 1999, p. 157-158.

<sup>27</sup> Manduteanu 2017.

nery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1953). The book covers most of his face so that only his cautious eyes are visible, as he peers from behind the book at the approaching combatant (figure 6). The scene exemplifies how easily grief can be transformed into anger, and a reflection on one's loss into a desire for vengeance. But the scene also epitomizes dark humour, based on its cinematic mood conveying impending conflict, even though the opening does not explicitly create the narrative expectation of ‘trouble on its way’.



Figure 6: Trouble on its way (screen capture).

In other scenes dark humour is created by the overtly provocative, morally inappropriate dialogue, which encroaches on good taste. There is the exchange between Mildred and Father Montgomery (Nick Searcy), who at some point calls on her not to offer priestly solace, but to convince Mildred to get rid of her billboards. Without hesitation Mildred reacts with a lengthy monologue, in which she compares the Catholic Church to LA street gangs, against which injunctions were obtained by the Los Angeles City Attorney in the 1980s, stating that:

*Father, that whole type of situation is kinda like your Church boys, ain't it? You've got your colors, you've got your clubhouse, you're, for want of a better word, a gang. And if you're upstairs smoking a pipe and reading a bible while one of your fellow gang members is downstairs fucking an altar boy then, Father, just like those Crips, and just like those Bloods, you're culpable. Cos you joined the gang, man. And I don't care if you never did shit or you never saw shit or you never heard shit. You joined the gang. You're culpable. And when a person is culpable to altar-boy-fucking, or any kinda boy-fucking, I know you guys didn't really narrow that down, then they kinda forfeit the right to come into my house and say anything about me, or my life, or my daughter, or my billboards. So, why don't you just finish your tea there, Father, and get the fuck outta my kitchen.*

During the monologue, which lasts for two minutes and ten seconds, the camera mostly stays with Mildred, framing her either in medium shot or in close up, but nevertheless there are cuts to a number of reaction shots with Father Montgomery and Mildred's son Robbie (Lucas Hedges) who is witnessing the scene. The scene empathically lacks musical accompaniment, and its emotional impact relies heavily on Frances McDormand's performance, which within just two minutes comprises an affective gamut that runs from casual through sarcastic and contemptuous to aggression and even hatred. There are also Father Montgomery's facial expressions, which progress from quizzical to approving, then to anger and even shame. After Mildred has turned around and walked out of the kitchen, the scene ends with a profile shot of a flabbergasted Father out of focus in the foreground, and the obviously proud Robbie in focus in the background, supplying comic relief with his line: "But thanks for coming anyway, father." The scene is full of Mildred's pain, but it is also saturated by dark humour based on carnivalesque rebellion against, or feelings of cynical superiority towards (the hypocrisy of) the Catholic Church, mocking and ridiculing the authority of the clergy.

After Mildred has been arrested for drilling a hole in the local dentist's thumb (another authority figure) with his own equipment, she finds herself in the questioning room at the police station under Dixon's suspicious gaze. Wryly, she then asks him in a casual tone how the "nigger-torturing business" is going. Caught off guard, Dixon defensively protests that "it's 'persons of colour' -torturing business these days, if you want to know." When next Willoughby has dismissed Dixon, he explains to Mildred almost apologetically: "If you got rid of every cop with vaguely racist leanings then you'd have three cops left and all o' them are gonna hate the fags so what are ya gonna do, y'know?" Obviously, the use of the words 'nigger' and 'fags' in the scene is disconcerting and offensive, especially given the Midwestern setting of the film. In his discussion of the scene, Tony McKenna points out that "the racism [TL adds: and homophobia] here is handled too lightly—when the acts it refers to are so genuinely horrific and have a real resonance in the historical context in question."<sup>28</sup> The film has been critiqued by many commentators for neutralising through light irony political and social controversies concerning race and sexual orientation, not only in this particular scene, but in general throughout film. Even though the analysis of such controversy is beyond the scope of this article, I offer as an argument that the scene with the quoted upsetting word exchange is also darkly comical, not in spite of, but because of its political incorrectness. Here, dark humour results from a perverse contrast between the intuitive ethical aversion experienced by the spectators—which parallels Dixon being suddenly full of moralist fervour—and the bland, cheery factuality with which Mildred utters the

28 McKenna 2020, p. 184.

n-word. As a result there is a connection between moral awareness and humour in the scene, which opens the possibility of perverse delight in the very thing that intuitively clashes with our basic moral feelings. In his discussion of Jonathan Swift's satire, Shane Herron (2016) explains this phenomenon as follows:

[People] possess a faculty of rational choice or will, guided by an intuitive sense of right and wrong, and yet not only do they still act like Yahoos, but they seem to display a perverse delight in using reason to twist and distort their basic moral sense [...] for no reason than the illicit thrill of doing wrong.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, the police station scene is darkly comical, because it addresses our ethical intuition, but invites us to respond in a way that distorts this intuition. This is related to what Murray Smith (1999) has coined "perverse allegiance" that "takes as its object not only depicted actions, but also what we take to be the accepted and responsible moral response to these actions [...] the delight it evokes [being] partly founded on the disapproval of the strict moralist."<sup>30</sup>

While the Father Montgomery scene and the scene at the police station combine dark humour with the emotion of anger, the scene with the slippers has grief as a counter-emotion for laughter. This scene follows the one with the burning billboards, and it starts with a soulful guitar ballad, which is a variation of the 'loss' theme on the soundtrack, while the camera tracks in on Mildred lying on bed in her room. The camera moves to a close-up from low angle as she sits up on the edge of the bed, not only directing our attention to her weary expression, but also to the red butterflies that abundantly decorate the wallpaper in the room. The next shot is from behind Mildred as she ruefully whispers: "I'll crucify the motherfuckers", the mirror to her left reflecting the butterfly motif as she reflects on her loss. We share her POV as, amused at her own action, she becomes aware of the light pink bunny slippers she is wearing, complete with pompon noses and beady eyes, positioned in such a way that they return our gaze when shot from floor height. Twisting her feet, she then starts her private puppet performance, with the bunny on her right foot asking the left one in a deep voice: "Who you gonna crucify? The motherfuckers?" To which the bunny on the left foot answers in a high-pitched voice: "Yeah, I'm gonna crucify the motherfuckers" (figure 7).

29 Herron 2016, p. 424.

30 Smith 1999, p. 232.



Figure 7: "Who you gonna crucify?" (Screen capture)

In this scene, dark humour aligns negative and the positive emotions not only providing Mildred with a remedy from her anger and grief, but also enabling her to contemplate with a clearer head what her ensuing actions will be. This is in stark contrast to a previous scene, in which the hot-headed Dixon reacts to the news of Willoughby's death by assaulting Welby and throwing him out of a window. Dark humour renders the scene with the slippers a defining moment that opens roads to multiple possibilities concerning payback or redemption. Even though Mildred ends up making a choice that is both ethically mistaken and problematic, her choice is measured and deliberate, and both she herself and the spectator know this to be so. This interplay between emotions in *Three Billboards* shows that choosing a right course of action is a complex affair that involves more than the 'cold deliberations' associated with 'reason', or the 'hot instincts' that are associated with 'emotion'. The humorous undercurrent is there not only to enable insight into affects and decision-making, but also to tie the complex emotions together so that they form an organic whole. This operational logic makes *Three Billboards* a remarkable film in its affective-aesthetic orientation, both towards its own world and towards its spectator.

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# The Object of Silent Cinema

Todd McGowan

**Abstract:** For psychoanalytic theory, the object of the cinema has always been the gaze. The importance of the gaze as the impossible object around which films are constructed is impossible to question. However, this essay contends that we should consider the importance of the voice as a possible object of a particular type of cinema. We should think of these two objects, the voice and the gaze, as having a historical relationship with each other. The contention here is that while the gaze is the object of the sound film, the voice is the object of the silent film. The absence of voices in silent cinema provides the perfect form for depicting the voice as an absent object. Once characters actually begin to speak on the screen, however, their voices obscure the voice as an absent object, and the result is that the gaze becomes the central cinematic object and preoccupation.

**Key words:** voice, gaze, objet a, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalytic film theory

## Encounter with the Absent Object

Since the emergence of psychoanalysis in the study of cinema, the gaze has played a privileged role. Even though a profound disagreement exists between early psychoanalytic theorists (who contend that the gaze is the eye of the spectator, which parallels the camera) and recent theorists (who locate the gaze as an unseen object in the screen, in what is absent from the visual field), the gaze retains its priority as the cinematic object.<sup>1</sup> However one understands it, the gaze has become the privileged point of analysis because the visuality of the cinema trumps its aurality. Many theorists influenced by Jacques Lacan, including Michel Chion and Kaja Silverman, note the conceptual underestimation of the voice among psychoanalytic theorists of the cinema.<sup>2</sup> They are not incorrect: the psychoanalytic theorization of cinema has for the most part forgotten the voice, in spite of the fact that Lacan, the foundational thinker for psychoanalytic film theory, gave the voice a central role in his system. Like the gaze (the object that dominates the psychoanalytic analysis of cinema), the voice, according to Lacan, is a version of the objet a, the lost object that causes desire.

The lost object is crucial to every art form. It is an impossible object irreducible to any field of representation, which is why it triggers the subject's desire but can never serve as an object of desire that the subject might obtain. Its absence is constitutive of its status as an

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<sup>1</sup>The psychoanalytic theorist who first criticized the early conception of the gaze is Joan Copjec. She claims, "film theory operated a kind of 'Foucauldianization' of Lacanian theory." Copjec 1994, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> See Chion 1999 and Silverman 1988.

object. This absence from the perceptual field of the artwork arouses the spectator's desire for aesthetic engagement. Without this central lack in the artwork, it would appear complete unto itself and leave the potential spectator cold. The question is what form the impossible object takes in each aesthetic medium.

As with other arts, the encounter with the impossible object defines the cinema. It testifies to the cinema's importance for the spectator because this encounter plays a central role in the constitution of the subject. Though psychoanalytic theorists have disproportionately focused on the gaze, both the voice and the gaze function as the central cinematic object. We should not, however, see them both as equally important at all times. The cinematic object has a history: despite what might appear self-evident, my claim is that the voice serves as the object of silent cinema, while the gaze plays this role for the talkie. The revolutionary invention of recorded dialogue transforms the psychic experience of cinema for the spectator in a radical way—by introducing the gaze as the cinematic form of the impossible object and causing the voice to retreat behind the gaze's predominance.<sup>3</sup> With the onset of recorded dialogue, all of the talking tends to obscure the voice as an object that could cause the spectator's desire. The encounter with the impossible object changes over the course of cinematic history, but this encounter in its changing form remains the source of cinema's lasting appeal.

When the subject experiences the encounter with the impossible object, it necessarily recognizes the division of its subjectivity and the division of the social authority (or big Other) at the same time. The encounter with the impossible object reveals an opening beyond any authorization, a gap within signification. It is a moment that opens the path to the subject's free act because it shows that the subject is its own authority, that there is no external substantial authority. The enactment of the division in social authority represents the possibility for the subject to act in the face of its symbolic determination and to consider itself as a political being.<sup>4</sup> Because it strips away the authorization that gives the subject its identity, the encounter with the impossible object is always traumatic, and the trauma of this encounter holds the key to the political potential of the cinematic experience for the spectator. Lacan notes the

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3 As many film theorists and historians have noted, the terms in English for the two modes of cinema are misleading. "Silent cinema" almost always included sound, including music and narration, which seems to render the opposition to "sound cinema" nonsensical. The French terms—*cinéma muet* (mute cinema) and *cinéma parlant* (talking cinema)—have the virtue of a much greater accuracy. It is a contingency of the French language that permits one to emphasize the difference between *muet* and *silencieux* in the cinema, which makes the conceptualization of the voice as object a of *cinéma muet* more clearly articulatable.

4 According to Lacan, "The objet a is that by which the speaking being, when it is taken up in discourses, is determined. It doesn't know at all what determines it. It is through the object that it is determined as a subject, that is to say, divided as a subject, or it is the prey of desire." Lacan 20011, p. 73.

effect of the trauma with the appearance of this object when he says, "the objet a is not tranquil, or rather, one must say, it could be that it doesn't leave us tranquil."<sup>5</sup> The trauma occurs because the encounter with the impossible object makes clear that the subject exists only as deracinated. The object confirms that subjectivity is not equivalent to symbolic identity. Through the encounter with the absent object, subjectivity loses the security of knowing what it is.

At the same time, the encounter with the impossible object is also the source of the freedom of the spectator in the filmic experience. When one watches or hears this object, one finds oneself confronted with a lack of support for one's identity. This support no longer exists in the Other. Neither the subject nor the Other can offer any sort of foundation for identity. This lack of support is the subject's freedom. Because the subject and the Other are divided and cannot offer a basis for identity, the subject has no complete or permanent symbolic determination. One discovers the path to the freedom of the subject in the filmic experience when the impossible object is in play. The cinema is a privileged site for this encounter with the impossible object.

In order for it to attract the desire of the spectator, every film must include an impossible object, an object that is lacking, a gap in the form of the film. Spectators engage the film because they experience an absence in the film of the film or a deformation in its structure. The way in which a film deploys its lack is at the same time the way it shows its lost object. When one speaks about the cinema, it is almost self-evident that the gaze has the foremost position among the versions of the lost object, but the gaze is not the only possible cinematic object.

### Versions of the Object

Although his notion of the objet a develops and receives many different iterations during his intellectual trajectory, Lacan gives the clearest explication of this object in his *Seminar XI* on the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the objet a has four forms. He adds the gaze and the voice to the two sexual objects theorized by Freud—the breast and the feces. The gaze and the voice are activities that the subject performs. Even if a subject looks, however, the gaze as objet a is not the act of looking. By distinguishing the gaze from the look (even though there is only one term in French—*le regard*), Lacan turns away from his own earlier theorization of what's at stake in the act of seeing that occurs in his most well-known essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the / Function." In this essay (which has had an outsized influence on psychoanalytic film theory), he conceives of the act of looking as the way that the subject establishes its ego and creates an illusory sense

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5 Lacan, unpublished seminar, session of 1 December 1965.

of bodily wholeness.<sup>6</sup> As he puts it, “For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Lacan links the act of looking with the subject's self-deception. But by the time he develops the concept of the gaze as a form of the objet a, this focus undergoes a profound transformation.

Rather than facilitating an illusory ego identity in the mirror relation, the gaze is the deformation that places subjects in what they see. All the forms of the objet a play a similar disruptive role for the subject. When one encounters a form of the objet a or impossible object, one encounters a fundamental disruption in the field of experience. Lacan defines these forms as the breast, the feces, the gaze, and the voice, and he insists that none of them fit within the subject's field of experience.<sup>8</sup> Instead, they trouble this field by including the subject within it as what doesn't fit.<sup>9</sup>

The versions of the objet a are not the objects that the subject wants to have. There is thus an important distinction between the object of desire (what the subject desires) and the objet a or impossible object (what causes the subject's desire). The impossible object functions as the cause of desire because it is not present in the field of experience and cannot become present, unlike the object of desire. It is the absence of this object that gives it its privilege. It attracts the desire of the subject because it remains always unassimilable for the subject. Even the breast and the feces (when they function as versions of the objet a) are beyond the mastery of the subject. This resistance to the subject's mastery is the key to their power relative to the subject's desire.

Clearly, the breast and the feces do not play a significant role in the experience of the cinematic spectator, except perhaps for someone obsessed by the absence of the mother's breast during the projection or someone else who cannot stop visiting the bathroom instead of watching the film. But these are, clearly, exceptional cases. There is no doubt that the two objects of cinema are the gaze and the voice. This doesn't explain,

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6The most influential work of film theory that takes Lacan's mirror stage as its point of departure is Laura Mulvey's classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” According to Mulvey, what she calls the gaze enacts a fetishistic process that enables the male spectator to disavow castration by associating it with the female character in the field of cinematic vision. Mulvey's gaze has nothing to do with Lacan's understanding of the gaze as a form of the objet a. See Mulvey 1975, pp. 6-18.

7 Lacan 2006, p. 76.

8 Lacan states, “we have found a certain type of objects, in the final account, that have no use. These are the objects a, the breasts, the feces, the gaze, the voice.” Lacan 1973, p. 269.

9The concept of the objet a is unlike Lacan's other concepts, such as the symbolic, imaginary, and real. That is to say, the concept of the objet a does not exist throughout Lacan's intellectual career. He invents it, but one cannot be entirely precise concerning the date of its birth. According to Guy Le Gauffey, “the term objet a is not encountered, with the value and signification that we give it today, before the beginning of the 1960s. And contrary to Lacan's other inventions or discoveries, it is not easy to date this appearance in a simple and clear fashion.” Le Gauffey 2012, p. 13.

however, the fact that almost everyone ignores the importance of the voice in order to analyze the gaze.<sup>10</sup> We certainly live in a visual era, and one could say that the theoretical emphasis on the gaze at the expense of the voice is simply what one would expect in such an era. But this explanation is an explanation that doesn't really explain anything and thus leaves us unsatisfied. There is another possibility. Perhaps psychoanalytic theorists have privileged the gaze because they have concentrated by and large on the talkie and left silent cinema unspoken for. The examples of the experience of the impossible object in the cinema proffered by psychoanalytic theories comes almost without exception from the era of the talkie.

This is evident in the work of Slavoj Žižek, who is doubtless the most influential psychoanalytic theorist today in the study of cinema. He chooses his examples of the impossible object from the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and David Lynch, among others. Žižek provides a multitude of cinematic examples, but he rarely talks about silent cinema. When he does, he theorizes the resistance to the talkie as a resistance to the voice. This resistance, according to Žižek, is the result of a desire to remain in the paradise of silent cinema. He writes, “directors like Eisenstein, Chaplin and even Hitchcock were so resistant to embracing sound [because they] ... wanted to prolong their sojourn in the silent paradise where castration is suspended.”<sup>11</sup> For Žižek, there is no lack in the universe of silent cinema. The resistance to voice among early directors is a resistance to the encounter with lack. But perhaps what was happening among directors in silent cinema was not resistance to the voice but resistance to giving it up. The universe of silent cinema looks like a paradise where one is not subject to castration only because we look at it retroactively. There is no escape from the ubiquity of lack, but lack doesn't always take on the same form. If we look for lack in the form of the voice rather than the gaze, we can find it in silent cinema. The absence of speech makes the voice the lost object.

### Encounter with Absence

It is difficult to hear the absence of the voice in the talkie. Theorists find the gaze and miss the voice because they choose the talkie as their primary theoretical terrain. In this cinema, there is too much noise for the voice, and at the same time the presence of sound gives free space for the emergence of the gaze. There are only a few truly exceptional talkies that are capable of making the voice evident. In the epoch of the talkie, it is difficult to find instances where the gaze doesn't play the privileged role. But the epoch of silent cinema is another story.

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10 For my own culpability in privileging the gaze and marginalizing the voice, see McGowan 2007.

11 Žižek 2012, p. 677.

Because the lost object is an object that arises in its absence, silent cinema offers the perfect arena for the encounter with the voice. There is a direct relationship between the different modes of cinema and the different forms of the lost object. The gaze is the form of the lost object privileged in the talkie, while the voice is the form privileged in silent cinema. When cinema begins to speak, it changes objects. Although several theorists analyze the gaze as the central object of cinema, in fact this version of the lost object does not emerge completely until after the end of silent cinema. In the first epoch of the cinema, the voice is absolutely absent, but it deforms the silent film as such precisely through its absence. Each silent film must struggle with the voice as a central absence. While the gaze functions as an absence in the field of experience of the talkie, the object that serves this function for silent cinema is the voice.

Silent cinema indicates the absence of the voice and renders this absence determinative and significant. In any art, there are absences that are simply not there, that are absolutely removed and outside of the field, like the breast and the feces in cinematic art. We cannot create a psychoanalytic theory of cinema taking the feces as the point of departure, except perhaps for a certain genre of fetishist pornography. This is not only a joke, however. Feces are a complete absence in the cinema. But there are also absences that have the status of a proper absence, that is to say, absences that the art produces as an absence and that it renders palpable for the spectator. This is the case with the voice in silent cinema.

There is little space for the gaze in silent cinema. Of course, one could mention instances where one definitively encounters the gaze, including the celebrated Odessa steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) or the end of *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin, 1931), but the voice plays an important role even in these scenes that depict an encounter with the gaze. Even when the gaze is evident in silent cinema, the voice takes the upper hand. These scenes offer us the definitive proof of this postulate because they show the gaze in such a powerful fashion. But the voice is even more powerful. The evident and massive absence of the voice determines the structure of these scenes and of all silent cinema. The lack of voices concentrates the desire of the spectator on this object that is not there: silent films are constructed around what they cannot say. Because they have different objects, silent cinema and the talkie are different species of the same art. In order to understand these species, one must distinguish their proper objects.

The politics of a talkie is located around the question of its relationship with the gaze (and secondarily in relation to the voice). If a film maintains the gaze in its absence and demands that the spectator confront this ineluctable absence, the film takes a radical direction and stimulates a political questioning that derives from its own structure. If a film forces the spectator to encounter the gaze as a deformation of the

perceptual field, the film goes even further politically. On the other hand, more ideological films are those that deploy the gaze but then fill the lack that they introduce and thus resolve the problem that they raise.

In the talkie, the gaze creates the possibility for spectators to encounter the trauma of their own unaccounted desire, a possibility that seems not to exist in silent cinema. The absence of the voice creates the image of a cinema without the traumas that are always just around the corner for the spectators of the talkie. From our perspective, it seems as if the universe of silent cinema is a paradise lost. This idea furnishes the basis for Pascal Bonitzer's analysis of the cinema. Describing the transformation from silent cinema to the talkie, he says, "The cinema had been innocent, joyful, and dirty. It is going to become obsessional, fetishist, and icy. The dirtiness doesn't disappear, but it is interiorized, moralized, and moves into the gaze, that is to say, into the register of desire."<sup>12</sup> The idea that the gaze emerges in its proper form with the talkie is convincing, but one must not, following Bonitzer, nostalgically transform silent cinema into a field of pure plenitude. According to this position, lack is not constitutive but avoidable at certain historical epochs and in certain aesthetic modes. If Bonitzer were correct, there would be no way to make sense of why spectators returned to see silent films because these films would lack any free space in which the subject could desire. In order to experience enjoyment, one must desire. One must be a lacking subject. The life of a subject or of an art does not begin with pure enjoyment but with the lack that creates a path toward enjoyment that the subject follows. According to Bonitzer, silent cinema is a space filled with enjoyment and empty of desire. It is cinema before the fall. Romanticism about origins is always a temptation. But it is also always a trap that one has to avoid. When Bonitzer talks about the innocence of silent cinema, he falls into this trap.

But while falling Bonitzer nevertheless places his finger on an important point: it is true that the spectator of the silent film doesn't encounter the gaze in the same manner as it occurs in silent cinema. With the introduction of actual voices in 1927, a cataclysm occurs. This event marks the end of the career of many directors and actors, as recorded fictionally to perfection in *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952). The film industry undergoes a tremendous upheaval and becomes an actual industry, which it wasn't before. But another more dramatic event also occurs. Cinema's principle object radically changes. The importance of the voice declines while the gaze takes its place. The gaze was always there in silent cinema, but the complete absence of the voice in this cinema obscures the role of the gaze and hinders its functioning as the object that orients the desire of the spectator and the structure of the film. Bonitzer is wrong to say that there is no gaze

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12 Bonitzer 1999, p. 38.

in silent cinema, but he is right to say that the gaze emerges with the introduction of actual voices in the cinema.

In silent cinema, there is no pure enjoyment but rather another sort, another structure, of desire. The form, as Bonitzer explains, is more open to the public and less interiorized, but it nonetheless maintains the possibility of a confrontation with the trauma of desire in the distortions of the visual field produced by the absence of the voice. Clearly, one cannot hear the voice in silent cinema—that's why it's called silent—but one can see one's lack of hearing. This phenomenon happens all the time.

In silent cinema, the voice reigns over the gaze because of its absence from the perceptual field. One produces a form of the impossible object by removing something from the perceptual field. The lost object emerges through subtraction. The gaze, for example, emerges when spectators lose their mastery over the visual field, as occurs in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). When the film's hero Jeff (James Stewart) looks out his window and sees nothing but a cigarette burning in the darkened apartment across the courtyard, we encounter the gaze. We see what doesn't belong in the visual field and what interrupts the spectator's mastery over this field—the desire of the murderer in that apartment. With the cigarette in this scene, Hitchcock introduces a gap in the visual field and demands that the spectator confront its ramifications. After this appearance, we don't see the visual field as a whole—that is, with the eye of mastery—but as the site where desire can explode in the form of the gaze. The visual field has a void in the center where the lighted cigarette is located. But to produce this effect, the film must create an absence at the moment when we expect a presence.

Of course, silent cinema can produce the same effects by introducing absence in the visual field. There is nothing prohibiting it. It's completely thinkable as a possibility. But this cinema has no need to produce the absences like the one that we see in Hitchcock's film. There is an entire field that is absent—the auditory field. This absence opens the door to the appearance of the impossible object in the form of the voice.

To say that silent cinema is silent would be an error that many historians of cinema have already corrected. The absence of speech does not equal silence. There was always music in the cinema—and many silent films had narrators. There was sound. However, silent cinema does not have the voice. When an art lacks the voice but at the same time shows characters that visibly speak, the absence comes to the fore.

The emergence of the voice as the principle object in the cinema is not exclusive to silent cinema. There are talkies that place the accent on the voice, but they remain necessarily exceptional. One encounters the voice, for instance, in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) or Brian DePalma's *Blow Out* (1981), when one confronts a gap in the sound of the film. Kaja Silverman, a theorist of sound in the cinema, spends much time discussing *The Conversation* because this film is one of the few in the era of sound cinema that privileges the voice. But even here,

in a case that seems clearly on the side of the voice as object, one could make a reasonable argument that it is still the gaze that predominates. In her analysis of the final scene, Silverman herself talks about the gaze as much as the voice. She says, "whereas in the opening shot of the film we look at and listen to Union Square through Harry's bugging equipment, here [in the final scene] we look at and presumably listen to him through someone else's."<sup>13</sup> When one analyzes the talkie, even if one wants to emphasize the voice, the gaze manifests itself during the course of the analysis.

### Listening For What We Can't Hear

Turning toward silent cinema, one discovers that the situation is completely different. The theorist who seeks the lost object in silent cinema might begin by looking for the gaze, but the voice becomes perceptible if we listen for its absence. Although few (or no) analyses of silent cinema emphasize the voice, this object comes to the fore when one approaches this form of cinema with the aid of psychoanalysis. When one dives into the analysis of this cinema, one finds everywhere the effects of the voice as the predominant form of the lost object. The traumatic encounter with the point of absence occurs with the voice rather than with the gaze. One can see this in the most important scene in the history of cinema.

The scene on the Odessa steps that Sergei Eisenstein constructs in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is visually unforgettable. Clearly, to say that it represents an instance of the voice as object is a provocation. Eisenstein's visual montage advances the art of cinema, not his utilization of sound. But the key moments of this scene have an intimate relationship with the visibility of the absence of the voice. One sees the horror of the massacre through the fact that one hears nothing but music.

First of all, the spectator doesn't hear the cries of the people in the process of being shot. The slaughter occurs with cries in the visual field but without any vocalization. This silence of the people creates a disconcerting effect for the spectator, in which the absence of the voice that cries out functions as the center of the scene. This absence arouses the spectator's desire and actually produces all the movement of the montage in the scene. Eisenstein cuts the shots so quickly and in a completely discordant way in order to approach the silent cries in another manner. The cuts speak what cannot be spoken on the soundtrack. The montage shows the cries of the people indirectly and points toward what remains inexpressible.

The scene focuses on the people who arrive at the shore to congratulate the sailors who have successfully revolted against the officers on their battleship. But state power in the form of well-armed

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<sup>13</sup> Silverman 1988, p. 98.

soliders arrives to suppress any possible birth of revolutionary spirit among the people. When the soldiers march toward the people as soldiers would march to combat and when they pitilessly fire on the civilians, we see the people facing this onslaught begin to cry out. There are certain particularly important sequences, both of which concern a mother who cries out because of her child.

The first series of shots involves a mother who is in the middle of the steps and who is descending hand-in-hand with her child. As this mother flees the firing soldiers, she suddenly discovers that she has lost contact with the hand of her son. She turns around, finds her son bleeding on the steps, and carries him in her arms while walking toward the soldiers. Eisenstein shows her pleading to the soldiers for the life of her seriously injured son. The spectator sees her speak but hears nothing, and this nothing functions here as the impossible object. One sees that her speech has no effect on the soldiers. Their response: fire at her and her son in cold blood. In the montage of this scene, Eisenstein places the spectator in the same position as the soldiers. Neither one nor the other hears the cry of the mother, and she dies with her son because of this deafness. But the deafness of the spectators is also the provocation for their investment in this scene. Out of our deafness, we hear the voice in its absence.

After this series of shots, there is another series that follows more or less the same logic. This series begins with the shot of a mother who pushes her baby in a stroller. The soldiers fire on the mother, leaving her mortally wounded. She cries out in pain and lets go of the stroller with her baby inside. As the stroller moves down the steps, one sees the baby crying in panic because of the fall. The mother is dead, and the baby is in absolute peril. One hears nothing but music at this moment, but one sees what one should hear. One desires through the impossibility of the voice. If the voice were accessible during this fall, its presence would diminish the trauma of the impossible encounter. It is the absence of the voice of the baby—its silent scream—that is at the center of this scene and that gives it its power over the spectator.

Eisenstein localizes the spectator's desire around what is not present in the film's visual field. But the visual field gives clues that put the spectator on the proper track. This is the genius of Eisenstein's film: one sees what one cannot hear, and in seeing this lack of hearing, one experiences the voice as an impossible object. This object predominates in silent cinema, but Eisenstein, especially in this scene, shows it in a way that has no precedent and no equal. The scene rouses the spectator in opposition to despotism through its depiction of the voice. The voice that we don't hear in this scene cries out against despotic violence and demands that the spectator cry out in a way that can be heard. In this scene, Eisenstein develops a politics of the cinema on the basis of the absence that he includes in the scene. Focusing on the absent voices of those suffering points toward the elimination of this type of suffering through political transformation.

The Odessa steps sequence is unequalled in the history of cinema. No other scene has its political power. However, it is not the only scene that places the voice in the fore and that emphasizes the hole that it creates in the representation. Nor is it the only scene that makes clear the trauma of this hole for the spectator.

After the scene on the Odessa steps, the two other most important instances of the voice as impossible object in silent cinema appear in two comedies, in the masterpieces of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. The films are *City Lights* and *The General* (Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton, 1926). As in all films of the silent epoch, one hears no voice during the course of these films. In this sense, they are not exceptional. But at the end of each film, one suddenly encounters the voice as a trauma that troubles the spectator's position of mastery.

Chaplin notably resists for longer than other directors the physical voice in his films. *City Lights* is a silent film that appears in the epoch of sound. Chaplin disdains the use of speech in his film in order to emphasize the voice as an object. This object is present in its absence throughout the film, but the last scene reveals it in the most traumatic fashion. *City Lights* recounts the story of the Tramp (Charlie Chaplin) who gives a million dollars (that he obtains from a drunk millionaire) to a blind florist (Virginia Cherrill) for a surgery that will give her sight. She doesn't know the identity of her benefactor but, due to a misunderstanding, believes him to be a rich man. When the surgery takes place and she regains her sight, she sees the Tramp and understands after a few moments that he is the source of the money that saved her: she asks if it is he, and he responds affirmatively. At this moment, Chaplin ends the film with a close-up of the Tramp's face. The spectator does not see how the florist reacts, whether she is happy or whether she begins to laugh or even cry. But the most important thing is that one hears nothing from her because no one can speak audibly in the film. The absence of the young florist's voice produces an encounter with the lost object for the spectator.

In the conclusion of this scene, the spectator's desire is oriented around the young florist's desire. Many questions arise because one doesn't hear her. Is she disappointed? Does she love the Tramp, or is pity the only sentiment that she has for him? Does she think of him with gratitude, or does she wish he were someone else, like the millionaire? The encounter with the lacking voice sustains the impossibility of responding to questions like these and leaves the spectator without any hope for the resolution of the problem of desire.

In a talkie, this scene would have been much more difficult or even impossible because sound would change the spectator's expectations. Watching this scene unfold, one would expect the response of the young florist. Her lack of verbal response would be a definitive response, that is to say, a negative response. Saying nothing to the revelation would entail rejecting the Tramp. But the lack of the voice permits Chaplin to

emphasize the complete absence of what she says. The absence of the voice produces an encounter with it.<sup>14</sup>

This encounter has the effect of forcing spectators to confront their own attitude toward those who don't belong. The Tramp is a social misfit, an internal exile within the social order. The florist's reaction to him thus stands in for our own. The absence of her voiced response puts all the weight of this response on the spectator. While watching and not hearing, we must accept the Tramp's proximity to us without recoiling. We must, the film suggests, embrace the Tramp and like figures as potential love relations. Taking up this attitude involves one in a complete political on the personal level. One must embrace what one feels compelled to push away. One must accept the proximity of those who don't belong.

In the final scene of *The General*, one finds oneself in the same situation as a spectator. Thanks to the efforts of Johnnie Gray (Buster Keaton) and his locomotive the *General*, the South wins a battle in the Civil War, and Johnnie receives a reward for his part in the victory: he becomes an officer in the army, which is what his lover Annabelle Lee (Marion Mack) desires in order to marry him. At the beginning of the film, Annabelle refuses to marry Johnnie, despite her love for him, because he is not a soldier. This was an absolute barrier for her that left Johnnie totally distraught. But finally, at the very end of the film, his success on the battlefield makes possible a marriage with Annabelle.

When Johnnie begins to kiss Annabelle for the first time in the film in this final scene, another barrier arises. Because he is now a lieutenant in the army, all the soliders that pass in front of the couple must salute and thus interrupt the kiss. Each time that Johnnie tries to kiss Annabelle, another solider passes and again interrupts until the end of the film. Johnnie finally begins to salute while kissing, which solves the problem but detracts from the kiss. Unlike the conclusion of *City Lights*, one knows in this case that Johnnie and Annabelle desire each other. They want to kiss. However, they cannot realize their desire because of the procession of soldiers. If Johnnie could speak out loud, he could say that he wants to be left alone with Annabelle. It is thus evident in the film that he cannot speak. He responds to the salutes with his own salute but never says anything. This scene shows an unsurpassable barrier that deforms desire, and this barrier is the absence of the object that could realize desire.

*The General* seems to lack the clear politics of *Battleship Potemkin* or even *City Lights* because it involves someone who achieves acceptance. Johnnie isn't a figure of social nonbelonging like the women on the Odessa steps or the Tramp. He has become part of the ranks of

14 The proof that Chaplin treated the voice as an objet a occurs in his next film, *Modern Times* (1936). This film has a completely ambiguous status: some people speak, but others (including Chaplin himself) act as if they as in a silent film. It is impossible to classify the film definitively in the category of silent cinema or the talkie. This gives the voice a spectral quality in the film, especially when one hears it through the loudspeakers (I owe this point to Sheila Kunkle, Metropolitan State University).

society—both through gaining his military commission and gaining a marriage partner. But the insight of Keaton consists in showing how even those who belong to the social order nonetheless persist in their nonbelonging. Even as a full member of the military, Johnnie still cannot attain the complete satisfaction that he anticipated. Here, the voice shows itself as the obstacle to completeness. The encounter with the impossible object doesn't just prompt us to political changes. It also reveals the limit of these changes. The conclusion of *The General* makes evident that even the enjoyment of insiders remains always partial.

The greatest successes of silent cinema concentrate their attention on the voice. The inability to record the voice produces an absence in which we discover the object that animates desire, in the same way that blindness has a positive effect on hearing or the sense of smell. Without vision, one must hear and smell better to get by in the world. One can witness the same phenomenon in the history of silent cinema. The absence of the voice demands the invention of conflict montage. In fact, montage as such exists in large measure thanks to what the first films couldn't do directly with sound. If they could reproduce the voice at the beginning of the era of cinema, it is likely that we would not have montage today. It is always the case that a lack produces an excess.

The fecundity of the voice's absence in the visual field creates a real dread of the talkie among the first film theorists, including, among others, Rudolf Arnheim and Walter Benjamin. The future of the talkie engenders dread because they foresee in the recording of the voice the filling of the absence that constitutes the art of cinema, even if no one puts it this way. According to these theorists, the danger is the evanescence of the art of cinema under the pressure of another more ancient art—the theater.

Béla Balázs is the official representative of this theoretical position. Balázs, who initially has hope for the sound cinema, becomes disappointed after a few years of the development of this new medium. According to Balázs, "The art of the silent film is dead, but its place was taken by the mere technique of the sound film which in twenty years has not risen and evolved into an art. On the whole the film has reverted again to a speaking photographed theatre."<sup>15</sup> With the recording of the voice and the debut of the talkie, one has no need to cut the film in order for spectators to see what they cannot hear. Balázs expresses the fear that the art of cinema would become obsolete with the lack of its lack.<sup>16</sup>

15 Balázs 1970, p.194-195.

16 One should also note here the view of Walter Benjamin on the emergence of the voice in cinema. Benjamin believes absolutely that this emergence is nothing less than an almost consciously counterrevolutionary project. In a letter to Theodor Adorno, Benjamin writes, "I see more and more clearly that the launching of the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the film industry designed to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which had produced reactions that were difficult to control and hence dangerous politically." Benjamin 1999, p.295.

The debut of the talkie is a desert for the deployment of the two forms of the impossible object—the gaze and the voice. The introduction of sound essentially prevents the utilization of montage, at the same time that the immobility of the camera limited the capacity for tracking shots. It is not a coincidence that once Eisenstein could include actual voices he turned away from montage. The visual field becomes impoverished as sound emerges. Contrary to what one might tend to believe, there is no great explosion of experimentation with sound during this epoch, except for the case of *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1929), Hitchcock's first sound film. The film begins without the voice and during certain moments Hitchcock introduces gaps and deformations in the soundtrack of the film. But this film remains an exception, even in the oeuvre of Hitchcock himself. For the most part, the initial talkies in the era of sound cinema utilize sound in a simple and synchronized way. The debut of the era of the talkie is not a promising debut.

Eventually, the gaze appears in the talkie, but other than a few exceptions, the voice more or less disappears. Before its quasi-obsolescence—that is to say, before 1927—the voice is the star of the cinema. When actors begin to speak, their voices obscure the voice as the cinematic object. A radical change occurs in the cinema. At one point in time, the voice was nowhere and thus everywhere; now, it is everywhere and thus inaccessible as an object.

We must continue to analyze the voice as the object of the talkie, even if Mladen Dolar has already written an essential work on the subject.<sup>17</sup> Other psychoanalytic theorists today have also tried to emphasize the voice, and many will undoubtedly follow their example. But one should also recognize that something has changed with this object. When characters speak on the screen, it is no longer possible for the voice to play the principal role that it played that it did when they were silent. One cannot lament the introduction of the talkie, but at the same time we must note the theoretical contours of the change that it brings. In 1927, cinema largely loses the voice, but it gains the gaze.

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17 See Dolar 2006

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# Bacurau — On Blood, Maps and Museums

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**Abstract:** The museum has a central role in the Brazilian film *Bacurau*, directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles. Inserting the small village of Bacurau in a long and ongoing history of colonial resistance in the backlands of Brazil, the museum holds the iconography of popular struggle in the region, as well as the weapons used on past confrontations, which remain available for future ones. This essay broadens the discussion of *Bacurau*'s museum to present-day Brazil in the aftermath of the presidential elections of 2018—when the far-right got into power. Arguing for a museological stance similar to the one in the film, this essay proposes that such a stance is a way to respond to the rise of authoritarianism in the country. A 'museological stance' is thus presented as an alliance between the living and the dead as a means for conjuring up new futures. It presupposes the cannibalization of the stories of violence in aesthetic, political and psychological ways. Completed in November 2019, a post scriptum was added to the essay in April 2020; reevaluating the meaning of an alliance between the living and the dead after COVID-19.

**Keywords:** *Bacurau*; sertão; museum; violence; Brazilian Film and Art.

*Bacurau*, the Brazilian film directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, starts with a warning. "Bacurau 17 km/ If you go, go in peace" can be read on a road sign right after the film's opening credits, when an artificial satellite approaches the northern region of the Brazilian territory, known as *sertão*. If we are to believe the threat, made implicit by the conditional clause, "if you go, go in peace", both the spectator and traveler are warned about the bravery and belligerence of Bacurau's people. Between the road sign and the village, there are still other strange signals of its population's warrior temperament: from coffins piled up by the roadside to the carcass of a gunned-down police car. There are enough bullets and coffins to confront and bury those who do not come in peace.

As part of the movie's marketing strategy, a similar sign was positioned at the entry hall of a few film theaters in Brazil, serving as a challenge to the spectator. Placed in the film and in the real space of movie theaters, this sign suggests that *Bacurau* is a physical territory (a town) as well as an imaginary and fictitious one (a film)—much like the *sertão*.

## To Be and Not to Be on the Map

Untranslatable, the term *sertão* refers both to a specific semi-arid region in the northern part of Brazil and to a set of often contradictory imaginary and ideological constructions. Condemned by its barren weather to hunger, misery, and underdevelopment, *sertão* has always

been the uncivilized Other to the project of a developed, urbanized, and industrialized nation. In Brazilian popular culture and art, *sertão* is often associated with the notions of indomitable insubordination, resistance, vitality, and creation. It escapes its geographical specificity to become a state of mind, a space of symbolical and unyielding existence.

“The *sertão* is where you least expect it”, writes João Guimarães Rosa in one of the great Brazilian novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Grande Sertão Veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1956). From this perspective, the *sertão* cannot be spotted by a satellite or located along the 17 kilometers that connect two points in space. It transcends the borders of the map, to inscribe and assert itself where least expected. “You know, sir, it is in the *sertão* that one’s thoughts have to rise above the power of the place,”<sup>1</sup> says Riobaldo, the character in Guimarães Rosa’s novel. Erased from the map, the *sertão* continues to exist beyond it. Similarly to a film or a memory, it exists in another dimension. “Neighbor of the fifth cardinal point, and friend of the fourth dimension—it is the third margin... Where amazement, escape, and creation combine, there is the entrance to the *sertão*”<sup>2</sup>, writes Rondinelly Medeiros, a Brazilian historian who researches ways of life and thinking in the *sertão*. Both *Bacurau* and the *sertão* are and are not on the map.

Taken as a “condition” and a “state of mind,” a symbolic territory of fabulation and invention, the *sertão* and Bacurau, as its allegory, transcend their geolocation to carve and project themselves onto another map and another episteme: affective and prospective. They create counter-mappings that reposition and reclaim forms of existence from the realms of possibility and of becoming, beyond dominant representations. However, precisely because they affirm the prospect of creating and existing in other territories, they must be “taken off the map.” There is always a moment when the colonial powers must wash the *sertão* off the map, as the submerging of Canudos reminds us.<sup>3</sup> Reasons are always given and frequently enforced with battalions:

1 Guimarães Rosa 1963, p. 19

2 Medeiros, 2019, p. 58.

3 In 1883, a wandering preacher, Antonio Conselheiro, gathered thousands of followers around him and settled an autonomous community in the backlands of Bahia, in what became the village of Canudos. The community attracted impoverished peasants, landless squatters, runaway slaves, Indians and all sorts of people oppressed and marginalized by the ruling classes. It expanded rapidly, thus becoming the second most populous settlement in the state of Bahia. In the midst of a dispute between groups scrabbling for control of the country, the new republican government rapidly saw in Canudos and in Conselheiro, who was a monarchist, a menace to its order. In the rise of eugenics and hygienists policies, the intervention of the armed forces was invoked to save the country from its own people. From 1896 to 1897, during the course of three expeditions, the *sertão* was invaded by battalions fiercely repulsed by the inhabitants of Canudos. The fourth expedition, however, succeed in exterminating the entire population of the village, killing approximately 25000 people. Canudos was burned down and dynamited afterwards. Seventy years later, during the Military Dictatorship, a dam was built on the ruins of the city, in what seems to have been a deliberate effort to erase the memories of the suppression of the popular revolt by the republican army in 1896–97.

expanding territories, combatting backwardness with the myth of progress, and last but not the least, suppressing its mystery from seducing and contaminating what is on the outside—what would become of the world as we know it (capitalist, individualist, and expansionist), if all were to enter a state of becoming *sertão*.

In Dornelles’ and Mendonça’s film, such double condition—amid the constantly renewed menace of erasure and the repositioning of existence by counter-mapping—is staged and updated by the relationship of the museum with its exterior. In this essay, I intend to examine this condition through the case of the Historical Museum of Bacurau (HMB), as it combines a past of oppression and resistance with a call to arms.

Phantoms and Museums

Although impenetrable and mysterious to the very end, the museum is the most important symbolic space of *Bacurau*. When two strangers, coming from the southern part of the country, arrive at the village to obstruct its mobile signal—an operation needed to remove it from the map—the locals believe the museum is the reason of their visit: “Did you come to see the museum?”; “Aren’t you going to visit the museum?”, they ask. For the people of Bacurau, the museum puts the village on the map.

Nonetheless, it is only close to the film’s ending, when foreigners invade the village to begin a hunt for its inhabitants that we’ll enter the museum space to find out what it holds. In an antechamber: newspaper clippings and photographs referring to the iconography of popular struggle and resistance in the *sertão*—Canudos, Cariri,<sup>4</sup> cangaço.<sup>5</sup> In the following room: pistols. These, however, are solely recognized by the placards and the white stains held on the dirty wall. When we finally enter the gallery, the pistols are already in the hands of the people.

The Historical Museum of Bacurau is not a metaphorical site of resistance but a literal one, the guardian and supplier of weapons needed for the confrontation. Alongside the school, it is also one of the first places to be attacked during the invasion.

With no windows and reinforced by a secondary layer of wooden beams, this museum resembles a bunker. Perhaps, the people of Bacurau already knew what most Brazilians only learned in 2017: that schools and cultural institutions are the first ones to be attacked and taken off the map when certain forces—intolerant, rather than merely

4 From 1683 to 1713, the Cariri people, an indigenous group native to the *sertão*, fought against the Portuguese colonizers. It was an organized and united resistance, similar to a confederation, opposed to the occupation of their land, as well as to slavery. The Cariri resisted the colonizers for 30 years.

5 Cangaço was a social bandit phenomenon of the *sertão* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The “cangaceiros” performed robberies for both political and economic reasons. Seen as common criminals by the State, they were perceived as popular heroes by many of the local population.

conservative—and armed with moral schematism, decide to take power by manipulating affect.

It may be useful to recall some recent events: in the city of Porto Alegre, a cultural space decided to shut down the exhibition, *Queermuseum—Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art*, when online protesters accused the show's organizers of inciting pedophilia and zoophilia. Soon after, a video of an artist, who was watched by and interacted with the public (including a child) while performing in the nude, at the opening of an exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of São Paulo (MAM-SP), went viral.

Thus began a national crusade against artists and art institutions. Eyeing the following year's election, opportunistic politicians (the soon-to-be president of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro and the governor of the state of São Paulo, João Dória, among them), launched a cultural war, defending “family values,” and advocating censorship of the arts. Meanwhile, other citizens, inflamed by such protests (and fearing their inner *sertão*?), turned to violence and attacked the museum's workers and visitors.

I'm not sure whether it is possible to analyze what ensued in the presidential elections of 2018 with adequate clarity. One or two scenes might suffice to demonstrate the surrealness of it all: images of erotic baby bottles, shaped in the form of a penis and allegedly distributed to young kids, as a way to educate them about homosexuality, informed some of the campaign discussions; photomontages depicting the progressive faction's vice-presidential candidate worshipping Satan and claiming that Jesus was transgender circulated broadly. All along, Bolsonaro, the far right's candidate who ended up winning the elections without ever showing up at a public debate, promised to free Brazil from cultural Marxists and gender ideology. Even though we cannot precisely measure the impact that the events of 2017 had on the following year's elections, one thing is certain: the phantoms of authoritarianism took to the streets and, to say the least, left their marks on our holiday family dinners.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps, all this happened because those ghosts were never truly imprisoned, or psychologically processed and exorcized. Indeed, it seems that we chose to believe that a decree<sup>7</sup> was enough to make torturers, and tortures by extension, vanish.

Some may believe that decrees, struck by pens, verdicts, and promises of imminent futures are enough to erase past aggressions.

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6The 2018 elections violently split the country in two. The electors of Bolsonaro accused the Left, and Left-Center voters of abetting corruption, of being “against Brazil” and degenerate; many times giving reins to racist discourses. One month after the elections, many people chose not to attend family Christmas celebrations, to avoid coming face to face with their family members who voted for Bolsonaro. See note 7.

7 In 1979, a decree by the Dictatorial Regime absolved all political crimes committed during the dictatorship. The amnesty included the crimes carried out by the military.

But there might be another way to deal with the histories of violence: defunctionalizing them, taking them to the museum, where they must remain captive.

Boris Groys situates the origins of such a proposal during the French Revolution, when, instead of destroying the objects and regalia of the Old Regime, the revolutionaries chose to aestheticize them in museums. Groys argues that to transform the old politics into a purely aesthetical object of contemplation is an even more radical way to neutralize the past than iconoclasm. It is necessary to display the domesticated corpses of the past, to keep them in sight, so that their phantoms won't surreptitiously leave in the middle of the night to come and sit at our bedside or our dining tables, when we are busy being born and busy dying.<sup>8</sup>

It might be useful to revisit a not so unusual comparison between museums and mausoleums. Setting aside the moralistic horror of death, we should reframe the necrological tendency of museums and look for its positive aspects. Again, Boris Groys offers some insight:

Already during the nineteenth century, museums were often compared to cemeteries, and museum curators to gravediggers. However, the museum is much more of a cemetery than any real cemetery. Real cemeteries do not expose the corpses of the dead; they conceal them. This is also true for the Egyptian pyramids. By concealing the corpses, cemeteries create an obscure, hidden space of mystery and thus suggest the possibility of resurrection. We have all read about ghosts, vampires leaving their graves, and other undead creatures wandering around cemeteries at night. We have also seen movies about a night in the museum: when nobody is looking, the dead bodies of the artworks come to life. However, the museum in the daylight is a place of definitive death that allows no resurrection, no return of the past. The museum institutionalizes the truly radical, atheistic, revolutionary violence that demonstrates the past as incurably dead. It is a purely materialistic death without return—the aestheticized material corpse functions as a testimony to the impossibility of resurrection.<sup>9</sup>

In *A Night at the Museum* (2006), a movie that Groys references without naming it, the ghosts of pharaohs, dinosaurs, and Civil War soldiers come back to life, playing different roles and interacting with each other. Far less reluctant to take seriously the so-called entertainment cinema,

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8 Reference to the 1968 song, *Panis et Circences* (*Bread and Circus*), by Mutantes, which became a manifesto or emblem of Tropicalismo. The song is a satire on the conventions of a traditional bourgeois family plagued by immobility and mediocrity. The chorus repeats: “But the people in the dining room are busy being born and dying”.

9 Groys 2014, p. 6.

Pedro França reminds us—in an article written at the aftermath of the fire at Brazil’s National Museum<sup>10</sup>—that the problem with the film starring Ben Stiller isn’t what happens inside the museum at night, but what happens when the “fragile pact that keeps the museum pieces within its walls is broken, and the past breaks free (dinosaur skeletons and giant, stuffed mammals running wild in the streets)”.

Contradicting the belief often inherent to the avant-gardes, according to which all of the museum’s objects are dead, it is possible to think (following França’s argument) that these objects are actually being held for later treatment. In this sense, the museum is a psychiatric clinic, designed for the collective elaboration of past traumas. In daytime, it shows the past as dead; at night, it is a prison that holds its ghosts captive and busy, deterring them from returning to the world.

Bacurau is a nocturnal bird; it flies during the time of “fear and terror” as “phantoms haunt the wake”—so Sérgio Ricardo sings on the film’s soundtrack. But as legend has it, Bacurau can also be a Phoenician scribe, transformed into a nocturnal bird by Tupã, the native Brazilian god of thunder. According to this legend, the Phoenicians arrived on the continent before the Portuguese. One day, a lost scribe was mistaken for a bird-god by the local indigenous population, angering Tupã. With the stroke of his lightning, the scribe was made into a bird, and this bird is Bacurau.

Bacurau is thus a nocturnal animal, as well as Brazil’s first “cannibalized” museologist, scribe, and librarian. In line with such double identity, Bacurau would be the museum’s guardian when no one’s left, as well as the “curator-psychologist,” in charge of organizing the living ghosts’ collective psychodrama. Perhaps this is one of the roles of a curator: to organize the worldly objects with the intent of dealing and processing emotions, collective memories, and traumas that eventually surface in our consciousness during the night. Another role should be to create small points of contraband to the outside, making the museum a prospective device for future struggles and revolts.

In *Bacurau*, a subterranean tunnel connecting the center of the village to the weapons’ room inside the bunker-museum bridges past and future. Used for access to the pistols during the invasion, this tunnel is also employed as a jail, imprisoning the sole foreign survivor of the attack (the character played by Udo Kier). Once buried alive, his ghost can only move towards the interior of the museum. Besides the bloodstains deliberately left on the walls after the attack, and close to the resistance’s fallen ones, he will be mentally absorbed and incorporated into the collective narrative. But before his burial and disappearance, he addresses the people of Bacurau and the film’s spectators in a threatening tone: “This is only the beginning.” Enunciated from within the hatch and directed towards the world of the living, such a prophecy repositions the history at play, and reminds us that victories are always partial and temporary.

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10 França 2019, p.6.

Insomuch as clinical psychoanalysis acknowledges the impossibility of definitive cures, the clinic-museum understands the limitations of its ambitions. First, it does not believe in the *telos* of salvation and liberation, to which the analyzing of past mistakes would eventually lead—to believe such *telos* would mean that there might come a time when museums (and analysts) cease to be needed. Secondly, it recognizes that imprisoning and treating phantoms from the past doesn’t stop the emergence of new monsters; the clinic-museum acknowledges the constraints of the tools at its disposal. Nevertheless, it claims dealing with the past as its function and responsibility, so that multiple and unknown futures may take place. The dislocation is subtle and decisive; the future is not to be built on the image and likeness of the past, on the fear of phantasmagorical reappearance, but rather on an immense unknown that must be invented. *A sertão*.

At this point in our history, when the untreated ghosts of our past are on the loose, we are faced with two alternatives. The first is to continue doing what we have always done: to leave them on the outside and hope they’ll someday fall asleep, so that life may once more normalize—this has been the choice of many museums and art spaces that, fearing the savagery of irrational moralism, have opted for self-censorship. Another alternative might be to *bacuralizar* [*bacurize*]: to cannibalize the stories of violence in aesthetical, political, and psychological ways; to reenact these stories with other means and for other ends; to invent disparate outcomes, so that we may then return them to the world. To *bacurize* is to assume a museological stance. A stance that depends on a radical alliance between the museum and the present, as well as between the living and the dead (or those that are absent).

*Bacurau* is built upon a radical symmetry among characters. This symmetry is essential to what I call here as a “museological stance.” The film has no exceptional protagonists. Barbara Colen, Thomáz Aquino, and Wilson Rabelo are no less important than Sônia Braga. The former aren’t any more protagonists than the film’s non-professional actors—the only character that gains more notoriety than the others, Lunga (played by Silvério Pereira), doesn’t even appear before the story’s third and final part. But the lack of hierarchy among the actors (professional or not) doesn’t create an indifferent, uniform mass of equals. The film does not resort to the artifice of employing extras as a means of staging collectivity—notice, for instance, the number of close-ups, as opposed to wide shots (a safer and more frequent choice when filming extras). Almost all characters carry traces of differentiation, specificity, and concreteness in their portrayal—more so for the inhabitants of Bacurau than for its visitors: outsiders, southerners, or the mayor; the majority of which are characterized as archetypes. At least in the inhabitants’ case, we may assume that they are, in one way or another, protagonists, or else, distinctive and constitutive fragments of a collective body; a protagonist-village.

The symmetry can also be found between the present and the missing characters. The people of Bacurau tirelessly invoke the persons who are away: Ms. Carmelita's many children who, having left the town, weren't able to come back to her funeral; the fallen brothers and sisters, possibly never known, defeated and massacred in other struggles, *sertões* and *bacuraus*. Their names are conjured up during the funeral procession at the end of the film: Mariza Letícia, Marielle, Pablo Tavares Maciel, Francisco Assis Chaves, Adalberto Santos, Audilene Maria Silva, Mariza Letícia Roberto Ferreira Silva, Nelia Maria Albuquerque, João Pedro Teixeira.

Amid so many unfamiliar names, the fresh wound of recent events in Brazil allows us to recognize some, even if their last names were altered or omitted: Mariza Letícia [Lula da Silva], Marielle [Franco]. There is another one that stands out: João Pedro Teixeira, a peasant leader brutally murdered in 1962, during an ambush.

Teixeira—invoked last and the only person whose actual surname is preserved—isn't a mere accessory on that list: in Brazilian film history, Teixeira connects the pre-coup d'état era to the age of re-democratization. In 1964, the year of the military coup in Brazil, the filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho was in Galileia, a town in the state of Pernambuco, in the midst of the *sertão*, directing a film about the life of Teixeira, with his widow, Elizabeth, and other peasants as protagonists. The army invaded the set, arrested the peasant leaders and the crew, and confiscated the equipment. The negatives, however, survived. Two decades later, Coutinho resumed filming. He returned to Galileia to show the original negatives to Elizabeth and to the surviving peasants. The final film included their memories, revived by the projection. Coutinho's *Twenty Years Later* (1984) is therefore a film about a double erasure: of João Pedro, and of the interrupted movie. Also, it is a counter-history that reconnects a suppressed future (the life of a peasant man, the agrarian reform, the Cinema Novo) with the present, or presents.

### November, 2019

As I complete this essay, I learn that a speech, against the new government's cultural policies, and made at the opening ceremony of an important Brazilian film festival, has been censored. Even more distressed, I follow the latest actions of the democratically elected government, which is trying to approve a law that, in practical terms, legalizes torture, and institutes martial law, by exempting from prosecution both the police and the military personnel accused of killing on duty.

Perhaps this is not 1964. Maybe, this time they [the politicians] will act in accordance with the law, with the approval of Congress and of public opinion, which has been hijacked by the WhatsApp alt-right groups. Maybe, they've already learned from the experience of 1964-81

how to protect themselves from future trials. But futures are certainly being repressed, and many more will be suffocated.

We ought to salvage a prospect of a future—this could be another definition for *bacuralizar*, or another way to describe the museological stance that I've been defending as urgent. We must inhabit Bacurau. We must ally ourselves with the fallen (João Pedro, Marielle) and with those who resisted (Elizabeth Teixeira, the peasants, Eduardo Coutinho, *Twenty Years Later*), summon up different films and different struggles to conjure up new futures. As the museologist-scribe-angel-bird has done it, we have to summon the dead and the fallen to such a funeral procession, so that, with them, we may walk towards the time to come. This procession is nothing but a museum. Maybe we will fail. But so did they.

### April 1st 2020

When I first finished writing this essay, in November of 2019, I liked the ambiguity of the personal pronoun in the essay's last sentence: "But so did they". Although most readers recognized our enemy—the Other of our horror (aka the dictatorship)—in that pronoun, the opposite was equally true; "they" could refer to our past allies, who were also defeated, and who also failed. Their "sacrifice" didn't make us a more just society; no future sins were absolved—which doesn't mean that they failed entirely. They left us the struggle for other futures, and the capacity to confront the oppression and the horror of our present reality with the imagination and desire for different outcomes.

But that was a Pre-COVID-19 world, in a country imprisoned and immobilized in a sort of psychological quarantine, caused by the trauma of the previous year's presidential election, when the alt-right candidate, Bolsonaro, called a "myth" by his voters, was elected with a racist, misogynist, homophobic, and openly authoritarian discourse, inflamed by a cultural war against the "cultural Left." My encounter with *Bacurau* was framed by that trauma, and the text I wrote was an attempt to deal with it from the point of view of the arts.

The trauma of 2018 was succeeded by another, still ongoing, and whose developments in the economic, political, human, and psychosocial spheres are yet immeasurable. Despite uncertainties about the future, the paranoid authoritarianism in—with its chimeric foes and so-called truths conspired by Twitterers-in-chief—has surely found a worthy antagonist in the virus.

When I returned to the text in this new context, to translate it into English, I was confronted by a series of new questions. Not so much about the film, but about what I meant in that text referring to a future, to alliances between the living and dead, and to a museological stance.

It's 10 AM. Open on my browser is the website of the Brazilian newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*. Its cover story features a photo of four people carrying a coffin and dressed in suits similar to an astronaut's.

I click on the link, and among the available images, I find an aerial shot of new graves being dug. The news article mentions that the public cemeteries of São Paulo are burying between 30 to 40 bodies a day, as their cause of death is still to be confirmed by the COVID-19 tests.

The graves are now being dug before death, in its anticipation. The incoming bodies won't be allowed a funeral procession; the quarantine hampers farewell rituals. But even though bodies cannot be seen or touched, the "data" of death is visible. We follow, day by day, the "evolution of the curve."

Since Brazil *counted* its first death by COVID-19, death has been experienced as a variation of the curve. Unlike other recent (or not so recent) tragedies, this time *images are lacking*—even for the mediatic spectacle of necrophilia. Still, death isn't any less present. It is our relationship with it that has changed; having fears, anxieties, and grieving conditioned to and associated with a "graph's curve", not knowing if or when we'll become part of it.

In this reality, the difference between *us* and *them* is only signaled by the temporary, and continuously evolving, distinction between those that are and those that are not on the curve: the living/survivors and the dead and future dead. It is almost certain that, by the end of the pandemic, this difference will have clear racial and class outlines. However, as I write, the fear of becoming *one* or *another* traverses everyone equally, justifying the quarantine's defense by the same ones whose lives are within "*normal* situations of inequality," the most protected and preserved ones.

What does it mean to defend an alliance between the living and the dead when the dead pile up in front of me and not behind? And when the dead, fallen or to fall, are not united against a (bio/necro) political project of regulating life's forces? When there is no recognizable difference between *us* and *others*; when the enemy is not even an enemy in common parlance?

The virus is not an agent with intentionality. It has no desires or plans. It doesn't gain power as I lose my life force. It is indifferent to my symptoms, if I live or die. It only searches for a host.

The "war on the virus" narrative is not comical because it is tragic: this "enemy", which never truly declared a war, and could have continued as happy as it was, "made" us, the ones combatting it, its army. It's possible that a dead or dying body might carry, unbeknownst to me, a virus that reproduced and multiplied asymptotically inside me. It's possible that part of my "breath of life" finds its death in the body of another. I am as much prey as predator.

The dead will not become martyrs. Among them there will be allies and non-allies, oppressors and victims. The same is true for the living and survivors. If the virus has any power over us, it is to radically alter what we understand as *us* and *them*, as prey and predator, alien and local.

When all of this is finished we will have to bury the dead. If capitalism will be shaken, or if authoritarianism will have found new forms, it's impossible to know. Probably a mixture of both. Whether we'll have invented new futures, as part of the Left has been postulating and wishing for, is also impossible to know. But we will have to deal with this trauma.

In Brazil, the trauma won't have the face, voice, paranoia, of the negationist asinine in power.<sup>11</sup> Neither will it be caused by the phantoms of authoritarianism. Even worse, it is possible that authoritative measures, like the ones being implemented in China, might end up containing damage and, ergo, trauma.

With that said, a few questions should be raised: What can be expected from the museological stance, for which I've created and untranslatable verb inspired by Bacurau? What can we ask of this bird-scribe-museologist?

As I follow the world's intelligentsia throwing itself into a restless and vigorous exercise of provisional thinking, frequently getting things wrong (e.g. Giorgio Agamben) and stumbling on its own limitations, I see the art system diving into a manic, compulsive syndrome of producing visibility. As soon as the quarantine started, we were inundated by offers of virtual tours and audio-guides from museums. Galleries are even more active now than during art fairs, arranging virtual studio visits, online conversations between curators and artists, made available daily. On Instagram or Zoom, there is an infinite menu of lives, around the most diverse themes.

Some, following the example of the Market saw an "opportunity" in COVID-19. New institutions were created to offer "daily curatorships" of artist and experimental films, while existing ones offered "web residences," which are, to put it in very plain materialistic terms, a cordial trade of non-paid visibility.

Curators and film programmers feel impelled to post daily selections of films to watch, or of historical works they claim to have gained new layers of meaning during the quarantine. Suddenly, a rush to the most unknown work of mail art, phone art, has been started. Even web art has been rehabilitated.

Although late to the digital world, many of these initiatives deserve praise. Speaking from the perspective of someone living at the periphery of the international art circuit, I can only welcome the facilitation of access. Yet, the late and necessary democratization of access is not the issue here, but rather the pioneering drive that seems to underline many of these initiatives, the competitive push to see who gets first in the race

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11 From the outset of the crisis, Jair Bolsonaro has been diminishing the gravity of COVID-19. He has referred to it as a "small flu" and has insisted that the pandemic is being overestimated by hysterical news conglomerates. Against the quarantine, he has repeatedly defended the immediate return of all economic activities. If Brazil beats the virus, it will be despite Bolsonaro.

for the newest, smartest, and most groundbreaking response to our crisis (be it planetary or restricted to the art system).

When the economy itself acknowledges that the only thing to do now is to stop, the art system seems to takes license to become even more productive, intensifying the authoring and the circulation of visibility. It ignores the fact that such productivity sustains and is sustained, feeds as it is fed, by the compulsive capitalist dynamic that brought us to the collapse.

But the anxiety is understandable and real. In two, three, five, or ten months there will be a world in which, along with our delayed bills, we will need to exist more than ever. For cultural workers, that means to be remembered and to be visible.

However, to continue as we were, to work to maintain the same dynamics as before, is to give up on any responsibility for the world to which we desire to return. I do not intend to suggest that art go on strike, or any type of creative or critical hibernation. But it seems to me that we must choose *what* and *how* we want to produce, now and afterwards: regardless whether it be our survival in a world that will either end or crash us, or alternatives for the future, including for art. In other words: if we wish to be the living ghost of capitalism or the bird-scribe-museologist.

We cannot truly defend the end of capitalism, “of the world as we know it,” if we continue functioning according to its logic and laws, thus making it stronger. If we want to topple capitalism, we need to start by preventing it from operating inside us.

This would be an appropriate task for the bird-scribe: to treat the ghosts of hypervisibility, the phantoms of an economy of the self-image. This bird will be given the task of taking our contemporary art system to the clinic-museum, where it shall be defunctionalized and transformed into an object of contemplation, ruin and relic of a world that used to commodify the struggle against capitalism.

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# Animal filmicum: Notes on Some Scenes from Béla Tarr

Peter Szendy

**Abstract:** Among all the animals that haunt the films of Béla Tarr, there is one, the owl, that demands we challenge Giorgio Agamben's binary and metaphysical definition of man as the only "moviegoing animal." The owl then leads to the whale and the horse. Together, they raise a series of questions reminiscent of Aristotle's remarks about the eyes of animals and their dreams. What if, far from being the privileged domain of mankind, cinema constitutively included the pivoting or panning of an animal gaze? After Bresson and a few others, Tarr's films open new perspectives onto this "filmanimal."

**Keywords:** Agamben, animality, Aristotle, cinema, gaze, Tarr

Cows mooingly come out of barns to spread on the muddy ground. The camera follows them and begins a slow lateral tracking shot along the dilapidated buildings of the village. It stops when, through a path between the walls of the barracks, we see the cows again, and chickens now seem to want to join. The camera remains stationary. The cows end up leaving the frame. The chickens too. Fade to black.

No visible human figure inhabits these first eight minutes of Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994). The only human beings who can be assumed to be involved in the scene in any way—external stakeholders, so to speak—are those who, not appearing in the images, may be watching, like me at this very moment, the screen where they are projected.

Who—or what—might be watching in this way? Who—or what—could face these cows and chickens?

To the supposed viewer of this show, Edgar Morin, a long time ago, had proposed to give the name of *homo cinematographicus*:<sup>1</sup> a *homo* that would be characterized not so much by the fact of being *faber* or *sapiens*, but rather, says the sociologist, as "*demens*, producer of fantasies, myths, ideologies, magics."

*Sátántangó*'s opening scene echoes much later, towards the end of the film, when we hear the din of hoof noises resonating through the deserted streets of a small town at dusk. This time, horses cross the main square, go around the column erected in its center, and disappear as the camera descends—like the evening—on the three characters who are watching, filmed from behind. This time, unlike the sequence with cows, there are men who observe from within the image, so to speak. One of them notes: "The horses have escaped again from the slaughterhouse" (*már megint elszabadultak a lovak a vágóhídról*). The three men start walking, heading for the street whence the horses arrived. As they move away, some horses return to the square and circle idly around the column.

<sup>1</sup> Morin 2005, p. 222. See also p. 12: "A membrane separates *Homo cinematographicus* from *Homo sapiens*. As it separates our life from our consciousness."

In his monography on Béla Tarr, Jacques Rancière noted this insistent animal presence, by sketching a sort of animal list through the director's films:

Ever since *Damnation* the animal inhabits Bela Tarr's universe as the figure in which the human experiences its limit: dogs drinking from puddles, which Karrer barked with in the end [in *Damnation*]; cows liquidated by the community; horses escaped from abattoirs, and a cat martyred by Estike in *Sátántangó*; the monstrous whale of *Werckmeister Harmonies*; all the way up to the fox wrapped around Henriette's neck [in *L'Homme de Londres*].<sup>2</sup>

By uniting this motley collection of specimens under a common denominator, the animal, Rancière says that it would therefore be in the cinema of Béla Tarr a figure bordering on the human. As if these diverse representatives of wildlife found their unity in it, the unity of their roles. This is what the horse confirms in *The Turin Horse*, which forms an apparent exception in Rancière's list only to better unify the animal *limitrophy* as a way of testing the human:

"all that remains is the horse, in whom several roles are condensed: it is the tool for work, the means of survival for old Ohlsdorfer and his daughter. It is also the beaten horse, the animal martyred by humans that Nietzsche embraced in the streets of Turin before entering the night of madness. But it is also the symbol of the existence of the disabled coachman and his daughter, kin to the Nietzschean camel, the being made to be loaded with all possible burdens."<sup>3</sup>

The tool-animal, the sacrificed animal, the mirror-animal in which misery is reflected... In this zoological list of Rancière's, in this list which converges towards the horse as beast of burden and as animal taking on him all others (as *metanimal*, if you will), there is at least one element missing: the owl.

The owl of *Sátántangó* is missing, this owl that we see, at the end of an interminable tracking shot, in the deserted house where Irimiás led the villagers, after the suicide of Esztike, promising them in exchange for their meager savings the bright future of a new collective farm. It appears, this owl, at the moment when everyone falls asleep and begins to dream. It even seems to observe or direct those who dream while it is watching.

Rather than the cows, the horses or the cat martyred by Esztike, it is this owl from *Sátántangó* who should guide us here. Because it is the

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2 Rancière 2013, 2013, p. 77-78.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 78. I understand the term *limitrophy* in the sense that Jacques Derrida has given to it in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (Derrida 2008, p. 29), namely the *multiplication* of the limits, what feeds them (*trophein*) to multiply them, "complicating, thickening, delinearizing" them.

owl who, in the films of Béla Tarr, will put us on the track of another animal paradigm: what we will call the *animal filmicum*, the animal as a figure of the film or of cinema itself. The whale of *Werckmeister Harmonies* and the horse of *The Turin Horse* also belong to it. Or at least: that which, of the whale and the horse, cannot be simply enlisted in the service of an anthropocentric discourse on the limits, the borders of the human.

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"I said it right, you must never give up hope! You must have confidence, until the last breath!" (*Ugye megmondtam, sohasem szabad feladni a reményt! Bízni kell kérem, az utolsó leheletig!*), exclaims one of the villagers from *Sátántangó* while others try to sleep in the big empty house. One of these voices in the dark tries to imagine the near future and talks about the workshops that Irimiás certainly intends to set up in neighboring buildings. During this awakened collective dream, the camera begins a slow, infinite forward tracking shot towards the silhouette of the owl. At first, it is barely visible. Then, while someone talks about "bright prospects" (*ragyogó kilátásaink*) coming, it gets closer and closer. We begin to see its nocturnal bird's head, which swivels on its neck like a mechanical device which seeks to see everything, to watch everything around at three hundred and sixty degrees.

*Sátántangó*'s owl, with its rapid rotation movement mechanically tracing an arc of a circle, is certainly part of a whole lineage of owls on the screen that I will not be able to count here. It would be necessary to investigate, to collect snatches of scattered cinephilic memories: the owl from the river scene in *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955), which in turn seems to reincarnate in the owl from the beginning of *Blow Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981), or the artificial, "replicant" owl from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)... All these owls also pan with their agile viewing heads. But while these panning movements could go unnoticed if we did not pay attention, in *Sátántangó*, the insistent pivoting of the nocturnal bird, throughout the slow approach of the camera which will end up showing it in close up (it takes almost three minutes, punctuated by the echoes of the voices of the sleepers), this mechanical or mechanimal pivoting then seems to repeat itself, amplified and stretched, in the bewitching circular rotation of the camera above the bodies immersed in sleep, while the narrator's voice-over tells their dreams, starting with the dream of the character named Halics, who sees himself chased by "a small hunchbacked man with a glass eye" (*egy üveg szemű, púpos emberke*).

After having told a number of dream tales, the voice-over ends up being silent, but the camera continues its inexorable rotation, again and again, like a sort of carousel spinning empty, like a kaleidoscope trying to capture from above the dreamlike images emanating from the sleepers stuck in their blankets. The fascination of this scene, its hypnotic character, is not only due to the slow circular movement, as if the swirling

camera formerly suspended by Marcel L'Herbier on the ceiling of the Paris Bourse (in *L'Argent*, 1928) had been decelerated to the extreme to better adapt to the psychic effluents of the villagers who dream, to better collect the exhalations of their souls by giving them time to evaporate. No, what is truly striking in this unforgettable moment of *Sátántangó* is the relationship between the brief nervous and jerky pannings of the head of the owl and their spreading out, this almost stationary gyration which is its slowed-down counterpart. The movement of the owl, in short, seems to have gone from the diegetic plane (we see a bird that turns its head) to the extradiegetic plane: it is the camera itself which seems to have adopted its rotary gesture, as if it were moving like a filmic or filming meta-owl.

This is precisely one of the places in Béla Tarr's work where the animal told and represented also becomes what I would call an *animal filmicum*, a filmanimal or cine-animal. And the owl is not the only specimen of this metafauna which, as we will see, is not simply metaphorical: the whale or the horse are still waiting for us. We will pay attention to them rather than to the animal as scapegoat which, from the short film produced by Edison studios in 1903 (*Electrocuting an Elephant*) to the donkey of *Au hasard Balthazar* (Robert Bresson, 1966), never stopped haunting cinema.<sup>4</sup>

Or perhaps it is the animal which, in Bresson as in Tarr, or even in the cinema in general, does not cease to be divided between what Raymond Bellour, in *Le Corps du cinéma*, calls on the one hand its "inevitable anthropomorphism" and what he describes on the other hand as its "dull eye", which seems to escape or resist any possible humanization. This is why, moreover, in the sequence of *Balthazar's* circus—in these "vertiginous reverse shots" between the gaze of the donkey and that of a lion, a bear, a monkey and an elephant—"our place as beholders", as Bellour rightly notes, begins to tremble or to waver "in this wavering between the animal and the human".<sup>5</sup>

4 I share only to a certain extent the interesting hypothesis of Akira Lippit (Lippit 2000, pp. 196-197): "One final speculation: the cinema developed, indeed embodied, animal traits as a gesture of mourning for the disappearing wildlife. [...] the technological media commemorated and incorporated that which it had surpassed: the speechless semiotic of the animal look. Animal magnetism had moved from the hypnotist's eye to the camera eye, preserved in the emblematic lure of cinema." Filmanimality, in fact, that is to say the animal as film (rather than the animal *in* film), cannot be reduced to the work of mourning that the cinema needs to forget the loss of a nature that it would have helped to make disappear. A few lines further on, Lippit precisely names Edison's elephant as a symptom, in a way, of this sacrificed animality that haunts the cinema (p. 197): "Thomas Edison has left an animal electrocution on film, remarkable for the brutality of its fact and its mise-en-scène of the death of an animal. [...] The advent of cinema is thus haunted by the animal figure, driven, as it were, by the wildlife after death of the animal." More generally, on the question of animality in the cinema, I can only refer to the remarkable book by Raymond Bellour (Bellour 2009). Bellour, who devotes a long note to Lippit's work (p. 436-437), systematically explores the links between the posterity of "animal magnetism" described by Messmer in 1773 and (proto-)cinema.

5 Bellour 2009, p. 576.

Is an owl dreaming? Does it dream with its eyes open or its eyes closed? Aristotle, in his *History of Animals*, clearly said that animals also dream:

"Furthermore, it appears that not only men (*ou monon anthrôpoi*), but horses, dogs and oxen, dream (*enupiazein*), indeed sheep too, and goats and the whole group of viviparous quadrupeds. Dogs betray the fact by barking while asleep."<sup>6</sup>

Regarding other animals like the oviparous or those that live in the water (*ta enudra*), continues Aristotle, one cannot say on the other hand if they dream or not. And since some do not have eyelids (*blephara*), it is from their apparent immobility that we can conclude that they are sleeping.

Man seems certainly to have, for Aristotle, a certain privilege as a great dreamer among the living, but in the end this privilege is so relative that one wonders even if it is one. "The animal which dreams most of all is man", he writes (*enupniazei de tôn zôôn malista anthrôpos*), but he immediately adds:

"Children and infants do not dream at all; but dreaming begins in most cases about the age of four or five. Instances have been known of full-grown men and women who have never had a dream in their lives. Some people of this sort have in fact come to dream later in life..."<sup>7</sup>

From Aristotle to contemporary neuroscience via Darwin and a few others, the animal is regularly attributed with the faculty of producing images, namely *phantasia*, imagination.<sup>8</sup> And yet, even if the analogy between the dream and the cinema has become a commonplace, even if the animals could therefore also *have filmic fantasies* [se faire du cinéma], it seems that the name of *homo cinematographicus* proposed by Edgar

6 IV, 10, 536b (Aristotle 1970, p. 83).

7 *Ibid.*, 537b (Aristotle 1970, p. 89). We find in the *Problemata* (whose attribution to Aristotle is however debated) a passage which goes as far as wanting to distinguish *ways of dreaming* in animals and man (X, 16, 892b15-19; Aristotle 2011, p. 295): "Why do some of the other animals not have nocturnal emissions (*ouk exoneirôttei*), while some have them rarely? [...] is it because the other animals do not dream in the same way (*ouk enupniazei ta alla homoiôs*), but a nocturnal emission always occurs with imagination (*meta phantasias*)?"

8 As Derrida notes in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Derrida 2006, p. 62-63): "The question 'Does the animal dream?' is, in its form, premises, and stakes, at least analogous to the questions 'Does the animal think?' 'Does the animal produce representations?' a self, imagination, a relation to the future as such?" Darwin (Darwin 2009) does not hesitate to write (p. 62): "No one supposes that one of the lower animals reflects whence he comes or whither he goes—what is death or what is life, and so forth. But can we feel sure that an old dog with an excellent memory and some power of imagination, as shewn by his dreams, never reflects on his past pleasures in the chase? and this would be a form of self-consciousness." Or again (p. 58): "A long succession of vivid and connected ideas, may pass through the mind without the aid of any form of language, as we can infer from the prolonged dreams of dogs." Or finally (p. 45-46): "The *Imagination* is one of the highest prerogatives of man. [...] Dreaming gives us the best notion of this power [...]. As dogs, cats, horses, and probably all the higher animals, even birds, as is stated on good authority, have vivid dreams, and this is shewn by their movements and voice, we must admit that they possess some power of imagination."

Morin has, in the eyes of some, something pleonastic to it. Suffice it to think, for example, of the definition of man that Giorgio Agamben offered, namely that “man is a moviegoing animal.”<sup>9</sup>

By paraphrasing another Aristotle—not the one from the *History of Animals*, but the author of the ultra-famous formula of *Politics*, namely that “man is the only animal that has language” (*logon de monon anthrôpos ekhei tôn zôon*, 1253 a)—Agamben thus adds to the traditional list of the metaphysical privileges of man that of being the only one among animals to have a relation to images as such. Such a massive assertion is already problematic in view of the scope of experimental data which should lead to complicating it: certain animal—monkeys, elephants, dolphins, for example—indeed seem to recognize their own image as such; others, like pigs, can find an object by locating it with its reflection in a mirror.<sup>10</sup> But above all, such an assertion does not allow us to think about what I am proposing here to call the *animal filmicum*, namely the constitutive animality of the film, even the animal as film.

\*

So let’s take a closer look, on the side of this “dull eye” of the animal of which Bellour speaks by naming it in the singular.<sup>11</sup> And let’s ask ourselves already: why one eye, why only one rather than two?

In the *Problemata* attributed to Aristotle, there is a sketch of a comparative analysis of the distance between the eyes in humans and in animals. Aristotle—or the pseudo-Aristotle?—writes as follows:

“Why does the human, of all animals, have the least distance between the eyes (*diastêma tôn ommatôn*) in proportion to size? Is it because he, much more than the others, is in accordance with nature (*kata phusin*), and perception by nature is of what is in front? For that toward which the movement is directed should be seen beforehand. Now the greater the distance between the eyes, the more the organs of sight will face sideways. So if something should be according to nature, then this distance should be as small as possible; for in this way the sight will most of all travel forward. Further, it is necessary for the other animals to see sideways, since they don’t have hands (*kheiras*). This is why their eyes

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9 Agamben 2002, p. 314: “Man is the only being who is interested in images as such. Animals are very interested in images, but to the extent that they are fooled. You can show a male fish the image of a female fish and the male will eject his sperm; you can fool a bird with the image of another bird, in order to trap it. But when the animal realizes it’s dealing with an image, it loses interest completely. Now, man is an animal who is interested in images when he has recognized them as such. That’s why he is interested in painting and why he goes to the cinema. A definition of man from our specific point of view could be that man is a moviegoing animal. He is interested in images after he has recognized that they are not real beings.”

10 Cf. especially Broom, Sena and Moynihan 2009, pp. 1037-1041.

11 Bellour 2009, p. 576. See also Bellour’s comments (p. 522) on the “shark’s eye” in *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) described as “all seeing”, as well as on “the giant eye of Moby Dick” (in the eponymous film by Huston in 1956).

have been set apart more, especially in sheep, because they usually move with their heads bent down.”<sup>12</sup>

Of this divergent strabismus of the animal looking sideways—that is to say towards two different sides—the horse of *The Turin Horse* is the embodiment par excellence, as we can see with the two close-ups which linger on him during the film, first during the fourth day, then during the fifth. Old Ohlsdorfer and his daughter are going to visit their horse, which refuses to eat, in the stable. Between them, standing and framing the horse’s head, the camera approaches it, it advances towards the animal until the two human beings leave the frame. We can only see the flat muzzle, parallel to the screen, repeating the screen in the screen in the form of a hairy, black and opaque surface, while the two eyes squint, diverge so radically that they make looking at the camera impossible. In fact, the closer the camera is to the muzzle, the less the horse looks at us; the less it *can* look at us. Then the camera goes in the opposite direction, it moves away, the father withdraws the halter, and the daughter leaves and closes the door. Close-up on the closed door of the stable: we now know that the horse will not move; will not go out.

We will no longer see it, but its impossible gaze, spread apart by the abysmal distance which seems to have opened between the two eyes, will not cease to haunt the following images. Of the next shot, a fixed view through the panes of a window, we can no longer say which eyes see it. First there is only the greyness, the leaves and the dust that spin outside in the wind, as if the image itself began to decompose, to pulverize, to incinerate, to become an ash-image or a powder-image. We are almost surprised when the camera, stuck on this window for an interminable minute, finally backs up by including the father, from behind, in the frame: was it he who was watching what we were looking at? No doubt, but the granular image which was being atomized, which disintegrated in the frame, will nevertheless have seemed to belong to no human gaze.

From the horse of *The Turin Horse* to the whale of the *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the distance between the eyes of the *animal filmicum* increases more and more, until it becomes potentially infinite. So let it come, this whale, let’s watch it arrive in the little town to which the director of the circus is transporting it.

What we see first, without knowing anything yet, is a trailer pulled by a tractor. Its approach, with the thundering noise of the engine and the headlights which pierce the thick night enveloping the streets, lasts two minutes. Two endless minutes, taut with the intense effort, vibrant with the work of this infernal machinery; two minutes of fixed shot, without camera movement. Then, when the tractor arrives in the foreground, the camera slowly rotates to the right, it follows the machine with a slight panning which freezes again to let the ridges of the corrugated iron of the trailer go by, while the silhouette of János Valuska (Lars Rudolph), from behind, enters the field. Everything is suspended, the spatial coordinates,

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12 X, 15, 892b5-14 (Aristotle 2001, pp. 293-295).

the points of reference are abolished; there is only this man who looks, with his back to us, at the image of a pure striated scrolling.

At the end of this endless sequence, János walks away and lets the camera linger on the poster announcing with a lot of exclamation marks—“attraction!!” (*atrakció!!*), “fantastic!!” (*fantasztikus!!*)—the show of “the biggest giant whale in the world” (*a világ legnagyobb oriasbálnája*), with the guest star of the show (*sztárvendég*): “the prince” (*a herceg*).

We will only learn little by little what—or who—it is all about.

First, we hear the gossip and rumors about the arrival of the whale and the prince. They can be heard at the postal sorting center where János picks up the newspapers he has to distribute. “The world has gone completely crazy” (*teljesen meg bolondult a világ*), says an employee, “and now on top of it all this circus is coming (*és akkor mindennek a tetejébe megérkezik ez a cirkusz*), they bring this horrible big whale, and this prince (*hozzák azt a borzalmas nagy bálnát, meg ezt a herceget*), it is said that he weighs ten kilos (*állítólag tíz kilo*) [...] and that he has three eyes (*három szeme van*).” Before we even see it, the prince, a sort of prosthesis of the whale, is announced as the bearer of an additional eye—one more eye which seems to constitute the symmetrical counterpart of the single and cyclopean eye of the whale: of the latter, you never see two eyes at the same time, it is doomed—we come to this—to be able to have only one in the frame.

We will see this whale after having followed János for a long time as he crosses the town square, full of silent men who wait for who knows what, with their serious, threatening faces. We hear the creaking of the sheet metal and the chains of the trailer door which opens slowly to let in those who would like to see the giant cetacean. János is the first to pay a hundred forints.

In the whale’s lair, in this rolling cavern in the shape of a caravan, János finds himself facing the eye of the naturalized Leviathan. The camera follows him and fixes on this double of itself, this glassy eye that does not blink and on the surface of which is reflected a fragile point of light, perhaps the shimmering of the filming itself in the dark. Going beyond the eye, János finds himself in front of the baleen that fills the mouth of the monster. Arranged regularly in an almost silky curvature, they evoke a stage curtain, a veil made of threads that would open on the inside, on the other side of the eye. Like a drapery, a fabric that would form a screen, also striated, like the sheet metal walls of the trailer.

But János, the new Jonas from the time of cinema, does not enter the whale. János turns around it in a long tracking shot which now leaves the drapery of the baleen to move towards the other eye of the cetacean. We see it emerge, this protruding eye, from the shapeless mass of the large mammal, before the shadow cast by János covers it.

János runs alongside the large body and heads slowly towards the exit of the cave, towards the light.

Later, János returns to see the whale a second time. The town square is even fuller of hostile men gathered around improvised braziers. The trailer is closed. János runs along it, the ridges of the corrugated iron roll again in one direction, in the other, until János discovers an opening, a door on the side.

It is as if János was moving aside the striations themselves: he goes through the hatches that divide and split the image, he enters the interstice of the inter-image which stripes the screen and he disappears in the trailer. The camera remains fixed, as if dazed facing the corrugated iron.

When a change of shot finally occurs, it is the whale’s eye that we see. As if the mechanimal eye was precisely what resides in the interstices, in the interstripes of the corrugated iron that forms the screen. In the folds of the image, it gazes: there is the “dull eye” of which Bellour speaks, the eye of the *animal filmicum*, so close to—and yet distinct from—“the eye of matter” that Deleuze wrote about.<sup>13</sup>

We are motionless in front of this eye to which János’ voice-over is addressed in the complete darkness (“You see all the harm you do”, he says softly, *látod mennyi bajt csinálsz*, “and yet it has been a long time that you cannot harm anyone”, *pedig már régóta nem tudsz te ártani senkinek*). Then, while other voices are heard, the camera shifts from the whale’s eye to the eyes of János, who is listening. Lurking in the darkness near the whale, he overhears the argument of the director of the traveling circus and the prince’s interpreter.

Of this prince whom his interpreter describes as uncontrollable—he is endowed with a “magnetic force” (*magnetikus ereje van*)—we will only see the cast shadow, in a scene that evokes Fritz Lang’s *Mabuse*<sup>14</sup>. The shadow of the prince speaks with two voices: his own (in Slovenian, it seems to me) and that of his interpreter (in Hungarian). Perhaps three eyes, said the postal worker—and who could contradict her by counting the eyes of a shadow? Three eyes and more than one voice: the prince, a sort of appendage of the whale, embodies supplementarity itself.

János is still listening to him, in the dark.

The camera slowly advances towards János’ face. At first we only see one eye emerging from the shadows, as if János himself had become a whale. But no, the other one also appears. The shadow of the prince, now off-screen, lapses into curses, calls for massacre and destruction, while a new shot shows János running through the dark streets. He runs out of breath and his two eyes shine like embers in the deep night.

13 Deleuze 1997, p. 81: “Vertov’s nonhuman eye, the cine-eye, is not the eye of a fly or of an eagle, the eye of another animal. [...] On the contrary, it is the eye of matter, the eye in matter [...]”

14 When asked: “What’s your interpretation of the Prince character? What does he signify?”, Béla Tarr answers: “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him. I have only seen his shadow. That’s all, what you too have seen. The same. You know, I don’t like to explain anything about the story.” (Daly and Le Cain 2001, online at [sensesofcinema.com](http://sensesofcinema.com)).

The eye of the whale, this eye still waiting for the other, which however remains too distant to form with it a human gaze, we will see it a third time, after a long sequence where János is still running, fleeing the ruins of the general rampage. He runs on the railroad tracks as a helicopter approaches and circles around him, much like the plane chasing James Stewart in *North by Northwest*.

When the helicopter stops, suspended in the air facing János, a few meters from the ground, it is like a buzzing insect with a duller, glassier look than ever. We look at this helicopter for a long time from János' point of view, before the next shot, a sort of elliptical reverse shot, shows us the latter sitting on his bed in the mental hospital, his eyes empty, while his friend György Eszter, the composer who dreams of re-tuning the temperament of the world, talks to him.

Eszter has left the hospital and is now approaching the whale spread out in the middle of the square, among the ruins of the trailer. We see it for the first time in broad daylight, outside the cinema-cave where, welcoming every Jonas who passes by and is ready to pay a hundred forints, it made them dream by casting shadows.

Eszter looks at the dead beast's eye, stares at it before lowering his head and continuing on his way. He hesitates for a moment, one last time he turns around, he takes a last look back at what was an eye without glance, neither alive nor dead—at this cycloptic and always open eye which couldn't be humanized in a pair. But now the undead eye of the dead whale is dead.

Eszter leaves the frame. The camera continues to stare at the large stranded body, gradually disappearing into the greyness that invades the image. It is as though there is a veil of dust, or better, a cataract, which descends on the eye of the camera. Faced with the death of the dead eye of the dead whale, the filmic gaze also dies. With the end of the *animal filmicum*, which was never simply alive or dead, it is the film which ends, which turns gray; gray like ash. Everything is incinerated. Or better, as I have suggested elsewhere, everything is *cinefied*.<sup>15</sup>

And that's what happens in *The Turin Horse* as well, which started with the voice-over reading the first sentences of a story by László Krasznahorkai, *Legkésőbb Torinóban*.<sup>16</sup> We hear the narrator recall briefly, sharply and factually, the story of Nietzsche throwing his arms around the neck of a beaten horse in the streets of Turin, in January 1889. And the voice soberly concludes: "What happened to the horse, we do not know" (*hogy mi lett a lóval, nem tudjuk*).

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15 On cinema and ashes, on *cinefication*, see Szendy 2015, p. 73 and p. 127.

16 "At the latest, in Turin". This story appears in the collection *The World Goes On* (New York: New Directions Books, 2017).

With these words, the first shot of the film shows us a horse pulling a cart. It is backlit, you can't see its eyes, hidden in the shadow of the blinders. And the camera, from its slight low angle, seems to have trouble fixing the head of the beast that moves constantly in the effort—it also keeps covering and uncovering the face of the old coachman in the background. The coupling of these two, launched through the wind, the dust and the twirling leaves, is the impossible coupling of two gazes which follow each other, fragily held together by the bar of the cart, with its leather straps and chains.

Repeating on a large scale the final gesture of *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the latest film by Béla Tarr (which should be his last, according to the director's declarations) perhaps tells nothing more than the slow, long closure of the *animal filmicum*'s eye. That is to say, the unbinding, the untying of the impossible coupling of gazes, the severing of their ties.

From the moment—let's remember—when the horse gives a last diverging look to the camera, from the moment when the stable door closes like a wooden mega-lid on the eyes of the filmanimal that turn sideways, the end of the film is announced not so much as a freeze frame but rather as a freezing of the blink, in a general becoming-dust and becoming-ash, which hyperbolically amplifies the last shot of *Werckmeister Harmonies*. As if the black greyness that lasts ad infinitum when the oil lamp of the coachman and his daughter goes out by plunging them into the darkness of the sixth day; as if this half-light was that of the eye already half-closed of the dying horse that we no longer see.

The filmanimal's eye slowly closes, like a last blink of an eyelid that one would try to slow down as much as possible. The duration of the film could well have been that of this singular blink.

*Translated by Rodrigo Gonsalves*

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# Preston Sturges and The End of Laughter

Alenka Zupančič

**Abstract:** Preston Sturges embodies, in his own person, the break between the so-called “old” and “new” Hollywood, the decline of the latter’s “golden age”, which roughly coincides with the decline of the studio system. The paper analyses this break and the wider social circumstances related to it through discussion of two of Sturges’ films. *Sullivan’s Travels* carries the date 1941 and certainly represents one of the peaks of the old Hollywood, whereas *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948) already belongs to a different era. Both films are comedies, yet they are profoundly different in form as well as in spirit. The paper focuses particularly on how Sturges’ cinematic genius responds to the question which has been in the air at that time, and which also seems to be very relevant today: should artists engage with the pressing issues of their time, and how?

**Keywords:** Comedy, laughter, social relations, collective, ideology

There seems to be a unanimous agreement that Preston Sturges embodies the very point when something irreversible happens to the classical Hollywood (and particularly to comedy<sup>1</sup>); something that irreversibly changes the direction and even the “nature” of Hollywood, ending the so-called golden age of Hollywood (on the systemic level this is of course related to the beginning of the decline of the studio system). Sturges embodies this shift in the most literal sense: his opus is quite literally split in two. On the one hand we have the extraordinary and absolutely deserved success that accompanies his early movies, made within the framework of the classical studio system;<sup>2</sup> on the other hand there is the period when (led by the desire of a greater artistic freedom) he left the studio system, to which he had subsequently returned with *Unfaithfully Yours*. Even though this is also the period of some of Sturges’ great artistic achievements, it is generally seen as the period of his “decline”. I propose to take a closer look at two films by Preston Sturges, which are paradigmatic of this shift, *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) and *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948).

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<sup>1</sup> See Harvey 1998. *I will be referring a lot to this excellent book.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Great McGinty, Christmas in July, The Lady Eve, Sullivan’s Travels, The Palm Beach Story, The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek, Hail the Conquering Hero* – a series of extraordinary achievements all of which were made between the years 1939 – 1943. 50 years later the American film institute will put no less than 4 of these movies (*The Lady Eve, Sullivan’s Travels, The Palm Beach Story, The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*) on the list of the 100 funniest American movies.

## Sullivan's Travels

What happens with Hollywood (and particulars with comedy) in the late 40s and early 50s is usually described in these terms: comedy loses its innocence and turns black, or vanishes altogether. In this it shares the destiny of genre films in general; but let's focus on comedy for now. We can attempt to put this shift in a slightly broader perspective by way of reminding ourselves of a few facts. Screwball comedy, which is a unique and extremely interesting variety of comedy, became popular during the Great Depression, originating in the early 30s and thriving until the early 40s—another proof that hard times and comedy usually go together. Times were hard also in terms of the artistic freedom, as censorship got harsher by the increasingly enforced Hays Code. But Freud was right: obstacles and censorship can increase the ingenuity of humor, and outsmarting the prohibitions is in itself an important source of pleasure in comedy. The Hays Code was particularly harsh on sexual matters, and screwball comedies ended up finding such ingenious ways of circumventing it that film critic Andrew Sarris even defined screwball comedy as “a sex comedy without sex”. And as it turned out, this was a great recipe for inventing, exploring, and keeping alive what Alain Badiou has named *la scène du deux*, the scene of the two. That is to say, a love relation that is neither a fusion of the two into one, nor an anatomy of the impossible love, but a scene on which the “two” is kept alive through the very difficulties, oddities, and non-obviousness of the relationship.<sup>3</sup> Crucial for this kind of ongoing dance, this *pas-de-deux*, was the invention and presence of the “screwball ladies”. These were not simply strong, independent women, they were also active generators of comedy and of the comic spirit of love.

So, times were hard, but screwball comedy was not the only kind of comedy around. Another Hollywood giant, Frank Capra, while inaugurating the screwball comedy cycle with *It Happened One Night* (1934), had turned away from it and towards a very different kind of comedy: less crazy or immediately funny and more moderate, sentimental, even moralizing. Capra's comedies always have a message and profess a direct engagement with the most pressing “issues” of the time (poverty, deprivation). There is no doubt that Capra was a cinematographic giant (and Master), but it is far from sure whether this kind of direct engagement makes him politically more radical than other authors of comedy. He did convince Graham Green who, in a 1936 review of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*<sup>4</sup>, wrote: “Capra has what Lubitsch, the witty playboy, has not: a sense of responsibility.”

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<sup>3</sup> Alluding to Lacan's famous dictum we can perhaps best define relationships in screwball comedies as “non-relationships that work”.

<sup>4</sup> *Mr. Dees* is a comedy about a rich man who, at the end, gives his money away to the people who need it.

This is an interesting question, and of some actuality today, since times are not so very different. Should artists engage with the pressing issues of their time, and how? As far as comedy goes, and leaving Lubitsch out, we could say that there is the Capra way, and then there is the Sturges way—and the comparison is indeed quite instructive. The Capra way echoes in a lot of what we hear today in terms of “responsibility” in dealing with the contemporary issues of (increasing) poverty, social differences, and deprivation, even in otherwise rich parts of the world. What brought this about, we hear, is (moral) *corruption*. Corruption is the source of all evils, and it comes with wealth and power, which is why poverty is on the side of moral good. Although it makes people rough on the surface, once you scratch the surface and get to know these people, they are all really nice and good. The flipside of this is, of course, that poor people are good only so far as they stay poor, that is to say so far as we are in the position to help them. To quote from James Harvey:

“The ‘sense of responsibility’ that drives Capra to rise these issues doesn't prevent him from betraying them on screen – from falsifying and condescending to the poor people he shows us and from sentimentalizing the impulse to help them. ... There is always a lot of talk in Capra's films about dignity of people like this farmer [the maddened out-of-wok farmer from *Mr. Deeds*], but what we get when we see them is wheedling and ingratiating and emotional blackmail. The poor man who comes on with a gun [and threatens to kill Deeds] finally says ‘Excuse me’ for pointing it and ends up just the way these movies like their poor people: weak and lovable and grateful. ... Capra seems nearly unable to imagine a poor person who isn't genteel, once you get to know him. Getting to know him is always the main problem – as it is with your neighbor, too. John Doe [another famous Capra's hero] sees ‘the answer’—‘the only thing capable of saving this cockeyed world’ in people's finally learning that the guy next door isn't a bad egg.’ But what if you learn that he *is*—even worse than you imagined, or at least more troublesome? Then what?—forget him?”<sup>5</sup>

In respect to the social issues taken up by Capra, his main message is thus that poor is good, and that one should love the poor for the richness of their heart, and for their moral standards. Diagnosis of corruption as constituting the main problem wipes out all consideration of social antagonisms and of their systemic causes; it sends out the message that these antagonisms can be overcome by a kind of sentimental reconciliation between the poor and the rich.

It is in relation to this that we can measure the subversive edge of Sturges' position, whose answer to the question of the “pressing issues of the time” was considerably different. In one of the highest points of his first, screwball period, *Sullivan's Travels* (1941)—a movie directly dealing

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey 1998, p.141.

with the question of if, and how, should a rich film director engage with “the pressing issues of the time”—he engages in quite open polemics with Capra. He frontally dismantles the axiom “poor is good”, as well as the condescending posture relating to it. And, philosophically most interestingly, he proposes a kind of *ontology of poverty*. I am referring to the deservingly famous exchange between Sullivan (a very rich and successful movie director) and his valet; the dialogue revolves around Sullivan’s decision that he would stop making genre movies which only entertain people, and take up a serious and pressing issue of poverty and misery in which more and more people find themselves. In order to carry out this project, he has to—this is his conviction at least—begin by learning first-hand about poverty and deprivation, so that he can make a realistic move about it. He thus decides to go out in the real word and take a closer look at it. Here’re some bits of the dialogue:

**Sullivan:** I’m going out on the road to find out what it’s like to be poor and needy and then I’m going to make a picture about it.  
**Burrows:** If you’ll permit me to say so, sir, the subject is not an interesting one. The poor know all about poverty and only the morbid rich would find the topic glamorous.  
**Sullivan:** But I’m doing it for the poor. Don’t you understand? (...)  
**Burrows:** You see, sir, rich people and theorists—who are usually rich people—think of poverty in the negative, as the lack of riches—as disease might be called the lack of health. But it isn’t, sir. Poverty is not the lack of anything, but a positive plague, virulent in itself, contagious as cholera, with filth, criminality, vice and despair as only a few of its symptoms. It is to be stayed away from, even for purposes of study.

This is certainly not the way in which any of Capra’s heroes would speak about poverty. Burrows’ thoughts are undoubtedly intriguing, and we should repeat and recite them today with rigor, in the face of the (almost exclusively) humanitarian approach to poverty, and of its sentimentalization.<sup>6</sup> There is absolutely nothing glamorous or “nice” about poverty, and we should not think of it simply in negative terms: it is an ontological entity of its own standing, and produces certain kind of behavior. It needs to be eradicated, and not understood. To say that poverty is not a lack of something is of course not the same as to say that the poor lack nothing—the deprivation is very real. Yet the point is that this deprivation can precisely not be understood *so/ely* as deprivation (minus), but as something that has its “positive” ontological foundation

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<sup>6</sup> As well as its glamorization. –The fashion industry is turning big money out of the business of glamorization of poverty: just think, for example, of all the torn, ragged jeans sold over past decades, often for higher prices than impeccable jeans....

in the systemic reproduction of social relations. Or, put more simply: if we want to abolish the minus, it is not enough to “fill it up”, for the minus will not disappear, but rather become a filled-up, “full minus”; in order to really change anything, the structural place of the minus (deprivation) itself would have to disappear, for this place is in itself a positive entity, perpetuated by the existing social relations, regardless of the changing fluctuations of richness. The question, for example, is not simply why so many people are poor and dying of hunger, if we know that there is enough food and money in the world for this not to have to happen. The right question is slightly different: Why is it that, in spite of this, so many people *have to* live in poverty?

To return to the movie: Sullivan doesn’t listen to his valet, and goes on with his plan. After several comical and unsuccessful attempts to get out in the real world, attempts at the end of which he always ends up in Hollywood again, he finally succeeds to “infiltrate” himself among the poor and live with them for a while.<sup>7</sup> Sullivan is touched and affected by the misery he sees, and he decides to directly distribute part of his money among the poor; which he does, enjoying the surprised and grateful looks of the lucky receivers.

Now comes the crucial turning point of the movie, in which Sullivan unexpectedly gets to experience in full what it means to belong to the bottom of society. What happens is this: one of the poor and needy—who, however, does not correspond the cliché of the inner goodness of a poor man’s heart—steals his shoes in which Sullivan has hidden documents testifying to his real identity. A bit later (when he sees Sullivan handing out big amounts of money) this same tramp robs him and almost kills him; while escaping from the scene, however, the perpetrator is run over by a train. Disfigured beyond recognition he is identified by “his” (that is Sullivan’s) shoes, so Sullivan is proclaimed dead. The real Sullivan remains without identity, and when he wakes up from his unconscious state after the fight, he also suffers from short-term memory loss. When he then responds to a railway guard (who treats him as brutally as he treats other tramps hiding in trains) by punching him, Sullivan is sentenced and sent to six years in a hard labor colony. This part of the movie is particularly interesting, and for many reasons.

First for how it extends the comedy over its own edge: the real—not only of poverty, but also of social injustice—surprises us in what is a direct extension of comedy (and not in the form of dropping the comedy, and turning to serious business). Sturges uses the classical comic technique of the surplus-realization (of what Sullivan planned and wished for): Sullivan gets to realize his original plan (to experience how the poor and needy really live) fully, and with a surplus. He is officially dead, nobody is looking for him, and in the prisoner’s colony where he now finds

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<sup>7</sup> Connected to this is a love story with an unemployed actress played by Veronica Lake: they “join” the poor together.

himself they look upon his claims that he is really a famous movie director as simple craziness. He is submitted to brutal violence, even torture—all of which is considered perfectly normal here, considering the *class* of people sent to these colonies. A classical comic technique of surplus realization is thus used in a way that (gradually) kills the laughter off. There seem to be absolutely no way out.

Then, in a rather sublime twist, which actually constitutes the peak of the movie, the laughter moves from the audience (we have stopped laughing a while ago) and emerges on the side of the “poor and needy”, and of the prisoners. The prisoners join a congregation of black people in a church where they are allowed to watch a movie; a slapstick cartoon. We first see a long line of worn-out prisoners marching toward the church in chains, against the background of gospel music. They sit down on the benches and the black priest greets them as equals (with the rest of congregation). The projection of the slapstick cartoon that follows is filmed as a series of cuts, jumping back and forth between the action on the screen and the faces of the spectators (the blacks and the prisoners). The rhythm is accelerating as the salvos of laughter also intensify, and the camera takes time for a series of close-ups of the crowd and of the faces of the prisoners (each face being a story of its own), laughing more and more uncontrollably, hysterically. Upon seeing the shots of the prisoners, with their faces deformed with irresistible laughter, we cannot but agree with the labeling of Sturges as “American Breugel”... The laughter is hysterical and contagious, which is not unimportant, and the whole sequence is long, meaningful. The prisoners laugh from their hearts, as we say, but at the same time there is something sinister (menacing, ominous) in this laughter and in the way it is filmed: something excessive, something disturbing the homely comfort of the (supposedly natural) social differences that frame the film at the level of its narrative. We get something like a time outside of time, a hint at the emergence of masses as collective subject, or at least at the possibility of such an emergence. The poor and underprivileged are certainly not shot here “as we like to see our poor”: as weak, grateful, and lovable; no, they are presented as subjects emerging out of, and with this excessive laughter...



Sullivan eventually finds a way out of prison. He finds a newspaper reporting about his mysterious death, and thus, learning what happened, he turns this into an opportunity. He claims to be the one who has killed the famous director (himself), for which he gets a lot of attention and publicity—which is how his friends and co-workers find out that he is in fact still alive. In the end, he gets to marry the girl he loves, and decides against making a realistic movie about the suffering of the “common people”, although the studio bosses now fervently want him to do it, because of the huge publicity that his adventure got.<sup>8</sup> He decides to make a comedy instead, for this is what he has learned: the best he can do is to create something that will give the masses of the poor an opportunity to laugh.

This ending and its message may seem rather meek, even trivial, but are they really? I would point out two important things that one shouldn't fail to notice. The first concerns the question of how this ending affects the storyline that leads to it, and particularly what it brings out in relation to its final part (Sullivan's time in the prisoner's colony). Sullivan abandons the project of the realistic film about the poor, claiming that he hasn't suffered enough to make it. What exactly does this mean, this idea that he hasn't suffered enough? Here's what I think this means, or suggests: as much as a good-hearted rich man may want to think that underneath all his wealth, he is just the same kind of human being as the poor are, *he is wrong*. Once we have our social (class) positions, there is no zero-level of humanity at which we would all be the same. He is not one of them, they are not in the same boat, and it would be extremely

<sup>8</sup>The film was supposed to be called “O Brother, Where Art Thou?”. As it is well known, the Coen brothers made a movie bearing this title in 2000—a direct reference to Sturges and, in many aspects, a homage to him.

presumptuous to think so. This is precisely the lesson Sullivan learns in the prisoner colony, and especially *by getting out of it*. For the following is quite amazing, if you stop to think about it: Sullivan wasn't sent to the prison colony on false charges, he *did* hit the guard, and for this he got exactly the sentence that low class people usually got for this kind of offence. There was no individual injustice or misunderstanding at the origin of his imprisonment. The injustice is *systemic*, and this becomes obvious when, upon succeeding to make his (also class) *identity* known, he is immediately set free, while the rest of his co-prisoners stay in prison—although we may reasonably suspect that at least some of them committed no bigger offenses than he did. What comes out here is the real, and the irreducible, of the class difference. This is marked clearly enough (although in a playful way) in a brief dialogue between Sullivan and an old man whom he befriends in prison.

**Sullivan:** I don't have time to spend... six years...  
**Old man:** But you were sentenced.  
**Sullivan:** I know that, but I still haven't the time.  
**Old man:** Then you'll have to find the time.  
**Sullivan:** Look, they don't sentence picture directors to a place like this for a little disagreement with the railway guard.  
**Old man:** Don't they?  
**Sullivan:** No.  
**Old man:** Then maybe you aren't a picture director. Maybe this idea just came to you when you were hit on the head. Maybe. We used to have a fellow here who thought he was Lindbergh. He used to fly away every night. But he was always back in the morning.

This last line is a very nice formulation of the class difference: whatever this guy thought or did, he always ended up back in prison. On the other hand we have Sullivan who, whatever he tires and does to get away from Hollywood, always ends up back in Hollywood (this is precisely the joke, the running gag, of the first part of the movie: the comedy of his unsuccessful attempts at getting "out in the real word").

We are not claiming that the film calls for Communist revolution, but it certainly doesn't embellish the misery of the poor or romanticize it: it doesn't reduce the poor to the stereotype of "inner wealth" and goodness, but leaves here a space for the subject. It does not picture class division as an epiphenomenon under the surface of which we are all the same (just human beings), nor does it imagine that class division could disappear if the rich experienced and appreciated what it feels like to be poor. This is decidedly not a matter of feeling (which is why comedy is perhaps the best genre to approach it). Despite the happy ending, the end of the movie is certainly not an image of general social harmony (or at least of its approaching)—but this does not exclude the laughter.

The other important point related to the film's ending concerns the question of laughter as such, and of its place in the movie.  
Laughter is not only or simply an expression of individual relief and pleasure, it is decidedly a *collective*-forming affect, more so perhaps than any other. At the same time the collective setting enhances the powers and effects of comedy (the two feed and increase each other in a kind of dialectical spiral). And let us not forget that movies of that time were unavoidably intended for a *collective public* experience (and their directors were very much aware of this). We also know that to see a good comedy home alone, or even with a few friends or family, is never the same experience as to see it in a public place, together with all kinds of different people we don't know. "Seeing a smart comedy with a smart, responsive audience—where everybody's perception seems to sharpen and heighten everybody else's, where intelligence as well as the hysteria becomes infectious—is an experience like nothing else."<sup>9</sup>

This is a very simple and a very far-reaching observation. It holds particularly true for comedy (and much less for melodramas, thrillers, or other kind of movies). And it is safe to say that whereas the rise of TV (and the huge decline in movies attendance)<sup>10</sup> did not destroy the movie industry, it destroyed (or deeply affected) movies as collective experience; and this has a lot to do with the end of the golden age of film comedy.<sup>11</sup>

So the final argument of "Sullivan's Travels" about the importance of making people laugh is not simply an argument about the comforting pleasure of laughter; it rather points to laughter (and comedy) *outside of their service to anything* (outside of their being good for this or for that purpose). If laughter can function as a potential place of the emerging of a subject (and of a collective subject), it is precisely so far as it serves no immediate purpose. The ending of the movie clearly suggests that.

Sullivan is out of prison, very happy, and decides to do a comedy, while the rest of the poor prisoners remain where they are. Except that they get the last laugh. The last lines of the movie are followed by a shot

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9 Harvey 1998, p. 672.

10The average weekly attendance, which had been around 90 million in the mid- to late-forties, dropped to almost half that by 1953, and has been declining more or less steadily ever since.

11We often hear today that movies and TV shows, including comedies, are so stupid and simplistic because "this kind of thing is what people want". But there is no "people" here, no collective, just a sum of individuals in no danger to be infected by an intelligence other than their own. Which may explain the increasing stupidity of these films and shows. Freud has already written on how jokes do not really exist before they are told and laughed at (by others). Joke is by definition ontologically incomplete, and it needs an audience to come into being. By responding to a joke we don't respond to a full-blown entity, we are involved in its ontological constitution. And it is this shared involvement that transforms a mass of individual into a (temporary) collective. And the possibility that a joke falls flat is as important as its success, and is actually part of it. To be sure, there are lots of reactionary jokes and reactionary collectives, and stupidity can be as contagious as intelligence, but this in itself is no argument for dismissing the capacities of the collective. Collective is more than just a mass of people (and we also know how the post-war America was scared of anything collective, directly identifying it with "totalitarianism").

in which we see again the prisoners joined in a collective laughter. This could be understood of course simply as an illustration of Sullivan's last words (that a good comedy or laughter, is the most he can give to the people). But this final shot has a non-negligible self-standing, independent power of suggestion; it is a dream-like, phantom-like shot, in which the "poor and needy" are united in hysterical collective laughter; inserted among them, in an amorous cloud, is the love-couple (Sullivan and the actress), who laugh together with the prisoners.

This last image is extremely interesting. It is a paradigmatic image of the screwball comedy's invention of the relation between love and comedy, sanctified by collective laughter. But it also invites some further speculations. For example, in screwball times, people were looking at amorous couples on screen, laughing at their adventures, dialogues, jokes. This last ephemeral shot of *Sullivan's Travels* looks like the laughing collective itself moved from the audience to the screen, on the side of the amorous couple, almost as if all of them were now waving goodbye to us, the "real" audience, which will remain there merely as an assembly of individuals condemned each to him or herself. This assembly will have, from now on, only irony in its disposal—irony, rather than comedy. As Harvey formulates this brilliantly (linking it to the "death of laughter"):

"Where a successful joke connects you to an audience, an irony may do just the opposite. Mostly, an audience 'gets' a joke or else it falls flat, as we say. But an irony ... may only confirm itself, may begin to seem richer than it did even at first, if half the audience misses it."<sup>12</sup>

So in the final, phantom-like scene of *Sullivan's Travels*—a film which is otherwise the paradigmatic representative of the golden age of Hollywood and of comedy—we can already see a kind of premonition of the future history of Hollywood: the comic love and collective experience are leaving the scene, which will soon be occupied by other, newer, and more mature trends and approaches, at pace with social changes and new circumstances.

Before we thus jump from 1941, when he made *Sullivan's Travels*, to Sturges' second period, when he made *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), we can briefly and roughly resume these circumstances as follows:

There was the war and the end of the war; men returned home and women who were encouraged to work during the war and take an active part in the war economy and public life were now encouraged (in different ways, including cinema) to stay at home and serve as perfect housewives. In the movies this marks, among other things, the end of the (screwball) comedy, and the comedy that remains gets increasingly sentimental (just think, for example, of Capra's paradigmatic *It's a Wonderful Life*, made in 1946), or it slowly turns black (Chaplin made *Monsieur Verdoux* in 1947). Mainstream Hollywood moves from genre movies to more "mature",

<sup>12</sup> Harvey 1998, p. 672.

problem films, often about personal problems and controversial topics (postwar traumas, adolescent's problems, racism...), whereas on its more imaginative or bizarre ("creative") side, screwball comedy is replaced by film noir and its typical black irony.<sup>13</sup>

The genre film started to feel outdated after the war, it started to be considered as a mode of "escapism", and (screwball) comedies as utterly childish and unrealistic. The set-bound films were replaced by films shot more realistically, on real locations. But, as Harvey again remarks most perceptively, this passage from the (alleged) war time "escapism" to post-war "maturity" was itself highly ambiguous.

"The movies took on such topics as psychoanalysis, juvenile delinquency, postwar readjustment and Cold War jitters, even racism. But the odd thing was that however 'explosive' the subject, it always took place in these films against a backdrop of social harmony. America was pictured as a place where the political problems had been solved. All we had to do now was solve the 'personal' ones, as it seemed. ... And yet, paradoxically, it was the old-fashioned genre films (...)—rather than the 'mature' and 'controversial' ones, the so called new Hollywood—that turned out to be most daring. Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), for example, and Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), and Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959). (...) They revealed things in their 'genres' that no one had ever suspected before. And more."<sup>14</sup>

Let's stop first at the first part of these extremely lucid observations, which hold astonishingly true not only for today's Hollywood as well, but also for politics (and its media support): controversial, "radical" themes (inciting the passion of the spectators and dividing in fervent debates, "pros" and "cons") are very welcome, so far as they are situated against the background of social harmony (as

<sup>13</sup> In spite of its popularity, screwball was never mainstream Hollywood; and film noir developed out of B production movies. When we think today of the Hollywood stars of the 30s, of the best that that period produced, we think of course of Barbara Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Carol Lombard, Katharine Hepburn and many others). Yet the top box office star at that time was the (child star) Shirley Temple (she starred in *Heidi*, for example). Between ages 7–10 she was at the top of box office for four consecutive years, ahead of stars like Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. We have a similar situation with film noir and thrillers that count today as absolute classics; while some of the greatest masterpieces were made (including most of Hitchcock's films), the most famous star was from a quite different orbit: Bing Crosby. As Harvey poignantly describes him: "By the time he had become a major star, his main characteristic was a kind of relaxing blandness, omitting all trace of the exciting young singer he had once been .... He became instead the most affectlessly genial of stars.... In his musical numbers he had perfected the ability to make any song he sang—whatever its tempo, mood, or style—sound exactly like the last song he's sung. .... And everywhere he was recognized as distinctively American type... he was a suburban type: at home in the outdoors, but generally on some kind of lawn – with golf clubs and Hawaiian shirt. Anyway, he was inescapable, and his prominence banalized our lives in the same comforting way that advertising did: suggesting that there was very little at stake in them—beyond a choice of lawns. It's no wonder then that the apocalyptic tone of film noir – a movie genre even less generally popular than screwball comedy was—found appreciative and receptive audiences, and to some of them even seemed oddly cheering." Harvey 1995, p. 665-6

<sup>14</sup> Harvey 1998, p. 679.

already achieved). The existing socio-economic system is ideal, what still remains to be solved are individual (or cultural, identity) problems—and of course we have to fight the corruption, replacing it with personal “responsibility”...

This allows us to conclude that the narrative that framed the mentioned shifts in the post-war society and film production in terms of the passage from (innocent, and necessarily childish) “escapism” to “maturity”, was itself a highly ideological narrative; moreover, this was the very narrative that paved the way for a genuinely modern form of escapism: the escape to “maturity”. Or, perhaps more precisely, *the escape to reality*. Realism became the big thing. Of course there exist different sorts of realism, some of them most-interesting. But it is nevertheless important to see how “realism” has become a kind of general ideological trademark of our times, on all kinds of different levels. It is therefore no coincidence that reality shows function as the prominent form of escapism (as entertainment): there seems to be nothing as comforting and reassuring as this showing off of realism, watching “real” people on “real” locations doing whatever they do in “real” life. Is there any better proof and illustration of Lacan’s thesis that “reality is always and necessarily fantasmatic”, than the popularity and mesmerism of reality shows? Reality is fantasmatic, and if we want to get to some real—we need recourse to some artifice.

This brings us to the second part of Harvey’s observations. We can add that the above-mentioned daring directors (Hitchcock, Ford, Hawks) didn’t act as if nothing happened to affect and change the genres they were working with; they didn’t act as if they could simply go on making the genre films in the same way as they were done in the old days. On the contrary, they were highly sensible to this change; they were all aware that their genres lost their innocence, but they were satisfied with pursuing the genre after it lost its innocence. This is precisely what was formally most-interesting and led to some of the most outstanding formal inventions (as well as experiments in “breaking the rules”: Hitchcock’s killing the leading star only 20 minutes into the film is one of the more notorious ones).

### Unfaithfully Yours

We can also include in this company Sturges himself, and particularly his late comedies. For example *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), which is particularly interesting because it is also a quite direct reflection (at the formal-cinematographic level) of the changes that we are talking about. We are still dealing with comedy, yet a comedy that differs considerably, both in texture and in form, from Sturges’ early successes.

To begin with, the collective background of Sturges’ early movies all but disappears. Like any other movie, the film introduces many different characters, but the amazing thing is that in all the action and interaction,

the main character (Sir Alfred, a famous conductor) has no real interlocutors, he seems to be strangely alone, wrapped in and obsessed by himself. His remarkable eloquence in dialogue sounds more like a well-rehearsed monologue. His wife Daphne, the lady of the film, is not the classical screwball lady, but is reduced to a surface so unproblematic and blank (and beautiful) that it becomes enigmatic and fascinating because of its blankness (So it is no coincidence that she functions as the screen on which Sir Alfred projects his fantasies...).

This is the basic outline of the story: Sir Alfred is talented and successful composer, married to a beautiful and much younger woman (of the domestic type—she has no life of her own) who adores him, and they are shown as a happiest couple. Then his brother-in-law manages to plant a seed of jealousy in Sir Alfred. He suggests that his beautiful younger wife is cheating on him with Tony (Sir Alfred’s young secretary), and what follows is a perfect and most-literal illustration of what Slavoj Žižek has called “the plague of fantasies”. There is this seed of doubt, and it spreads like a plague and affects the whole of Sir Alfred’s being. Although he does his best to rationally resist it, it wins, torments him, and produces the three fantasy scenarios, or “prospects”, as Sturges called them, that constitute the central part of the movie. All three are played out (for us) while Sir Alfred conducts three different pieces of music: they seem to further inspire his conducting performance and make it an outstanding success. Each time we move into Sir Arthur’s head by means of a close-up of the pupil of his eye and see the “movie” that takes place in his head, against the background of the music he is conducting.

The first fantasy/prospect (played out against the music of Rossini’s overture to *Semiramide*) is that of *revenge*, filmed in a film noir style. In this fantasy scenario, Sir Alfred commits a perfect murder: he kills his wife and frames Tony for it, following which Tony is sentenced to death by execution. In spite of its comic framework, the episode is quite macabre, and it was experienced even moreso that way by the audiences of the time. Sir Alfred is shown as clearly *enjoying* killing his wife (slashing her throat), and there are other details (like the close-up of her hand trembling and then relaxing as she dies) that kill the laughter off.<sup>15</sup> And then laughter returns from an unexpected side, in the form of Sir Arthur’s own diabolical laughter when he sends the innocent Tony to death.

The second fantasy (played out against the background of Wagner’s overture to *Tannhäuser*) is that of *noble forgiveness*. As with the first *noir* fantasy, Sturges goes all the way (and further) this time with the melodramatic genre. Not only does Sir Arthur forgive his wife, he (who is older and thus “should have been the wiser”) describes himself

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<sup>15</sup> So much so that after the test screening they even thought of advertising the movie as thriller, rather than comedy: the unexpectedness of seeing this kind of shot in comedy was too much; it was too black.

as “the one to blame, entirely and alone”. He goes on and on like this, reproducing all sorts of clichés of dignity, indulging rather shamelessly in this grandiose image of himself and his eloquent nobility.<sup>16</sup> He writes his unfaithful wife a check for 100.000 dollars, so as for her to never be in the position to worry about unromantic things like money.... And then he lets her join her lover (“Youth to youth, beauty to beauty.”). Again, he gloats in what he does and says, enjoying every moment of “seeing” himself in this scene...

The third fantasy (on the music of Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*) is that of *humiliating the guilty couple*, and especially Tony. Sir Arthur confronts the young couple, and it is interesting that the first two fantasy-scenarios are referred to within this one. He tells his wife that he first wanted to cut her throat, then to forgive her and even give her an enormous check, but then decided to do neither. “No, you should have no money, and fate will decide which man you'll have and how much of a man he is.” And he challenges Tony to a duel—a game of Russian roulette—in the presence of his wife. Tony stars to sweat, visibly nervous and afraid, panicking in face of the possibility that he will die. Sir Arthur thus succeeds to humiliate him in front of his wife, revealing him as a coward, unable to put up a fight for her, while he, Sir Arthur, bravely takes the gun (without his hands shaking, as he doesn't forget to point out)—and shoots himself. The wife, realizing just how brave and honorable her husband has been (as opposed to her lover), embraces him, crying. Although in this fantasy he dies, he still enjoys every moment of it.

It is most interesting that even Sir Arthur's fantasies are not about what his wife did with Tony (as in the classical “plague of fantasies”), but about what *he* did to them. It's again all about him; his reaction and his enjoyment. The only thing that resists the isolating and all-encompassing dominance of his subjectivity in the movie are inanimate objects. There is a very peculiar scene that literally sticks out of the movie; that is out of its smooth and eloquent elegance (which is mostly Sir Arthur's eloquent elegance). Once the three fantasies (and the concert he conducted) are over, Sir Arthur runs home with the intention to make the necessary preparations for carrying out, this time for real, his first scenario. The preparations involve a recording machine (which he needs in order to frame Tony for the murder). What follows is an extremely long scene (by all standards: it goes on for a full 14 minutes) of continuous mishaps during which he manages to completely wreck the apartment (every object he takes in his hands breaks, or falls, and he with it), constituting a sort of “*slow motion slapstick*”. Objects resist him, he acts with embarrassing clumsiness. ... And this drags on and on. The scene doesn't really make us laugh, and I don't think it was intended to, although it looks like a classical slapstick comedy scene. The scene is literally “off”:

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<sup>16</sup> He even throws in a kind of self-satisfied self-reflection concerning his artistic work: “I couldn't understand music the way I do if I didn't understand the human heart”.

in terms of rhythm, timing, length, but above all by being put in this kind of (rather sophisticated) film at all. It looks as if it is coming from a very different movie. All this makes it almost painful to watch. I would suggest that the scene in question actually *stages* the death of laughter—of precisely the kind of hilarious laughter that this kind of scenes could still produce, say, in the times of *Sullivan's Travels* (at least supposedly, like the prisoners laughing to the slapstick cartoon—and the scene with Sir Alfred is constructed in exactly the same way, even with sound effects that come directly from cartoons). But instead of making us laugh, it is rather painful to watch.

The only funny part of the scene is its very last bit, when Sir Arthur tries to follow the instructions of the recording machine, and then manages to produce and record a strange, low, animal roar, upon which his wife and Tony enter the apartment; as if at this point Sturges slowly and almost imperceptibly reintroduced the comedy, so as to connect this scene with the remaining of the film.

In what follows Sir Arthur acts his suspicions out, for the first time, in a real confrontation with his wife. The suspicions finally turn out to be completely unjustified, caused by a pure and unfortunate misunderstanding.

This last part of the film is, indeed, a masterpiece of comedy, provided that we stayed with the joke so far. For the whole movie could be seen as a complex and extremely rich staging of one fundamental *joke* that comes at the end. In its structure this joke corresponds incredibly well to the following one:

A man comes home in the evening, quite drunk. He lives alone on the fourth floor of an apartment building, and as he tries to put his key into the keyhole he gets an irresistible urge to have a potato soup. He has no potatoes at home, and so he concludes: “I will go down to the concierges' apartment and say to her: ‘Excuse me madam, could you please lend me a few potatoes, I will return them tomorrow’.” And down he goes. As he arrives to the third floor, he thinks, “But why should I call her madam, she is only a concierge. I will say to her: ‘Excuse me, could you please lend me a few potatoes, I will return them tomorrow.’” Arriving to the second floor, he thinks some more: ““But after all, why should I use polite formulas like ‘excuse me’ and ‘please’, she is only a concierge. I will simply say: ‘Could you lend me a few potatoes, I will return them tomorrow’”. When on the first floor, he thinks again: “But, after all, why should I return the potatoes, she is only a concierge, I will just say to her: ‘Give me a few potatoes!’” Finally arriving to the ground floor where the concierge lives, he rings her bell. When she opens the door, smiling politely, he snaps at her: “You know what, you can take those potatoes and stick them up your ass!”

This is precisely how sir Arthur's thinking and acting are structured. After some real grounds of suspicion appear, the whole drama of his wife's infidelity and of his reaction to it is played out in his head

exclusively, following the three fantasy scenarios, and she has no clue about his suspicions. And when he finally tries to confront her with his suspicions and his knowledge about her betrayal, he behaves exactly like the man in this joke: acting and talking as if she knew all that went on (only) in his head so far; that is, as if she were there for the whole path of his suspicions, fantasies, and conclusions. The scene is a real comic delight, built from little details and the discrepancies between the knowledge of the two protagonists, and she is more and more at loss as to what is going on while he keeps hinting at his fantasy scenarios. Until he finally spells it out directly: he knows that she had betrayed him with Tony. From there on everything is cleared up very quickly, the misunderstanding explained, and the couple is happily reunited.

*Unfaithfully Yours* is, among other things, a good example of comedy that persists after and beyond the genre “lost its innocence”. It follows the general trend of shifting towards “seriousness”, psychological complexity, introspection, disturbing events (hence the *noir* side and the black humor of the film)—yet it renders this as a new version of comedy and of comedic heroes, and not as an antipode to comedy. There exists in fact an interesting continuity—in some respects at least—that leads, for example, from the character of Sir Alfred to the characters often portrayed by Woody Allen...

Earlier on, I evoked Lacan’s thesis that reality is always fantasmatic, and that if we want to get to the real, we need recourse to some artifice. The usage of different genres (fantasy scenarios) inside comedy is certainly an example of such an artifice. Similar claims could be made for black humor. How does black humor work? It works by introducing a crack into the most genuinely felt, serious sentiment; yet is not the same as cynicism. It is above all something that disturbs the monolithic structure of reality (as felt and experienced), injects it with some dialectics, gives rise to thought, as well as to pleasure more awarding than the kind of preemptive gratification that mostly dominates today.

Some consider black humor as a more realistic form of humor—but wouldn’t it be more precise to say that it is actually an answer to realism; an artifice that cracks it open? Preston Sturges knew something about black humor. When his career went downhill, he started writing his autobiography, and he died before he finished it. It was later published under the title *Preston Sturges by Preston Sturges*.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, his own idea for the title was much less “mature”. He wanted his autobiography to be called –: *The Events Leading up to My Death*.

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17 Edited by his last wife, Sandy Sturges.

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# Interview with Sophie Fiennes: Risk is the Holy Grail We Need to Hold Onto

## Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

1. You have mostly, even though not exclusively, done what is commonly referred to as “documentaries”. Yet, you have impressively demonstrated the variability, maybe fluidity of this genre and category. Your movie on Kiefer is quite different from the one with Žižek and certainly again different from the one on and with Grace Jones. Could you tell us a little about what it means for you to do a “documentary”?

‘Documentary’ is most compelling for me when seen simply as the capture of time into a material that can take many forms; song and oral traditions, certainly painting and the written word. It precedes cinema. It is document as remainder, a moment witnessed and lost – except for the document. There is something pathetic and exceptional in this. And a work will also change in time.

Starting out I was drawn to the early experiments in filmmaking, with their haphazard sense of astonishment that time could be captured and retrospectively re-animated, the dead brought back to life, people made to walk backwards and objects to fly. It’s both the concrete moment and the magic of the medium that fascinates me. It isn’t that documentary is objective truth, nothing is more subjective than the editing process, but there are truths that speak for themselves in the smallest of moments and it’s what these can do to each other across a film that can be revelatory.

‘Documentary’ is also a set of guiding principles I might choose to push against or engage in. The form of my films vary because the subjects vary. It really is that simple. I’m like a bloodhound smelling out where the meat is and the form emerges through this. There is the doing, the constant reflecting, the failure, the risk, the necessity to get lost and then assemble moments of real time into ‘scenes’. It’s a hybrid between observational ‘*objects trouve*’, and the compression of footage into a structure that is in many ways fictional but echos poetry more than prose, as film is made of fragments. While I am responding to the subject, I am also engaged in an invisible, imagined relationship with another, a viewer’s, perception and sensibility.

2. You once said that “cinema is the space in which [you] feel most at home.” And you continued by stating: “That’s why my response is to make films for the cinema, to insist on cinema.” What is the specificity of the cinematographic space for you? What is the difference between, say, cinema and television (if the latter still exists)?

This is because of the mark left by my own experience watching films in the cinema. I experience it as closer to theatre, with more ritual and magic than TV, flatscreens or smart phones. A strange mental landscape is entered into; my waking self is partly suspended as the images seduce,

fascinate, provoke and sometimes bore, which is also important as part of an internal expansion. The projected image is bigger than life, but paradoxically more intimate.

Watching films outside of the cinema is like watching a copy, not the original. You might get the information, but not the experience. It's also worth pointing out that the editing rhythm is not the same. When the image field is bigger, it takes more time for the eye and brain to process what is playing out up there. Films cut for the cinema might seem slow on a small screen, but hit their natural speed when projected. Much of today's cinema sacrifices cinematic space for speed and kinetic cutting, so the effect is more kaleidoscopic. The cinematic grammar that underpins American film noir for example is more than just about mood and shadows.

It's important the cinema is not marked out only for market driven product. Cinema's amplification of the smallest moment is what I enjoy most as a viewer. Before the invention of DVD and even VHS, there were repertory cinemas all over London. Twenty seater screening rooms projected films from 11.00 am up to midnight. When I was in my late teens this is where I went to watch films. It took some effort, now everything is available, which is fantastic, but the question of *how* films are watched is crucial.

3. Eisenstein once has the plan to make a film out of Karl Marx's *Capital*. But he never got to it (even though even a fragment of a screenplay exists). You did two films with Slavoj Žižek and one could have imagined before that this is something almost as impossible to do as to make a film out of Marx's *Capital*. Even though Žižek is very readable and constantly refers to different movies, his theoretical position can be quite difficult to fully get. You seem to have prevented some of the implied difficulties, by focussing not so much on Žižek himself – even though he appears in almost every scene of the movies – but on a concept or “phenomenon” (the movies and ideology). Could you tell us something about what it means to make a movie about a concept?

I think this is a case of fools rushing in where angels fear to tread. I left school at 16 and did a one year foundation course at art school. I'm not conventionally educated so don't have the sense of what is difficult or impossible, but respond to what can be communicated and how.

My mother was a writer and a passionate thinker and both my parents photographers. They were hopeless at making ends-meet; at one point we lived in a small cottage with no kitchen and a bathroom that was more of an outhouse. However, the central room was wall-to-wall with books collected over the years. My mother had been certified insane

several times and psychoanalysed in her early 20's after a dysfunctional childhood, so 'concepts', or what she would have called 'ideas', were more urgent than the food on the table. Biography was considered 'kitsch', it was important to go 'straight to the text.' In this sense, the films with Žižek were always going to be about 'the text', the theory and the films, not Slavoj himself.

Slavoj is a brilliant communicator, and refining and reducing the material we created felt like shaping a series of bullets. My aim is to go for as much complexity as possible, to where ideas feel just within reach. I need to keep the thread of thought-forms moving across the film, like shooting a series of arrows that need to hit their marks. I want to work with that experience of mental rupture Slavoj's work produces.

4. You have done two movies with Slavoj Žižek, *The Perverts Guide to Cinema*, and its sequel *The Perverts Guide to Ideology*. We agree with you when you said that cinema is a great tool to explore ideology. Could you tell us a little more about your position here?. How do movies embody ideology (if they, from your perspective, do that)? And, how does cinema relate to ideology critique? Is there a critique of ideology specific to the movies?

As humans we take to movies and ideology like ducks to water. We are ready to believe in a story, be drawn in, use it to shape the world and bring meaning. I recall a conversation with Slavoj where he emphasised how infuriating it was that non-believers are often seen as taking the easy option by choosing not to believe. “My God!”, he exclaimed, “do they not understand how hard it is *not* to believe!” Belief is our default setting.

*The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* broke new ground for me. We went beyond our love of movies and theory, but used both to show how ideological projects are 'built'. The emphasis on “being responsible for our dreams” felt crucial to the film. Fictional movies are also “documents” of the ideological consensus of their time.

This relationship between cinema and ideology forces me to question my own practice as a filmmaker and confront the uncomfortable truth that the moving image is *the* central propaganda tool, used with terrifying efficiency from Nazi Germany up to all kinds of fake news and mainstream news, today.

Financing films that critique ideology is hard! Financiers want to recoup their investments, and this has become more and more the only agenda. If you are not making money, you are not making sense, even though the business model in terms of exploitation makes it impossible to recoup. We are currently trying to finance the final film in our series, *The Pervert's Guide to The Twenty First Century*, despite our past achievements this is not easy.

5. In what sense can one understand movies as “guides”? Once you said: “I never embark on making films from the point of view that I’m a woman; I’m just making films, and then it’s a surprise that I’m a female film director.” If your movies are not “female” movies, do you nonetheless consider them to be political?

It’s impossible to make work and be non-political even in the broadest sense of the word. I do seek to up-set some apple carts. Making films is a process through which I push myself and take risks with form and material. If I knew exactly what I was making from the outset it wouldn’t be an engaging process, I wouldn’t have the necessary nervous and ‘hysterical’ energy. In terms of my films with Slavoj, ‘guide’ is a term that suggests this is not a dramatic narrative, but a set of propositions and a polemic.

6. If we think of your films, say your *Hoover Street Revival* (2001) or *Grace Jones: Bloodlight and Bami* (2017), our impression was that the fascinating dimension of them was somehow linked to what appears to be a documentation of a specific time. Is this something you aimed for or is this rather only our impression?

Yes. This is true. What drives me to shoot observational footage is discovering how in committing real time to film/video a kind of transubstantiation can occur. Framing is crucial, it can unlock or generate layers of sense and inference that accumulate in the moments captured. This is most fascinating when it’s subtle. I try to let the material I am gathering speak to me. Shooting *Hoover Street Revival* I became intrigued by the echoes of biblical imagery in the most banal of things. I heard fragments of poems in my head from the period I love, the English metaphysical poets of the 17th Century. This process or response recurs in the more stable environment of the editing, where editing feels like writing with time.

Initially some critics were disconcerted that *Grace Jones: Bloodlight and Bami* was not full of archive, given all the stunning and iconic imagery of Grace Jones. But that imagery lives in Grace’s body. The film didn’t need to refer to archive. I explored this, but it quickly broke a spell. It suggested comparisons that were crude, journalistic and less interesting than shaping the time collected in my encounters with Grace herself. Our footage was its own Grace time-capsule and I can account for the truth of those moments, because I was there.

7. Walter Benjamin writes that “only film can detonate the explosive stuff which the nineteenth century has accumulated in that strange and perhaps formerly unknown material which is kitsch. But just as with the political structure of film, so also with other distinctively modern means of expression (such as lighting or plastic design): abstraction can be dangerous.”<sup>1</sup> How does film, and cinema in general from your perspective function in our century? In other words, what is the relation of cinema to its own time from your point of view? Does or can it present time and history?

There is no getting away from how films date, can seem remote and irrelevant. This ‘failure’ reflects how historical film is. The real wonder is when films or works of art retain their life, can still shatter us and cut across time. I watched Rosellini’s *Rome, Open City* again and it tore me apart.

8. Sergei Eisenstein claimed that cinema breaks away with the classical modes of representation and is thus able to articulate or even create a meaning beyond that which are made possible either by language, or by the photographic image. Does that sound convincing to you?

I do agree because film at its best is more unruly than language, its grammar less academic, less stable. I don’t know if meaning is a word I would choose as the moving image is opaque, dumb in the sense of speechless. There are dictionary definitions for words, but image moments are more evasive. The expressions that pass across a human face in a moment of time are at odds with any attempt to describe what they tell. It’s hard for actors to compete with the untrained gaze of the non-actor. When cinema contrives too much, it becomes obvious, kitsch or camp, which is not without its pleasures. But when the truth of fragmentation inherent to film is well handled, cinema’s mode of representation is beyond other forms but combines and responds to them. I was always interested by how Eisenstein found Joyce’s *Ulysses* essentially filmic.

9. What do you make of the abundance and huge contemporary success of the format of the series? Is this the new form of cinema (as some claimed when “The Wire” came out that it is comparable to the realist novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century)?

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin 2002, p.396

I simply do not have the time to watch them. They seem designed to fill up the content hole and are the product of the entertainment industry, designed to support home watching and all the tech that goes with it. They refuse the discipline of cinema, but don't contain the beauty of 'rushes' - the unprocessed raw material of film making. The random nature of YouTube surfing is more absurdly pleasurable and surprising for me.

10. There is this influential distinction between say, Hollywood blockbusters, as a kind of trash cinema – at least often –, and what some refer to as 'fine' or art movie. What do you think of this distinction?

I deplore the labelling of films into groupings such as 'art movie.' This started in the 1990's. Can't films exist outside such categories? It's the same with the use of 'world cinema' which simply means non-English speaking films. Hollywood wasn't always a term for trash cinema, but the death of strong independent production companies in the US, the dominance of studios and now Netflix and Amazon has clipped the creative wings of the industry. The apology for this comes in the form of a handful of Netflix product made with highly established directors and with such inflated budgets to make anyone else blush at the thought of recouping, not to mention the distribution and marketing costs. Netflix runs at a massive deficit.

11. How do you see the relation of cinema to other arts, say to theatre, or to painting, or to literature, especially to the novel? Many have been turned into films. One cannot but mention Jose Saramago's *Blindness* (directed by Fernando Meirelles, 2008) in the midst of pandemic Covid 19 (quite a few interesting parallels can be drawn between the novel and our current situation), or Ágota Kristóf's trilogy *The Notebook* (directed by János Szász, 2013). What do you think about these movements from literature to film (especially because you have already made movies about a singer, with a philosopher, and about an artist)?

I enjoy collaborating with people who have gone quite far out in their various practices and are tangled up in all kinds of complex, sometimes paradoxical and pleasurable zones. I meet them there as a film maker. There are limitations to what can be transposed to film, but sometimes film brings a new dimension to their work. With Kiefer, initially he just thought I should film what he had created, but I insisted the process was important, even a digger excavating a tomb-like space. He soon became excited by revealing his 'actions'; the making of the objects, but crucially the breaking too; the shattering of glass or plates or vessels.

Writers can explore ideas freely on their own terms and might produce a rich text and material for a film, but I think the narrative structures of theatre, film and literature don't have to conform to the same organising principles. For example the work of Pirjo Honkasalo and her extraordinary films, *The Three Rooms of Melancholia* or *Atman*, could never be created from a novel, or a novel from them. These films are so particular to documentary cinema and in my opinion do point to what Eisenstein was getting at; they articulate a meaning beyond that possible in language or photography.

12. You have done two documentary short films and two other short films (*First Row Orchestra* and *Hopper Stories*, both in 2012). What is interesting about the short(er) format? Does it lead to condensations? Is it another type of film or in what do you see its specificity?

I approach short films like working in a sketch book, or think of them as two maybe three short scenes or ideas. I made a lot when I was first experimenting with film, shooting on Super 8. No sync sound. It was a nice brief to work with; to imagine a moment behind one of Hopper's haunting paintings.

13. Can we ask two final and rather broad questions? What do you think is the task of cinema today (if there is any)?

That is a big and broad question, I'll try a pithy response: Risk is the Holy Grail we need to hold onto. Audiences don't know what they want until they see it. And we have to argue to make films for the cinema that are not only the big screen machine products. And we must keep watching and keep close cinema history, not lose touch with it.

14. And, it is hard to avoid this topic: what are your thoughts about the current pandemic?

I think this is a fascinating moment where the organic and fragile truth of our human bodies stands before the machine of production and consumption that felt like it was stealing something from us. Stealing Time itself. I don't want 'normal' to return. We know we have to change the order of things. We must insist that all stimulus packages invest in non-fossil fuel industries. This pause has been instructive. We need new industries, new models that see a future that is possible and we must learn from our mistakes. Even the 'social distancing' suggests a new sensitivity to human intimacy, the close up exchanged glance.

# Interview with Todd McGowan: Politics of Moviegoing

Agon Hamza &  
Frank Ruda

1. Could you tell us what in your mind is the task and function of film theory—in difference for example from the theory of literature or of painting? What kinds of particular and singular demands does film confront a theoretical approach with—maybe demands and requirements that only film raises? And in what way does psychoanalysis especially help film theory (maybe it does help the theory of literature, too, but is there a conceptual connection that singles out the link between film and psychoanalysis)? Is the unconscious structured like a movie (or vice versa)?

I think that each artistic medium has a specific object. That is, it has an object that it treats as impossible within the field of experience that it depicts. The works of art within this medium attempt to show this object as impossible. Both cinema and painting share the gaze as their object. But what's different about cinema—and what makes it more appropriate for a psychoanalytic account than any other artistic medium—is the way that it figures the gaze. The static nature of painting makes it very difficult to engender an encounter with the gaze in this medium. Jacques Lacan draws our attention to Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* as examples of paintings that do facilitate this encounter. However, there is a temporality to the encounter that paintings, even paintings as impressive as these, cannot enact. That is what cinema can do. Because it shows a visual field unfolding in time, cinema comes close to the structure of fantasy. And it is in and through fantasy that we can encounter the gaze as a traumatic interruption of a narrative unfolding. The interruptive nature of the gaze occurs only in cinema. It enables us to experience the shock of seeing our desire where we didn't expect to see it because our desire is unconscious. In this sense, cinema, at its best, can almost work like a psychoanalytic session. I wouldn't say that the unconscious is structured like a movie but more that movies allow us to see the unconscious in a way that no other art form does. Perhaps this is why psychoanalytic film theory has been the only fully developed film theory. There has never been a fully worked out Marxist theory, and others—such as feminist film theory or queer film theory—primarily work through the foundation of psychoanalysis. I know that there are exceptions, but I believe that film theory is either psychoanalytic or it isn't. It can be something else on top of this, but first and foremost it must be psychoanalytic.

2. To follow up, you write that many psychoanalysts argue that cinema offers a public version of dreaming. This is something you endorse as well (we are thinking in particular of your *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, 2011). Perhaps a parallel can be drawn to the cinematic critique of ideology. You've

written extensively about both. For instance, in the same book you say that “ideology works on the basis of a masculine logic of exception because it must create the illusion of a whole—a whole society and whole identities—in order to provide a sense of social stability.” Does the psychoanalytical ideology critique of cinema, or the cinematic critique of ideology, work precisely by suspending the idea of a consistent totality or by privileging antagonism over the whole? If so, what consequences can we draw from this?

I think that’s exactly right. Ideology in film works by creating a sense of healing and social stability. Even the most ideological film has to present a rupture or cut in order to create some interest for the spectator. Ideology occurs in the manner that the film responds to this rupture that it creates. The critique of ideology in cinema has to proceed by focusing on the falsity of the wholeness that films produce as they cover over the ruptures that they depict. The point is that the whole is always only illusory. There is no need to deconstruct the whole because it undermines itself, which is what a psychoanalytic ideology critique makes manifest. But this suggests that no film is purely ideological. Because film follows the structural logic of fantasy, it always provides an opening to antagonism and contradiction. Even a film such as *Forrest Gump*, which I view as an ideological nightmare, still has moments where the contradictions it contains in the end become apparent. The point is, I think, to reveal these contradictions through analysis and to make clear how the film betrays them through a recourse at the end to an imaginary whole.

3. Film theory based on Lacan often emphasizes or begins from a reading of Lacan’s mirror stage. This can certainly also be said about Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation, which was based on the same theoretical concept and has influenced some contemporary theory of film. One representative of this current is undoubtedly Jean-Louis Baudry, with whom one can draw a clear parallel to Althusser’s claim that “ideology interpellates individuals as subject”, since for Baudry “cinema constitutes the subject by the illusory delimitation of a central location.” You are clearly opposed to this “synthesis”, if we can use this obscene word, this strange bringing together of Lacan via Althusser and film theory. What would be the alternative or the best, or, say, the most productive way of approaching Lacan’s oeuvre for the purpose of formulating a film theory?

I think that we should probably throw away all copies of “The Mirror Stage” essay. I’m not exaggerating. I think that this essay has done so much damage to how we should conceive of psychoanalytic film theory that getting rid of it totally is almost the only recourse that we have. The real shame is that this is the first introduction that most people get to Lacan’s thought. It primes one for a misreading of the concept of the gaze because it theorizes looking as an act that creates an illusory wholeness through the apprehension of the bodily imago. The theory of the gaze that Lacan develops in *Seminar XI* runs counter to this. There, Lacan envisions the gaze as the object that disrupts the visual field. It is an object that shatters one’s sense of wholeness instead of helping to establish it. So the best place to approach Lacan’s thought, in my view, is starting with *Seminar XI*. One should leave “The Mirror Stage” aside. I see the film theory that Baudry and others developed on the basis of this essay as a massive misstep that could easily have been avoided. The result of it is that film seems like an ideological trap due to the functioning of the apparatus. But this completely leaves out the possibility of films working formally in ways that disrupt our ideological interpellation.

4. You have argued that film can disturb the spectator when something in the filmic object irritates the stable role distributions of the spectator watching the movie from a distance, gazing at the film that does what it does independent from her or him. In what way does film productively disturb us? Could one say there is a filmic alienation effect at work, in the sense that Brecht gave this term in theatre? Is this irritation a subjectivizing effect in your understanding (does film create “visitations”, to use Badiou’s term, not of an idea but of a subject)?

Film can disturb us by eliminating the distance that separates us from the screen. The most radical filmmakers, as I see it, are the ones that create moments when we can metaphorically touch the screen. In this sense, I would contend that radical filmmaking works in the exact opposite way from Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Instead of alienating spectators, the most important films lure spectators in to an encounter that they would otherwise consciously avoid. Because watching a film deprives the spectator of agency, it can follow the logic of the unconscious. The only thing that a spectator can do is to turn away or walk out. Otherwise, the encounter is going to take place, as long as the film directs the spectator to the point of its occurrence. The encounter with the disruption of the gaze or voice—the elimination of safe distance—happens in a variety of films. We can think of David Lynch’s films as examples. While watching *Blue Velvet*, we see Dorothy Vallens walking naked in a suburban neighbourhood. When she

becomes visible in this otherwise typical scene, she acts as a figure of the gaze forcing us to become aware of our investment in what we see. The psychic disturbance that she creates reveals our unconscious desire to us, thereby eliminating the safe distance from the events on the screen. Lynch doesn't have a monopoly on such moments. We can see them even in relatively straightforward recent Hollywood films such as *Motherless Brooklyn* or *Knives Out*, both of which I highly recommend. We shouldn't be fooled by their mainstream status.

5. Who are for you directors who should be considered true embodiments of *contemporary* film-making—if there are any (you wrote monographs on Nolan and Lynch, so maybe they are on the list)? And if there are, why these? We are implicitly asking the old question of how to distinguish between a “good” and a “bad” film / director.

I tend to write about directors that I like and find to be politically proximate to me. So these would include David Lynch, Christopher Nolan, and Spike Lee, to whom I've devoted whole books. But there are certainly others: Jacques Audiard, Jane Campion, and Christian Petzold, just to name a few. For me, the way to distinguish between leftist directors and conservative ones concerns the relationship that they take up in their films to the gaze (or in a few cases, to the voice). The filmmakers that try to obscure disruption of the gaze are conservative, while those who make this disruption evident in some way are on the side of emancipation. I understand that this is pretty reductive. But it serves for me as a handy way to think about the politics of the cinema. Some leftist critics hate all auteurism because they think that it stresses the individual to the exclusion of the collective necessary for the creation of any film. Of course this is true, but I see auteurism as a handy shorthand for understanding the politics of cinema. Filmmakers tend to make films that work in the same way relative to the gaze. It is in this sense that I believe it is reasonable to talk about an auteur.

6. To follow up on this—in what ways do you see political proximity between you and Lynch?

I would say that Lynch's films share my political position completely insofar as they are concerned with the importance of the rupture. In each of his films, we see a rupture within the signifying space of the film take place, and this rupture has the effect of producing a political revelation. For instance, *The Elephant Man* concludes with John Merrick doing what he cannot do. He lies down to sleep on his back in a normal fashion. This is a radical rupture. The entire film highlights his abnormality and his desire to live a normal life, but it shows this to be impossible. Whenever he begins to feel normal, an event comes along and reminds him of his abnormality. At the end of the film, he achieves normality by simply lying down. While it does kill him, it also shows how he must be part of humanity. His final act is an assertion of his humanity, an indication that we must account for the abnormal within the normal. In this way, the film asserts the politics of equality, but it asserts equality in a new way. It proposes that John Merrick and figures like him cannot be excluded. And it is his act that makes this clear for us. Insofar as Lynch illustrates a politics of such acts, he and I are in sync politically. But I should add that I have heard from someone who knows him that he completely rejects my interpretation of his films. I think that he is not a fan of psychoanalytic theory or a psychoanalytic politics. But my contention would be that his films know more about his politics than he himself does.

7. Your book on him (*The Impossible Lynch*, 2007) is very helpful in contrast to the standard interpretation of Hollywood plot-lines, from the setting wherein the impossible becomes possible and heroes accomplish impossible tasks to the fundamental ideological purpose of almost any Hollywood movie: the creation of a new couple. Against this predominance, your book confronts us with the status of impossibility in Lynch's cinematic world. The impossible is not overcome, it remains. It is not resolved. The terribly disturbing aspect of his work lies precisely therein. What is your reading of the impossible in Lynch and would you agree that it runs across his entire work—it allows to understand its inner consistency?

Yes, I think this is the main through-line. What I find most fascinating about Lynch is that he explores the radical potential of fantasy. That's where he locates the impossible being accomplished. He doesn't disdain fantasy or try to find a way to escape it. Instead, he tries to go fully into it in order to discover its political implications. I think that this

first becomes completely apparent in *Fire Walk With Me* (which is for me Lynch's absolute masterpiece). It's the figure of Laura Palmer who is able to accomplish the impossible when she breaks out of the trap of patriarchal violence, even though this costs her her life. But Lynch doesn't just confine himself to depictions of the impossible. What makes him a great filmmaker is that he forces spectators to experience the impossible happening while it nonetheless remains impossible. This is especially evident in the two films subsequent to *Fire Walk With Me*—*Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. These films are demanding for spectators because they violate not only the usual cinematic logic but also the rules of everyday life. Although the idea of the impossible happening becomes clearest in the later films, once it is apparent it is easy to look back at the earlier films and see this same structure animating them.

8. Lynch's last film was *Inland Empire* (2006). When it was released, some of his critics argued that this would be the last film of his career, that is to say, that with it Lynch exhausted his means as a director and *Inland Empire* would be the culmination of his entire career. Do you have a reading of this film? In *The Impossible Lynch* you claim that the great achievement of Lynch is to break down the distance between the spectator and the screen. He disturbs the safe distant position of the viewer by forcing him or her to realise how the film itself takes into account his/her desire. Lynch is "weird", as you claim, because he changes the spectator's experience of cinema. Can you explain this a little?

Even though *Inland Empire* came out after my book on Lynch, I nonetheless went back and wrote an essay on it that came out in a collection on Lynch. Although I did write on it positively, I think it's safe to say that this is Lynch's worst film in large part because it doesn't allow the spectator to touch the screen in the way that his other films do. In his films, Lynch creates moments where we must recognize our involvement in what we see. The paradigmatic scene of this effect is the moment when Dorothy Vallens appears naked and bruised on the suburban lawn in *Blue Velvet*. All of these people are around ready for a fight to take place, and her sudden appearance stops everything. What's amazing about the scene is that no one thinks to cover up her naked body. As a result of this failure, the spectator experiences the impulse to cover Dorothy, which is our experience of our involvement in what we see. At this moment, the distance separating us from the screen collapses. Our investment in keeping the repressed repressed becomes apparent. I don't see any moments like this in *Inland Empire*. The film breaks down the barrier between fantasy and social reality, but the elimination of this barrier portends the aesthetic failure of the film, I would say. The problem with

the film is that we go into the fantasy and don't clearly come out on the other side. His great masterpieces all have this other side of the fantasy, a world stripped bare of phantasmatic depth, that *Inland Empire* lacks.

9. A classical understanding of the art of cinema is to say that, in cinema, we are dealing with a genuinely temporal art (different from sculpture or painting for example, but closer to music in a certain sense). You wrote a book about "atemporal cinema". Can you tell us a little about how this concept sits with regard to the former understanding of the film?

I do agree that cinema is inherently a temporal art. But where I depart from Deleuze is the direction that I think it goes from there. For Deleuze, temporality is in some sense the end point of cinema. It gives us access to temporality that philosophical concepts do not, which is why Deleuze credits cinema with being a philosophy in its own right—a competitor with what we think of as philosophy. My contention is that cinema thrusts us into temporality in order to make evident the atemporal structure of our subjectivity. The paradox is, I would say, that it is through the thoroughly temporal art that we can best apprehend our inherent atemporality. Our everyday life hides this atemporality by creating the sense that we are constantly moving forward toward new objects. But cinema, in its most accomplished articulations, can arrest this forward movement. In my book on atemporality, I single out films such as *2046*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *The Constant Gardener*, among others, for their ability to immerse us in an atemporal structure.

10. Some philosophers, like Deleuze, argued that cinema is able to make visible something that we otherwise never see: time. Cinema as an art of time; an art-form that present us with a temporal flow that delights everyone, because it enables us to see what otherwise remains invisible. In someone like Heidegger there is a connection between our relation to time and our relation to ideology. Ideology penetrates and dissolves the standard understanding of time and arrangements of the society and its subject. Or, as you have elaborated, it permeates the subjects to evade the constraints of temporality. Could we say that the goal of cinema is to establish a new temporality, or would that be too radical a thesis?

I would say that the goal of cinema is to allow us to accede to our atemporality rather than to a new temporality. As you say, capitalist ideology distorts our perception of time. But I would go even further and

say, contra Heidegger, that it tries to convince us that we are temporal beings. Ideology doesn't try to obscure our temporality but rather to interpellate us as temporal. I believe that we are atemporal subjects that never fit within time. Time is always external to us. Time is not the form of our intuition (as Kant has it) but rather the external structure that obscures our own fundamental atemporality. This atemporality stems from our basic drive: we turn around a single impossibility without moving forward. We stumble up against the same obstacle again and again. But we constantly mistake the sameness for difference, failing to see our atemporality because we are caught in the trap of the illusion of temporality. We see different objects of desire instead of the same impossible object that blocks and impels our desire. It is cinema—the most temporal of the arts—that enables us to experience this. This is what I tried to work out in *Out of Time*, but I don't think that I went far enough in that work. I didn't separate subjectivity from temporality to the extent that I should have.

11. In your book on Spike Lee, among other things, you qualify him as “a political film maker.” This makes him quite a unique character in the cinema world, but not because there is lack of politics among movie directors or actors/actresses. Perhaps there's even an over-abundance of a certain form of politics. What would be your take on the politics of film that Lee paradigmatically incorporates?

For Lee, politics resides in film form, not directly in the content of his films. Even though he makes films that have an overtly political content such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Bamboozled*, the political force of his filmmaking stems from his formal inventiveness that is separate from any political content. This is why his most significant political film, *Summer of Sam*, is actually one of his films least concerned with politics in its content. The two great montage sequences in this film—set to the songs from The Who, “Baba O'Reilly” and “Won't Get Fooled Again”—are political moments almost on par with Eisenstein's epochal montage sequence showing the massacre on the Odessa steps. When watching these two sequences, we witness Lee exploding the logic of paranoia that defines so much of contemporary conservatism. By forcing the spectator to see the obscene enjoyment inhering in the paranoid position, Lee makes that position uncomfortable and ultimately untenable. These sequences expose what's at stake in paranoia and how easy it is to fall into its logic. In this way, they help to break the hold that this logic has over us, even or especially when we don't recognize it.

12. Could you tell us something about the political capacities and potentials you see in the movies? Slavoj Žižek once spoke of a “Hollywood Left” (he meant Zack Snyder and his film “300”). Is there something that can be characterized as left popular (and not populist) cinema in your view?

I definitely think that there is a left popular cinema today. It includes figures like Spike Lee, Michael Mann, and David Fincher. With apologies to Slavoj, I would definitely not include Zack Snyder, who is responsible for the unbearable *Man of Steel*. While leftist filmmakers outside of Hollywood are able to make all types of leftist films, what characterizes the figures that I single out here is that, because they operate within the constraints of Hollywood, the only political path open to them is the path of formal excess. That's what Lee, Mann, and Fincher all have in common. The formal excesses reveal sites of political opportunity. It's fascinating that Lee and Mann use formal excess in diametrically opposed ways. For Lee, excess exposes the stain that accompanies figures of authority or people acting in a racist way. Lee reveals excess in order to combat it. Mann, on the other hand, celebrates excess. His films focus on the excess of the ethical act. The formal excesses of his films express the ethical acts done by characters in the film. Oftentimes, Mann links the ethical act to someone who is morally very dubious, such as Neil McCauley in *Heat* or Frank in *Thief* (Mann's early and paradigmatic masterpiece). But these characters remain true to their desire, which enables them to break out of the situation that they find themselves in. Mann then illustrates this break through some cinematic excess. For instance, in *The Insider* he explicitly violates the 180 degree rule at one point to show us how Jeffrey Wigand's act has disrupted his entire world.

13. Todd Philipp's *Joker* caused quite a stir. With a few exceptions, the film was either read as pro-Trumpian neo-fascist nihilism, or it was understood as a plea for the revival of the proletarian rebellion. We do not find either of these readings very convincing, they rather seem to be too simplistic and articulate a strange fake sense of subjective urgency. Did you see the film and what do you make of it?

I agree with you that neither of those positions is satisfying. If one actually watches the film, what is clear, first and foremost, is that it is very bad. The figure of Joker is completely unappealing. I understand that this could be the way in which the film disturbs the spectator's ideological assumptions. But what's happening with *The Joker* is, instead, that the figure of Joker acts as a symptom for all those destroyed by contemporary capitalist society. His deformation is symptomatic. This is what the

champions of the film love about it. But I think he's a terrible version of the symptom, a misunderstanding of what is symptomatic today. The working class and the excluded are not driven to psychosis, as the film suggests. Joker's response is utterly singular and idiosyncratic. The broken promises of contemporary capitalist society create predominately neurotic responses rather than psychotic ones. The fact that Joker is a totally unappealing character, the fact that he is psychotic rather than neurotic, indicates the film's failure. Even the most ideologically distorted character must still retain a point that can hook the spectator. Without that, the character—and this is true of Joker—leaves the spectator cold. Those interpreters that celebrate this coldness fail to see, I believe, that some connection with characters is requisite for any political effect. The best films depict something appealing even in those figures that we despise. The fact that *The Joker* fails to do this indicates, to my mind, its abject failure as a film.

14. For some time, we have been flirting with the idea to do an issue of the journal on superheroes, especially since both of us have some sort of fascination with the Superman. You distinguish between him and Batman by saying that the latter is strong but only endowed with human capacities and that this makes him stand out from the set of superheroes, precisely because he doesn't have superpowers (even though in the newer generations there are many of this kind: think "The Punisher" for example). But Batman is here clearly distinct from Superman who has this false identity (as Clark Kent), so pretends to be part of ordinary life, even though he is clearly separate from it. But, the cards were shuffled, so to speak, with Sam Liu' 2009 *Superman/Batman: Public Enemies* and maybe also with Snyder's *Batman vs Superman: The Dawn of Justice* (2016), where Superman is killed by Batman—who in the same act becomes a revenge driven super-surveillance figure who in the name of "democracy" and "mankind" seeks to destroy everything that exceeds ordinary human capacity (and Superman, the *Man of Steel* (2013) as the prequel is called, so: Stalin, is not unproblematically the good one here, too). What do you make of these reversals of the role and function of a fighter against crime and injustice, into the defender of the ruling order, corruption, crime, etc.?

The superhero, as I see it, is always on the edge of slipping into corruption because of the inherently exceptional status that this figure has. It's not surprising that superheroes are constantly moving back and forth between supporting the law and undermining it. The superhero of some sort is necessary because law must deal not just with ordinary criminality but also with an excessive criminality tied to the excesses of law itself. Without some superhero—that is, some figure of excess—there will be no way to combat this. There are moments when a figure of exception is needed. But this figure is always dangerous. This is one thing that I like about Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*. He has Batman destroy the surveillance mechanism that he uses to locate the Joker after he has successfully located him. He understands that the exception can only be temporary, or else it will lead directly to a corrupt extension of authority. But this isn't a universal solution. I think that the superhero's exceptionality will remain a problem that we must constantly confront.

15. Let's move to your book on Hegel, which was published last year, and is entitled *Emancipation after Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution*. Therein you provocatively classify Marx as a Right-Hegelian. Could you say a word about it?

I have had several Marxists become very upset with me about this statement. I have a tendency to hyperbolize, and this is certainly one instance of it. My point is just that Marx does have something in common with right-wing politics and that is his belief that we can ultimately find our way out of contradiction. I find this a very dangerous position to hold because it licenses one to do whatever is necessary to advance one's political project. So there is a way that Stalin emerges out of Marx insofar as Marx promises a world free from contradiction, both explicitly in *The German Ideology* where he (and Engels) describe an unalienated future communist life, and implicitly when he labels capitalism the last alienating mode of production. If this were possible to achieve, Stalin would be right to go to the end of the line to try to realize it. That's for me the central problem. Once one puts overcoming contradiction on the table, there is no limit to what one should do to get to that point. So this is the political problem I see with Marx. But on the other hand, his analysis of the economic contradictions of capital is something that Hegel could never have accomplished. In this sense, I remain within Marx's basic trajectory, despite associating myself much more with Hegel in political terms.

16. Freedom plays a very important part in your book and reading of Hegel. In your reading of his theory of freedom, you do not refer much to being-with-oneseelf-in-one's-other (*bei sich selbst sein im anderen*), which is something Hegel refers to time and again, as a formula of freedom. What are your thoughts on this?

That's a terrible oversight on my part. I absolutely accept that being oneself in absolute otherness is the real definition of freedom. Maybe there are unconscious reasons why I don't refer to this that often—perhaps out of desire to undermine my own argument. My way of articulating this same idea is to say that freedom is reconciling oneself to the necessity of contradiction. This is, to my mind, exactly the same thing as being oneself in absolute otherness. I think I shied away from this latter formulation because of the way that otherness and difference have been fetishized today. So much of the impulse behind my writing the book was to critique this apotheosis of the other. I didn't want Hegel's conception of freedom to risk being understood as acquiescing to this apotheosis. But it's still a lapse on my part that you rightly identify.

17. And all this was just a trick to lure you into the following question: Eisenstein, as you know, once wanted to make a film with Marx's *Capital* as his script (an idea that sounds as if Fredric Jameson travelled back in time and convinced Eisenstein to come up with a filmic aesthetic of cognitive mapping). Would you say Hegel ever went to the movies? Is there something like a Hegelian cinema—a cinema that is deeply Hegelian, either in the sense of his *Phenomenology* or of his *Logic* (the latter certainly being even more complicated)?

I have written that Christopher Nolan is a Hegelian filmmaker. But I think the better example is Orson Welles. I think Welles stands absolutely alone in the history of cinema. The novelist John O'Hara said of *Citizen Kane* that not only is it the best film that has ever been made, but it's the best film that ever will be made. I think that this is 100% correct. But I would apply it to everything that Welles did. The fact that every film he made besides *Citizen Kane* was in some way damaged by Hollywood only indicates further his greatness. Hollywood tried to undo what he had done because it recognized the absolute challenge that he posed to their business as usual. If we look at his films, we see the closest thing to a Hegelian cinema—or, to put it in your terms, Hegel going to the movies. His films move us from an opening where everything seems unclear and up in the air—what one might call sense

certainty—to an ending where we see the connections between all the disparate elements and thus are able to conceive the whole as contradictory. The ending of *Citizen Kane* is exemplary in this regard. We see that the privileged object that the entire film has revolved around is nothing but Kane's childhood sled. The disappointment attached to this insignificant object is akin to the moment of absolute knowing in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. We recognize that the absolute is nothing but the necessity of contradiction. There is no great realization, no end point outside the dialectical movement engendered by contradictions. This is the point to which Welles leads us in *Citizen Kane* and in all his films. My personal favorite film is his *Mr. Arkadin*, which goes, I think, even further than *Citizen Kane* in depicting the devaluation of the privileged object. This film sets up a riddle in which the solution lies within the riddle itself—a perfectly Hegelian structure.

18. Another question, which is unavoidable in our present situation: COVID-19. Many philosophers have written on the topic and the possible effects. Economists are already foreseeing a big economic recession, if not a new period of depression. Do you have a take on the eventual effects of COVID-19, as well as the current situation of self-isolation, quarantine, limitations of public and social life, etc.? In other words, does the Foucauldian conceptual apparatus come in handy in this situation?

I think now is the precise time not to be tempted by the Foucauldian or Agambenian analysis of biopower. Let's use this time to throw them out once and for all. I find Agamben's analyses of our contemporary situation risible. Now is the time to denounce this position as loudly as possible. I would feel that way even if I wasn't someone highly at risk from the virus, someone who benefits from the public efforts to block its spread. What the coronavirus exposes, I would say, is the bankruptcy of the notion of biopower and the corresponding concept of bare life. We can see now that there is no such thing as bare life. All life is politicized. Even the attempt to protect or promote life is part of a political form of life, to use Agamben's terms. The reluctance of conservative leaders to impose strict regulations reveals that regulating life is not inherently a conservative or ideological operation. The logic of capital demands the flow of commodities so that nothing gets in the way of accumulation. The outbreak interrupts this flow, thereby exposing how protecting life puts one at odds with the logic of capital. This means that we can see how the state—in its role of protecting life—is not just the servant of capital. If it were, we would not see the arrest of the flow of commodities. The catastrophe shows us that the state can be our friend, not just our enemy. The great revelation of the coronavirus catastrophe is the

emancipatory power of the state, the ability of the state to serve as the site for collectivity rather than acting as just the handmaiden of capital. This is something that the theory of biopower can never accept. The anarchic tendencies behind this theory need to be shown as fundamentally libertarian, not leftist. This is what the virus has demonstrated to us.

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# Notes on Contributors

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