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Crisis Narratives in World Cinema: Visions of Violence, Spectres, and Desires

Screenshot from Cristi Puiu's *Malmkrog* (2020).

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Notes on the Miraculous Event in *Ordet*
by Carl Theodor Dreyer

Fabio Pezzetti Tonion
Museo Nazionale del Cinema (Turin, Italy)
E-mail: pezzetti@museocinema.it

Abstract. Can the transcendence of the sacred be represented through the potential of cinema, a medium based on the ontological reproduction of the Real? Can the dimension of the completely Other, whose limits and boundaries are hardly identifiable, come to the screen and become sensitive and perceptible? This contribution, taking as references the phenomenological dimension of the sacred proper to the investigation of Father Amédée Ayfre and the more stylistic one studied by Paul Schrader, intends to propose a reflection on how the miraculous event, understood as an objective suspension of physical laws, of narrative verisimilitude, in which the procedures of representation and rendering in images are configured as a fracture with respect to the customary nature of aesthetic expression of reality, are made evident in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet*.
Keywords: sacred, realism, style, Carl Theodor Dreyer, religion.

> *"An incomprehensible light*
> *fills the whole circle of the Earth.*
> *It resounds powerfully on and on*
> *A most desirable word of promise:*
> *Whoever believes shall be saved."*
> (Martin Luther: *With Peace and Joy I Now Depart*)

Beyond the Threshold: the Experience of the Limit

Can cinema represent the transcendent and render the dimension of the sacred through its own evidence of mimetic reproduction of the real? Can an expressive medium that insists on ontological reproduction convey that completely Other whose limits, boundaries, and pertinences are difficult to identify? If the sacred, according to Amédée Ayfre's reflection (1953), is placed between the fundamental poles of transcendence and immanence, can it be evoked in an aesthetic dimension?

Referring to the lesson of Roger Callois, which reflected on the reduction and internalization of the sacred in the horizon of modern society, within which it appears as a generating and at the same time destructive force from which it is necessary to constantly protect (Callois 1961), Ayfre defines the sacred in an oppositional way, contrasting it with the profane; then, following Rudolf Otto, he underlines how one of his "fundamental characteristics is that of being oriented towards the Other, without however clarifying the specific nature of this Other" (1953, 113–114). The radical problem is linked to "the aesthetic incarnation of Transcendence. It is a question of researching how it is possible to evoke, through the use of human signs forcibly charged with nature and humanity, a reality that belongs to other superhuman, supernatural orders" (Ayfre 1953, 121–122). To do so, it is necessary to take into account the phenomenological nature of reality, identifying the moments in which the process of unveiling makes a religious possibility of cinema evident, concretizing that transition between Incarnation and Transcendence inscribed in the basic ambiguity of the cinematographic image, which for Ayfre indicates the potential for further meaning, an expression of the mystery of the sacred, detached from the concrete, objective, naturalistic datum (1964, 222).

For Paul Schrader, the cinematographic medium manifests the sacred by using peculiar stylistic methods, which are based on two essential premises that he notes by associating the reflection of Mircea Eliade with that of Heinrich Wölfflin: for Eliade, there are hierophanies, that is, "manifestations of the sacred capable of expressing the transcendent in society," while for Wölfflin "there are common representative artistic forms shared by divergent cultures. Transcendental style is each of these" (Schrader 1988, 9). Although artistic works, in different eras and in different ways, have been confronted with the possibility of accessing the otherness of the sacred, having been created by humans "cannot *inform* one about the Transcendent, they can only be *expressive* of the Transcendent" (Schrader 1988, 6). That is, they express the nature of the transcendent reflected in the mirror of mankind, not so much by expressing feelings of a religious nature as by representing the sacred itself; cinema can reach the process of expression of the transcendent by recalling a series of stylistic peculiarities which, by resolving cultural, social, and subjective differences, reach a synthesis of a spiritual type (Schrader 1988, 9).

Schrader's reflective thinking identifies the three phases in which the transcendental style manifests itself: everyday life, understood as a "meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living" (1988,

39); the disparity, or "an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action" (1988, 42); finally, stasis, which is understood as "a frozen view of life that does not resolve the disparity but transcends it" (1988, 49). These three phases, in which the stylistic practices of staging can be divided, allow to reveal the "mystery" of the representation of the Sacred; if the latter exists as an impenetrable Unity (from which its own mystery derives), the subdivision makes it intelligible, understandable and approachable.

For film scholars, although many directors have made use of the transcendental style, there are two who have rigorously applied it in their films: Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson. Carl Theodor Dreyer's cinema, which also tends towards the representation of the sacred, uses formal models of the transcendental style without fully accepting it: of all the films by the Danish director, *Ordet* is certainly the one that comes closest to the stylistic procedures identified by Schrader (1988, 46), however, stopping after having crossed the threshold of the miraculous event which is the heart of the film, deliberately unable to reach that stasis which is an indication of the manifestation of the sacred.

The film stages the events that happen to the Borgen Family, whose serene and industrious daily file is suddenly challenged by the presence of Death. Old Borgen, who owns a rich farm, has three children: Mikkel, married to Inger, Johannes and Andersen. The latter, who is the youngest of the three, is in love with Anna, the daughter of the tailor Peter; but Peter and Borgen oppose his marriage to the girl for religious reasons. Mikkel, on the other hand, is an atheist and resists the attempts of his wife, who would like to lead him back to the faith; while Johannes has become so immersed in theological studies that he has been struck by a religious mania and believes himself to be Jesus Christ himself. Inger, who was expecting a baby, dies in childbirth. Inger's death upsets Johannes, who runs away from home. He reappears on the day of the funeral, perfectly cured of his mania. Sometime before he had promised one of Inger's daughters to resurrect his mother if she died: animated by profound faith, he orders the dead woman, who is about to be locked up in the coffin, to get up. The miracle takes place: confronted with the prodigious fact, Mikkel finally finds faith.

However, it is clear that *Ordet* is based on the clarification of the completely Other that occurs in the miraculous event of resurrection, starting from the work with which Kaj Munk – staging an "articulated diatribe between Pietists and Krundtvighians on what meaning is to be given to the 'Word' par excellence, that of God" (Martini 2000, 90–92) – proposed to represent "not only the promise of the miracle, but the miracle itself, such as a mystical juggler wavering on the

abyss of madness, Johannes, the young theologian who believes he is actually Jesus" (Papi 2009, 11–12).

The major difference with respect to Schrader's thinking lies in what we could define as the moral question of representation. For the Danish director, it is a priority to make the mystery of the life of human beings manifest, and it is no coincidence that the film ends with a kiss between Inger – who, after Johannes has brought about her resurrection by means of the "word," has returned to life – and her husband Mikkel: the carnality of love can finally return to fulfillment; and this, implying an action that directly modifies the state of things, makes it impossible to achieve stasis.

For Dreyer, the split allows a return to life and the everyday; he claims to love "life deeply, all beings that are truly alive. My films are intended to be a serene meditation on the great mystery of life, not on death, the denial of life" (Salvestroni 2011, 18). The sacred event, undermining the profane limits of the experience of death, questions the limits of representation: can it allow a stylization of reality "capable of showing, beyond appearances, the hidden filigree of a supernatural substance?" (Ayfre 1962, 123). Dreyer's films operate within a universe of limits, reaching certain extremes of human experience, beyond which there are dimensions – real or imaginary – that cinema can make visible or at least it can suggest and evoke its presence (Ayfre 1971, 135; Perrin 1969, 63–68; Rollet 1998, 71; Tone 1978, 92–93). They are limits in which to be contained or to be overcome, where the act of containment or the tension to escape and for movement produces not only a creation of meaning but allows the actual life (or death) of the characters. "*Vampyr*, kingdom of shadows, stages disjointed signs in which bodies are shapeless, ghostly presences. The image – the bodies and the souls – is placed in a limbo, from which it seems unable to become incarnate in order to exit, so as to be present. *Ordet* deals with the representation of borders, with the passage from the concentric and centripetal context of the home and the dispersion of the desert space of the dunes that surround it." (Rollet 1998, 71.)

Places and spaces, bodies and souls, proceed from the organic and carnal concreteness of existing in a historicized here and now that is gradually bent towards a dimension that extracts the bodies from the brute concreteness of reality and abstracts them in a questioning about the possible meaning of faith, through the (ambiguous yet vivifying) possibility of miracles, or through the destruction of the order of reality.

The Dialectic of Opposites

In presenting *Ordet* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1955, Carl Dreyer cited Munk's statement that the task of any authentic art is to "shock the soul" (Vaughan 1974, 156). This task can be achieved by abstracting from reality, by abandoning naturalism to arrive at an essentiality in which the perception of the experience of the sacred can unfold, placed "outside of time and space" (Solmi 1956, 31). Dreyer's protagonists are confronted with this possibility and their bodies are charged with a *sur-reality* that upsets and changes them, as happens to the character of Inger in the film's finale.

In Dreyer's cinema there is a strong formal dimension, which tends to build and define the meaning of the work. Especially in the last part of his career, the Danish filmmaker, particularly in long shots, identifies a formal model of representation which is typical of cinematographic language and which guarantees the latter the possibility of achieving artistic results. For Le Fanu, "both *Ordet* and *Gertrud* were adapted from theatrical plays and a highly abstract meditation on the dialectical relationship between cinema and theater can be seen in these films. Dreyer seems to be wondering what makes a film different from a play, provided you allow yourself the ability (through the use of exceptionally long takes) to bring something of the experience of real time and of performance that is proper to the theater into the film?" (2003, 30). David Bordwell (1987, 70) also underlines the pictorial dimension of Dreyer's last feature films, in which the characters are presented as if they were to pose for a portrait within environments in which rarefaction and abstraction are sought.

Dreyer began working on Kaj Munk's drama in 1932. It took him more than twenty years to finish the project, after a series of reflections. For Montanari, the director conveys Munk's message through an "existentialism drawn directly from its sources, and not yet degenerated and impoverished in the formulas in which it circulates today in public opinion," where "the dark sense of anguish, a Kierkegaardian anguish, forms the leitmotif of the film" (1958, 55). Those reflections led him towards a style of great sobriety, in which the possibilities of staging are aimed at restoring the ambiguity of the sacred, starting from a theatrical origin that finds its own cinematographic specificity linked to the experience of time and duration of the actual event (Le Fanu 2003, 30).

Referring to the work of adapting the play, Dreyer stated that "a reorganization of the matter and a simplification is necessary. It can be said that it is a purification, because all the elements that do not contribute to the development

of the central idea are removed. You have to concentrate and compress. […] This job of simplification is a radical job. It happens for the film that an action must be interrupted or even suspended to give viewers time to reflect, the time necessary for them to continue to follow the film" (Rasmussen 1955, 48).

Everything must lead rigorously towards the central event, the scene that closes the film: a resurrection that takes place when the transcendent rips off the veil of immanent reality and makes an alterity of reality emerge in a disruptive way. To achieve this effect, there can be no uncertainty, no hesitation, no corollaries to action or reflection can be added. For this reason, the style of staging adopted by Dreyer is deliberately bare, preferring static shots that capture the characters in an everyday environment and using with sobriety camera movements that focus on characters caught in moments of reflection.

Ordet is a radical work both in the fideistic conception that questions the spectators and confronts them with a choice of acceptance or rejection of the miraculous event, and in the rigorous and inexorable dramaturgical scansion, in a narrative flow which proceeds without leaving room for hesitation or digressions. *Ordet* is a source of bewilderment for both the believing and the non-believing spectator. For those who believe, the film directly questions the dimension of faith in the possibility of the miraculous event in the age of science; for those who do not believe, it is the absolute rigour of the staging of this possibility that causes scandal.

For Guido Aristarco, whose reflection comes from a Marxist cultural background, the film is "a disconcerting work, full of internal contradictions that lead to a question that cannot be answered with ease. We cannot share, as they appear at a first reading, the subject, the content, and the thesis of the film; yet a particular charm springs from it, not the illusory and empty one of the *Vampire*, or which can be confused with a handwriting, albeit exceptional" (1955, 172). As Le Fanu points out, "although the real meaning of the film is shrouded in an impenetrable mystery, at its core, there are the same untouchable Christian mysteries: incarnation, resurrection, and the promise of eternal life" (2003, 32).

For Dreyer, "the strength of the drama consists in its absurdity. Among other things, this is the purpose of art. Art must give us the truth of life in a strong, concentrated form. One of the truths that it can demonstrate and confirm to us is our certainty that the spirit is power, that the soul can be stronger than the flesh. [...] There is a condition for resurrection to take place. And this is that one knows that it can happen. Those who are intelligent know that it cannot happen. The unintelligent, the foolish, or children believe in the wondrous. This is why the wondrous can become reality [...] A crazy idea was conceived: resurrection from

the dead – and this idea is debated and carried out until it is finally carried out in the staging. All with great simplicity and realism" (Stender Clausen 1987, 32–33).

The core of the film is the unfathomable tension that places the man who approaches the event of death and the subsequent "scandalous" resurrection, in the shadow of doubt and bewilderment, deriving from Dreyer's decision to stage the miraculous dimension of a return to life without misunderstandings. In fact, "the director trimmed and radicalized the theatrical text; for example, Munk leaves ambiguously undecided whether Inger's death is true or apparent, Dreyer instead makes an unequivocal choice for the miracle" (Rocca 2004, 494; Perrelli 2020, 138–139). If it is possible to insist on the aesthetic dimension of the representation, underlining how the ambiguity of the question is such as not to allow us to be sure of how much belief determines what aesthetic pleasure is, it should nevertheless be noted that the director reaches a staging of such effectiveness in which "everything bends to a sublime and overwhelming emotional force, which penetrates and demolishes even the best-protected skepticism" (Le Fanu 2003, 32).

The film stages the question of faith, its presence or absence, in an environmental context that generates anguish (Solmi 1956, 67), in which "Inger's death does not come unexpectedly, but has the numinous sense of the event that comes to interrupt and fulfill life, realizing the hope of overcoming the hidden pain of things" (Tone 1978, 94).

The idea of anguish is built on a dialectic of opposites, grafted onto a discourse of fundamental contrasts: life and death, faith and doubt, immanence and transcendence. The dramatic tension that arises between these antithetical values of the spiritual dimension is rendered in a spasmodic and non-resolving way until the moment of the miracle. Although dark tones prevail, negative and always painfully annihilating notes, there is however a positive note that wants to be present in the scandalous possibility of the expected miracle, sought after and at the same time rejected by the logic of faith itself which has become a dogmatic–religious system (Montanari 1958, 55).

The Struggle to Believe

The characters are defined on the basis of their relationship with faith and the possibility that they accept the event in which the sacred is manifested. Old Borgen, embittered by life, no longer believes in miracles; Peter feels he is the bearer of a chosen faith but is unable to forgive; Mikkel has a materialistic attitude; lastly, Johannes, who has gone insane, believes himself to be Christ. On the other

side of this gallery of male characters are those who "seem completely refractory to faith or those who have always had it. On the one hand, Inger and her daughter Maren, who have always believed in a God capable of intervening "here and now." On the other, the pastor and, in part, the doctor, officials of a religion and a science who would like to share the care of body and soul, but who know nothing of that 'life' that Inger invokes at the end of the film" (Rocca 2004, 494).

The possibility of resurrection, which causes scandal and disbelief, places the film in a temporal dimension free from the urgency of the present, influencing its slow and hieratic narrative rhythm (Tone 1978, 92–93), showing the protagonists as the last survivors within a world in which "only the dying person – or whoever lives dead among the living dead – can have faith in the ultimate hope: a miracle" (Aristarco 1955, 173). The ministers of worship, Christians today, believe that miracles belong to a past time and can no longer happen today. In contrast to the dominant thought, Johannes makes the power of the Word current when – healed from his conviction of being Jesus – he approaches the coffin of his sister-in-law and asks Christ for the word that gives life to the dead (see Azalbert 2017, 85).

Aristarco notes that it is "surprising that in an age like ours – which is largely summed up in the name of Einstein – Dreyer assumes, so to speak, attitudes contrary to science in order to believe in the miracles of religion instead" (1955, 173), sustaining that "the lugubrious, mournful tone of *Ordet* and its sepulchral characters perhaps mean that only survivors can still be interested in a certain problem, a certain mysticism; that only the dying – or whoever lives dead among the living dead – can have faith in the ultimate hope: a miracle" (1955, 173). But faith and hope in the event that undermines the natural order of events is shown with polemical tones by the director, for whom "only the pure, Johannes or the daughter of the deceased, can communicate – and directly, without intermediaries – with God. Dreyer confirms his nature as a Protestant, and at the same time accuses the Christians of the different churches of no longer believing in the religion they profess" (Aristarco 1955, 173).

In open controversy with Aristarco, Dreyer claims not to have "rejected modern science for the miracle of religion. On the contrary, Kaj Munk's work has acquired a new and richer meaning for me, because the paradoxical thoughts and ideas expressed in the drama have been proven by recent psychic research carried out by pioneers such as Khine, Ouspensky, Dunne, Aldous Huxley, etc., whose theories explained in the simplest way the seemingly inexplicable events of the drama and established a natural cohesion behind the supernatural facts found in the film" (Montanari 1958, 54–55).

Therefore, religion does not replace science but the latter is understood as the tool capable of accounting for dimensions that go beyond the three-dimensional world, allowing us to "learn more about all that is divine." In this regard, the director notes that "Kaj Munk had the presentiment when he wrote his work in 1925, arguing that John is closer to God than the Christians who surround him" (Rasmussen 1955, 48). This leads to a complex relationship between faith, innocence, and agnosticism (Solmi 1956, 70).

The problematic posed is read by Maurice Drouzy in an ambiguous way, which leaves transcendence aside to propose a sort of positivism, in that "for Dreyer a miracle is a psychic phenomenon, a kind of telepathy. If we knew how to stem and channel these still unknown mental forces, we could cause a resurrection. In the same way the madman is not a man who has lost his reason but is instead ahead of it, and his desire, having reached a certain degree of incandescence, could become reality" (1990, 238).

The inability to understand the possibility of a miracle in the absence of faith is what arouses doubt, which reflects the inability to believe that is inherent in the characters themselves in the film, except for Johannes (the madman, an instrument of faith [Aristarco 1955, 173]) and Inger (the body in which the active potentiality of faith is made manifest [Rollet 1998, 72]).

Made by "a profoundly, radically materialist filmmaker, whose work tirelessly questions the enigma of the incarnation" (Rollet 1998, 71), *Ordet* stages the human, carnal dimension of faith and its contemporary leaning towards imperceptible presences that are actualized in the reality of the signs (Ayfre 1971, 139; Bazin 1987, 38).

Barthélemy Amengual, in opposition to a critical tradition that identifies Dreyer as a filmmaker who stages the interiority of the human soul, emphasizes the radical materialism of the Danish filmmaker, indicating that in his films "the soul, the spirit, are present, palpable, flagrant as the presence of stones and bodies" (1997, 640). However, this materialism is activated through a process of stylization, in which the action is situated in a context of religious beliefs, abstracting those elements from it that, in everyday reality, could put it into question. From this point of view, the resurrection at the end of *Ordet* (that of the mother passing through that of the son, returned from death or madness) is possible only insofar as the word finds a body and the image a place of origin (Amengual 1997, 642).

There is a strong material dimension also for Ayfre: "they [Dreyer's films] exist only to reveal imperceptible presences beyond the limits of our everyday world.

But these presences must ultimately be as real as the signs that serve to evoke them. Hence the constant concern of the creator – and here it is necessary to give the word its strongest meaning – to accentuate the reality of the signs. We are always faced with real scenes, with naked faces, with objects of extreme density, with profoundly human attitudes" (Ayfre 1971, 139, translated by the author).

Ordet stages not only the re-generating dimension of the word, but also its destructive side, with the tailor's curse from which Inger's death seems to follow. "But the word, at least that of the madman, of the one who makes a mistake and to whom no one wants to listen except a child, also has the power of resurrection. Then the word can take on bodily shape: that of the mother" (Rollet 1998, 70).

Contrary to what Amengual said, for whom with *Ordet* Dreyer made the only one of his films that requires a believing spectator (although nothing excludes the possibility of a scientific explanation of the resurrection), Derobert argues that the director primarily targets non-believers, "appealing to their reason, serenely affirming the transcendent character of Inger's resurrection" (1988, 108).

Between Faith, Innocence, and Agnosticism

The miracle in this sense, against a blind conception of the existence of God, is an act of faith that certifies that existence; it is neither a question of feeling the presence of the divine nor of acting in the light of a revelation. Instead, the miracle is established within a rational cause–effect relationship, since only the presence of God is able to explain it and therefore to justify faith in the impossible (Derobert 1988, 108).

Vaughn argues that the Kierkegardian leap of faith is necessary, in the absurdity of faith, which is what Munk requested. Anyone who wants to draw the same conclusions for Dreyer must take the miracle as factual (Vaughan 1974, 162). Johannes's reawakening is functional to the narrative dimension and to the creation of a dimension in which the miracle takes place in all its disruptive flagrance. This is because man's insanity could have represented a further otherness, a sort of realistic confirmation of faculties that go beyond the normal, and therefore "the resurrection of Inger would consequently have been weakened by its incredible subversive effectiveness" (Guerrini 2004, 159).

A dualistic process takes place between reason and faith, between the categories of Good and Evil, in a non-Manichean opposition in which the presence of Evil is absolute, pervasive, all-encompassing. Ayfre notes that in Dreyer's cinema "the innocent will always be persecuted, but with his failure not everything is

finished. His death is a resurrection. […] We are […] far from an American-style happy ending, where victory is easy and takes place immediately. Instead, with Dreyer, the victory of evil is very real, heavy and cruel. Jesus dies, Joan is burned like the witch of *Dies Irae*, Inger really dies. The ultimate victory is that of faith and not that of knowledge. It addresses the invisible. It is a victory that is both miracle and mystery until the end" (1971, 139).

Johannes, a man among men, is the intermediary through which the possibility of the miraculous event is given. His actions, calm and measured, act in a direction of concreteness proper to the act of faith. As Derobert pointed out, "resurrection is not the fruit of an evanescent spiritualism, but of an active reflection. What matters is the *act* of faith" (1988, 108). Dreyer's film therefore departs from the temptation to stage a faith that is imbued only with a tension towards asceticism and annihilation in something superior (spiritualism) to instead account for a vitalistic and regenerating power, which is able to act and restore Life even after death.

A faith which, however, is not placed out of time and which must be acted out concretely, consciously, and if necessary, in opposition to those and what surrounds us. In fact, "the capacity of faith as a saving awareness of one's own existence is the first characteristic highlighted by Dreyer's protagonist" (Guerrini 2009, 309) considered to be crazy because he claims the possibility of the impossible, that is, that miracles can still be worked. He is the center of the construction of the film as a model of the possibility of faith and the miracle is the visible instrument through which to make this possibility evident and acceptable. Evidence that goes beyond rational understanding, where "the resurrection of Inger is not primarily for herself, contrary to that of the evangelical Lazarus […]. The miracle is instrumental to Johannes's affirmation as a model of faith in God: without condemning anyone he judges implacably but, at the same time, with his exemplary action, he helps the desire of a human being who's more human by making a child's will his own" (Guerrini 2004, 161–162).

It is no coincidence that Drouzy identifies the emergence, within the dualist–oppositional dimension typical of Dreyerian cinema, of the presence of a third pole, represented by Johannes and Maren, the madman and the young girl. Unlike the other characters, defined on the basis of their ideological positions and the role they play within society, these two represent the world of the excluded and the rejected. Seeing as "after Inger's death, no one, and especially not those who profess to be believers, took into consideration the possibility of a miracle, of the unexpected. And instead, it is precisely the impossible that happens – and through two characters from whom we did not expect anything" (Drouzy 1990, 238).

Instead, the pastor is in line with the official position of the Danish church, which considers a miracle to be an event operated by Christ alone and in fact, Jean Sémoulé points out that one of the macro-differences between the film and the theatrical text lies in the fact that in the latter "the pastor denies that there was a miracle and the doctor condemns the incompetence of those who verified the death" (2004, 30).

According to another position – which can be summarized as the "pragmatist doctrine of a miracle" – miracles are nothing more than ordinary facts to which a symbolic meaning is granted. In contrast to these positions which are part of Protestant theological thinking, for Catholicism miracles are based on the promise made by Jesus that they would be continued in his Church (Mark, XVI, 17). These are therefore extraordinary facts but, postulating a divine intervention, they are possible and real. In *Ordet* the miracle, understood as a paradoxical event of the order of time, is not conceptually defined with the intention of understanding and accepting it, but is "recounted and respected in its embarrassing contradiction" (Modica 2001, 10). In the rational world, a miracle is the representation beyond all logic, of the act of faith and the possibility of penetrating the daily life of the completely Other, misrepresented by Johannes's madness. As Guerrini noted, in Dreyer's cinema there is "a real 'ontology' of the act of faith. [...] In fact for Dreyer, Johannes does not present distractions or feelings of guilt, he is the interpreter of authentic faith seen according to its aspect of 'madness' in relation to the world of everyday existence and seen as the reality of a single existing that acts by realizing something impossible. His faith is so focused that even when Inger's first attempt at resurrection fails, he affirms his identity with the Son of God" (2009, 310).

For Aristarco, "Dreyer argues that only faith, those who truly have faith – here in particular religious, mystical – can pursue and reach a concrete end. The thematic constancy is the thematic axis of the film" (1987, 133).

There is a relationship between faith, innocence, and agnosticism. The figure of the doctor is interesting from this point of view – when the pastor wants to stop Johannes whom he considers to be mad – he intervenes to preserve the possibility of the miracle. Dreyer summarizes the moral problems of the unbeliever in this character, whose doubt in the expectation of the possibility of the miraculous event first becomes desire, then hope, and finally becomes a shared observation of what is considered impossible, a witness to the scandal of the act of faith and the constancy of an oppressive uncertainty. In fact, according to Tavilla, the film's ending connects to a dimension of existential possibility, expanding the boundaries of Dreyer's realism, fostering a distressing sense of bewilderment and doubt, in that

"no approach to death among the many suggested, none of the opposing concepts of man expressed, none of the existential alternatives present at the same time, persuades the viewer. After all, the miracle does not constitute a certainty, but *the beginning of uncertainty*. In the Western tradition, resurrection, more than any other event, represents the fulfillment of eschatological fullness" (2007, 129).

The ministers of worship, Christians today, believe that miracles belong to a past time and can no longer happen today. "But then why still believe if it is not possible to believe in miracles? What is the point of repeating the words of the Gospels if one cannot fully adhere to them and make them one's own? Johannes makes the divine word actual, freeing it and making its power effective" (Azalbert 2017, 85) and he does so when – having recovered from his conviction of being Jesus – he approaches the coffin of his sister-in-law and asks Christ for the word that gives life to the dead.

Ayfre speaks of the need for the invention of a style fully capable of bringing into being, between the play of presence and that of the absence of the representation of the transcendent (Ayfre 1962, 123), the possibility of making the sacred arise and become manifest Ayfre 1962, 123–124). If the latter is defined and finds space in the ambiguity of reality, the latter is the place where a defeat is embodied that becomes victory. Inger's death testifies to a defeat of life, which, through the miraculous event, changes into a victory which is that of "faith and not knowledge. It addresses the invisible. It is a victory that is both miracle and mystery until the end" (Ayfre 1971, 139).

Like Bresson, Dreyer tries to reach the sacred through a process of extreme stylization that "allows them to make the hidden mystery they contain appear to be apparent. But the almost liturgical purity of these films, which for them becomes access to transcendence, does not neglect the needs of the incarnation. Only, it is not the case to look for it, especially here, in a vulgar naturalism, in a search for psychological or social verisimilitude, but rather in the precise choice of detail, objects, accessories, gestures, and extremely concrete noises" (Ayfre 1962, 125).

Dreyer conducts the film directly towards the representation of the event, with a construction that rigorously tends towards it. The stylization process works on the dimension of an atmospheric realism that purifies the most marked features of the latter, as do the *kammerspiel* influences (Solmi 1956, 66), an austere, harsh and puritanical realism with a dry prosaic style (Sémoulé 1962, 146). The stylistic dimension of opposition between the fully materialistic dimension and the temptation of the transcendent is highlighted by Drouzy, when he argues that

"Dreyer strives to make us understand that it is an exclusively 'horizontal' drama. Everything takes place close to the ground. No opening to the sky. No vertical panning throughout the film." His purpose is to "create a prison atmosphere, suggesting characters who live under its yoke, as if crushed by their context of life – as well as a symbol of the inner slavery to which they have been reduced by dogma and sectarianism" (1990, 238–239).

The process of purification of the images, spaces, gestures and psychologies leads to that process of splitting in which time is suspended: the event of the resurrection, the potential that becomes real through faith. By preparing the spectator for the unthinkable, indeed insisting on the denial that a miraculous event can materialize, "Dreyer takes the spectator by the hand and disintegrates all our reticences, all our defenses one by one and ends up responding to our deepest desire, which is to witness the impossible" (Azalbert 2017, 86).

In its failure to adhere perfectly to the Schraderian formulation of the transcendental style, *Ordet* therefore presents itself as a contradictory and elusive object like the theme it stages. On the one hand, with an essential and measured style, sober and that little indulges in sophisticated virtuosities, Dreyer wants to show how cinema can approach intangible dimensions, evoking them and making them perceptible by the viewer. On the other hand, once the completely Other has been evoked, the film withdraws from it. This reticence then raises another question: regardless of the style adopted, is there a limit of representation that cannot be crossed? The richness of Dreyer's cinema lies precisely in this unsolved attempt to represent the unrepresentable, with the awareness that a limit can be reached but cannot be overcome. Cinema evokes, does not show. Style is everything that allows to help evoke and suggest what cannot be represented and therefore the shot – understood as the smallest unit of meaning – must be deprived of all that is spurious, of all that can distract. The Dreyerian style to suggest the possibility of the Other is to tend to an "ideally" empty shot, ready to be invaded by the completely Other that it suggests.

Ordet stages this tension, this desire to reach beyond the limit without ever succeeding and in this never resolved tension lies the charm of the question – is a miracle possible? – which it continually proposes without giving a solution that satisfies us completely if not in abandonment to the Faith.

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Crisis Narrative and Affective Intermediality: Figuring Disaster in Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf*

Judit Pieldner

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Cluj-Napoca, Romania)
E-mail: pieldnerjudit@uni.sapientia.ro

Abstract. Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf* (*Le temps du loup*, 2003) depicts a grim vision of the world in the aftermath of an unnamed catastrophe. Haneke turns the genre of dystopia into an experimental terrain where he can test the limits of the cinematic medium in the sense of "negating cinema in order to let reality speak for itself" (Nagib 2016, 147). An existential parable, *Time of the Wolf* envisions a sombre post-millenium age. It is a sharp analysis of what remains of man and society when the frame of civilization collapses. It scrutinizes the functioning mechanisms of the individual, the family and the social community in times of civilization undone. A harsh experiment towards a negative dialectics of the image, the film's exceptionally austere cinematic language confronts the spectator with the aesthetics of the "unwatchable" (Baer et al., 2019) and "cinematic unpleasure" (Aston 2010). The paper explores the ways in which Haneke's "intermedial realism" (Rowe 2017) also manifests in this film through photo-filmic images and painterly compositions, perceptions of stillness and motion, and cultural remnants of the past, giving way to affective sensations of intermediality.[1]

Keywords: dystopia, decivilization, intermedial realism, epistemic and affective images.

Time of the Wolf as a Crisis Narrative

Born in the context of the post-9/11 global atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf* (*Le temps du loup*, 2003) figures among the dystopias that were recommended for watching by *The Atlantic* during the first lockdown in spring 2020. The film depicts a grim vision of the world in the aftermath of an unnamed catastrophe. Withdrawing information regarding the

cataclysm, the collectively experienced traumatic event that affects mankind, throws the spectator into a post-apocalyptic scenery *in medias res*, leaving room for the possibility of generalization and recontextualization, reverberating with today's global sense of impending doom. Haneke had kept the script, written in the early period of his cinematic career, in the drawer for long until he felt it topical to deal with in the shade of 9/11, the event that proved to be the first act of a long series of crises, including the 2008 financial crisis, the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, the terrorist attacks against the Western world, the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Brexit vote in 2016, the increasingly pervasive environmental crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine War, that have shaped the history of the 21st century. With *Time of the Wolf*, Haneke thus envisions a sombre post-millenium age, picturing a general state that György Kalmár words like this: "our time is that of shock, bewilderment, cognitive disorder, regressive escape from reality and the painful task of readjusting one's sense of normalcy year after year. Oftentimes, the general sentiment is that there is something wrong with the twenty-first century, this is not what history was meant to be, there is something awfully off" (Kalmár 2020, viii).

Michael Haneke's entire cinematic universe is related to crisis, to global crisis as well as to the crisis of the contemporary Western world, of European modernity. As Janina Falkowska suggests, "Haneke's films must be seen in the context of the recent history of Europe: the dissolution of the communist system, German unification, terrorism, mass migratory movements in Europe, and increasing homophobia and terrorist paranoia, as well as general globalization and unification trends within the new global economy and the Western world" (2014, 85). Falkowska highlights mourning and melancholia as both being reactions to loss, may it be a person, an abstraction or an ideal.

In his feature films made since the end of the 1980s, Haneke looks at the unstable pillars Western modernity and identity is built on and at what makes them vulnerable in terms of repressed individual and collective tensions, unprocessed conflicts and historical traumas. Haneke's films showcase apparently stable life patterns that drastically turn into liminal, existential situations due to some intrusion, unexpected invasion or unfolding tension. Haneke's main target is the middle-class, bourgeois family; he looks at what lies behind the carefully sustained balance and façade of the core unit of society. The first feature film of the Viennese-Parisian transnational filmmaker, *The Seventh Continent* (*Der siebente Kontinent*, 1989), having as its protagonists Georg, Anna and Eva – names that will repeatedly turn up in his later films, also in *Time of the Wolf*,

suggesting the intratextual connections among Haneke's films and showing protagonists as "everymen" in parable-like narratives –, depicts a grim picture of a family that unexpectedly commit collective suicide. In *Benny's Video* (1992) the parents discover traces of a murder committed by their son Benny on a video cassette recorder and then become accomplices by keeping silent and family life becoming a nightmare; *Code Unknown* (*Code inconnu*, 2001) builds up, on parallel threads, convoluted identity patterns against the backdrop of immigration, social insecurity and existential despair. In the same year, *The Piano Teacher* (*La pianiste*, 2001), the screen adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek's novel, was released, followed, in a chronological order, by *Time of the Wolf* (2003); not ranked among Haneke's best creations, *Time of the Wolf* carries further the theme of the collapse of the bourgeois family but dissolves it in the larger context of a community of survivors. An ingenious mind game film, *Hidden* (*Caché*, 2005) is yet another grim depiction of the implosion of the bourgeois family under the impact of some threatening video tapes of unknown origin, the threads leading to the protagonist Georges's adopted half-brother of Algerian origin and his son, and, through that, to issues of collective guilt and collective memory. "Michael Haneke likes to say that his films are easier to make than to watch," a reviewer writes (Conrad 2012). Haneke confronts the spectator with violence inherent in modern society, with historically grounded fears and uncertainties, through the violence of the image. Perhaps the most brutal confrontation is provided by *Funny Games* (2007), in which two gentlemanly behaving youngsters, Peter and Paul intrude in the holiday home in the picturesque Alps of a consolidated bourgeois family and exterminate them in the untroubled manner of playing a computer game. Another instance, *The White Ribbon* (*Das weiße Band – Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, 2009), devised in high-contrast black-and-white images and extreme long takes that is characteristic in general of Haneke's real-time cinema, takes the spectator back to the period before WWI, and shows the domestic tensions and anxieties of a previous generation that point at the roots of transgenerational trauma transmission. To wrap up the selection of Haneke's filmography, *Love* (*Amour*, 2012) is an austere depiction of the intimate relation between an ageing couple, compromised by the limitations posed by the failing body. Based on the above, Haneke's spectator can be sure that a title such as his 2017 *Happy End* can never be taken for granted but rather as yet another a flick at the high bourgeois shams evoking classical Hanekean themes of crisis such as "family dysfunction, inter-generational revenge, the poisonous suppression of guilt and the return of the repressed" (Bradshaw 2017). In the context of the Hanekean oeuvre, the dystopian

Time of the Wolf stands apart in offering the largest spectrum of crisis, examining human behaviour at the level of the individual, the family, and the social group interacting in the loose frame of disintegrated community bonds, in times of post-crisis, in the sense György Kalmár defines it, "not after crisis but rather as the time when the effects of critical breakdowns are played out" (2020, viii).

In-between Genre Film and Auteur Cinema

For connoisseurs of Haneke's cinematic "mind games" and "performative self-contradictions" (Elsaesser 2010),[2] the choice of a popular film genre, that of a post-apocalyptic movie, must be suspicious from the outset. As nothing stands more apart from the European arthouse film director than Hollywood genres and clichés, which Haneke formulates as a program in his writing entitled *Film als Katharsis*: "[My films] are intended as polemical statements against the American barrel-down cinema and its dis-empowerment of the spectator. They are an appeal for a cinema of insistent questions instead of quick (because false) answers, for clarifying distance in place of violating closeness, for concentration rather than distraction, for provocation and dialogue instead of consumption and consensus" (quoted in Frey 2010, 155). Haneke's dystopia rather draws on the European art-house tradition of post-apocalyptic cinema, most notably represented by Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957), Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (*Offret*, 1986) (cf. Torner 2010). Generically speaking, *Time of the Wolf* fits into the framework of apocalyptic reactions to 9/11, however, it goes much beyond this reference; besides, as this paper tries to demonstrate, Haneke opts for a dystopian narrative only to deconstruct it and defy expectations arising from the genre, which has been one reason for its being downrated by critics.

The connections with the genre of the dystopia may as well be placed in the context of his "performative self-contradictions," on the grounds that while adhering to its generic frame, Haneke also manifests his criticism towards it. Thus, unifying Tarkovskian powers of depicting scenery with Bressonian

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2   Borrowing the term "performative self-contradiction" from the philosopher Karl Otto Apel, Thomas Elsaesser applies it to the ambivalent epistemological stance underlying in Haneke's powerfully confrontational cinema: "Violence is bad for you, says the director who inflicts violence on me. But Haneke is also the control freak who likes to play games with chance and coincidence. Once formulated, the paradox becomes interesting, because it ties not only Haneke in knots, but also Haneke's critics, who risk putting themselves into a double bind, contradicting Haneke contradicting them" (2010, 56).

minimalism, Haneke turns the genre of cinematic dystopia into the material of an *auteur*, leaving his authorial signature both on its narrative and its style. It is not accidental that modernist filmmakers' names are hereby mentioned: Haneke turns up in the post-media scene as an almost anachronistic descendant of modernism, but one who also "plays" the modernist and sets its aesthetic principles against the contemporary context. In a 2012 study on Haneke's *Caché*, I tried to grab Haneke's intermediary status as follows: "Haneke's position is, nevertheless, much more problematic and slippery than simply being labeled as a postmedia-age filmmaker. If we regard his affinities with philosophical and cinematic modernism, his influences such as Robert Bresson, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky, his professional attitude reminding of modernist *auteurism*, then he seems to be rightfully considered as (one of) the last modernist(s). But once these affinities and attitudes are viewed as consciously assumed performative games, we are nowhere else but in the wide field of the postmodernist aesthetics of pastiche and games" (Pieldner 2012, 185).

Modernist connections are already suggested in the title: Haneke's film shares with Ingmar Bergman's 1968 psychological horror film *Hour of the Wolf* (*Vargtimmen*) the Ragnarök reference,[3] the title being a quote from Völuspá, the opening poem of the Edda. Bergman translates the mythical reference into a personal, psychological interpretation of one's deepest fears and anxieties; Haneke's film is also reticent about disclosing any further connections with the myth, displaying a more widely interpretable existential space which Kate Ince defines as one that "has 'atmosphere,' resonates with past happenings, and thrills with the possibility of future ones" and demonstrates as being "crucial to the atmosphere of anxiety and tension generated throughout Haneke's cinema – the pervasive questioning, uncertainty and fear that have become his trademark" (2011, 86).

Depicting the Decivilizing Process

Time of the Wolf is an existential parable, a sharp analysis of what remains of man, family and society when the frame of civilization, including laws, morals and values such as democracy, human rights and dignity, suddenly collapses, and fear and uncertainty become dominant. It scrutinizes the functioning mechanisms of the individual, the family and the social community in times of

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3   The last battle fought between the gods and the giants in the Skandinavian mythology, which ends with the destruction of almost the entire world. The ancient phrase "hour of the wolf" speaks for itself, suggesting a post-apocalyptic scenery when humans are degraded into animals.

civilization undone, the process of decivilizing or dyscivilizing whose emergence the German sociologist Norbert Elias describes like this: "The armour of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today" (2000, 523, quoted in Kınlı 2017, 34).

In *Time of the Wolf*, Haneke considers such a scenario of post-crisis regression, when processes take a downward trend. The original opening of the script has been removed, thus only the effects of some unknown catastrophe are imparted to the viewer, that cities have become uninhabitable, there is no electricity and the water is contaminated. The opening episode shows the Laurents, a middle-class family arriving at their weekend cottage; they are shocked to discover that the house has been occupied by a vagrant family. After a failed attempt of negotiating the situation, the foreigner shoots the father, Georges. The mutilated, fatherless family, Anna and her children, Eva and Ben, are compelled to seek shelter elsewhere. They are welcomed by no one in the nearby village and thus spend the night in a barn – a scene shown in pitch-dark images – where, after Ben's pet bird is accidentally killed and ritually buried, the boy gets lost in the darkness. Mother and daughter try to keep the fire on to provide a spot of light for Ben to return, but Eva loses control of the fire, accidentally setting the barn aflame. Ben appears only in the morning; he has been held captive by a Romanian runaway youngster who informs them on the ongoing barter trade. The four of them set out on a journey together, across devastated scenery, seeing corpses of burnt horses and of a shepherd whose clothes they put on, then a train passes next to them with other refugees on, but they cannot stop it. They arrive at a railway depot, where they come across a rudimentary community of survivors desperately waiting for a train to stop [Fig. 1]. There is no schedule, it is totally unpredictable when the next train comes and if it does, whether it will stop or not. The rest of the episodes take place at the railway depot and show post-crisis community life based on insecurity, fight for a palm-sized spot, barter economy, self-imposed leadership, competition and violence. The act of waiting might as well outline a cinematic alternative to the Beckettian absurd; Haneke portrays an absurd life situation but in a less witty and tragicomic, much rather a cruel and confrontational manner, whereby the spectator is involved in the ghetto-life of the railway station and is constrained to adapt, together with the protagonists, to the given conditions. Without the perspective of mobility, the normal course of life comes to a halt, and social coexistence undergoes profound transformations.

The film is exemplary in depicting the end of civilization. In this respect, it carries an inherent epistemic potentiality and may nourish scientific research beyond the scope of film studies. An analysis of the film carried out by İrem Özgören Kınlı (2017) from the perspective of figurational sociology[4] sheds light on Haneke's scenario of deconstructing civilization, on the structural changes, changes in social conduct and emerging modes of knowledge in the time of crisis that are displayed in *Time of the Wolf*. This analysis from the perspective of figurational sociology is very helpful in understanding the chaotic social interactions that the film displays and, at the same time, how precisely Haneke depicts the reverse mechanism of dyscivilization. Kınlı's figurational analysis of the film looks at: 1. changes in the pattern of cooperation and competition; 2. we–I balance between established and outsider groups; 3. transformations in the control of nature, in social controls and in self-controls; 4. changes in modes of knowledge and the balance of involvement and detachment. In terms of changes in the pattern of cooperation and competition, the author points out how, in Haneke's film, the weakening of the central state's authority brings along the lessening of chains of social interdependence. This manifests in a highly competitive environment and the refusal of mutual assistance; the desire to possess poses a threat to cooperation. As concerns the we versus I balance between established and outsider groups, the article points out how in times of crisis the balance inclines towards the group since at lower stages of development the individual depends more on the group. By setting the Romanian runaway boy's individual strategies of survival against the group living in the ghetto of the railway depot, the film models two alternatives of subsistence and shows the superiority of the group and the exposedness of the individual (they accuse the boy of theft and chase him; only Eva keeps in contact with the boy and shows solidarity with him) [Figs. 2–3]. Within groups, the film also contrasts the established group – those arriving earlier at the depot having more rights and possessing more information – and the newcomers – those coming later have to fight their way into the larger group and are exposed to conflict and racial discrimination. The deepest point of the narrative is when a group of newcomers arrive at the depot and Anna faces the murderer of her husband but has no means to prove the murder. From the perspective of transformations in the control of nature, in social controls and in self-controls, the post-crisis scenario shows loss of control in all aspects (a suggestive example is how Eva

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4   Figurational sociology is a research trend in sociology in which figurations of humans – evolving networks of interdependent humans – constitute the focus of investigation.

loses control of the fire which thus turns from protective to destructive force). At the same time, the loss of control over greater forces and structures brings along compensatory attempts at regaining control over smaller structures and weaker individuals. The survivors struggle to exercise control over each other, regularly manifested in form of manipulation, abuse, fight and rape. And finally, as regards changes in modes of knowledge and the balance of involvement and detachment, Kınlı's analysis points out how detachment proves to be a better strategy of survival in times of crisis than involvement: those who accept the primitive conditions with relative emotional detachment and surrender to the logic of barter economy, have better chances of survival than those who cannot overcome emotionally and commit suicide as in the case of a young girl. According to Kınlı, Haneke's film is exemplary in showing how myths and the desire for transcendence emerge in times of crisis.

"Crises precipitate a meaning deficit by disrupting the processes and patterns of sense making […] There is a need, therefore, to tell stories and offer accounts and explanations to reduce the uncertainty and find perspective and create or recreate meaning" (Seeger and Sellnow 2016, 11). Along fits of rage and clashes of racism, sporadic gestures of solidarity emerge and the myth of the Thirty-Six Just starts to spread about the saviors of humanity; when one of them dies, another is born. Ben, who has become muted by the series of experienced traumas, hears the story and decides to become one of them, and in order to save the world by self-immolation, he makes a fire on the rails. He is saved from self-sacrifice by Fred, who has killed his father. With a sudden cut that, again, withdraws any narrative causality, the final scene seems almost supernatural and in stark contrast with the entire undoing and immobility that we got used to in the course of the film: for more than two minutes, we can see the image of the landscape passing by from the perspective of a mobile train, while nothing is known about how the train has stopped, who has boarded on it and what its destination is.

The Crisis of the Image

In *Time of the Wolf*, the representation of crisis is rendered, at its best, through the crisis of representation. Crisis is simultaneously present at the level of both the theme and the style. Watching a film by Haneke is, without exception, a harsh experience; *Time of the Wolf* is, in particular, "a film that perfectly foils the escapism of the eye and mind" (Torner 2010, 548). In what follows, my analysis focuses on the ways in which the crisis of representation, the intended implosion

of image, relates to intermediality as visual excess, and describes the effects resulting from the tension underlying in these apparently divergent tendencies.

With a radical gesture that evokes the entropic postmodern (both in literature and cinema), whereby rendering a chaotic world takes place in a chaotic form, Haneke's cinematic disaster discourse undoes civilization via undoing the image itself. The viewers have to find their way out through images of pitch-darkness; Haneke uses no artificial lighting and seems to renounce the high aesthetic that results in glossy, glamorous, saturated images, which he used in *The White Ribbon*, abounding in poignant black-and-white photofilmic images. In setting up a dystopian scenery, Haneke strives to be as "real" as possible, apparently avoiding anything that goes in the direction of smooth arrangement in terms of narrative or style. This is the way in which the violence of the image[5] manifests here, via an exceptionally austere cinematic language which may stand in stark contrast with the rich intermedial connections that Haneke's films generally abound in.

As Christopher Rowe points out, Haneke's intermediality is profoundly connected with the representation of the real.[6] With reference to Haneke's films, he connects "intermediality" and "reality" by coining the term "intermedial realism" as Haneke's access to the crisis of contemporary life. According to Rowe, "intermedial realism suggests that 'this world' can no longer be defined without making recourse to the audiovisual media that structure our perceptual and affective apprehension of it, and to the transformations these media effect on sensation itself. A new and necessary mode of realism, a Hanekean realism is thus uncovered by an intermedial cinema that expresses the profoundly fractured and mediated reality of contemporary life" (2017, 209). By the title of the book, *The Intermedial Void*, Rowe suggests the tensions and disjunctions between film and other media. Haneke's aesthetic sustains and makes emphatic "performative contradictions" through convoluted media representations of reality. "In Haneke's strategy of medial fragmentation, cinema does not come to 'represent,' 'deconstruct' or otherwise implicitly master other media, but rather to establish irresolvable spatiotemporal discontinuities between these forms of expression, producing mimetically fractured yet profoundly affective and evocative images of thought" (Rowe 2017, 11).

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5   In other films by Haneke, most conspicuously in *Funny Games*, the violence of the image, the "reinvestment of the shock value in the image" (Grønstad 2012, 14) can be encountered in the form of extended exposedness to painful images by means of long takes.

6   Christopher Rowe's volume entitled *Michael Haneke: The Intermedial Void*, published in 2017, is a remarkable achievement in intermediality studies as it discusses an entire directorial oeuvre from this vantage point.

At first glance, *Time of the Wolf* seems to stand apart from this aesthetic. Yet, I regard this film as an experiment with the limits of representation, with the degree to which the cinematic image can be itself "decivilized," as an inquiry into whether it can be totally deprived of the (inter)medial traces in a downward process towards a negative dialectics of the image. In short, whether film can do without the excess of what elevates, what transcends the image and what can make it pleasurable for the eyes. By conveying a liminal experience of the "real," Haneke challenges the spectator with the aesthetics of the "unwatchable" (Baer et al. 2019) and "cinematic unpleasure" (Aston 2010). *Time of the Wolf* is an instance of non-cinema, a gesture of "negating cinema in order to let reality speak for itself" (Nagib 2016, 147). The "decivilizing process" of the image operates with signifiers, remnants of the past whose code is unknown – to allude to another film by Haneke, *Code inconnu*. While we hear in voice-over the voice of the girl writing a letter to her dead father, her voice is accompanied by static, photo-filmic images created in the in-betweenness of photography and film. The scene thus turns into an aestheticized rendering of the delapidated scenery, contrasting the calmness of nature with the building interior showing human traces, erstwhile household utensils, photographs, fragments of documents, postcards pinned onto the wall, evoking the olden times of normalcy [Figs. 4–5]. These are visual signifiers, cultural codes, indexes of the past that grab the eye through their imageness and arrestedness. The static images suggest that time has come to a halt, the mobility of life has turned into immobility, inertia and lethargy.

Among them, a simple drawing that is actually part of Albrecht Dürer's *Dream Vision* (1525, Kunsthistorishes Museum, Vienna) turns up, almost unnoticed, a watercolour on paper of a landscape with trees, columns of water pouring down from heavens [Fig. 6]. The original drawing is accompanied by a handwritten text by Dürer [Fig. 7], in which he confesses that he made the drawing after a dream that he had: "in 1525, during the night between Wednesday and Thursday after Whitsuntide, I had this vision in my sleep, and saw how many great waters fell from heaven. The first struck the ground about four miles away from me with such a terrible force, enormous noise and splashing that it drowned the entire countryside. I was so greatly shocked at this that I awoke before the cloudburst. And the ensuing downpour was huge. Some of the waters fell some distance away and some close by. And they came from such a height that they seemed to fall at an equally slow pace. But the very first water that hit the ground so suddenly had fallen at such velocity, and was accompanied by wind and roaring so frightening, that when I awoke my whole body trembled and I could not

recover for a long time. When I arose in the morning, I painted the above as I had seen it. May the Lord turn all things to the best."[7] It is regarded as the first faithful painterly representation of a dream, born in times of religious precariousness brought along by the birth of Reformation and marked by a general fear that a flood would put an end to the world. The plain, sketchy drawing in watercolour remarkably stands in opposition with representational conventions of the time, just as Haneke's minimalist visionary realism stands in opposition with cinematic representational conventions of post-apocalypse. Thus, the unexpected painterly reference may be regarded as a moment of visual excess, an instance of intermediality as it transposes its media properties onto the medium of the film.

The ghetto life at the railway depot is characterized by a general stasis and inertia. However, together with the emergence of gestures of solidarity – a totally unexpected and "disruptive" behaviour in the context of the depicted decivilizing process – static images also appear when the camera becomes compassionate and pans the survivors one by one, grabbed in photofilmic arrestedness and chiaroscuro painterly compositions reminding of Georges de La Tour's paintings [Fig. 8]. In this manner, the film signals the desire for transcendence inherent in the human being that manifests at the level of the images themselves. Thus, intermediality finds a way and "breaks in," counterpointing the "unwatchable" with the poetic and the pleasurable. Concomitantly, intermediality re-fills the moving image with an affective and sensual quality.

The greatest change is introduced by the final scene of the film, which contains mobile images recorded as if viewed from the inside of a moving train. After prior images of cargo trains that do not stop, the much-awaited train is suggested to have finally arrived, most probably due to Ben's commitment to sacrifice and the fire made on the rails. However, a lot of questions emerge: where is the train coming from and where is it heading to? Where is the place of salvation if the entire living space is contaminated after the catastrophe? Is there any perspective of "re-civilization"? There is no supportive information in this regard. Yet, with Ben's symbolic performance – a gesture of individual responsibility –, accompanied by Fred's compassion – a gesture of care for the other – the potential of community salvation sets in, opening up the way for a slight sensation of hope.

After the grim representation of stagnation at the depot, the motion provided by the train journey is cathartic. It is a two-minute scene of the landscape passing by and the sound of the train [Fig. 9]. It is non-human, what is more, post-human, as the medium of motion interacts with the spectacle without any reference to

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7   *https://www.wga.hu/html_m/d/durer/2/16/2/12dream.html.* Last accessed 18. 06. 2022.

the possessor of the gaze. The alluring view of the supposedly contaminated landscape creates a sensation of the uncanny, the unbridled desire to regain the lost sense of the natural. It seems as if the entire prior state of immobility had prepared the single moment when, together with the protagonists' retrieved possibility of motion, the moving image itself were re-born, also literally, as an affective, "moving" image.

The train is essentially conjoined with the moving image. In this way, Haneke carries out a reverse media archaeology, leads the viewer back to early cinema by reconnecting to the first moving images of the *Arrival of a Train* (*L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat*, 1896) by the Lumière brothers. Despite the significant difference in the representation of the train, with its passengers situated outside vs inside the train, waiting for the train and travelling by it respectively, the Hanekean rendering of the train motif may be regarded as a film-historical reference [Figs. 10–11]. A closer association to a rail journey in a post-apocalyptic scenery, showing the landscape of the Zone from the perspective of the railcar passengers, may be Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) [Fig. 12], while strikingly similar snapshots may also be discovered in Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1956), a documentary recorded on the site of the former concentration camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek, a timeless memento of the Holocaust [Figs. 13–14]. The idea of salvation associated with the train as a cultural code remnant of the 20th century, a visual signifier of the Holocaust, provides an uncanny experience. In this way, the long take exerts effect on the viewer as an ethically loaded sequence, an unsettling lead into post-civilization as a future that folds back onto the past.

Conclusions

Haneke's rendering of ghetto life and train transport, albeit in an indirect way, reconnects to the representations of the Holocaust and thus leaves the ending open, counterpointing relief with traumatic historical memories, suggesting that the moving images can no longer be innocent and are condensed as a constantly re-emerging ethical burden in the spectatorial experience. As the Hungarian experimental filmmaker, András Jeles said, "Auschwitz has always been and will never pass" (2007, 10). However, irrespective of the interpretation conferred to the final sequence, mobility in itself is relieving and there is no better moment to have this visceral experience than at the advent of the Virocene, when our perception of the naturalness of motion, our social interactions and our place in the world have been profoundly affected. A universal parable of the doom

of civilization and the chances of regeneration, Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf* is a rethinking of the genre within art-house cinema in general and the Hanekean aesthetic in particular. Its re-reading in the context of the current global crisis has tried to point at multiple sensations of in-betweenness granted by the film experience: between cinema and non-cinema, the unwatchable and the pleasurable, the epistemic and the affective, the real and the intermedial.

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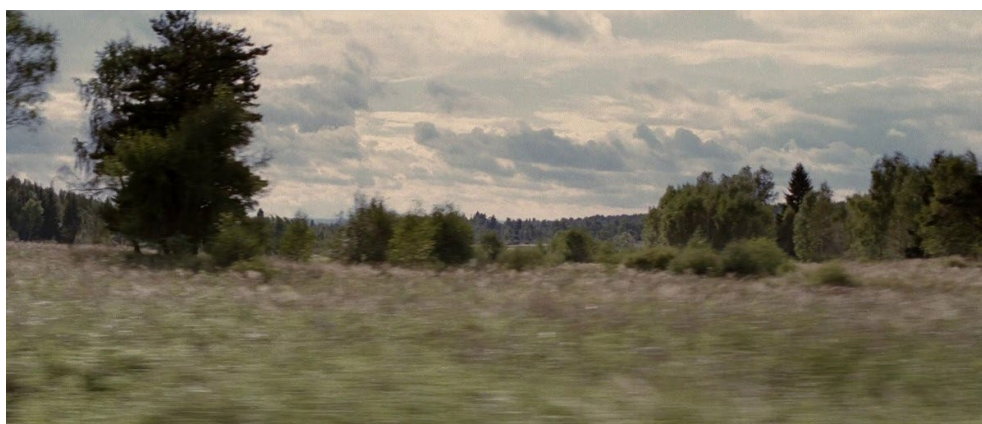
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Cinema from the End of Time: *Malmkrog* by Cristi Puiu and Vladimir Solovyov

Christina Stojanova
University of Regina (Canada)
E-mail: Christina.Stojanova@uregina.ca

Abstract. Arguably Cristi Puiu's most intricate film so far, *Malmkrog* (2020) comprises nearly three and a half hours of intense discussions about some of the most pertinent questions of our times since the Industrial Revolution – about the ethics of war and progress, the inevitable end of history, and the elusive nature of Good and Evil – posited by the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir S. Solovyov in his seminal book *War, Progress, and the End of History* (subtitled *Three Conversations Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ*) and published in 1899. The article looks at the screen rendition of Solovyov's three dominant discourses – statist-militarist, bourgeois-liberal, and religious-philosophical – through the grid of *katechon* (or "that which restrains") in its Biblical, and above all, in its political philosophic meaning (following Carl Schmitt, Georgio Agamben and Sergei Prozorov). Furthermore, by introducing the concept of intermedial *katechon*, the article argues that while Puiu's audio-visual rendition remains congenially faithful to the original, it transcends its allusions to the tragic 20th century, and illuminates our murky times of ubiquitous (bio-)political, social, intellectual, and above all ethical angst.

Keywords: *katechon*, Anti-Christ, anomie, Tolstoy and Tolstoyanism, bare life.

> "Nikolai: In any event, it is clear that the negative increases with the positive. The sum tends toward zero." (*Malmkrog*)

Arguably Cristi Puiu's most intricate film so far, *Malmkrog* (2020) comprises nearly three-and-a-half hours of intense discussions about some of the most pertinent questions of our times since the Industrial Revolution – about the ethics of war and progress, the inevitable end of history, and about the elusive nature of Good and Evil – posited by the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyov at the closing of the 19th century. It is difficult to think of a handful of filmmakers who would be interested in Solovyov's prophetic prose, and of even fewer who would be successful in pulling off its screen adaptation. Which makes Puiu's screen rendition

of *War, Progress, and the End of History* (subtitled *Three Conversations Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ* and published in 1899, one year before the author's death), nothing short of congenial since it not only remains faithful to the original, but transcends its allusions to the tragic 20th century, and illuminates our murky times of paramount angst – medical, social, political, but, above all, ethical.

My interest in this film was sparked by the way it develops two major themes – the conjunction of ethics and aesthetics, and the phenomenology of evil – which in my view have been ingeniously tackled by the New Romanian Cinema, and on which I have devoted a few publications since the early years of the millennium (2013, 2016, 2019b). These themes have also inspired me to describe the unique cinematic phenomenon of New Romanian Cinema as existentialist realist, where "austere aesthetics […] reinforced by its archetypal narrative structures, brings together contents, minimalist form, and ethics into a compact philosophical entity, comparable to the philosophical propositions of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which he also described as 'pictures of reality'" (Stojanova 2019a, 12). Most importantly, however, the existentialist realism of New Romanian Cinema is "not only a philosophy and an aesthetic approach," but also "a way of life for its directors" who, in the words of Søren Kierkegaard, find in their work "'a truth that is true for [them]. . . the idea for which [they] can live or die'" (Stojanova 2019a, 12).

The powerful ethical-aesthetic congruity of Cristi Puiu's works has predetermined his formative influence on the movement and its Existentialist Realist aesthetic to a great extent. Of particular importance is the theme of death at the heart of his oeuvre, and the way Puiu sees it played out in a society that, albeit officially atheist, is deeply gnostic, and thus intimately interested in the interplay of Good and Evil as independent Manichean forces of equal standing rather than in Christian terms as the confrontation between Good, identified with God, and Evil, which is merely the absence of the Good. As Mircea Eliade, the renowned Romanian cultural anthropologist states, "the Balkan peninsula is both a crossroad and a zone of conservatism in which the arrival of a wave of higher culture does not necessarily dissolve and obliterate the earlier form of culture simply by its success" (1972, 160). It is therefore understandable why besides Puiu – and Sinişa Dragin before him – an increasing number of New Romanian Cinema directors[1] offer fascinating interpretations of Evil on screen, interlaced with oblique references to the Antichrist.[2]

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1   E.g. Gabriel Achim in *The Last Day* (*Ultima zi*, 2016), Bogdan Mirică in *Dogs* (*Câini*, 2016), Marian Crişan in *Horizon* (*Orizont*, 2015), Constantin Popescu in *Pororoca* (2017). For more on the topic, see Stojanova 2019b.

2   Curiously enough, the promotional text for Achim's *The Last Day*, quoted on the film's IMDB

The Christian *Katechon* of the Gospel

Yet for Solovyov – and for Puiu – Anti-Christ is of a different magnitude; unlike Christ, he is not an incarnate abstraction, and mythological entities like Lucifer, or Beelzebub do little to capture his omnipresent, yet elusive presence which, if personified, would be hardly discernible from the rest of us. For as Nikolai – the screen version of Solovyov's original stand-in, Mr. Z, and principal moderator of the *Three Conversations* – warns us at the very end of the film, "in ecclesiastical literature, we find only his passport, with his distinguishing marks,"[3] but nothing about his individuality. He then leaves his companions, promising to soon return with the manuscript by a certain monk, called Pansophius (or the "all-wise"), which would reveal the true nature of the Anti-Christ. And although he never comes back – Puiu leaves it up to us to seek out and read the perilously genuine *Short Story of the Anti-Christ*, the epilogue of *War, Progress, and the End of History* – Nikolai's closing announcement throws in high relief all references to the Anti-Christ (seven, to be precise) throughout the film. Furthermore, these references link the book – and the film – to St. Paul's *Second Letter to the Thessalonians* (or *2 Thessalonians 2*),[4] and its warnings against the plan of the Anti-Christ to "make people wrong," i.e., to bring them to a state of *anomie*.[5] Albeit the Letter – being mostly preoccupied with the *exposure* of the Anti-Crist – never identifies him by name (Ἀντίχριστος)[6], but calls him "man of lawlessness," "man of Evil,"

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website, reads: "The devil used to tempt people, nowadays he doesn't even bother. He just shows them the way and wishes them 'safe journey!'"

3   Direct citations from Solovyov's book are identified throughout the text, all rest are from the transcribed English subtitles of the film.

4   "3 Do not let anyone fool you in any way. Before the day of the Lord comes, many people will stop believing God (*Apostasy*). The Man of Evil [*the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition*] will be seen […]. 4 He will put himself against God. He will put himself above everything to do with God, and above everything that people worship. He will sit in God's holy place and tell people that he is God […]. 6 And you know what is holding that evil man back. He will not be seen until it is his time to be seen. 7 The plan to make people wrong (*anomie*) has already begun to work. But someone is holding back that plan (*ho katechon*). He will stop the law-breaker for a time. 8 Then that evil man will be seen. The Lord Jesus will kill him with the breath from his mouth. The coming of the Lord Jesus will be so bright and wonderful that it will put the evil man to an end (*Parousia*)." 2 Thessalonians 2, from *Worldwide English (New Testament) (WE)*, *https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Worldwide-English-New-Testament-WE/*. Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

5   In a sociological sense, *anomie* is described by Émile Durkheim as "instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals." See: *https://www.britannica.com/topic/anomie*. Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

6   The idea of the Anti-Christ (singular and plural) is derived from the First and Second Epistles of John, where it is employed to designate "those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (2 John 1:7) and whoever "denies the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22), making

and "son of perdition" – it speaks for the first time about the fateful role of the *katechon* as the sole restrainer (in Greek: *τὸ κατέχον*) of his actions. According to the Letter, the *katechon* is "what is holding that evil man" – and his rebellion or Apostasy (apostasía / *ἀποστασία*) – "back," preventing his plan from coming to pass. Yet in doing so, the *Katechon* also prevents the Anti-Christ from being exposed, that is, from being seen for what he is, and killed by Lord Jesus, and therefore simultaneously impeding the "bright and wonderful" Second Coming of Christ (or the *Parousia / παρουσία*).

St. Paul's Letter gives preferences to euphemisms, foregrounding the devastating socio-political effects of *anomie* – normlessness or lawlessness. Due to what political thinker Sergei Prozorov (2012, 489) calls "extreme political intensity," the Letter has been defined as "one of the foundational texts of the Western political tradition," despite reservations, calling for treating it only "as an obscure" passage in an ancient church epistle, which could hardly play any role in our secular contemporary politics.

The Secular *Katechon* of Schmitt and Agamben

The paradoxical duality of the *katechon* as both restrainer (of evil) and preventer (of good), accounts for the longevity of this eschatological metaphor in modern and postmodern social and political thought, which secularized – or rather neutralized – the term by the early twentieth century. One of the most prominent places among the *katechon* secularizers belongs to Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), a follower of Thomas Hobbes[7] and German political economist, who equates Pauline's *katechon* with the (Christian) Capitalist State as the sole restrainer of the forces of social *anomie*, and protector of the bourgeoisie (or the citizenry) against descending into the Hobbesian "state of nature" and "war of everyone against everyone else." Thus in its "neutral and general sense the katechon refers to any constituted authority" which – while "delaying the social catastrophe" – also "simultaneously withholds a radical redemption from it" (Prozorov 2012, 487).

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them unbelievers in the Christian revelation and therefore also candidates for Antichrist status. According to the Revelation of St. John, an apocalyptic catastrophe would bring the era of Christ to a dramatic end, signalling the triumph of Antichrist as reincarnation of Satan.

7   Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was an English philosopher, considered the central figure in the secularization of the *katechon* for "his theory of sovereignty seeks precisely to ward off the anomic catastrophe of war of every man against every man […] whose potentiality is inscribed in the state of nature" (Prozorov 2012, 487).

The neutralization (or secularization) of the *katechon* was further developed by the Italian social-religious philosopher Giorgio Agamben, notable representative of the so-called "messianic turn" of the postmodern thought, epitomized by such diverse figures like Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, and Zygmunt Bauman. Building on Schmitt, but mostly on Thomas Hobbes – Agamben goes on to claim that the "covenant" of the modern democratic state with its subjects or citizenry, "is void," since "the subject is simultaneously abandoned *by* the sovereign, i.e. left without his protection, and abandoned *to* the sovereign's unlimited exercise of violence" (italics in the original, qtd. in Prozorov 2012, 487). If in Schmitt's understanding "the secularized katechon is legitimized as the only force that wards off the natural *anomie* and the end of the social order as we know it," Agamben "suggests that the katechon is the Anti-Christ that perpetuates its reign by concealing the fact of its long having arrived and pretending to be the 'lesser evil,' to ward off its own advent" (Prozorov 2012, 487). In Agamben's understanding then, "the idea of the katechon is an insidious device, by which 'substantially illegitimate,' anomic power perpetuates its reign, diverting the quest for redemption to the preoccupation with protection against the 'greater evil'" (Prozorov 2012, 487). In other words, because of its preoccupation with bio-politics, meant to restrain "the natural state" – that is, human nature – the modern democratic state reduces its subject to *homo sacer*[8] in a state of "bare life,"[9] and is therefore no *katechon*, but the Anti-Christ, the evil incarnate itself, paving the shortest cut from democracy to totalitarianism.[10]

8　According to Agamben, *Homo Sacer* is, a "paradoxical figure […] one who may not be sacrificed, yet may be murdered with impunity." See: *A Dictionary of Critical Theory https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095943431*. Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

9　A term Agamben created, according to *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, by merging the "two different words… ancient Greeks had for what in contemporary European languages is simply referred to as 'life': *bios* (the form or manner in which life is lived) and *zoē* (the biological fact of life)." His argument is "that the loss of this distinction obscures the fact that in a political context, the word 'life' refers more or less exclusively to the biological dimension or *zoē* and implies no guarantees about the quality of the life lived." *https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095446660.* Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

10　An intriguing take on the political-religious dimensions of the *katechon* is offered by British political scientist David G. Lewis in his recently published and very relevant book in light of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (2020). Among others, the author (2020, 211) links contemporary Russian politics to Solovyov's critique of Slavophilism as a form of Russian messianism, and subjects to heavy criticism the ultraconservative ideas of New Eurasianism, propounded by Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, and particularly the way he relates them to Carl Schmitt's understanding of the *katechon* (2020, 193–215).

Puiu's Intermedial *Katechon*: Summary

Bearing in mind the rich epistemic potential of the concept, which implies the complexity of any struggle for restriction of chaos, this paper introduces the notion of an intermedial *katechon*, entailing sophisticated narrative and audio-visual artistic approaches, designed to preserve the authenticity of Solovyov's ideas with their prophetic urgency from being diluted into the mire of postmodern philosophical relativity, where "everything could be otherwise" as Ludwig Wittgenstein has cautioned us in Proposition 5.634 of his *Tractatus*.[11]

In adapting Solovyov's book, Puiu has brought it closer to our current realities by making it palatable without affecting its original meaning and wording, which in itself is a tremendous feat. It is this unique artistic brilliance – equally successful in critiquing, even ironizing Solovyov's ideas while endorsing them; in historicizing while also contemporizing them; and ultimately in entertaining while educating us – which I have defined as Puiu's intermedial *katechon*. Intermedial, because he uses audio-visual techniques, borrowed from paintings, theatre, cinema, widely different musical genres and multi-layered sound montage, not to mention structural borrowings from philosophical dialogues. And *katechon*, because the resultant fluid artistic and discursive *heteroglossia* allows competing media and meanings to reinforce each other in vying for the viewers' attention, yet to simultaneously keep the viewers focused on the ideas discussed by ingeniously warding off attempts at their resolution or vulgarization.

Puiu's intermedial *katechon* is thus instrumental in the screen rendition of Solovyov's three dominant discourses – statist-militarist, bourgeois-liberal, and religious-philosophical – focused respectively on the contradictory role of the (Russian imperial) State; on (pan) European civilization; and on (Christian Orthodox) religious beliefs in the eternal struggle of Good vs Evil. What is more, by designing the *mise-en-scène* of the debates as a succession of *tableaux vivants*, seeped in warm dark colours and shot by Tudor Vladimir Panduru in panopticon-like manner, Puiu tampers the crudeness of cinematic realism, transposing the action to an alien, yet canny realm. The captivating visuals thus lay bare the social sterility and political limitations, which have affected such crucial philosophical discourses then, at the end of the 19th century. And at the same time compellingly demand from us to confront these discourses in their

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11   According to the proposition, if there is no "part of our experience that is a priori," then "everything we see could also be otherwise" and "everything we describe at all could also be otherwise" (Wittgenstein [1922] 2015, 87–88).

new apparition, recognize the pressing need to relate to them, and debate their relevance to our day and time.

In this line of thought, the intermedial *katechon* permits Puiu to offer an aesthetic equivalent of Solovyov's ideas and – via the rich *heteroglossia* – bring into high relief the paradox of the freedom of choice – one of the fundamental tenets of his philosophy. By presenting Solovyov's text as prudently as possible, he situates its personages within a scrupulously defined and ingeniously visualized historical moment and yet suggests that – as any freedom of choice obliges – we approach Solovyov's ideas without prejudice and bearing in mind their inherent disposition to what Carl Gustav Jung calls *enantiodromia*,[12] that is, their tendency to turn into their opposite at the blink of an eye within different historical, ideological, and political contexts.

The Intermedial *Katechon*: Narrative and Architectonic Dimensions

Puiu's intermedial *katechon* is instrumental in limiting the representation of immanent social problems, which would have drained Solovyov's ideas from their archetypal energies, reducing them to political slogans. It is with this caution in mind – that "everything could be otherwise" in "the absence of an a priori experience" – that Puiu approaches Solovyov's text.

To begin with, while generally respecting the original chronology, Puiu's script observes – in the best traditions of the New Romanian Cinema – the Aristotelian unities of time and space. And instead of following the characters over several days in the bright summary climes of the French Riviera, Puiu has the five interlocutors confined, from dawn to dusk – or as Aristotle has it, for a "single revolution of the sun" – within the sprawling reception quarters of a wealthy Transylvanian manor around Christmas time in the 1890s (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1994). Furthermore, Puiu has altered the gender balance of Solovyov's *dramatis personae* from four men and one woman to three women and two men; and has both internationalized and individualized the original "cast." Thus although nominally Russian, his characters converse in French, speak with the servants in either German or Hungarian (in tune with the linguistic realities of Transylvania at that time), and very rarely use Russian. Finally, Puiu has changed

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12 Borrowed from Heraclitus, *enantiodromia* is a term defined as "an essential characteristic of all homeostatic systems," pertaining to "the inherent compensatory tendency of all entities, pushed to the extreme, to go over to their opposites" (Stevens 1990, 140).

their names from generic – the General, the Politician, the Lady, the Prince and Mr. Z – to the respectively cosmopolitan-sounding Ingrida, Edouard, Madeleine, and the Russian Olga and Nikolai. By selecting excellent theatre actors, Puiu has made sure that his personages are full-blooded characters and not just anthropomorphized mouth-pieces. Two of the actors – Ugo Broussot (Edouard) and Diana Sakalauskaité (Ingrida) attended a theatre workshop in Toulouse, led by Puiu in 2011, and participated in his little known film *Three Exercises in Interpretation* (*Trois exercices d'interprétation*, 2013). A dry run in preparation of *Malmkrog*, *Three Exercises* is an edited record of table-top readings of Solovyov's *Three Conversations.* The other actors – Marina Palii (Olga), Frédéric Schulz-Richard (Nikolai), and Agathe Bosch (Madeleine), as well as the two in the supporting roles, István Téglás as the Chief Butler and Levente Nemes as the Colonel – are all well known in their respective countries (Romania, France, and Hungary) as theatre rather than film actors; an extremely important condition with regard to the convincing delivery of the philosophical text.

Further impelled by the need to structure Solovyov's text, Puiu has divided the film into six parts of unequal length, five of which are named after the main characters (I Ingrida, III Edouard, IV Nikolai, V Olga, VI Madeleine), and one – after the Chief Butler (II István). This intervention provides a narrative, aesthetic, as well as ethical structure of the film against the proliferation of meanings – forbiddingly complex or seemingly outdated – inspired by Solovyov's text and bound to overwhelm the contemporary viewer. On the one hand, the intertitle plates create a sense of formal order in the film narrative, and also allow for a respite in-between the parts of this unusually long film. On the other hand, the intertitles focus the viewer's attention on the eponymous characters, on the dress, meals, and behavioural code they – as well as everyone else present – abide by, construing these as a kind of restrainer, a flimsy *katechon* of sorts against the increasing signs of on and off-screen *anomie*.

The Statist-Militarist *Katechon*: Ingrida

Understandably, Puiu takes yet another step to contemporize and universalize Solovyov's principal philosophical concerns. Thus the *First Conversation on War* is inaugurated by Ingrida, who Puiu introduces in lieu of Solovyov's General. The General is dispensed of at the very beginning of the film, and we only see a glimpse of him bidding his good-byes on his way out of the manor. This substitution is no small directorial feat as Ingrida, as the General's wife, does a much better job

with her stern, impressive demeanour in the ensuing heated discussion on war, its divine nature, and its role in the battle between Good and Evil. Indeed, such a militaristic stance commands a much closer attention when coming from an intelligent woman who, although past her prime, is still stunning, elegant and well-spoken – rather than from a high-ranking solder! Thus by naming Part I of the film, Ingrida, the director justifies her throwing in the General's original anti-Tolstoyan (and in light of current events in Russia, prophetic) remark "Does a Christ-loving glorious Tsarist army exist at this moment, yes or no?" – used by Solovyov as a starting point of the discussion in the *First Conversation on War* – and focuses our attention on the manner she fiercely carries through her militarist argument.

At the heart of the *First Conversation* is an excerpt Ingrida reads from a letter her husband wrote to her during one of the Russian-Turkish wars from the second half of the 19th century. The letter graphically describes the "barbaric" atrocities a mercenary, Bashi-Basouk army inflicted on an Armenian village in Asia minor, followed by a no less barbaric, "eye for an eye" response on behalf of her husband's regiment. Her most passionate opponent is Olga – another apt rendition of an original character, that of the Prince – who is an epitome of the pacifist Tolstoyan position,[13] and therefore against any violence, especially when perpetrated in the name of God. Despite her counterarguments, put forth with poignant earnestness – Olga even faints at one point, unable to sustain the mounting intellectual and emotional pressure – the offhand participation of Nikolai and Edouard help run into the ground this verily contemporaneous discussion about justification of holy wars. Yet although the film – like Solovyov's original for that matter – fails to offer a viable response to the basic ethical question as to why atrocities in the name of the higher Good – whether Christian fate, Freedom, Democracy, etc., – are somehow better and nobler than atrocities, perpetrated by "barbarous evils" like the Ottomans, it offers solid justification for the existence of Schmitt's secular *katechon.* For the war waged by the General and his army, while nominally in the name of God as the higher Good, is actually waged to strengthen and enlarge the Russian Empire; the Armenian village episode is only a detour in the right direction. And since according to Schmitt the only force that could prevent a total collapse into the "state of nature," and could "provide a bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events, and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the German kings" is "the belief that

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13   The Tolstoyan social movement was based on the philosophical and religious views of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), whose views were formed by rigorous study of the ministry of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. Famous followers of Tolstoyanism are Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Ludwig Wittgenstein, etc.

a restrainer holds back the end of the world" (Schmitt 2003, 60). In other words, the subject of Ingrida's belief – as well as that of Schmitt – "is not a figure of the divine but rather a secular force" – a state, an empire – that "restrains the ultimate advent of the divine," allowing for the energy of the people to be harnessed in the name of the higher Good as defined by the Sovereign (Prozorov 2012, 486).

The Intermedial *Katehcon* of Gesturality and Sound Ineffability: István

Before moving to the *Second Conversation on Progress,* or Part III of the film: Edouard, it is important to note Puiu's meticulous attention to the amalgamation between the concrete materiality of the physical world, shown on screen, and the existential metaphysics of the dialogue, which Ágnes Pethő has succinctly formulated in her analysis of *Sieranevada* as "gesturality" of objects […] prevailing over the image, yet "all point[ing] to people having placed them there" (2020, 420). In *Malmkrog* the "gesturality" of beautiful objects – well-designed furniture, leather-clad books covering the walls, paintings, sculptures, ornate candle holders, beautiful crystals and china, expensive clothes, stylishly served meals, etc., definitely contributes to the intellectual intensity of the *Conversations*, serving, as does the soundtrack, as an unspoken argument in support or in opposition to its main theses – in this case the role of Civilization and Progress, which Edouard is about to passionately defend as the sole *katechon* against lawlessness.

The highly suggestive gesturality of objects in *Malmkrog* is instrumental in both scrupulously identifying the historicity of time and space circa 1899, and in transcending it by creating a contemporary mental comfort necessary for transposing the viewer amidst Solovyov's world of ideas. This transcendence is further enhanced – to quote Pethő's discussion of *Sieranevada* again – by the feeling of being "immersed not so much in a story, but in a world," where "the sensuous universe of voices" and "rich choreography of gesticulating bodies […] renounces classical dramaturgy" for the sake of "fluctuations in tensions, endlessly repeated acts of comings and goings from one room to another," with all of this happening in a "quasi-real time format," which amounts to an experience resembling "site-specific theatre" (2020, 420). Yet while the intellectual, emotional, and physical commotion of *Sieranevada* affects each character, thus betraying the egalitarianism of Romanian post-communist society, in *Malmkrog* the character movements are definitely correlated with their place in the social

hierarchy. Indeed, the carefully choreographed laidback passages of the five interlocutors from one spacious space into another, morph elegantly into reposes around breakfast or dining tables, on sofas, or around the grand piano. Their self-assured and purposeful slowness is contrasted by the increasing motility of the personnel, lurking on the back and middle ground under the keen eye of István, the Chief Butler. Therefore, the naming of Part II: István, after a character non-existent in the original – and interlacing it, so to speak, with the *Conversation on Progress* – is decisive in augmenting Solovyov's polyphony of characters and ideas. And although we hear István say but a few words – he is mostly gesturing or giving brisk orders to the servants, and even slapping one of them over the unsavoury taste of the samovar tea water – his ubiquity brings to bear the role he and his employees play in securing the precarious *katechon* of statist order and bourgeois splendour. And while István and his people surely do not own the beautiful objects, they are intrinsically related to them as they are the ones who keep them in "place," thus creating this crucial sense of security and permanency.

As the film evolves, we also become sensitized to the ineffably sensual dimension to each episode, originating from the masterful parallel editing of folly sounds and musical pieces. The film opens with the muffled chiming of church bells somewhere from beyond a frosty wood, and a child is being lovingly summoned into a white-column mansion at the foot of a snow-covered mountain. The bells of a passing-by herd of sheep blend in with Stevan Mokranjac's divine Christian-Orthodox psalm *We Sing to Thee* – thus creating an inimitably nostalgic atmosphere of a harmony long lost, yet passionately yearned for. In fact, the background soundtrack would gradually – along with the *mise-en-scène* – establish itself as a distinct voice in the film's *heteroglossia*.

The statist-military *Conversation*, dominated by Ingrid's deep and assertive voice, is punctuated by noises, beckoning the invisible but busy life of the manor. Initially benign and sporadic – like doors banging at the far end of the house; sotto-voce exchanges among the servants; a group of street singers at the door wishing to congratulate the residents with Christmas – blend reassuringly within the general atmosphere of material comfort. Yet some of the noises begin to take a markedly disturbing life of their own – loud clatter of kitchenware; commotion, signalling a medical emergency and the hurried arrival of a doctor; an agitated child rushing into the guest premises and briskly whisked away by a nanny – thus creating a foreboding dissonance with the intellectual coziness in the guest quarters. The growing sense of menace on the sound track reaches its peak, as shall be seen, during the *Second Conversation on Progress*, that is, in Part III: Edouard.

The *Katechon* of Civilization: Edouard

A screen version of Solovyov's Politician, Edouard is a diplomat, a libertine, an admirer of everything Western – and a self-nominated gambler. A self-confident man of delicate stature, considerate and sympathetic, Edouard however seems to be taken not very seriously by his companions. The thesis he propounds is that neither State nor Empire, let alone God or the Military, but the bourgeois Civilization, a stronghold of Progress and Culture, is only capable of securing lasting peace and prosperity. And the life it would bring, is bound to invariably make people better and brighter, and open to lofty ideas, to art and philosophy, as well as to religion, if they so wish, but not necessarily. Therefore, all European countries, along with Russia, should come together in this march towards Civilization under the banners of Progress – preferably peacefully but most likely pugnaciously – against "barbarous" civilizations like the Ottoman and the Chinese, perceived as the biggest threats. To achieve this, however, a pan-European union should be established, something like the United States of Europe, with Russia as part of it.

Edouard's stand on war is curious – while he believes that any inter-European war is "insane and internecine" – he defends what he calls an "anti-war," which is not of the in-the-name of-God kind of war Ingrida has previously defended, but rather a Just War, which is waged in the name of European Civilization. For, as Edouard competently declares, "first there were only Greek Europeans… then all the rest appeared … then … American Europeans, now it is the turn of the Turkish Europeans, Persian, Indian, Japanese, and even Chinese Europeans." For, in his view, "European is a notion with a well-defined content, which is constantly growing."[14]

Edouard obviously belongs to those hapless hedonists and opportunists whose idealistic worldview would soon crumble in the conflagration of two world wars, while their illusions of a better, just world order, guaranteed by an inclusive democratic state, would turn into a cruel mockery – first by Bolshevism, then by Fascism and Communism, and finally by Bio-politics – until totally buried under the trash of ubiquitous consumerism. Unlike the divisive first and last conversations, featured in Parts I, IV and V, this one – quite appropriately for its subject matter – is rather tame and the discussants have no problem agreeing to disagree. In the absence of Olga and in the mostly disinterested presence of Nikolai

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14   If this sounds too colonialist and even racist, then changing European Civilization to Global Civilization would definitely contemporize Edouard's discourse (without however making it less colonialist or racist), and reveals, once again, Solovyov's prophetic stance.

and Ingrida – whose tongue in cheek remarks focus on Edouard's frequent visits to Monte Carlo rather than on his world views – it is Madeleine who remains his only, albeit offhand interlocutor, surmising sardonically that if the subject of the previous conversation was God and War, now it is Culture and Peace, with culture understood mostly as synonymous to politeness, good manners, and good food.

It is thus significant that the off-screen chaos, growing over the first hour or so of the film, comes to a head during Edouard's passionate defense of the civilizational benefits of a pan-European culture and democracy. The tail end of this *Second Conversation* becomes drowned in a loud piano banging of a ragtime, accompanied by jovial drunken laughter and off-tune singing voices, forcing Edouard to repeat passages of his tirade in order to be heard. Immediately preceded by Nikolai's inability to summon István as the guardian of domestic order, and Madeleine's remark that the situation is increasingly remindful of a "comic opera" house, the culmination occurs on the top of the second hour of screening time. The cook, followed by other servants, rushes into the quest dining rooms, screaming "Zoechka, Zoya!"[15] Shots are heard, glass is broken (or explodes), Edouard and Nikolai drop to the floor, the room is filled with smoke, yet it never becomes clear as to whether the turmoil was caused by some kind of a man-made (social) cataclysm or a natural disaster. The screen goes black, and opens again on a serene panoramic shot of the guests, all of them intact, leisurely strolling in the wintery park just outside the mansion, with chaos and normlessness once again restrained – if not by State or Civilization, then at least by Puiu's Intermedial *katechon*, which has relegated them once again to the safety of the off-screen space.

The *Katechon* of Bio-politics: The Colonel

This major disruption could easily have been explained away as a class-motivated upheaval, making *Malmkrog* comparable to Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu,* 1939) or its contemporized version *Gosford Park* (Robert Altman, 2001), if Puiu had not kept Solovyov's original *dramatis personae* strictly separated from his add-ons, thus creating a very clever simile of the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire, which exploded in the murderous social conflagration of the Bolshevik Revolution as soon as elites and ordinary people – kept apart for so long – came together under the Provisional Government in March–October 1917.

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15   It might be reading too much into it, but the name is directly derived from the Greek *zoē*, which Agamben translates as "bare life."

In any case, the metaphoric representation of social tensions in *Malmkog* is way more effective than its literal realistic rendition in Renoir's and Altman's films as the growing turmoil in the background of the *Conversations* here adds yet another mental dimension to the three main discourses. And the eruption of *anomie*, which derails the *Second Conversation*, also exposes the dangerous *enantiodrom*ic propensity of Western Progress, and the porousness of Civilization as a *katechon*. Stability is however quickly restored and normlessness is once again restrained by the still strong statist *katechon*.

Yet there is one kind of disruption that neither State nor Civilization or Religion could contain, and which Puiu chooses to look at: the disruption of Illness, Age, and Death, epitomized in the film by the old and ailing Colonel, the significance of whose existence on and off screen could be best seen in light of Agamben's bio-political *katechon*. To reiterate, Agamben insists that by diverting the quest for (spiritual) redemption to preoccupation with bio-politics, meant to restrain "the natural state" – that is, human nature at its worst, including illness and death – the modern democratic state reduces its subjects to "bare life."

The Colonel, although non-existent in Solovyov, is created by Puiu in tune with the Russian philosopher's prophetic stance, and – among other things – in support of the argument that Death is the greatest and irredeemable Evil, espoused by Nikolai in the *Third Conversation*. In contrast to the omnipresent and motile István, the Colonel is bed-ridden in his rooms at the far end of the lofty premises on the ground floor, where the five main characters converse over a succession of formal meals, punctuated by tea, coffee, and wine drinking. A continuously destabilizing presence on dramatic level, the Colonel is first seen at the beginning of the film, in the early morning, when Ingrida's husband, the General, makes a deliberate point to bid him good-bye before hitting the road on his urgent mission. Thereafter, Puiu reminds us of the Colonel by including – along with the other disruptive "bursts of real life" – audial and visual vignettes, indicative of his health emergencies, but remains deliberately vague about who the Colonel actually is, and why Nikolai and Olga are so concerned about his well-being.

In the context of the *Second Conversation*, whose focus is on the limitless potential of Progress, the Colonel provides a powerful counterpoint, foregrounding the biological limitations of such a Civilizational utopia. In other words, despite of his high rank and visible wealth, the Colonel is already reduced to "bare life" as infirmity and old age have all but destroyed the quality of his life, seen by Edouard as the high-end product of European Civilization.

And yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, the *katechon* of Carl Schmitt's (Christian) Capitalist State of modernity was still effective in protecting the affluent social strata against the "state of nature." Even so, the disturbing manifestations of normlessness observed so far point to other, much more tangible threats to the Civilizational utopia, put into ideological and historical perspective by a telling, semi-audible exchange between the Colonel and István, planted by Puiu just prior to the last *Conversation on the End of History*. The cluttered soundtrack, featuring house noises of caregivers moving in and out of the Colonel's rooms, is dominated by an unpleasant child-like voice struggling with a tune, accompanied by an equally irking piano playing. The exchange in question is partially seen from the vantage point of Nikolai who – dressed in formal evening attire – idles in front of the Colonel's rooms while waiting to accompany Madeleine to the dinner table. The Colonel, having just been given a bath and tucked into freshly changed sheets, is heard asking István what is the actual meaning of the first lines of *L'Internationale* – "Arise, life's accursed / Arise, those condemned to hunger!"[16] This exchange between a powerful man, reduced to "bare life," and his butler on whom he is entirely dependent, could be seen as the "message in the intermedial bottle" Pethő wrote about (2020, 399), meant to suggest a possible interpretation of the normlessness, so diligently restrained via various *katechon*s, including the intermedial one. The rumbling chaos could therefore be understood as an expression of the growing tensions between an ageing old elite and an emerging young social stratum, determined to overcome its class limitations by making itself first indispensable, and then gradually take over. There is nothing civilizational or progressive in the *L'Internationale* exchange between István and the Colonel since – judging from István's attitude to his employees – they equally detest people "who want to work less but earn more" as the Colonel suggests. The only difference being that the Colonel belongs to the more sophisticated yester elites, and István – to the upstarts who are about to helm the bloodiest social revolutions of the twentieth century – the Bolshevik and the Fascist, and thus clear the way for the insidious bio-political state, which – being Anti-Christ incarnate, would pretend to be the *katechon*, preventing his own advent. Caught in-between are the intellectuals and the intelligentsia – that is, Solovyov's interlocutors, whose ideas, to reverse Mephistopheles's famous dictum, are "Part of that Power, not understood / Which always wills the Good, and always works the Bad" (Goethe [1808] 2005).

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16   *The International*, hymn of the world proletariat movement, verses by Eugène Pottier, 1871.

The Religious-Philosophical *Katechon*: Nikolai and Olga

Yet it is still late 19th century on screen, Nikolai closes the door to the Colonel's room, and takes Madeleine to the dining room, where the last, *Third Conversation* is to take place. As already mentioned, Nikolai, as Puiu's version of Solovyov's Mr. Z, is a good-looking, well-mannered, and intellectually smug interlocutor who likes to play the devil's advocate – an image enhanced by his well-trimmed goatee and fashionable moustache. A controversial – and often confrontational – role, which he vindicates, citing the Gospel: "He came to bring us the Truth, and the Truth, like the Good, is a sword, it divides." Nikolai is obviously also quite wealthy – the host of the *Conversations* and most likely the owner of the sprawling Malmkrog estate – and therefore far removed from Mr. Z as stand-in of the Russian philosopher, whose generosity reportedly led him to donate to the needy anything he owned, including the clothes on his back.

Olga, on the other hand, is the youngest and most idealistic amongst the five main characters, and is also Nikolai's favourite target. The gender change from Solovyov's faceless Prince to Puiu's beautiful Olga – gentle and fragile looking, yet a tenacious debater – has allowed the director to play up the philosophical and filial tensions between her and Nikolai thus forming a kind of intellectual yin and yang entity, as the director mentions in his video interview for the Berlin Film Festival in 2020.[17] Olga is cast as the voice of Tolstoyan ethics as the doctrine of life in service of the Absolute Good, which makes her vulnerable before Nikolai's unsettling reading of the Gospels. Inspired by the Mephistophelean spirit of negation who stimulates human activity through productive contradiction – and informs the works of foremost 19th-century thinkers like Goethe, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky – Nikolai boldly challenges the Christian dogma of God as the highest good – that is *summum bonum,* or the "totality of all goodness" – whereas Evil is – as formulated by Saint Augustine – a *privatio boni*, that is the "absence of Good" (qtd. in Eliade 1962, 79).

The religious-philosophical discourse in *Malmkrog* is concentrated around the discussion of two parables, placed strategically at the opening and at the closing of the film. By moving the first parable from its original place in the *Second Conversation on Progress* to the prologue, Puiu sets up the highly-charged intellectual atmosphere of his film. Once inside the mansion and regardless of the early breakfast hour, we are immersed in a story Nikolai is telling Madeleine. It is about two ancient hermits and the very different outcomes of their incidental

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17   See Puiu's interview: "I believe that historical memory is a subjective and an emotional matter," *https://cineuropa.org/en/video/385835/*. Last accessed 23. 08. 2022.

lapse into debauchery during a three-day sojourn to Alexandria. And, as Nikolai tells Madeleine, while both of them "committed every other crime, only one met his doom – the one who became despondent" (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 76). The other one, who never admitted openly to the sins they committed, and, after a long and righteous life, died like a saint, and was canonized as one. The parable posits despondence as "the only mortal sin," because – as Nikolai puts it – "it gives birth to despair, and despair is not even a sin, it is the death of spirit itself" (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 71).

In analytical-psychological terms, the Anti-Christ represents God's dark side – or, what Jung calls the Shadow. As such, the Antichrist balances out Christ as the emanation of God's bright side, thus forming a *coniunctio oppositorum* or unity of opposites, which meets the Jungian definition of psychological wholeness. Needless to say, such an interpretation – although sound psychologically, metaphysically, and also ethically – has never been welcomed by Christian theologians, who as mentioned above, insist that God is the "totality of all goodness" and Evil – only its "absence."

In this light, the parable speaks of two very different ways of dealing with one's shadow: the first hermit succeeds in coming to terms with his despondency by integrating his dark side, and is thus able to get on with his life as a holy man. The other one, however, could not move beyond recognizing the chaos within himself, letting it ravage his soul.[18]

The second parable is in the centre of the *Third Conversation*, taking place around the dinner table. It tells the story of the hired hands who benefited from working in a vineyard, yet refused to give the owner his fair share, destroying his envoys and even killing his son. Its discussion further relativizes the problem of Good and Evil, taking it from the internal realm of psychological chaos discussed in the first parable, to the external, social one of lawlessness. The argument is provoked by Olga's Tolstoian interpretation of the parable as in her view, the vineyard stands for the Garden of God, who generously let His "servants" work there, but instead of "tending the land for their Master," they "imagined the vineyard to be their property," and "set on enjoying life," destroying those "who reminded them of Him and their duties." The sad result, Olga concludes, is that "almost everyone lives today like them," oblivious to the fact that neither the Garden nor their own lives belong to them, but to their Master.

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18   Interestingly enough, the issue of despondency comes up a few times in the Conversation on Progress, apparently reflecting Solovyov's own concerns with his dark side, and the need to keep it at bay.

Nikolai vehemently counters Olga's interpretation, censuring her doctrinal attempt to strip the servants – the husbandmen (or "hired hand's") in the Gospel – of agency, and suggests that the original text of the parable does not profess sheepish submission but rather freedom of choice as the ultimate ethical responsibility. And points out that the problem with the "husbandmen" is not their "unholy" desire to live like "pleasure-taking mushrooms" as Olga has scornfully put it, but in their ethical ignorance. In other words, by ignoring their Lord's envoys, and ultimately killing His son, the husbandmen have made a deliberate choice to not "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" – that is, to ignore the Law, both secular and divine – and have thus sealed their unsavoury fate. All the more that Nikolai has little respect for the Lawmaker, claiming that as long as "this Master who asks others to do good, but himself does not, who lays down obligations, but does not show love, who does not show you his face, but lives abroad, incognito, I will remain convinced he is none other than 'the god of this age,'" that is, the Antichrist.[19]

Yet Nikolai is equally critical of those who sheepishly follow the Law, especially doctrines of the Absolute Good thus implying that Tolstoy and Tolstoyanism could be instrumental in the dangerous *enantiodromic* reversal of Christian spirituality and ethics to their opposite. Indeed, as Solovyov argues when analyzing the ambivalent nature of contemporary evil, freedom of choice – while providing the only possibility to eradicate evil – could as easily breed it out of control. As Czeslaw Milosz remarks in his 1990 preface to the English edition of *Three Conversations*, Solovyov never appreciated "the metaphysical void of hollowed-up Christianity that leaves in its wake only a social, ethical message." By painting his Antichrist as the Great – and Tolstoy-like – Do-Gooder, combining demonic traits with traits of love and kindness, Solovyov "tries to warn humanity of the consequences of such a purely horizontal religion, reduced to ethics, without a vertical dimension" (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 12).

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19 Nikolai's interpretation of the two Biblical parables, and his argument in general, is heavily influenced by the Gnostic understanding of good and evil as two separate divine forces, caught in perennial struggle. Solovyov's religious thought was heavily influenced by Gnosticism, resulting in what is known in literary criticism as "Solovyov's philosophical Sophiology" (see Glukhova, 2016), expressed in his poetic works, devoted to Pistis Sophia (known also as world-soul, emanation of wisdom, the eternal feminine, etc.).

In Lieu of Conclusion: Madeleine

Although the odd person out, denied a strong conceptual voice of her own, Madeleine does an excellent job in keeping the debates going with her intent interest and witty remarks. Always clad stylishly in black, she is amicably engaged in all aspects of the otherwise irreconcilable viewpoints of the two opposing pairs of interlocutors, yet her big dark eyes consistently betray aloof disengagement. Designed originally as the Lady – the only female among Solovyov's five characters – Madeleine has retained that traditionally calming aura, believed back in the 19th century to ensure decorum in heated, all male debates. Although towards the end of the evening she has her moment in the limelight with the superb performance of Schubert's *Musical Moment Number Three* on the grand piano, it only underscores the lingering heavy mood after Nikolai's conclusive pronouncements at the end of the *Third Conversation.*

The issue at hand, Nikolai said, lies not with the Christian piety or the hedonist arrogance of the "husbandmen" – and even less so with their respect for or rejection of the Law – divine or secular. But in the fact that no matter how they live, they are doomed to die. This, he said, "means that Death is the ultimate Evil and therefore *obviously* more powerful than good." Therefore, Nikolai reasoned, "if the *obvious* is the only thing real … then the logical conclusion is that the world is the work of evil power," and therefore a Kingdom of Death rather than Kingdom of God (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 149).

Nikolai's tirades on Death and Evil chime well with Puiu's own preoccupation with death as a narrative expedient for his philosophical engagement with evil – it is enough to mention *Aurora* (2010), *Sieranevada* (2016), and particularly *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (*Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, 2005). In this light, Madeleine's comforting presence makes her comparable to Mioara, the compassionate paramedic-cum-psychopomp,[20] who faithfully accompanies Mr. Lăzărescu unto his death-bed at the antechamber of the surgical theatre, lending a friendly ear to his last clumsy efforts to connect with a world that is slipping away. Imagining Madeleine as a psychopomp, ready to gently show her friends to the banks of Lethe,[21] looks increasingly plausible, given the emotional and intellectual exhaustion that has set in at this late hour, and in light of the final conversation in the music room, which takes place within the short interval after

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20   I. e. in Greek mythology, the psychopomp is the guide of souls to the underground world of the dead.

21   Lethe is the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion; also the name of the River of Forgetfulness, one of the five rivers of the underworld in Greek mythology.

Nikolai's departure to bring the Anti-Christ revealing manuscript, and before the screen goes black, and the final credits roll under the sounds of Stevan Mokranjac's *We Sing to Thee*. Initiated by Edouard, the exchange dwells initially on rational attempts to explain the gradual loss of perfect clarity of vision as an objective phenomenon, and therefore sign of the mutual exhaustion, suffered by the aging interlocutors but also by the Earth, which is also getting older. However, with her remark about a disquieting "sense of foreboding," descending upon them, Madeleine makes way for Ingrida's metaphysical take on the loss of perfect clarity of vision, suggesting that it is "the devil's tail scattering fog across the created world," and a true sign of the Antichrist. To which Madeleine, with her eerily mysterious smile, retorts, "yes, Ingrida, no doubt about it."

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The Aesthetics of the Spectral and the Permanent Crisis in Tsai Ming-liang's Art

Csilla Markója

Eötvös Loránd Research Network, Research Centre for Humanities,
Institute for Art History (Budapest, Hungary)
E-mail: Markoja.Csilla@abtk.hu

Abstract. This paper focuses on the motif of permanent crisis and the "ghost" in Tsai Ming-liang's art through a close analysis of films such as *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (*Hei yan quan,* 2006), *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji dian*, 2001), *Vive l'amour* (*Ai qing wan sui*, 1994), *The Skywalk is Gone* (*Tian qiao bu jian le*, 2002), *The Hole* (*Dong*, 1998), and the relevant discourse of Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, pointing out new, previously undiscussed connections between *What Time Is It There?* and François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959). The aesthetics of the spectral is presented as a possible way of approaching films that not only reckon with the increasing immaterialization of the medium in the digital age, but also extend this to understand and represent new qualities of human relationships and existence in the world, using the motif of the ghost as an allegory of the medium and a "haunting" of traditional cinematic plot organization and narrative.

Keywords: Tsai Ming-liang, Taiwan New Cinema, aesthetics of the spectral, slow cinema, Derrida.

Introduction

At the time of a global pandemic, it was an upsetting and weird experience to watch a film in the first frames of which, still in darkness, the siren of an ambulance is heard and in which the characters cover their mouths with masks. It seemed particularly haunting, when we realized that the film was made in 1998 as one of the emblematic works of the so-called Taiwan New Cinema. Taiwan may be a symbol of looming danger, a distinguished place of permanent crisis, but the mask is mind-boggling: can it be that for the people of the East the imminence of a pandemic was palpable at such an early date, is this tangible reality, a Kafkaesque parable, or a presentiment? The film I am referring to is *The Hole* (*Dong*, 1998),

directed by Tsai Ming-liang, in which an awful epidemic spread by a respiratory pathogen isolates the individuals who live among piles of toilet paper in dark, damp dens, and who still find one another, if not otherwise, by breaking through the floor. In what follows, I will analyse some of the works of Tsai Ming-liang, in which the concept of the sublime has been replaced by the concept of the ghostly in an epistemological sense, and by the aesthetics of the spectral. In Tsai Ming-liang's films some characters, venues, motifs recur, reappear like ghosts.[1] The leading actor returns from film to film, and there are some haunting motifs: they form a strange spiritual web in-between the films not linked together in the traditional narrative way. Tsai's films constitute a huge rhizomatic network the nodes of which are not fixed or stable: within a film and between films the motifs peregrinate, occurring here, then there, or their absence is conspicuous in elliptical structures. Such perceived absences in places where there was somebody real earlier create passageways between the "real" and the "fictitious."

I Don't Want to Sleep Alone (*Hei yan quan*, 2006)

A destitute homeless stranger is battered black and blue in the slums of Kuala Lumpur. That wouldn't be an attractive story – let alone a love story – in any part of the world. Though the thrashing cannot be seen (there is an elliptic structure, an omission), but we see the man collapse at the roadside. A noisy group of young guest workers are dragging along a large mattress. They found it in the garbage, a mattress is a precious treasure. Though we hear that at first, they do not want to help, or even to stop, the now unconscious man is still carried off somehow (a new ellipsis). The busy caravan of people puts him down on the floor in a house. They are afraid of their Chinese landlady, yet they manage to find a place for the wounded man in a corner. He regains consciousness for a moment, and has to urinate. In another corner a young Bangladeshi construction worker, Rawang, the only character with a name, is cleaning the mattress on the floor. He realizes that the staggering man will get into trouble, so he backs him up. He backs him for the rest of the film, but now he gives physical support, embracing him, pulling down his trousers, propping the helpless man up for pissing. When he's done, he

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1   The relationship of Tsai Ming-liang's films to the ghost motif was highlighted by Corrado Neri (2017, 201–210). The Hungarian journal *Enigma* has also dedicated a double issue edited by Balázs Sipos and Csilla Markója in 2021 (no. 104–105.) to the theme of the ghost in contemporary cinema, analysing the films of Olivier Assayas, Albert Serra, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Chantal Akerman, Eduardo Williams, Claire Denis, Lucrecia Martel, João Pedro Rodrigues, Ben Rivers, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-liang, Lav Diaz, Béla Tarr, Pedro Costa and others.

can't let him go. He can hardly hold him, the urine pours to the foot of the wall, Rawang squirts some water after it from a pot with one hand, but they lose balance and the stranger's body, which he had to support from the back, collapses on him unwanted, into his lap. Like in a painting of the Deposition, in which Christ is just taken off the cross, Mary bending over him, in the eternal pathetic form of the Pietà. That is what it is, and it isn't. Balázs Sipos writes in the foreword of the two-volume special issue of the Hungarian journal, *Enigma* entitled, *Ghosts, Movies, Images*: "The striking pictoriality of […] Tsai Ming-liang's films is not a matter of mere decorativeness, but a way to expand the phenomenological capacities of the moving image. In this way, it inventively manipulates the temporality of his films, expanding their figurative possibilities and deepening their political dimension, and also creating the possibility to re-frame certain stylistic periods in art history, and even the museum exhibition space itself" (2021, 6, translation by the author). In this case, the traditional forms of pathos – in Aby Warburg's sense – take on a new social dimension, they appear in a new emancipatory role.

The anonymous sufferer, Lee Kang-sheng, is often considered Tsai Ming-liang's fetish actor, somewhat separating him from the kind of relationship that we saw between directors and their actors like Hanna Schygulla and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman, Anna Karina and Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Léaud and François Truffaut. This is how Tsai Ming-liang recalled their first meeting: "before I started directing feature films, for a few years I worked in television. At that time, TV shows were all escapist martial arts fantasies, melodramas, or historical dramas about World War II and the Japanese invasion. A university professor (named Wang Xiao Li) came back from the US, and brought me into writing scripts that comprised more social realism. In 1991 I filmed a miniseries on youth convicts. That's when I found Lee Kang-sheng in the streets. His family, with its very classic Taiwanese structure – a father from the Mainland, married to a local Taiwanese mother – and their quintessentially Taiwanese house were all very attractive to me. Plus, his delinquency, his air of mystery, ennui, brooding silence, and slowness… the manner in which he smoked, all made me think of my strict father, who hardly spoke any words to me during my entire upbringing. After I finished filming *Rebels of the Neon God* [*Qing shao nian nuo zha*, 1992], my father passed away. How I wished he could have seen a film I directed. How I wished I could understand him, be close to him, and even hug him. It's as if I projected this yearning onto the worlds of my films, and in particular, Lee Kang-sheng's character of Hsiao-kang with increasing intensity. In turn, gradually our real lives together seemed to reflect

and materialize the worlds of the films. Hsiao-kang suffered a strange illness after filming *Rebels*. His neck became crooked" (Pikerton 2015). Then he added a startling description (to be understood later): "He is 46, and we live very closely together, so I have come to know his various states of mind and shifting moods quite well. I remember when we were filming *The River* (*He liu,* 1997), a scene required him to cry, he was only twentysomething then, and he couldn't cry. I smacked him twice on the face, but still no tears. Filming *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji diani*, 2001), it was much easier for him to cry, because his father had just passed away" (Pikerton 2015). Tsai first met Lee in 1991, and since then he has been in all his films. In the past thirty years we have not only seen Lee grow up, this boy with the frightened look in his wide-open eyes which radiated some hard-to-define sadness or suffering, but we have got to know every inch of his body, his third nipple, his bodily functions, the intimate processes from eating to excretion, from masturbation to being together, from illness to recovery. In one of his YouTube interviews, they were sitting side by side, perhaps in Tsai's home, a bit aged, the interest in each other radiating from their eyes not having dimmed a bit. Tsai in black, with hair cut like a monk's, modest and extroverted, dedicated and narcissistic, with sudden outbursts of laughing, explaining vigorously, Lee sitting more quietly, with reserve, as the mysterious, submissive object of love. One could see domination in submission, devotion in domination. "I'd like to photograph Lee's face as long as I live" – he said.[2] The libidinous economy of the two has resulted in a creative connection, a co-authorship. Tsai explained: "all protagonists in different times and places appear to be one and the same person with different identities. I'd like my audience to enjoy both dimensions of my films: the film itself, and Lee Kang-sheng as film, or, the changes of allegedly one and the same person with time, with aging. In real life very few things happen, there is hardly a plot, there are everyday things: the viewer should realize that Lee is similar to all of us."[3]

When the Chaplinesque choreography of urination is over in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, the long nursing begins (as a recurrent, haunting motif). At first Lee is a helpless, closed-eyed corpus whom Rawang drags to his lair. He gets the important mattress and the even more important mosquito net over him. Without tools – only the director abounds in devices – a highly humorous awkward fumbling begins with a universal object, the plastic bag. Rawang washes and

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2   Tsai Ming-liang and actor Lee Kang-sheng talk about his film *Your Face* (2018). *https://www. youtube.com/watch?v=UUd1vX7M6-o&t=153s.* Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

3   Tony Rayns's interview with Tsai Ming-liang in 2007. *https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=YYYAQKiR_bk.* Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

feeds him ritually but doesn't manage to reduce his fever. For lack of a bottle, glass, or the like, they drink from a plastic bag (a recurrent, haunting motif, elsewhere they piss in it). Lee gets a plastic bag of shaved ice, which Rawang tried to fasten to his head with another plastic bag, clumsily, in a long process. By the time Lee comes to, the neon green slush (another haunting motif) is melted, it can be drunk, and soon he gets silently yearning companions, bugs (yet another haunting motif), actually bedbugs, and Rawang is from now a night lodger.

Lee, however, finds a girl to court as soon as he is on his feet again. The waitress (recurrent actress, Chen Shiang-chyi) nurses someone else, the son of the café's boss, who is unconscious in coma (another haunting motif). His nursing is a bit more professional, he has a wheel bed, catheter bag, but he is being nursed in another dirty hole, too. But in his case, there is no hope of recovery. It is hard to notice, and bizarre as it may seem, this role is played by Lee Kang-sheng, too, who knows why (so we have another ellipsis, haunting motif). The mother tries to keep her son alive by continuously anointing, massaging, trying to stimulate the body of the living corpse, Other Lee, in all possible ways (typically enough, its reception took the form of reflex-like disapproval in some cases, interpreting this extent of care as rape).The characters do not say a word to each other – we hardly notice it – but from the background noise, e.g. TV, radio, we are informed that the city is buried under a huge cloud of smoke, from the forest fires of a neighbouring country (the environmental disaster takes the form of a lethal pandemic elsewhere, e.g. in *The Hole* (*Dòng,* 1998)[4] – another haunting motif). The people put on mouth coverings to protect themselves against the stifling smoke, the unmoving body of Other Lee is wrapped – with absurd humour – in a large plastic bag and clean (?!) air is blown into it with a fan, to keep him safe. While Other Lee is choking with the infernal smoke under the plastic, First Lee with a mouth mask hurries with the waitress to the monstrous half-ready concrete edifice on which the construction worker Rawang is employed but work had stopped because subsoil water burst to the surface (haunting motif), inundating the inner court, the bay of the iron-concrete skeleton of a building resembling the surrealistic stairs of M. C. Escher (again, a haunting motif); at night Lee and his Platonic lover Rawang usually angled here until a huge death butterfly settled on Lee's shoulder. Now they are trying to kiss and make love amidst gasps for breath on the much-witnessed mattress in the mosquito-net cage, but the smoke foils it, then we see Rawang wearing a plastic bag instead of a mask (we know from the radio that masks are sold out in Kuala Lumpur), trying to cut First Lee's

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4   For its analysis see: Marno and Marno (2021, 35–48).

throat with a rusty can top while tears are flowing from his eyes. Lee reaches out and caresses his face. Suddenly we see the helpless body of Other Lee, dreaming awake, staring into the sky. He has a mouth mask. He appears to be crying. At the very end of the film an iconic image: on the raft of the mattress floating on the dark surface of the ground water the members of the love triangle are huddled together, resting peacefully. At last, they can sleep together (the title of the film is: "I don't want to sleep alone"). Is someone dreaming of a union, or conversely, is someone dead?

This must be a dream, certainly. But who is dreaming what? I grasped my mattress in astonishment, seeing this unusual happy ending in a Tsai film. I was overcome by restlessness, by the analyst's unease, although it ought to be sufficient explanation that "in a world dominated by the forces of helplessness, overcoming a conflict is equal to a miracle. The momentary conquest over loneliness is like redemption. The most shameless, blatant kitsch is allowed if it celebrates such a pregnant transcendental happiness" (Kemény 2020, 223, translation by the author). Lili Kemény has triggered off a highly inspiring train of thoughts by saying that in Tsai's films the "ghost" (as a trope) "should not be conceived as a supernatural entity but as a form of repetition (revenant in Derrida's term). […] It is implicitly based on the *Unheimlichkeit* concept of Freudian psychanalysis, which explains the weird unfamiliarity with the return of what was suppressed" (2020, 220). At the same time, the eternal return, we are aware, is never the eternal return of the same thing. What Kemény points out here is of crucial importance: "The immaterial structural ghost can only be acted out on the surface of a fiction with a shift, as a metaphor, just as the Freudian repetition is mostly realized through transmission: what returns never returns the same as it used to be before" (2020, 220).

Elaborating this statement further: the ghost comes about in the gap caused by the shift; the ghost is asynchrony itself. That Lee Kang-sheng needs nursing in the same film in two forms is upsetting, weird. We see him in two helpless bodies, one recovers, the other doesn't. Perhaps the beautiful dream at the end about being able to sleep side by side is not a simple dream, but the "parallel story," subconscious desire phantasy of Lee in coma, which has not existed, could not end happily as it was never fulfilled. A dream of the living corpse Lee, who – while breathing in the smoke of wildfires in the plastic sarcophagus – dreams of making love with his nurse suffocating with smoke. What a shift! And the connection is a plan gone up in smoke: the grand plan of love and civilization about liveable life, about life side by side. We are confused: who is a phantom,

the one who dreams or the one who is dreamt about? Did Lee Kang-sheng dream the butterfly, or was it the butterfly that was dreaming Lee Kang-sheng?[5] The characters have hardly any means to express emotions; actually, sudden channels of transmission, mediation, donation, caring open up. If need be, they even cut a hole in the dividing floor, they wriggle through to one another, as in *The Hole*. True, the logic of the spectral also means that desire always goes astray. The characters in Tsai's film, Lila Kemény writes, often appear catatonic, or like automata, which corresponds to the ghostly urge of repetition. She defines the notion of catatonic from the angle of the material aspect of the film, the dreamlike structures and anti-psychologizing leading of the cast, and not from the angle of the perceiving and interpreting recipient who ascribes emotions to the figures. In Lili Kemény's (2020, 226) view, the figurativity of Tsai's films means that instead of the characters, the actual situations in which they find themselves have contours, and the structuralism of the film means that the emphasis is shifted to the visual and kinetic-dramaturgical organization of the situations.

Approaching the question from the angle of the perceiving-interpreting recipient, we may characterize the emotional state of Tsai figures by saying: "they suffer like a dog, they suffer like an animal." Why is it that by human standards an animal suffers more than a human being? Why is it that the suffering of an animal (and a child) touches us most deeply? Why do we respond keenly to the fact that "animals suffer mutely"? Isn't it the lack of perceptible self-reflection that makes us feel they are more helpless, more exposed to external forces? From the reception side, the Tsai characters are extremely sensitive, emotionally surcharged. The lack or damage of speech, of communication leads them back into an animistic state in which animal and anima, instinct and emotion are still coincidental without reflection. Where there is suppression, there must be emotion, too, and where the head is replaced by a cabbage, like in *Stray Dogs* (*Jiaoyou*, 2013), in which such tropes take shape (topped with a ritual of devouring by love), the personality must also be involved, even if by being blocked, reserved, abstracted, similarly to how catatonia paralyses the motoric part of the personality.

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5   Reference to Lőrinc Szabó's poem *The Dream of Tsuang Tsi,* translated from Hungarian by Ádám Makkai. "Two thousand years ago the Master Tsuang Tsi,/ pointed at a butterfly and remarked rather musingly:/"In my dream" he said, "I was this butterfly,/and now I wonder if it is he, or, actually, I." "A butterfly, yes, a butterfly was I!" He would often tell,/ "and it danced and frolicked in the sun merrily/and didn't even suspect that he was Tsuang Tsi…/And I woke up… And now I cannot tell, now I have no idea!" He continued wistfully,/ "What is the truth? Which one could I really be?/ Did Tsuang Tsi dream the butterfly,/or was it the butterfly that was dreaming me?"

What Time Is It There? (*Ni na bian ji dian*, 2001)

Take Tsai's film of mourning: when young Lee tries to stop his mother from performing her absurd, compulsive act of mourning, the two figures suddenly break out in a storm of motion, throwing about their arms and legs vehemently, and in this chaotic excess of movements Lee suddenly finds himself face to face with his mother's lap; almost petrified (in a catatonic stupor) his eyes are fixed on his mom's genitals from where he came from: on the origin of life, like a Gorgon head the sight of which turns one into stone. It is not simply a pre-personality state, but rather an interpretive regression, a retreat to the origin. Incorporated in the impersonal behaviour of the characters of Tsai's film there is a sort of group identity, probably that is why death is such a distinguished theme in them, because the tradition of belonging to an entity larger than man becomes explicit at that point. Tsai's figures are not pre-personality beings but they regress into catatonia at times to evade the pains of individuation which tears them out of their original communities and which is accompanied by the local economic/social implications of alienation.[6] They would like to meet, to collide, as Lili Kemény writes, to be part of the whole, but since they are torn from one another, they keep mourning for the loss of the possibility of getting into synchrony – to borrow a term from the conversation of János and Dávid Marno (2021, 35–48).

In a spiral a distinguished point of the arc returns shifted a tier higher. "The time is out of joint;" Hamlet exclaims, "o cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right." Time "out of joint," shifted time is the place of the spectral in *What Time Is It There?* The uncanny which appears as immoderate in the aesthetics of the sublime features as shifted or displaced, not in the appropriate place (e.g. the phantom always appears at another place than expected). *What time Is It There?* is the film of the missing father. In Michelle Bloom's interpretation, the missing father is the metaphor of the art cinema of the French New Wave, besides being a concrete reference to Truffaut being a sort of spiritual father to Tsai.[7] In the Truffaut film, *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959), replete with autobiographic references, the unruly kid was played by Jean-Pierre

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6   The speechlessness of the Tsai figures also says much of the educational system and deprivation from cultural institutions – about the social crisis, the lack of learning communicative patterns, etc.

7   Truffaut, in turn, looked upon André Bazin as father instead of his own father. Truffaut, like the protagonist boy in *The 400 Blows* was brought up by his stepfather before he was put in a boarding school. Tsai dedicated the film to the memory of his father and of Lee's father who had just died: he confessed that Lee's grief had revived in him the death of his own father. See: Bloom (2014, 37–56), also Neri (2017).

Léaud. Between the two films, the parallels of Lee and Léaud open up lots of passageways. Léaud drinking milk is the inverse of Lee pissing. The more so as they use the very same bottle. The shift between the two scenes is pregnant with meaning. The greed to drink the milk alludes to the "defect" of the input, the retention of urination indicates that of the output. In Truffaut's film defect appears on the input side: the boy does not get enough paternal love, he is not nurtured by the world, while Lee cannot display, *give* out his emotions. He can't give free vent to his desires, feelings. The shift, the sequence of shifts, is indicated by the hands of the watch, haunted by the ghosts: this is the 6-hour shift between Taipei and Paris. In Lili Kemény's opinion, Lee sets the hands from the time of mourning to the time of love, which appears as a process of grief elaboration. In this sense, the hand of the clock is a visual metaphor of the penis, of libido. To make sure we shouldn't miss the metaphorization, in the public toilet Tsai shows the perversion of Lee's stolen watch through the exhibitionist guy who holds the watch gone crazy to his genitals, and suddenly we witness an obstruction of the grief elaboration, like a needle stuck in a groove of a record. Within the shift of time, being stuck is represented as perversion, the catatonia or compulsive motion of the libido. Perversion is none other than the obstruction of libido transmission. If we recognize the symbol of eternal return in the face of the clock, we will notice that the Ferris wheel is also a large clock face on which units rotate and we realize that Tsai picked from *The 400 Blows* the scene of the gravitron in the fun fair because in it young Léaud – who in a beautiful frame is face to face with Lee just past his tousled haired adolescence watching the film on TV – gets in the centrifuge in a sequence (a shift, a passageway) in which he can stand on his head, that is, he may enter the haunted jetlag of time "out of joint," into the symbolic six hours which separates the time of love from the time of mourning; Truffaut's time from Tsai's time; the daybreak of the cinema from the twilight of the cinema; the time of milk drinking from the time of pissing out the milk; the entrance from the exit. It is a subtle example of shifting when Lee, longing for the girl, goes to the railways station, where mad with anger he throws his shockproof, waterproof watch into a small basin on which a waterwheel is turning, then regretting his deed, he fishes it out. In another time, the girl sits in the Garden of the Tuileries next to a larger pool, with the silhouette of a Ferris wheel in the background. The girl weeps, then, being exhausted, she crouches, while strangers try to steal her suitcase. They empty it, or they don't, it cannot be seen (ellipsis). When the ghost of Lee's father – who as a phantom in the first frames of the film did not find his place in his kitchen – crops up in the last

sequence in Paris to fish out the suitcase floating off on the water of dreaming (a haunting motif), while the girl is fallen asleep from fatigue and sobbing, the membrane separating the characters in time and place is broken through. The suitcase is reminiscent of the watch seller Lee's showcase: it is important that it is not identical. The girl's suitcase is large, rounded, that of the boy is narrow, with reinforced corners – their difference refers to the above analysed shift, the return in a different way. The girl looks for Lee's phone number but finds Léaud's, and instead of Lee, his father's ghost appears while she is asleep.

Membrane could also be a key word of the film: membranes are stretched between the worlds, impassable yet allowing some osmosis:[8] such is the divided glass wall of the phone booth through which someone can shout his grievance, such is the kissing of the two women from which both withdraw into their snail-shells, such is the car window on which the girl knocks to Lee and the next day she steals all the reset watches of Lee in her disappointment, such are the elevator doors, the glass of the aquarium: this world closes off and opens up, it is porous, permeable, full of membranes. Through the centrifuge – as Truffaut did – we may step over from the realm of catatonia to the topsy-turvy world of the motion pictures. The image of the fun fair centrifuge leads us back to a lower tier of the spiral not exposed so far, to the birth of film as art, which came about from a play of silhouettes: a paper cylinder with stills on the inside was rotated to animate the still pictures inside, to achieve motion. This time travel is an *ars poetica*, an homage to the art of the film: it shows the spinning, the animation, the motion, the jolt out of immobility, the shift, and its reverse, freezing, petrification, stoppage at the same time.

In analyses about Truffaut's intertextuality the cited examples are exclusively the milk drinking, the gravitron and Léaud's eery return in the cemetery. In *The 400 Blows*, however, there is a short scene of which, I think, Tsai's film is the metonymy as Lee is the metonymy of Léaud. I venture so far as to propose that Tsai expanded this scene into the film; when in his twenties working in the national film archives of Taipei Tsai first saw a Truffaut in a retrospective series, he recognized the missing father, the spirit of the father (as he would mention almost in every interview later). In *The 400 Blows* Léaud, as Truffaut's alter ego

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8   The concept of permeability has also been discussed by David Teh in relation to Apichatpong Weerasethakul in a catalogue essay for the 2011 exhibition, Yang Fudong, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, CACSA, Adelaide. See: *https://www.academia.edu/48964430/Only_light_and_memory_the_permeable_cinema_of_Apichatpong_Weerasethakul*. Last accessed 08.08. 2022. The relationship between Apichatpong Weerasethakul's and Tsai Ming-liang's art is analysed in more detail in Markója (2021, 91–110).

suffers a series of disappointments and with his responses to them he practically spins himself out of society like with the gravitron, to the horizon of nothingness (the limitless sea) from where there is nowhere to escape. He has a single positive emotional impact, the joy of a returned relationship, with his friend, another little boy who offers the most hidden room in their enormous apartment as refuge to Léaud, who escaped from home, where he could live as if he was a ghost, almost unnoticed by the negligent wealthy father. This motif appears in one of Tsai's early films, *Vive l'amour!* of 1994 in which Lee in his twenties lives as a squatter together with a girl and a boy practically shunning each other (as a shift, a haunting motif). In *The 400 Blows* there is a scene of a breakfast, when the son steals some food from his father's table for Léaud hiding in the neighbouring room and gives it to him, but previously he set the clock to an earlier time so that the father would think he is late, and when he runs off agitated, he sets the clock back to the right time. They can meet in the jetlag of time ("out of joint"), which is the time of the two boys' friendship. Similarly to Lee, who sets all the watches in Taipei to Paris time, when his love whom he saw only once has left for Paris. And there is another, unnoticed ghostly motif that finds a corridor from Truffaut's film into Tsai's: the two boys stealing a round-faced alarm clock from a public toilet. The stolen clock oozed from Léaud's hand into Lee's hand who, having stolen it from the wall, holds it tight in the darkness of the cinema while he watches a French film, then the clock gets back somewhat perverted (with a shift, that is) to the satyr, to the public toilet. Lee and Léaud exchange watches (chronometers of love): the two clocks are, however, not the same, there is some difference between them.

Ghostwriting, or the Silence of the Subaltern

The history of the Taiwan New Cinema started in the 1980s and lasting into our days, ran parallel with the French deconstruction. Although he disputes his membership,[9] Tsai Ming-liang also joined this cinema as a member of the second generation. Derrida's book of ghosts, *Specters of Marx* appeared in 1994 and immediately elicited the acute disapproval of the Indian philosopher and founder of the post-colonial feminist critique, the translator of *De la grammatologie* into English, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her study entitled *Ghostwriting* (1995),

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9   See the documentary, *Flowers of Taipei. Taiwan New Cinema* (Chinlin Hsieh, 2014), featuring interviews with Hirokazu Kore-eda, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wang Bing, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and Jia Zhangke.

she summarily called Derrida's book a book of "how to mourn for your father," narrowing it down at the same time to a passageway between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Besides Derrida, Spivak also criticizes Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze in another fundamental text of hers, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* because "they side with the bourgeois sociologists who replace ideology with a continuous subconscious or parasubjective culture. The parasubjective matrix, interlaced with diversity" she continues, "introduces a nameless Subject, at least for the intellectuals who are influenced by the modern hegemony of desire." (Spivak 1996, 454.) Spivak refers to the de-subjectified philosophical formation "desire as machine," the desiring machine which Deleuze and Guattari describe in *Anti-Oedipus.* While these philosophers speak of the intellectuals as a mass, *groupuscule* and a variety, through the concept of *desire* they re-introduce a total, undivided universal – quasi-subjective – instance which they inevitably define in the European way on the basis of the (varied) European history of sexuality. She also puts forth a critical comment on the margin of a Deleuze–Foucault interview claiming that the French sages commingle the subject with the individual and are overhasty in urging for the elimination of representation and the figure of the committed intellectual, presuming that the minorities – with some encouragement from activists (Deleuze and Foucault were campaigning for the French prison reform at that time) – were already capable of fighting and speaking up for themselves. Spivak offers concrete examples of who and who could not speak up for themselves. She calls these groups – following Antonio Gramsci – subalterns (for Gramsci the term designated the "invisible" groups of people whose political rights were curbed by the hegemonic majority for bio-political "reasons," who were deprived of political representation and whose access to culture was barred, who were put to work under extremely unfavourable conditions, etc.). Spivak is the cartographer of history, the discoverer of blank spots, who calls attention to the concrete and individual, and with the zeal of the inquisition discards all sorts of general subjects, suspicious generalizations, displaying little understanding and affection for the singular ideas arising from an incessant interweaving of the particular and the general. Spivak does not appreciate Derrida's wit, but those for whom she raises her voice are ghosts indeed. Studying the "sati" rite of Indian women (i.e. the widow sacrifice: when women choose being burnt after their husbands' death) she asks the question who speaks up for these women, whether they are represented in historiography, whether they have a "voice." Can the subaltern speak, can it raise its voice in its behalf, or is it silent, mute, invisible? And don't those who ask for the abolition of representation return to the power

discourse thereby? (Cf. Müllner 2015, 8.) Don't they silence up the nameless, subaltern Other exactly by this demand of theirs? Perhaps this accusation by Spivak deprives the French philosophers' ideas from the historicity of the contexts, yet this critical reasoning has re-created and elevated Gramsci's forgotten concept, the subaltern, into the forefront of international critical thinking, and it is one of the key words for the understanding of the art of Tsai and Weerasethakul.

Long Live Love! (*Ai qing wan sui / Vive l'amour!* 1994)

Watching Tsai's films, one might tend to interpret the often nameless and voiceless characters as machines, automata of desire. Actually, what we witness is not only the urge of the instincts, but often morally justified emotion fuelled by commitment, empathy. The Thai masseur in *Days* (*Rizi*, 2016) helps alleviate Lee's infernal pains caused by his neck hernia with real compassion and sympathy, apart from the business considerations. In return, he gets a small music box which he opens when locked in loneliness in the bus stop and listens to it as a confession of love without words. The pictures of devoted care, nursing multiply with time as the creative duo, Tsai and Lee grow older, but already at the very beginning, in *Vive l'amour!* (which is perhaps the most brutally straightforward about alienation with the irresolvable loneliness of Lee in his twenties, we may see gestures which occasionally (sometimes literally, like in *The Hole*) break or try to break through the wall. Hardly more than a child, Lee crouches on the street mat next to his ghost fellow lodger and touches the women's dresses to be sold tenderly, almost with the care of a wife, they wait for each other, travel together, pay attention. In a phone booth even a few concise sentences are uttered for a sort of reflexion when the older boy, a black marketer calls to a date the homeless real estate agent girl living with them as the third ghost (what an astonishing metaphor of the common homelessness of the three in a philosophical sense): "Why am I irritating? I just want to talk to you. People are utterly confused. We must find ways to talk to each other." No more words are uttered, and although they meet, instead of a conversation the date is over with a quickie. A black marketeer of twenty-some years, a homeless young real estate agent girl and a kid selling urn sites are embodiments of *par excellence* homelessness, of the *par excellence* subaltern; they hang around in the illegally occupied flat (their world), but rarely happen to meet, without finding the real possibility of a relationship. Lee irresolutely cuts his veins, then bandages himself, the next day he buys a melon (a haunting motif) with which – a substitute for buxom female shapes

– he begins fiddling absent-mindedly till finally he digs eyes in it, like in *Stray Dogs*, in which, older in age, he envisions the face of his vanished wife in a cabbage, then he lies down in the black marketeer's bed (haunting motif), tries on the dresses of the girl who is away, lingers in the flat, washes in someone else's bathroom – this is where we first see his third nipple (a haunting motif, in *Days* old Lee immerses in a bath similarly and we see this special mark of his body which is "really" there), we accompany him to the urn cemetery which – to make it more depressing – is no more than a room with wall-to-wall carpeting, a flat full of urn cabinets, indicating with surrealistic emphasis what a tight place people will have in their final homelessness. "Taiwanese watermelons are wonderful. I must thank the watermelon for making it possible for me to get close to the body,"[10] Tsai said about an event: he had to film a female body close up, he was so frightened that he asked the actress to hold a watermelon between her legs "in the first round." A watermelon that becomes the symbol of a pregnant belly. In Tsai's films such substitutions are also subtle shifts. By taming metaphorization into metonymies with the shifts, the didactic constructions organizing his films also become animated, filled with life. In addition to permeability, porousness, the other key words with Tsai are contact and relationship. Since this relationship is never a perfect compatibility, correspondence, union, but a ghost image of it, it turns his films extremely plastic, naturalistic and at the same time, immaterial, inexplicable. The pedagogical, didactic structures are turned into amiable, gentle relativity. We find ourselves between reality and fiction, in the iridescent zone of the rainbow. Though we see people suffering like stray dogs, we do not suffer watching the film. Quite the contrary. We are actually moved from the first moment, reinforced by the momentary (metonymic) connections, and our being moved does not end with the film. The external world is like our inner self, full of problems, and in the film the landscape sobs instead of the people, clouds shed tears instead of the sufferers, canals and sinks flood over, partition walls and valves break through, everything is inundated with the memory of the uncontrollable burst of the water pipe Tsai had lived through as a youth in the dormitory, the suppression materializes, bursts forth, is released through cheerful and dramatic transmissions. I, the viewer, also weep and sob happily together with the landscape, the sewage canals, the clouds. Just as the girl does in *Vive l'amour!,* weeping for over ten minutes into the camera in the deepening amphitheatre of a public park, but she weeps as if her acting did not wholly

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10   Tony Rayns' interview with Tsai Ming-liang, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYYAQKiR_bk.* Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

convince her. Unconvincing sobbing – what a marvellous ending for a film. I leave the cinema anguished and moved at the same time, realizing that the real reason for suffering is the inability of expression. Why don't we speak? Why don't we believe each other? Already Lyotard raised the question in *The Postmodern Condition* how communication, expression could be verified, who would tell who was the repository of knowledge, of truth, who would decide what knowledge was at all (1993, 23). The process of ghostification was already registered at that time, and is still going on in the digital world. We have become ghosts for each other.

The Skywalk is Gone (*Tianqiao bu jian le*, 2002)

Almost immediately after *What Time Is It There?*, Tsai shot a short film to open the row of shorts that partly proved to be a long peripatetic walk towards the intimate, personal spaces of the museum,[11] and partly is a kind of epilogue, postscript to the ghost film (i.e. mourning film, father film). The trauma motivating the shooting was the shock to find the skywalk on which Lee used to sell the watches gone. It became a ghost, opening a new channel between reality and fiction. In the first part of the short film the girl returns from Paris and desperately looks for the place of her lover, of love, which (as a ghostly shift) is gone. The suitcase, the rounded one with wheels also appears, which was not identical with Lee's showcase full of measly watches glowing in iridescent colours, but still it held the promise of symbolically incorporating the other one. Typically enough, the suitcase is not in the hand of the girl who had escaped to Paris, but in the hand of a woman also jaywalking on the motorway (ghostly shift) with whom she is caught by the traffic policeman (we hear a background dialogue attributing the illegal crossing to the earlier existence of the skywalk at this place), then the policeman takes the girl's ID card and then seemingly forgets to return it, and when the girl comes back for it, he even denies getting it. This turns the girl into a subaltern in the sense Gramsci and Spivak understood it; she becomes a ghost who haunts the place of love in vain, she doesn't find anyone and she has no identity, either (as she was deprived of it). "It seems that many places that I shot for my films have vanished. This is kind of worrying!" Tsai joked on the new ghostly passageway between film and reality in an interview (Yu Sen-lun, 2003). Though the skywalk rising in front of Taipei station vanished with the place of the watch seller, Lee weirdly appears in a subway at the same location (ghostly

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11   The simile is used by Vincze (2020, 192–219).

joke) and on a staircase he accidentally meets the girl who doesn't recognize him. She goes down, Lee goes up, and at the top of the stairs – as if having seen a ghost – he turns, but has no time to linger because – having lost his job with the watches, he is hurrying to a casting for a porno film. The short film ends here only to open motivically for the next one, *Wayward Cloud* (*Tian bian yi duo yun*, 2005). The lovers cannot find either their common time, or their common place. They pass by each other as if they weren't there. It cannot be accidental that in this short film, which has a perfectly round story, one loses her identity, the other puts love up for sale. In addition to the universalization of the subaltern existence in Spivak's sense, the interpretation of Marx/Derrida about desire/libido as a commodity and about the stray nomadic subject torn from it, about this postmodern phantom which is constantly trying to find the voice of the subaltern hidden in all of us becomes possible.

The ghost does not kill the libido but resurrects/revives it in time. Suddenly we catch sight of the phallic clock hand that is revived by desire and the dead corpse that is galvanized to life. *What Time Is It There?* and the rest of the films suggest that art shifts, animates, love resets the clock, grief revives, resuscitates, breaks through membranes, opens passages; spirits and ghosts are already among us, we are ghosts ourselves.

Translated from Hungarian by Judit Pokoly.

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They Live: Violence, Horror and Spectres in Four Contemporary Argentine Films

Natalia Christofoletti Barrenha

Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava (Slovakia)
E-mail: nataliacbarrenha@gmail.com

Abstract. In the Argentine film *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, Lucrecia Martel, 2008), the protagonist Vero is haunted by the possibility of killing someone in a hit-and-run. Although hinting at the crimes committed during the last dictatorship in Argentina, *The Headless Woman* refers more to a mechanism of the past that is transformed and updated within contemporary society. In this essay, Martel's film acts a starting point in the exploration of recent Argentine films that deal with spectres from the past that pervade everyday life in the present: *Clementina* (Jimena Monteoliva, 2017), *One Sister* (*Una hermana*, Sofía Brockenshire and Verena Kuri, 2017) and *The Returned* (*Los que vuelven*, Laura Casabé, 2019). In a decade in which we can notice a remarkable growth of the horror genre in Argentine cinema, these films embrace several codes and characters from the horror genre to approach the Argentine reality. The author discusses how these filmmakers adopt similar aesthetic features from the horror genre to invoke and address the violence that permeates Argentine society today, with special attention devoted to ghosts, a key figure to understand an ongoing history of brutalities that usually go unresolved.

Keywords: Argentine contemporary film, horror film, ghosts and memory, violence, haunting and spectrality.

Introduction

In northwestern Argentina – the birthplace of film director Lucrecia Martel and the setting of her film *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, 2008) – it is believed that when there is a trauma, the soul leaves the body. This is what seems to happen to Vero, the protagonist of *The Headless Woman*, who roams about confused, resembling a zombie because she is haunted by the possibility of having killed someone in a hit-and-run on a deserted provincial road. Nobody notices Vero's altered state but her mentally ill, bed-ridden aunt Lala, who shares the vision of

cryptic apparitions with her niece and even guides her on that matter: "Don't look at them. The house is full of them. Shhh! They are ghosts. They are leaving. Don't look at them. If you don't look at them, they will go away" (translation by the author).

These are not the delusions of an old lady since Lala can detect something hidden behind Vero's unusual tone of voice. *The Headless Woman* depicts an erasure operation carried out by Vero's family: the dents in her car are repaired in a nearby town, the pieces of a baking pan broken during the impact are cleaned up, the hospital and hotel records are deleted. Vero tries to own up to her crime and take responsibility, but as the evidence fades away, she backs off and tacitly agrees through her silence, following the path suggested by Lala. The true story of the accident is never told. As stated by Natalia Taccetta, "the film shows how someone can disappear without leaving traces of those responsible and any risk of legal censure is blocked" (2011, translation by the author).

Martel has often remarked on her fascination with horror cinema and how the genre could unlock new readings of her films (Wisniewski 2009; Harvey 2017). As in a horror film, in addition to zombies, ghosts and the shuddersome title, *The Headless Woman* features things buried in the garden and terrifying tales about trees that move by themselves along the road, and it is populated by spooky acousmatic sounds (the blow of something hitting a fence, a wheezing in the dentist's office, the crackles of an x-ray, the hum of poorly tuned radios). Furthermore, the film echoes a dreadful past that affects the present: the mechanisms of negation, concealment, complicity and oblivion unleashed by the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983), which appear transformed and renewed within contemporary society.

Taking *The Headless Woman* as a starting point, this essay briefly explores recent Argentine films – *One Sister* (*Una hermana*, Sofía Brockenshire and Verena Kuri, 2017), *Clementina* (Jimena Monteoliva, 2017) and *The Returned* (*Los que vuelven*, Laura Casabé, 2019) – that adopt similar aesthetic features from the horror genre to invoke and address the violence that permeates Argentine society. In a decade in which there has been an impressive growth of the horror genre in Argentine cinema,[1] *Clementina* and *The Returned* adopt the canonical elements

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1   After a century in which the production of horror films was sporadic in Argentina, the genre has flourished since the late 1990s. The amateur feature *Zombie Plague* (*Plaga Zombie*, Pablo Parés and Hernán Sáez, 1997) became the most influential impulse for an expanding underground circuit that included not just the production of ultra-independent films, but also the development of festivals such as Buenos Aires Rojo Sangre and specialized distribution companies such as VideoFlims and SRN. In the late 2000s, the genre finally began to be backed by public funds, receiving a significant boost from the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA, in Spanish) through grants, screen quotas, film series on public

of the genre aiming at a niche audience, while *The Headless Woman* and *One Sister* do not strictly fall within the horror genre as such but still interact with it, portraying day-to-day life while embracing some horror tropes[2] and displaying not prototypical ghosts, but those who appear as mysterious, ethereal, dubious figures of questionable existential status.

I have chosen these films because they tackle different (but related) themes and approach horror in different ways while holding a metaphorical dimension by acknowledging *real* horrors. Horror deals with the expression of a widespread feeling in human experience (fear) and can be variously and diversely articulated – thus not necessarily pursuant to the features that became the basis for the genre. Therefore, the idea here is not to work with genre as something normative or closed, but as a productive critical lens for film analysis.

I will devote special attention to ghosts, which frequently appear in the four films. Haunting the present, ghosts are key to understanding past experiences of brutality and their impact on contemporary culture. I rely on the approach to ghosts proposed by Jacques Derrida, whose *Specters of Marx* (1994) is commonly considered the catalyst for the so-called *spectral turn*, establishing a new field – spectrality studies – in which the spectre is a concept that explains how the ghost and its capacity to haunt evolved from a supernatural phenomenon (fictional or otherwise) and conventional metaphor into a theoretical tool to examine culture and society (Blanco and Peeren 2013, 1–10).

Derrida's spectre is a deconstructive force that inhabits different time periods, disturbing the natural flow of events and traditional notions of temporality and history. It addresses injustices of the past that continue to inform the present, rejecting the idea that things should just be left behind and that the past is static while the present is uniform. Christina Lee states that "the spectre's return signals that there is still work to be done to prevent future injustice" (2017, 7), then articulating the futurity implicit in haunting. In line with Derrida, Avery Gordon considers the ghosts as vigilantes resulting from historical exclusion and invisibility (2008, xv–xx). According to her, ghosts are manifestations of repressed or unresolved social-political realities that refuse to vanish because there is

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television and exclusive spaces at prominent film market meetings such as Ventana Sur. This has led to a high-standard production with a broad distribution, from international festivals to Netflix (Rodríguez 2014; Risner 2018).

2   Laura Cánepa (2016) will name this variant that employs a tonal distance from mainstream genre expectations as *social horror*, which is in line with a global trend of contemporary horror cinema contentiously designated *post-horror*: a new wave of films produced in the 2010s mixing arthouse minimalism and established genre conventions so as to offer existential or politically "deeper" stories (Church 2021), such as *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).

still something at stake. As T. J. Demos affirms, "it is precisely the negations, disavowals, and rejections of historical responsibility and present advantage, occurring in political discourse as much as in cultural representations, that allow and even cause the ghosts to fly free" (2013, 12–13).

The Curse

In *The Headless Woman*, ghosts appear through the jerky, low-definition VHS of a wedding party, where Lala recognizes a friend who should have been dead by then, relatives who were senators and judges and even Monsignor Pérez, a local high-ranking clergyman who was the first one to refer to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo as mad women during the dictatorship. In addition to the washed-out VHS footage, ghosts also inhabit the aunt's dim bedroom, leave little handprints on the car's windscreen [Fig. 1], and surround Vero wherever she goes. Her face or the nape of her neck – always framed by flashy blonde curls – stands out at the forefront almost all the time, detaching the character from a blurry background. In that nebulous, out-of-focus zone there are ubiquitous shadowy profiles [Fig. 2]. Sometimes, they take human forms: as a young boy with Indigenous features (recalling the child whom the protagonist might have run over), or as domestic servants and other workers, who keep the protagonist's comfortable bourgeois microcosm running.

While hinting at the crimes committed during the last dictatorship in Argentina,[3] *The Headless Woman* approaches what strongly persists from collective violent behaviour, especially those attitudes minimized by their passive aspect. In the film, nobody cares about a possibly missing poor boy until his body is found in the canal and endangers the status quo where Vero, her family and her social class have rested for centuries. His disappearance is normalized, and his death would be ignored – so as in life, when he was just another spectre washing cars or carrying pots, inhabiting both the edges of the image and the edges of the town. Here, I am looking upon a broad notion of spectrality that enables it to encompass not only the ghosts of the past but the possible hauntings of those *living ghosts* produced in and by the present, as proposed by Esther Peeren: certain marginalized groups of people who are, for various reasons, perceived and/or perceive themselves as ghostly, phantasmatic or spooky in some way, on the basis of their lack of social visibility or unobtrusiveness (2014, 4–9).

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3   The authoritarian regime implemented a systematic plan that included abduction, detention in clandestine centres, torture, execution and improper burials, wiping out about 30,000 lives. Most of the Argentine population deliberately withdrew their gaze from these atrocities.

As Deborah Martin writes, *The Headless Woman* "does deal explicitly with questions of guilt, responsibility, trauma and amnesia, the central themes of post-dictatorship Argentine culture (and of the many films which reflect more explicitly on that period) but nevertheless avoids making that reference explicitly, and as a result re-focuses our attention on the violence and impunity of poverty and social marginalization contemporary with the film's making and its vague setting (1990s–2000s), even whilst hinting at their broader historical resonances. The film thus suggests a counter-memory that avoids neat expositions of the past yet at the same time reflects upon its traces, iterations and irruptions in the present" (2016, 80–81). In addition to the reiteration of an old sinister script that continues to be fully operational, the film mixes cell phones and contemporary cars with hairstyles, outfits and music[4] from the 1970s, establishing a retro atmosphere that reinforces the crossover of timelines. Likewise, Cecilia Sosa proposes, in her study of the film, how "the affects explored in Martel's film may be crucial in confronting the new faceless, that is, those whose social exclusion persists unnoticed during the current democratic regime, and whose lives are in a sense 'ungrievable.' [...] [And the] lives made to disappear during dictatorial times cannot be grasped except in conjunction with the silence surrounding poverty, the new spectre of the present" (2009, 250).[5]

It Follows

One Sister tackles similar issues to *The Headless Woman*: the contemporary disappearances of people, the helplessness of some sectors, and the complicity or indifference of society. It uses the same troubled chronology strategy of Martel's film: the setting looks like a ghost town frozen in time, making it difficult to establish with certainty when the story takes place. The desolate

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4   Two songs in the film are particularly relevant: *Zambita pa' Don Rosendo* and *Mammy Blue*, in the version sung by Demis Roussos. According to Mariana Enríquez (2008), the latter song became popular in the 1970s with Julio Iglesias's version and it is still associated with the dictatorship. *Zambita pa' Don Rosendo* was sung by folk singer Jorge Cafrune, who is widely known for using his voice as an instrument for social justice. The official story declared that his death by being run over in 1978 was an accident, but many believe it was an assassination devised by military officers linked to the government.

5   For insightful supplementary analyses that examine ghosts and the horror genre in Martel's film, see Oubiña (2022) and Verardi (2022), as well as the video essay by Grant (2019), which links *The Headless Woman* to the American B-movie classic *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, 1962), which the filmmaker considers as a great inspiration. Schwarzböck (2016) does not particularly scrutinize the film but engages in a dialogue with it in her work on the social, cultural, and political inheritances of state terrorism in post-dictatorship Argentina.

rural landscape at twilight, which is cloudy and cold, with an insistent mist that covers the scrubland, appears several times throughout the film. There are countless ruins across the village that seem abandoned, since human figures are never seen in the immense open spaces [Fig. 3]. The scenery could be defined as what Peter Hutchings termed an *uncanny landscape*, which is "suffused with a sense of profound and sometimes apocalyptic anxiety; it is also a landscape of a comprehensive dispossession and vacancy" (2004, 29).

The film accompanies the arduous journey of Alba, whose sister Lupe disappeared. It was produced in the wake of the far-reaching #NiUnaMenos [Not One Woman Less] movement,[6] and according to the directors (Betancourt 2016), one of its early references is the book *Dead Girls* (*Chicas muertas*, published in 2014 and translated into English in 2020), by Selva Almada, dedicated to recovering the stories of three teenagers murdered in the 1980s in small villages in Argentina. Another primordial spark for the filmmakers was the popular legend of *almamula*, about a woman who had sex with "innapropriate" partners (married men or members of her own family) and did not repent, and consequently was turned by God into a mule and condemned to wander through eternity dragging heavy chains. This curse can befall any woman who does not avoid unseemly temptations.

The guards, the noise of the police radio, the searching of a woman who, despised by the official forces, goes out to investigate the disappearance of her sister on her own, and the sceptical view of justice outlines a crime plot. Although the film is a whodunnit story, its development is rather elusive, since the question of who is to blame is never answered. Alba is constantly wrangling with bureaucracy and a lack of concern from the authorities, questioning acquaintances and strangers, receiving evasive answers or plain disinterest, and sketching potential suspects. However, the film moves away from the detective genre to venture out to a more oscillating terrain that employs non-linear events, the mixture between the real and the dreamlike, ambiguities and uncertainty.

Brockenshire and Kuri build up a strong sense of suspense to convey a "haunted aesthetic" based on indeterminacy. In terms of narrative, they hide facts and do not provide exact data. Visually, the film is flooded with darkness, shadows and furniture or objects that block the view, which increases the interplay between covering up and revealing things. Information is given but not fully exposed, which generates attention and apprehension in the audience. The visible is also

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6   For a brief overview of the #NiUnaMenos movement against gender-based violence, its achievements and challenges since its creation in 2015, see Alcoba and McGowan (2020), Prusa, Garcia Nice and Soledad (2020), and Leszinsky (2021).

strained when images appear through dirty, fogged glass, or when the source of light is intermittent flashes from torches, headlights and nightclub lighting. A significant scene is the children's hide-and-seek game on trains. In addition to the upsetting variation between darkness and bright spots of light, playing hide-and-seek is also linked to Alba's search as there are speculations, there is anxiety, and one needs to "find" someone who is not available, who is out of sight.

Acoustically, they make extensive use of off-screen sounds, which are emblematic in horror films because the shift between what is heard and what is seen creates a fundamental tension between the known and the unknown. These sounds represent gaps in a synchronized world, breeding fear due to the impossibility of anchoring or embodying a voice or noise (Donelly 2005). In *One Sister*, off-screen sounds are mostly present through anticipation: a sound may be extradiegetic in one scene but may become diegetic in the next, provoking a feeling of estrangement for a few seconds. Combined with the visual and the narrative instability that the film places us in, the use of off-screen sounds hinders our ability to normalize this technique. Additionally, the soundtrack is punctuated by artificial, low-pitch sounds, another disturbing element typical of horror films.

The lack of concrete explanation as to Lupe's whereabouts opens up new avenues for filling the void: in some scenes, Alba catches a glimpse of her sister's spectre [Fig. 4]. This apparition also harasses the wife of Lupe's boss, Teresa, who is introduced towards the end of the story. She has a different perspective than Alba, and brings new possibilities about what could have happened to Lupe. Like Vero in *The Headless Woman*, Teresa behaves as if she is hiding something. In other words, she tries to suppress a past event that will not stop haunting her.

Let the Right One In

One Sister focuses on the growing number of missing women and femicides in present-day (despite the enormous social mobilization and advancements in legislation in the last few years – Argentina passed an anti-femicide law in 2012), and the impunity that follows. The title *One Sister*, rather than *The Sister*, is a small but meaningful choice in locating the story it tells as if it were just one among many others. *Clementina*, released the same year as *One Sister*, could be another of these stories. It does not narrate a case of a disappearance,[7] but rather

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7   Monteoliva's following film *To Kill the Dragon* (*Matar al dragón*, 2019) is entirely devoted to this
     topic and recounts the disappearance of women through a fantastic tale that also uses elements
     from the horror genre.

of gender-based violence, through a variation of the classic setting of the haunted house intertwined with the theme of family loss. The female protagonist is in a state of constant peril and panic, enduringly haunted by mysterious events that can be interpreted either as supernatural or as proof of her insanity. However, it becomes clear that what fazes her is the fear caused by an abusive partner.

After a brutal battering by her husband Mateo, Juana suffers a miscarriage. He is at large, and it is not the first time he has attacked her. Upon leaving hospital, she refuses to report him or tell her parents about what happened. She lives an isolated life with no friends. In the many interviews with victims of domestic violence, the director has noted that women's isolation, in tandem with the withdrawal from her loved ones, is a common feature in abusive relationships[8]. Also in this regard, Mateo's proposal to flee to another city, start over from scratch and not inform anyone is representative of abusive partners.

The only people who know about Juana's situation are a neighbour, a policeman and a social worker.[9] Not having another place to go, Juana returns to the big apartment to which she had recently moved with Mateo. As Barry Curtis explains, "one of the features of the haunted house film is the uncanny animation of the house and its interiors; the flexing of margins and the refusal of objects to stay stored in place or within the limits of their customary significance" (2016, 11). That is exactly what happens in Juana's apartment. The restlessness that takes over the space is bolstered by the fact that the building is very old and under renovation, which at the same time justifies and enriches a mass of ambiguous sounds: the gasping on the phone, the knocking on the door, the water leaking, as well as paradigmatic horror noises, such as the tinkle of a music box and the giggle of a child.

On top of that, Juana does not change the locks, nor buy a mobile phone or carry a panic button. The dark and labyrinthine apartment where she lives, in conjunction with the high-angle shot that unrelentingly captures Juana, makes her seem even more fragile, lonely and at risk [Fig. 5]. It contrasts with her brief luminous hallucinations, always outdoors, where Mateo offers his hands in rare loving gestures, which the camera replicates by caressingly floating over her hair and skin. There is an actual luminous moment when Juana dances in the

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8   See the interview, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpSIs5MSCAg*. Last accessed 08. 10. 2022.
9   Even though differing from the complete institutional disregard that Alba experiences, the authorities who attend Juana do so insensitively; they are visibly ill-prepared despite their good intentions. It is shocking, for example, that the policeman, even armed, ends up killed by Mateo. In the case of *The Headless Woman*, the authorities (which seem to have long-standing ties with Vero's family) collaborate to cover up the possible crime, as we can infer from how the protagonist's husband, brother and cousin/lover proceed.

courtyard, bathed in sunlight, with expansive and buoyant movements. This moment is part of a series of small events that line up in Juana's itinerary towards healing: from cleaning her blood off the floor to going back to work, wandering around the city, sewing a dress and putting on makeup. As a witness of this process, the camera leaves the intimidating zenith position and starts moving alongside her until it culminates facing her head-on, showing the character in a resolutely empowered posture [Fig. 6].

If, initially, the paranormal prevails – the little ball that invites a macabre game, the television that turns on out of the blue, the neighbour's explanation, and finally the apparition of the baby Clementina – the menace of Mateo never ceases to hount Juana until it materializes on his return, which entails enduring his recurrent threatening behaviour. The outside world also enters the protagonist's private universe through her discovery of the lawsuit of Silvina Strada, a woman who is imprisoned for killing her husband after years of being beaten and mistreated. The Strada case pushes Juana to (strategically) take action. Meanwhile, Clementina is the ghost that returns to avenge her premature death, giving traction to the plans of her mother, who would do anything to have a second chance to protect her daughter.[10] In the gory ending, the mundane definitely triumphs, with the character "exorcizing" her ghosts by taking justice into her own hands.

The Hills Have Eyes

Like *Clementina*, *The Returned* ends in bloody carnage. The film takes place on a yerba mate farm in northeastern Argentina in 1919. It is organized into three non-linear but mirrored and complementary chapters, each representing the perspectives of protagonists Julia and Kerana, which converge in the final part. Julia is a white woman, the wife of Mariano, a powerful *hacienda* owner who rules with an iron fist and is an exponent of a colonialist, macho society based on the exploitation of the weak. After undergoing successive miscarriages, she gives birth to a stillborn child. Desperate, she ends up betraying the trust of her supportive mixed-race servant Kerana and asks Iguazú (a fictitious Indigenous deity)[11] to bring her baby back to life. The baby is resurrected, but not alone.

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10   A kind of female fraternity is formed (including the neighbour, a victim of gaslighting, who ends up in an asylum) that, directly or indirectly, influences Juana's decisions.

11   According to Casabé, the legend of Iguazú – described in the film as "giver and destroyer at her whim and will" – was created from the mixture of different myths from the Guaraní realm with the tale *The Monkey's Paw* by W. W. Jacobs and the novel *Pet Sematary* by Stephen King. See the

Three interrelated themes propel the story forward: one of them is the condition of women as white men's possessions, always in a place of submission and passivity. However, class, as well as ethnicity, plays an important role as the positions of Julia and Kerana are not equivalent – while the former can pass over her husband's violence, silently adhering to his decisions and fulfilling her role without conflict, the latter, being a servant, cannot enjoy the same kind of privilege. Julia's character is also complicated by her careless view of the complex spiritual cosmovision of the Guaraní universe and by how she appropriates the maid's son in her eagerness to be a mother, without questioning Kerana's sudden disappearance (she is secretly killed by Mariano). Through the appropriation of the child, a tenuous reference is made to not only the long history of taking children from Indigenous and enslaved peoples, but also the kidnappings and criminal appropriation of babies during the last military dictatorship, as well as the situation of impoverished families who, nowadays, see themselves obliged to "give away" their offspring due to the impossibility of raising them amidst extreme economic difficulties.

The Returned touches upon two other thorny issues. The first refers to the social conditions and the injustices of the Indigenous peoples in the Americas: murdered, displaced or reduced to servitude, they were deprived of their land, their culture, their bodies and, finally, their soul. They are *the returned*, zombies seeking to avenge those who have dispossessed them. The film retrieves this icon of the horror genre by relying on its metaphorical value as a reference to social exploitation, based both on the original Haitian folkloric myth of sugarcane workers transformed by voodoo to yield more in the plantations, and the tradition of the post-apocalyptic zombie as a result of the pathologies of capitalism, beginning with George A. Romero's cinema. Female complicity mutates Julia into a zombie, like Kerana and the other Indigenous people, as if she were considered one of them, or someone who fights alongside them. The second addresses the persistence over time of exploitative social and labour relations, which have not changed in centuries, and which points to the same machismo, land conflicts and racism in contemporary Argentina. This has kept Indigenous populations extremely marginalized and women as second-class citizens.[12]

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video posted on YouTube: Debate sobre o filme *Os Que Voltam* | XVII Fantaspoa [Debate about the Film *The Returned* | XVII Fantaspoa]. *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-8uRkOO_ys*. Last accessed 22. 09. 2022.

12   It is important to mention that Mariano's brother is a priest, which stresses the Catholic Church's role in this configuration: both the forced conversion and interference with women's bodies.

Laura Casabé (Transit Filmfest 2020) has revealed[13] that the film was inspired by the famous painting *The Return of the Indian Raid* (*La vuelta del malón*, 1892) by Ángel Della Valle, made in the throes of the so-called Conquest of the Desert, the frontier war waged against Indigenous populations in Argentina throughout the nineteenth century. At the time, the painting sought to synthesize and justify the military campaigns and concurrently feed the nascent Sarmentine binomial of "civilization and barbarism" (2003), with the Indigenous people being demonized as the savage who needed to be destroyed.[14] Another inspirational source for the director was the short story *The Mensú* (*Los mensú*, 2007) by Horacio Quiroga, published in 1917, on the semi-slavery regime that ruled yerba mate plantations in Paraguay and northeastern Argentina, which has not undergone substantive advances in the last hundred years.[15]

A "Quirogan" atmosphere is also noticed through the ominous and menacing jungle, which is so idiosyncratic in the oeuvre of the writer (Eljaiek-Rodríguez 2017). In the film, the humid, dense and chaotic jungle features prominently and haunts through its enigmatic and immeasurable nature [Fig. 7], evoking "the sublime" in its both wondrous and terrifying indifference to the human forms which it dwarfs (Church 2021, 143–144). The prevailing silence in these scenes only illuminates an infinity of unsettling noises, from the guttural murmur of the wind to a symphony of animals, unveiling a space full of life. Since the arrival of the colonizers, the jungle has been indiscriminately stripped of its riches, and the film juxtaposes the exploitation of this territory and the exploitation endured by the Indigenous people and women. Thus, the jungle is another monster that gathers the zombies, and it rises as a sort of spectre in *The Returned*: a source of deep-rooted terrors, whether as a green hell that does not submit to the supposed rationality of those who try to subjugate it, or as a refuge where the rebellion of the oppressed germinates.

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13   See the interview on YouTube, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygiW7qL-TRY.* Last accessed 8. 10. 2022.

14   *The Return of the Indian Raid* was painted for the specific purpose of being sent to the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago to commemorate the fourth centenary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World. It was the first image dealing with an issue with powerful emotive content of an unmistakably political and ideological magnitude, inverting the symbolic terms of invasion and plunder while implicitly suggesting the extermination crusade as the culmination of the conquering of America in relation to the 1492 celebrations. (See Malosetti Costa's comment on the painting: *https://www.bellasartes.gob.ar/coleccion/obra/6297/*; and the YouTube video, *https://youtu.be/TKtY00I2Ahs*, both last accessed 8. 10. 2022.). In 2010, Casabé embarked on approaching this subject with her first short film, also titled *The Return of the Indian Raid*.

15   See Re, Roa and Gortari (2017), and the documentary *Frayed* (*Raídos*, Diego Marcone, 2016).

If the threat embodied by the jungle shapes the exterior as dangerous, the interior is not safe either. Like Juana's apartment in *Clementina*, Julia and Mariano's house is inhospitable, labyrinthine and murky. There is a distinct tension-generating procedure that is reiterated not only in these two films but in all the works analysed here: the camera is placed, insistently, on the protagonists' shoulders [Fig. 8], accompanying them and connecting with their fears and expectations. On many occasions, the frames leave an empty space that can be filled, at any time, by a frightening irruption – an exemplary horror-specific device, as described by Julian Hanich: "in dread scenes the unbalanced composition cues us to expect the space left free to be filled by the killer or the monster" (2012, 164–165).

One more element repeatedly pervades our *corpus*: the thresholds that articulate the various places in the filmic space through doors, windows, cracks and re-framings, visually signalling the existence of borders, as well as their porosity. Metaphorically, these thresholds mirror the ghost's characteristic liminal position between life and death, presence and absence, materiality and immateriality, visibility and invisibility, natural and supernatural, past and present (Blanco and Peeren 2013, 2). Finally, the threshold is a place of crossing, of the passage between two different dimensions or states, which entails the possibility of a transgression and the destabilization of an order (Thibaudeau 2021, 136–137).

Spectral Justice, or They Live

Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez affirms that ghosts are portrayed as messengers of what is hidden: "either because it is difficult to talk about or because it is dangerous to unearth. Cinematic specters thus become incorporeal reminders of the effects of violence, social inequalities, and the rupture of taboos, all staged in a genre that is not traditionally recognized for its political significance (although from its inception it has been a well-suited form for representing the outlawed). [...] From this perspective, ghost stories are ways of narrating untold stories – belonging to the realm of the 'unspeakable' and the abject – as well as stories often unilaterally narrated" (2018, 126).

In the films discussed, the spectres shine a light on how atrocities committed throughout time form a chain of horrors that impact current social dynamics, including contemporary forms of violence and exclusion: from the colonialist (and later nationalist) genocide of native peoples and those erased by the dictatorship, to poor children who are run over by a car from which nobody gets out, raped

and murdered women, the Indigenous populations mired in poverty and disdain, and those affected by the immense deterioration of the welfare system and the increase of disparities driven by neoliberalism. As Sosa (2009) concludes about the ghosts of *The Headless Woman*, traumatic events can affect the whole of society beyond obvious sites of suffering, an observation that also applies to *One Sister*, *Clementina* and *The Returned*.

Following Derrida, Murray Leeder argues that ghosts "can signify the ways in which memory and history, whether traumatic, nostalgic, or both, linger on within the 'living present.' It can be a potent representation of and figure of resistance for those who are unseen and unacknowledged, reduced to a spectral half-presence by dominant culture and official history" (2015, 1). The ghosts are the consequence of a lack of human justice and an absence of recognition of damage, both individually and collectively, therefore they question the hegemony of a discourse and a system that denies and ignores it. Hence, despite Lala's advice to shut out and neglect the *espantos*, the vulnerability that assails Alba, Mateo's raging outbursts, and Mariano's pistol, these worlds are persistently challenged by disconcerting beings that, although erased or cloaked, have not entirely disappeared. Instead, they have remained to haunt the social imagination.[16]

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Figure 4. Alba recognizes Lupe's spectre in *One Sister*.

Figure 5. In *Clementina*, the "empty" spaces that surround Juana and the high-angle shot that captures her increase the impression that she is continuously in danger.
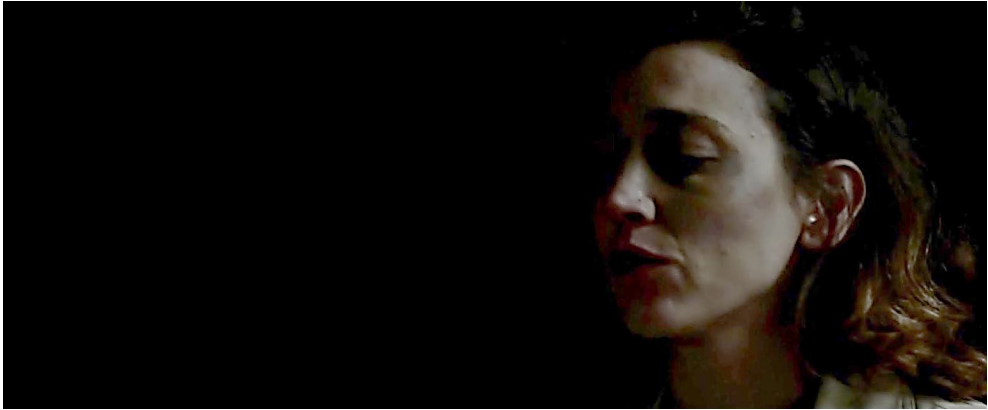
Figure 6. Towards the end of *Clementina*, Juana goes from being chased by the camera to facing it head-on, visually cueing that she is leaving her place as a victim and taking justice into her own hands.

Figure 7. The grandeur of nature shines through in *The Returned*, like when Julia meets the zombie Kerana.
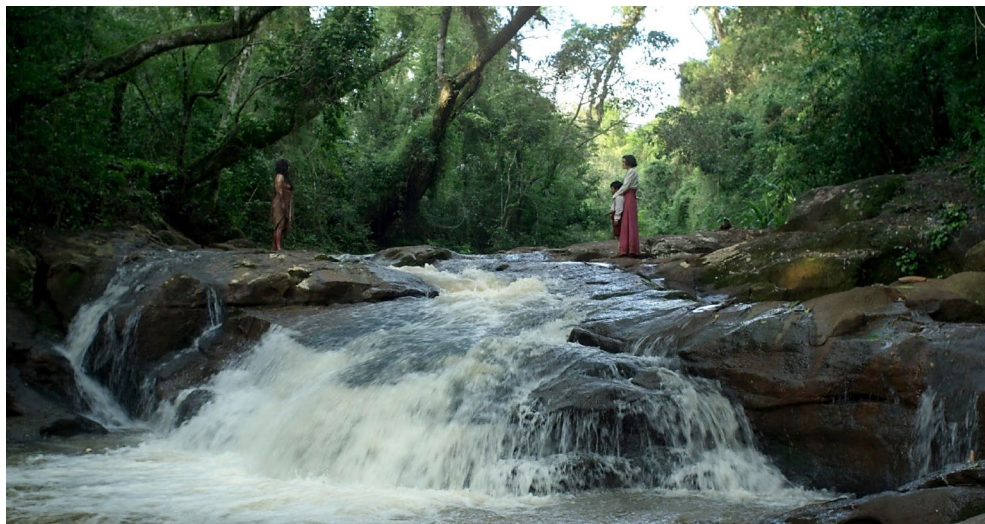
Figure 8. The camera focuses on Julia's shoulders in *The Returned*, a typical horror trope that generates tension, as well as the empty spaces left in the frame and the duskiness that hinders the vision.
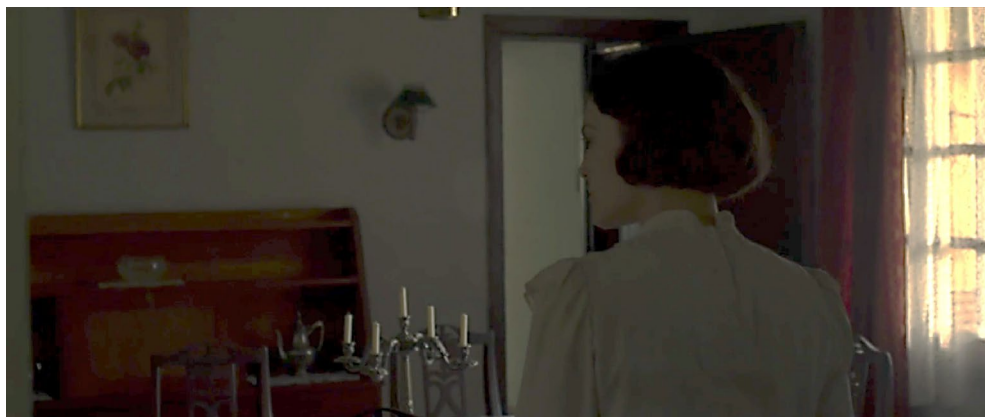
Between Troubles and Peace in Northern Ireland: Cinematic Divisions in Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* (2021) and Terry Loane's *Mickybo and Me* (2004)

Andreea Paris-Popa
University of Bucharest (Romania)
E-mail: andreea.parispopa@lls.unibuc.ro

Abstract. The Troubles officially ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, but the conflict left such profound scars in the history of the region that making a film about Northern Ireland tends to almost automatically assume a discourse informed by division. The question that arises, then, is how this context may be tackled so as to simultaneously do justice to its traditionally rendered black-and-white reality and offer a more complex, contemporary understanding of the past that embraces reconciliation, openness and multiplicity of perspectives. Thus, the paper offers a close analysis of multiple types of division featured in Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* (2021) and Terry Loane's *Mickybo and Me* (2004) by making use of John Hill's and Fiona Coffey's theoretical categorizations that distinguish traditional Troubles productions from the more recent Peace Process cinema. This genre-based inquiry allows for a probing of the films' positioning in relation to the Troubles paradigm, as well as a revealing of difference at the heart of two otherwise very similar films, whose employment of conventional vocabulary may not allow for their unproblematic alignment with the politics of peace.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Troubles, Peace Process, *Belfast*, *Mickybo and Me.*

Introduction

Cinematic depictions of the political and ethno-sectarian armed conflict that dominated Northern Ireland in the second part of the twentieth century have often lingered on the profound legacy of division that the region has come to be associated with. Its roots lie in the euphemistically-called the Troubles, which

saw the resurgence of the violent divisions generated by the country's partition and brutally brought to surface in the period between 1968 and 1998, claiming the lives of thousands of people on both sides of the Nationalist/Unionist, Catholic/Protestant barricades, before ultimately offering a promise of peace through the 1994 ceasefires and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. After having initially faced censorship on the part of the British government[1] and having assumed a general wariness to turn such a sensitive topic into cinematic entertainment, filmmakers started to lay the foundation for what would become the conventional Troubles paradigm.

Multiple critics, among whom John Hill, Martin McLoone, Ruth Barton and Fiona Coffey, have sought to identify distinctive patters of the Troubles genre in the cinematography of Northern Ireland, while also underlining the shifts in perspective brought about by the political Peace Process that allowed for a distancing from violence and a more complex, in-depth look at the conflict through the lens of the present. Thus, after the ceasefires of 1994, the decline in violence encouraged a more optimistic perspective which would have been impossible to put forth in the midst of armed struggle: "Given the changes in political climate, there was also the beginning of a move away from the traditional 'troubles' paradigm towards the development of new, more optimistic scenarios than had previously been the case" (Hill 2019, 196).

Although drawing categorical lines between Troubles cinema and Peace Process cinema may be difficult and critics may disagree in terms of the categorization of specific films, the quest for a better understanding of the genre led John Hill (2019) and Fiona Coffey (2013) to create templates that orient viewers with respect to the structural elements that are specific to traditional representations of the conflict. Hill carefully shaped his Troubles paradigm around the classic example of Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947), which is taken to be the epitome of the genre and the source of all its staples, while Coffey distinguished between closed and open texts, whose characteristics indicate whether the film is positioned within or outside the cinematic tradition of the Troubles. I have summarized their arguments in Tables 1 and 2 below.

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1   According to John Hill, British politicians have proven to be highly sensitive regarding the representation of the Troubles: "This, in turn, led to a growing reluctance to transmit certain kinds of material, the censorship of various programmes and, in some cases, outright bans. This policy also extended to the transmission of films relating to Northern Ireland that were deemed to be either 'controversial' or 'anti-British'" (2019, 193).

Table 1

John Hill: *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics* (2019)	
The traditional Troubles paradigm	**Peace-oriented films**
– Metaphysics over politics (the entrapment of fate > political complexity). – A conflict between private and public spheres (home and domesticity vs violent tragedy; romantic aspirations are destroyed). – Two different forms of male "hero" (e.g. the misguided but good IRA man vs the fanatical hardliner who is inherently violent). Examples: *Odd Man Out* (Carol Reed, 1947) – the first film that has ever dealt with the Northern Irish conflict since the 1921 partition.	– Ceasefire cinema (but the call for peace tends to be undermined by fatalism and sense of enclosure given by claustrophobic worlds that need to be escaped from). Examples: *Nothing Personal* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1995), *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan, 1997), *Resurrection Man* (Marc Evans, 1997) – Comedy and romance (optimism suggested by happy, romantic endings and the overcoming of divisions, yet many embrace a traditional return to the private sphere). Examples: *Cycle of Violence* (Henry Herbert, 1998), *Divorcing Jack* (David Caffrey, 1998), *An Everlasting Piece* (Barry Levinson, 2000) and *Mad About Mambo* (John Forte, 2000), among others.

Table 2

Fiona Coffey: Re-Envisioning the Troubles: Northern Irish Film in Transition 1990–2010 (2013)	
Troubles Films as CLOSED texts that are conflict-focused	**Peace Process Films as OPEN texts that are peace-focused (post-conflict outlook)**
– One position on the conflict (mostly Catholic).	– Multiple positions and perspectives.
– The context is closed, specific.	– The context is open, universal.
– Clear heroes and villains (essentialist representations: good, peaceful vs evil, violent)	– Ambiguous heroes and villains (conflicting interpretations)
– Clear victims and perpetrators (one-dimensional characters)	– Ambiguous victims and perpetrators (complexity and blurred lines)
– Demand for justice and punishment	– Questions and discussions of reconciliation

Fiona Coffey: Re-Envisioning the Troubles: Northern Irish Film in Transition 1990–2010 (2013)	
Troubles Films as CLOSED texts that are conflict-focused	**Peace Process Films as OPEN texts that are peace-focused (post-conflict outlook)**
– The breakdown of the family structure (in particular the father figure)	– The family remains intact (signalling positive growth, change)
Examples: many 1990s films, including *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan, 1993), *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan, 1997), *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George, 1996), but also some 2000s films such as *Peacefire* (Macdara Vallely, 2008) and *H3* (Les Blair, 2001).	Examples: many 2000s films, among which most notably *Five Minutes of Heaven* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2009) and *Omagh* (Pete Travis, 2004).

John Hill's and Fiona Coffey's templates complement each other very well, which allows me to use both of their theoretical categorizations in the analysis of the multiple facets of division that I believe are present in the cinematic representations of the Troubles in Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* (2021) and Terry Loane's *Mickybo and Me* (2004). The aim is to determine how these two films are positioned in relation to the Troubles paradigm and to what extent they reaffirm or subvert the Peace Process Northern cinematic tendency of recent productions. I have chosen these two films based on the discrepancy between their structural formation and the multiple remarking similarities at the level of production and content. Both of them have indigenous Northern Irish directors who are keen to introduce contemporary audiences to a Protestant child's eye view of the onset of the Troubles, while combining upbeat, feel-good and adventurous stories, with first-hand experiences of violence and metacinematic questioning of filmic representation. However, more often than not, underneath these similarities, the films differ in terms of their engagement with tradition.

The Sectarian Divide: Antagonism and the (Im)possibility of Taking Sides

Considering that the stories of both *Belfast* (2021) and *Mickybo and Me* (2004) are set against the beginning of the Troubles, in 1969 and 1970, respectively, they make sure to emphatically underline the segregation of the city of Belfast, where

everyone belonged to either one side of the sectarian divide or the other. What I am interested here is not in determining how historically accurate the films are, but to what extent they make use of conventional Troubles vocabulary, while also reflecting a presentist perspective upon the conflict, which would blur instead of reaffirm the gulf between the two communities and would avoid siding with one group (in particular the Catholics) over the other.

Before addressing the stances taken, it is important to highlight the visual representation of the sectarian divide, which both films employ. If on the level of content, the naïveté and innocence of the young protagonists is infectious and prompts viewers to momentarily forget about the tragic and violent nature of the divided society of Northern Ireland by joining Buddy, Jonjo and Mickybo in a gleeful prelapsarian jump, as they lift their feet off the ground[2] and seemingly forget about the Troubles, the colouring and frame composition of the films work in the opposite direction. The children's escapism, albeit fragmented and short-lived, exists, but the viewers are constantly reminded that the featured historical context embraced binarism and left little room for ambivalence and inbetweenness. Thus, viewers are visually confronted with the black and white reality and splitting nature of the city.

Belfast's black and white aesthetic renders the antagonistic discourse of the region and, as Kenneth Branagh asserts, this is the lens through which he remembers his childhood environment: "The city seemed monochromatic to me throughout this period, including what I could watch on television. Everything stayed gray in my mind, […] Films helped me understand the world at a tender age…" (Branagh quoted in Daniel 2022) [Fig. 3]. It is this last statement about cinematography that explains the sporadic splashes of colour. Branagh begins and ends his film with colourful, contemporary images of Belfast, which seem to announce a look at the past that is informed by the Peace Process, by an openness towards a multiplicity of colours, yet the sky always remains clouded, indicating that regional peace is still a work in progress. Buddy's artistic escapism is also symbolized through the colourful rendering of the film and theatre plays that he watches. Through art, the child's mind transcends the gritty reality in which he lives and literally exemplifies the Wordsworthian "colouring of imagination" (1802, 3) [Fig. 4].

Mickybo and Me also plays with colour, albeit in a subtler manner. The children's attempted escape to Australia is featured in bright colours [Fig. 5], as

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2   The posters of both films envision the children midway through their jump, with both feet off the ground, illustrating their playful and innocent separation from the violent world that surrounds them.

they travel along Northern Ireland and even cross the border into the Republic of Ireland, yet all depictions of violence that are based purely on the sectarian divide are displayed in cold, blue shades that are closer to black and white than they are to colour [Fig. 6]. For instance, the explosion at the beginning of the film, the bullying of Jonjo by the older Catholic boys and Mickybo's own violent, sectarian attack on Jonjo at the end of the film differ sharply from the warm, colourful adventure that the boys embark on in their escape. The transitions from colour to almost black and white are a constant reminder of the segregation of Belfast, which disrupts the boys' colourful friendship, but choosing to end the film on a positive note, Loane has the very last scene and ending frame go back to intense colouring, so as to underline the positive change that Belfast has gone through since the Troubles. Yet, much like Kenneth Branagh's last scene, it comes across as a rather forceful superimposition on an already highly impactful black and white division.

In addition, the frame composition is also reflective of the sectarian divide, since *Belfast*'s many split frames (by walls, pillars, alleyways, windows, etc.) [Figs. 7–8] are so frequent that they give the impression that division has become part of ordinary life and is inescapable in the context of the 1969 Troubles. The same strategy is used in the 2004 film and although the splitting is less common, it is far from being less impactful. More specifically, the oxymoronic dividing bridge simultaneously splits the neighbourhood and the cinematic frame horizontally exactly at the midway point, with Jonjo at the centre,[3] while the two railroads, symbolistic of the two communities, provide an additional division on the vertical axis [Fig. 9]. The imposition of division is reinforced by the voiceover: "Back in 1970, the whole world knew that Belfast was a divided city. Neighbourhoods were turning into ghettos […] The bridge was the dividing line between us and them. The Protestant and the Catholic. I'd been told a million times not to cross it. The other side was like the other side of the world."

A second example of this strategic splitting of the frame appears towards the end of *Mickybo and Me*, when Jonjo is chased by the same bullies, with the exception that now Mickybo has joined their ranks after having learned to hate Protestants indiscriminately. Now, viewers are visually reminded of the sectarian divide through a door that occupies the entire frame and divides into two equally blood-red windows that deny Jonjo any shelter from violence and allegorically

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3   The two bullies that follow Mickybo also stop at the very same spot, but unlike Jonjo and Mickybo, they do not dare to cross the dividing line and firmly remain within the safety of their own community, showing that they are unable to transcend their one-sidedness.

render the viewers' eyes and the cinematic gaze of a film that self-consciously points towards itself as a Troubles production [Fig. 10].

In the midst of this unrelenting opposition, the point of view from which the narrative is presented is paramount in deciding if and how a different stance may be taken. In both cases, the perspective is that of children seen through the cinematic lens of Branagh and Loane, who reflect upon their own Protestant upbringing during the Troubles,[4] which is also made evident through almost identical framing of boys from behind [Figs. 1–2]. This offers the promise of a refreshing, defamiliarizing take that counters so many Troubles films that mainly embrace the Catholic/Nationalist side, to the point of rendering the Protestant community either blameable for the violence or utterly invisible, off-frame (Bazin 2013, 2). This trend has been established by many critics such as Martin McLoone, according to whom "the majority of screen representations are either about nationalist culture in the south or about republican, as opposed to loyalist, paramilitaries" (2005, 226), Gary Mitchell, who maintained that "if you judged Northern Ireland purely on the basis of films you would think there are no protestants here" (quoted in McKittrick 2008) or David McKittrick, who firmly asserted that "republicans have basically had the big screen pretty much to themselves" (2008).

The nine-year-old boys Buddy and Jonjo are painfully aware that they must distinguish between Protestants and Catholics, but from their point of view this is nonsensical and there is no real basis for discrimination. Consequently, religious differences are a source of humour for Buddy, who jokes with his mother about Catholics being thrown water on them and plays games with his friend Moira, for whom sectarian identity is all about pretending and bluffing. "Moira: They can just come up to you, when yer not expectin' it, and ask you, 'Are you a protestant or a Catholic', but it's a trick question you see, cos they don't tell you what they are, and what do you say then? To not get a dig in the gob?/ Buddy: I'm a Catholic?/ Moira: Wrong. That's exactly what they think you will say. They think you're tryin' to bluff them. But you have to double bluff them […] You say, "I'm a Protestant"./ Buddy: But I am a Protestant. /Moira: That's the point" (Branagh 2020, 22–23). The lack of foundation for segregation and collective hatred is evident through the fact that it is something that the children do not understand and have to be taught about: "Moira: Well how the hell are you supposed to know then?/ Buddy: You have to get taught it" (Branagh 2020, 21).

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4 While Kenneth Branagh wrote an original script, overtly and heavily lodged in personal experience, Terry Loane worked with an adaptation of Owen McCafferty's play *Mojo Mickybo*, but also acknowledged the mirroring of his young self in Jonjo, the film's child protagonist and narrator.

Although the stance has shifted and the perspective is that of Protestants instead of Catholics, *Belfast* does not seem to manage to move entirely beyond the Troubles' traditional one-sided view of the conflict, since there is still only one position that is presented: that of peaceful Protestants. While Catholics are not blamed, they are definitely silenced, since in Kenneth Branagh's film there is no insight into what they feel, think or want to achieve, and Catherine, Buddy's love interest and the only individualized Catholic character, barely talks. It thus seems that although omnipresent and often mentioned, the Catholics of this film are little more than a backdrop, a necessary prop for the exploration of the conflicted minds of peaceful Protestants.

When Jonjo and Mickybo meet for the first time, one of the first things they establish is where they are from, but the difference in affiliation does not prevent them from wanting to form a gang and unite against two older bullies. In the ghetto-based region, the question of location betrays one's beliefs, which is why Jonjo, who spends time in Mickybo's neighbourhood, is recognized as an outsider and asked multiple times where he is from: "Mickybo's Ma: You're not local, son. Where did our Micky find you at?" and "Fartface: Where are you from, Jonjo?" This pressure is lifted once the children run away. It is then that they become inseparable so much so that throughout most the film, viewers most likely do not care which of the boys is Catholic and which one is Protestant. There is insight into both communities through the boys' families, but the polarities between them are erased through the protagonists' close friendship and their being seen as children whose world separates them from that of the adults. This perspective is valid until the end of the film, when the divide reappears and becomes deeper than ever, despite an evident attempt at reconciliation. Having considered the alternate tracing and erasing of the sectarian divide, it is important to point out that although the perspective remains that of Jonjo, Terry Loane's equal treatment of the boys entails a refusal to decisively focus on one group more than the other, which places *Mickybo and Me* closer to the conceptual shift given by peace process films.

Perspectives upon the Status Quo: Metaphysics or Politics?

According to John Hill, it is part of the cinematic tradition of Troubles cinema to "avoid focusing on the complex politics behind the violence and instead, retreat into metaphysics which feeds the films' fatalistic perspectives" (Hill 2014, 182). The fact that both *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* are presented as family films featuring children's adventures facilitates this avoidance of politics, and the

violence that does appear is not accompanied by much contextual explanation, but rather simplified as the consequence of a conflict that arose solely on sectarian lines, between Catholics and Protestants. There is no mention of Loyalists and Republicans, nor of the country's instability, which makes sense in a story told from the point of view of boys who know nothing of politics, but the absence of exploration in this direction makes the brutal acts of violence seem sudden and unexplainable. For instance, the riots and explosions that change Buddy's previously peaceful neighbourhood appear to him and to the viewers out of nowhere and with no context attached to them. The little political information that reaches Buddy's ears is through the television and radio reports, but all that he hears is fragments that are difficult to put together in a coherent manner. Therefore, Buddy does not know why their neighbour Billy Clanton targets some people on their street and the lack of understanding turns the villain into a criminal without a cause. Instead of politics, fate seems to come to the forefront: the multiple images of clouded skies go hand in hand with the acceptance that, as Buddy's Ma says: "the Irish were born for leavin'" (Branagh 2020, 64) and as his Pa yields: "it's a mad world" (Branagh 2020, 59), giving the impression that there is nothing to be done other than leave a city that appears to be doomed and devoid of rationality. In this manner, Branagh embraces the Troubles' "adoption of the vocabulary of fatalism [which] must work against a political explanation" (Hill 2014, 181).

Just like Buddy's unexpected plunge into violence, the two main explosions of *Mickybo and Me* are sudden and with no story attached to them: the first one abruptly interrupts the extra-diegetic Irish song at the beginning of the film, while the second one, just as unexpectedly wakes Jonjo up from his sleep. In addition, when Mickybo's father is murdered in a local pub at the hands of a fanatic, the child imagines a dialogue with his father in which explanation for his death is simply that "some joker just came in and started shooting all around him." Hence, as Pat O'Connor sustained, violence is assumed and accepted, rather than explained and analysed (quoted in Hill 2014, 182). The only explanation for violence that Jonjo is given comes from Mickybo's mother at the end of the film. In a similar vein to Buddy's father, she states: "The men in this country's gone clean mental," illustrating the acceptance of irrational violence. The fact that there is no point in actively involving oneself in changing the situation is underlined by Mickybo's impossibility to change his father's death, which is doubled by the impossibility to change his own fateful turn towards violence. The sense of fatalism is so strong that the children can only envision a supernatural, fictional being as their potential saviour: Jonjo says "if Superman was in Belfast, there'd

be no bombs," and later Mickybo declares, "if Superman was there, he would've stopped the bullets, wouldn't he, Da?"

Another characteristic of Troubles cinema that encourages the reliance upon metaphysics rather than politics and fatalistic acceptance rather than optimistic action has to do with the representation of the city. There seems to be a "pattern of decontextualization characteristic of earlier films concerned with the IRA" (Hill 2019, 198) that refuses to engage with the political implications of the city. Consequently, Belfast comes to be stripped of realistic details, of geographical peculiarities and landmarks, becoming an abstract and placeless city, similar to Robert Warshow's "sad city of the imagination" (quoted in Hill 2019, 191). This tradition began with pre-ceasefire cinematography that would use stand-in locations for Belfast (for security reasons) and presented the city as a nondescript place that the characters had to escape from. While for Coffey, this openness of context entails a universality of the plot that is specific to Peace Process films, for John Hill, this feature is found in *Odd Man Out* as well, the quintessential Troubles production: "In this respect, the film's representation of the city works less to denote an actual place (Belfast) than connote 'the city in general' and the 'universal' drama to which it plays host" (Hill 2019, 192).

In line with this tradition, *Belfast* (despite its title) was not filmed in the actual city because of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions which led to building a set just outside of London instead. Not only are there no landmarks or specific Northern markers apart from a few writings on walls, but Buddy's street could be anywhere, all the more since it lacks texture and realistic detail. This aspect, alongside perfectly clean streets and pristine locations, reminds viewers of the artificiality and constructed nature of a film that exists in its own fictional universe. Hence, the nondescript city brings about a sense of entrapment, which confirms *Belfast*'s allegiance to the traditional Troubles paradigm: the barricades that separate Buddy's street from the rest of the city induce a claustrophobic feeling of isolation[5] that is most evident through the small-scale set, but also through the contrastive images of children playing freely versus shots of their games being filmed through the barbed wire of the barricades that imprison them. The same concept is exemplified through the film's topic, as Buddy's family finds it ever more evident that the only way forward is by escaping the city.

Even though *Mickybo and Me* is filmed in Belfast and some of the places on the screen are recognizable, what does not change is the need to escape. This time, the

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5   The fact that Kenneth Branagh wrote the script of *Belfast* while isolating himself during the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have been transposed on screen.

children's ardent desire is to leave behind not only the city, but the entire region and head towards perceived salvation and independence in Australia – a dream that only Jonjo manages to achieve as an adult. The beautiful images of Ireland allow for a bracketing of the Troubles, although the children carry the suppressed conflict with them everywhere they go. For instance, when Mickybo looks at the barn fire he accidentally started, the violent burning prompts him to quote his favourite film by saying "for a moment there, I thought we were in trouble." The allusion is not only to the name of the Northern Irish conflict, but because it is a direct quote from George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), it uses metacinema to push the viewers into the realization that they are watching a film and, more specifically, a Troubles film. In this case, the sense of imprisonment is also present, but it comes mostly from the adult viewers' understanding that, whatever the children do, they cannot escape Belfast's troubles and their quest to reach Australia on their own can only be seen as futile child's play.

The Dividing Line between Heroes and Villains: Family and Violence

Through the eyes of young boys, the Troubles seem to be a fight between superheroes and villains, which proves to be problematic in terms of the contemporary cinematic trend of depicting a more complex Northern Ireland in which characters are not defined by a single facet of morality. As both Fiona Coffey and John Hill acknowledge, there has been a long tradition in Troubles cinema to pit two binary types of Irishmen against each other: "the misguided but fundamentally decent IRA man […] versus the more fanatical, hardliner […] who remains wedded to the violent prosecution of 'the cause'" (Hill 2019, 192) or "the fundamentally good/peaceful Irishman and the evil/violent IRA man" (Coffey 2013, 177) or "the classic 'hawk and dove' dichotomy that underlines so many Troubles narratives" (Barton 2004, 160). I argue that this division has not been blurred and the children's perspectives tend to make it even more evident. Despite the fact that there is no mention of the IRA, the two categories of Irish men still divide heroes and villains on account of their peaceful vs conflict-driven outlook.

For young Buddy, the line between good and evil seems to coincide with that between the private and the public spheres: it is his family that provides him with a safe haven away from violence, and thus becomes heroic by offering a very strong support system and educational roadmap for the boy. This is in tune with John Hill's paradigmatic tension between the private and the public realms,

which he recognizes as a staple of Troubles cinema: "it has been a feature of 'troubles' drama to counterpose the public world of politics and violence to the 'private' world of home and family" (Hill 2019, 200). In *Belfast*, there is a clear opposition between the unflinching commitment to peace of Buddy's family and the fanaticism of other Protestants, which "stress[es] the primacy of the personal sphere of home and family over the destruction and chaos of the public world of violent conflict" (Hill 2019, 192), while simultaneously, decisively shaping "'the man of peace' versus 'the man of violence'" (Coffey 2013, 177).

The two models for peace and soft masculinity that Buddy has are his father and grandfather, both of whom articulate a type of masculine identity based on non-violence and a commitment to family, a Peace Process characteristic (Farley 2001, 203) that brings the film close to the sensibilities of contemporary audiences. Thus, as a "man of peace," the father refuses the insistent call to violence that his neighbours impose upon him and stands his ground by teaching his children that there are no sides (although the statement is immediately followed by the past tense). Violence is only an option when there is an immediate threat to the family's safety. Also, as a true father-figure, Buddy's Pop instils in the boy the desire for peace through domestic, mundane conversations such as one about mathematics, which is in fact a social commentary in which the grandfather helps Buddy position himself on the side of the good, moral Irishman who counters "the (religious) long division" with "sums" and "the one right answer" with an openness for dialogue. "Buddy: God, this takes ages, no wonder they call it long division. Pop: Patience. Patience with the sums. Patience with the girl. Buddy: Is it 27?/ Pop: It's close enough. […] Buddy: But sure there's only one right answer. Pop: If that were true son, people wouldn't be blowin' themselves up all over this town. (Branagh 2020, 40)

Conversely, other male figures outside of Buddy's family, such as Billy Clanton, as well as a minister that Buddy is fascinated with are represented as teachers of violence and division. There is no question that Clanton is the villain of the story and his acts of violence are unambiguously evil and positioned at the opposite pole to the father and grandfather's rejection of violence. As a one-dimensional villain, the neighbourhood bully seems to be innately violent and since there is no background or context to soften his portrayal, he becomes a mere caricature of the violent Irishman that, as both John Hill and Martin McLoone point out, originated in the British colonial discourse that stereotyped the Irish as violent: "Ireland was also presented as a society torn asunder by violence and internecine strife, where a proclivity to violence was seen as a tragic flaw of the

Irish themselves. This again was often presented as the result of ignorance and a lack of progress" (McLoone 2006, 34).

Similarly positioned on the side of villains who stand for the public sphere is a minister whose episodic appearance turns into an obsession for Buddy. This is another instance of the advancement of a pro-conflict perspective through an antagonistic, black and white discourse that allows for the existence of only two roads: one towards good and the other one towards evil – a haunting image that the child takes very seriously: "This is the most worrying moment of his life" (Branagh 2020, 61).

In *Mickybo and Me*, the dividing line between heroes and villains becomes one that is traced between the child of peace and the adolescent of violence and, ultimately between children and adults. The two bullies that chase Mickybo and Jonjo are older boys, adolescents who have already internalized the aggression of the men of their society, which is what places them in the role of villains who perpetuate sectarian violence and (for most of the film) are shaped in opposition to the "children of peace," Mickybo and Jonjo. If at first Mickybo unflinchingly rejects the call to join the bullies against Jonjo, he later succumbs to violence, renouncing his childhood innocence in favour of a forcibly assumed adulthood. It is only after his father is killed that the young man imagines being called "the big man" and, as a result, assumes the role of the violent Irishman that he associates with adult masculinity and takes on "violence as the legacy from father […] to son" (Farley 2001, 206).

Through Mickybo's rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, from peace to violence, the film advances the argument that society as a whole is to blame for teaching these children (and future adults) the path towards violence. While both *Mickybo and Me* and *Belfast* employ the old binary division between two types of Irishmen and both intimate that children are not born violent but have to be taught how to play that role, it is only *Mickybo and Me* that shows that process of teaching on screen as a cautionary tale through the painful transformation of a character, whereas *Belfast* plunges in a traditional division that, without context and historical understanding, allows for no middle ground between Buddy's father/grandfather and Billy Clanton/the minister.

The Division between Heroes and Villains: Metacinema and Violence

Another important manner through which the demarcation between heroes and villains is established is through metacinema: all three of the boys (Buddy, Mickybo and Jonjo) have a passion for cinematography. The films that they watch are intermingled with the films in which they exist, giving rise to metacinematic renditions of film within film that have an important role in helping the boys understand their world, the harsh conditions that surround them, all the while constructing images of heroes and villains. Heterofilmic reflexivity (Gerstenkorn quoted in Limoges 2021, 172) is achieved through explicit intertextual references to other films: in this sense, *Belfast* appropriates multiple short scenes from films that Buddy watches in order to deal with the family's potential decision to leave the city as well as films that prompt him to view his family as perfectly good characters and actors; Micky and Jonjo's obsession with a single film, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), helps them cope with the violence of their world and allows them to indulge in the illusion that they are main characters who can escape the law like Butch and Sundance and leave behind the adult world of the Troubles.

In both productions, film watching and cinema going are reserved for the good characters: the boys are shown in the cinema through medium close-up shots, with their transfixed eyes glued to the screen, fully immersed in the films they are watching [Figs. 11–12]. Through such frames, the viewers recognize a mirror image of themselves, as they occupy a similar position while watching *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* – this ensures that through the process of identification, the cinema-goers are comfortably placed in the position of positive characters and the cinema becomes a safe place for "children to be children," as they let themselves engulfed by fiction, as opposed to the harsh reality of violence.

As already established, for Buddy it is *his family* that is endowed with the aura of positivity and peacefulness and forms the group of clearly good and moral characters, so they all talk about films and go to the cinema to watch family-oriented feature films such as *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Ken Hughes, 1968). Pa wants to take Buddy to the big picture house, for him to "forget about this whole bunch of eedijits" (Branagh 2020, 16) and Granny tells him that as a child, she used to think she could climb inside the screen. The metacinematic blurring of the border between film and reality affects Buddy too, as he seems to see his parents as film stars: at the beginning of the film, he hears his neighbour, Frankie West,

calling Pa Steve McQueen, a reference to the American actor that is reinforced through the subsequent whistling of the theme of the film *The Great Escape* (John Sturges, 1963), which foreshadows the father's desire to escape Belfast and his heroic nature. Cinema also helps Buddy view Billy Clanton as a fictional villain taken straight out of an animated film, as the script describes the boy witnessing his "superhero punch" "in graphic profile […] like a cartoon" (Branagh 2020, 34) and the direct confrontation between Clanton and Pa unrealistically sees the latter disarming the villain through a single, perfectly aimed throw of a rock that also seems to be taken straight out of a film.

In addition, seeing the world as film helps Buddy come to terms with his departure: for instance, watching *Star Trek* (Gene Roddenberry, 1966–1968) on TV encourages him to view England as a new planet that has to be explored and going to see *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (Gordon Douglas, 1964) eases Buddy into the world of gangsters, which he can recognize in the relationship between his father and Billy Clanton. The same bringing together of cinematic fiction and reality is underlined by the artificial street and houses that draw attention to their status as props, the multiple framing of windows and Buddy's imagining of both of his parents as perfect performers who dance in the street, while people watch and clap, as well as singers-dancers at the end of the film, when Pa sings "Everlasting Love" and dances with Ma in an exaggeratedly extravagant scene that draws attention to them being two beautiful actors whose performance makes them the centre of attention.

Mickybo and Jonjo's assumption of the identities of their favourite outlaws adds another metacinematic level of embeddedness to the story, as the actors John Jo McNeill and Nial Wright engage in roleplaying within the role. That is, they play Mickybo and Jonjo, who, in turn, play Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, respectively, underlining the performativity and constructed nature of film: "Mickybo: Here, I'm Butch, you be Sundance. […] I'm Butch, right? You're Sundance and I'm Butch. I started this gang. I run things here. […] Now come on and we'll blow up something, partner."

Not only are scenes from the original film presented through what Fernando Canet calls "restaged allusion" (the filmic past is brought into the diegetic present through screenings or dreams) in the multiple occasions in which the boys go to the cinema, but they are also "appropriated" (Canet 2014, 21) through interposed shots of the Irish boys and the American cowboys. George Roy Hill's film is also parodically assumed when the young boys constantly employ phrases taken as such from the original dialogue, sing the original theme song and even re-create

a wanted picture of Butch and Sundance and re-enact the cowboys' bank robbery and iconic cliff jump.

The children's fascination with the two film characters may be explained through their relating of the bombings of their community with the explosions in the film and the gun violence of Belfast with the outlaws' constant use of guns and narrow escapes. This is particularly evident when Mickybo uses almost the same words to describe the film and an actual explosion on his street, conflating thus the two ontological worlds: "Mickybo: When he kicked the big ugly guy up the balls. That was class" and "Mickybo: You should've seen that place burning. Nearly burnt down the whole street. It was pure class." It is the violence experienced through the safe place of the cinema that helps the boys cope with the real violence in their lives and leads them to shroud traumatic experiences in the veil of adventure and fictional game, so that a severed finger found in the aftermath of an explosion may be considered a treasure.

Moreover, the cinematic association between masculinity and violence that Mickybo and Jonjo internalize while watching *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* is cemented through the recognition of it as an essential element to their conflict-ridden communities. Yet, despite being robbers, Butch and Sundance are likeable outlaws who can hardly be considered villains. Despite their use of violence, they are charismatic, relatable, entertaining and positive characters, which brings the children into a grey area of ambiguity within which it is no longer easy to separate the good and the bad based on their alignment with the propensity towards violence typified by the villains of the Troubles paradigm.

Catalysts of Suffering: the Gap between Victims and Perpetrators

As maintained by Fiona Coffey, fluidity in the interpretation of victims and perpetrators is an essential element of Peace Process cinema in Northern Ireland: "Peace Process films can be seen through the blurring of the line between victim and perpetrator. Perpetrators in Peace Process films are often riddled with guilt, contradictions, and shame for their actions, and the films ask the viewer to approach these characters with compassion" (Coffey 2013, 180). Thus, it is important to understand the approach that *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* take in the portrayal of these two categories.

The Catholics from Buddy's street, who are most impacted by the conflict, remain silent, yet it is very clear that they are represented as the embodiment of

ultimate victims who have done nothing wrong and who are never seen as engaging with violence, not even at the level of reactive aggression used in self-defence. At the other extreme, the fact that Protestants have traditionally been portrayed as perpetrators does not change in *Belfast*, so Billy Clanton and his gang fit this role perfectly. Indeed, Buddy's Protestant family is the exception that confirms the rule. They are undeniably portrayed as victims who are forced to move in order to escape the threats from their fellow Protestants and even though they are not nearly as harassed and targeted as their Catholic neighbours, there is simply no ambiguity as to the fact that they are on the victims' side. It seems that one of the few characters that have the potential to blur the line between these two categories is the family's neighbour, Frankie West, who does not necessarily agree with the violent cause, yet he joins it immediately. However, this character remains a minor one, is not focused upon in the diegesis, so throughout Branagh's film, viewers know exactly where to stand, who is being treated unjustly and who is to blame.

At first sight, *Mickybo and Me* also seems to firmly dictate who victims and perpetrators are: like their cinematic heroes, the two young boys are sympathetic and charming, and the fact that they are children adds to the feeling of endearment and to the understanding that their pretend-violence does not make them aggressors. Conversely, the older bullies and the adults are always on the side of culprits. Yet, upon closer inspection, Jonjo is the only character who remains categorically spotless. The most violent and shocking transition is that of Mickybo who, at the end of the film, is seen as going from victim to perpetrator and turning on his friend Jonjo, punching, kicking and even slashing him with a pocket knife, in a symbolic reversal of their blood brotherhood, all the while being visibly conflicted.

The status of the Catholic bullies is also questionable since they may both be given a background story, but the fact that Mickybo joins their ranks reflects upon their condition as well and it is not difficult for the viewer to infer that they might have gone through a similar loss and subsequent conversion as the protagonist. This brings ambiguity to their depiction, all the more so, when the superficiality of their courage is visually revealed through one of them wetting himself when confronted with a real gun. Finally, Mickybo's father is evidently a victim of sectarian crime, but his character cannot be interpreted in black and white terms, since his absenteeism, passivity and negligence when it comes to Mickybo's education have been a leading factor in the boy's turn towards violence. Thus, the empathy and compassion for "the enemy," the dual status of victim and perpetrator, as well as the ambiguity and problematization of the two

categories are essential characteristics of Peace Process films and point towards an openness for dialogue and an interrogation of the past that does not have already established answers.

Divided Families: the Frail Line between Optimism and Pessimism

The pessimistic outlook of Troubles cinema is usually focused on division rather than unity, and this becomes most evident at the level of the family and close relationships. There is a fatalistic breakdown of the family structure, particularly driven by the figure of the father, which confers a sense of doom and inescapability that mirrors the state of Northern Ireland: "In Troubles films […] father figures are absent or dead, single mothers abound, and children are killed, imprisoned, or must flee the North for their survival" (Coffey 2013, 185). At the opposite pole, Peace Process films encourage more optimistic perspectives in which romantic relationships eventually flourish and families are reunited, which reinforces the politics of peace: "Reconciliation is thus configured not as the coming together of the two tribes, but as the reinstatement of the family unit" (Barton 2019, Ch. 6).

In *Belfast*, separations from family members and friends are presented as temporary, with the most notable exception of the grandmother's painful isolation. Pop's death is not depicted as permanent and is immediately followed by a farewell party that brings everybody together in song and dance, and as the family leave the city and the boy must renounce his love interest, the absence of romantic resolution is not envisioned as something tragic, but rather a light-hearted departure accompanied by a promise to return. While there is optimism on a personal level (Buddy remains happy, his nuclear family is intact), little to no hope is expressed in terms of the city's eventual peace settlement, since the only way for the family to prosper is by leaving Belfast. The fact that Buddy's grandmother (an important piece of the family structure) is left behind becomes the focus of the final scenes of the film, as it is her grieved face that the camera focuses on as Buddy and his family move on. As her head rests upon the vertical lines of a glass door, the viewer is reminded of the imprisonment of the city (once again, the screen is split down the middle) and although in its very final frames, Belfast returns to colour, to a contemporary view of the city, the image is still dark, the sky still overcast and the dusk is still representative of the North, with no indication of the family's reunification or of Buddy having ever returned to Belfast.

The strong bond between Mickybo and Jonjo may be seen as "a variation on the 'love across the barricades' scenario" (Hill 2019, 211) or as a forbidden brotherly bond that is insisted upon through multiple references to them being partners like Butch and Sundance, "blood brothers," united against everyone else: "Mickybo: It's me and you now, Sundance. Us against the world." The fact that their friendship meets an abrupt and violent separation with Belfast teaching young Mickybo that division takes precedence over friendship is reflective of pessimism in relation to the possibility of there ever being peace between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

In terms of the boys' families, no attempt is made for them to be shaped as perfect, but rather they are revealed as negligent groups that leave the children to their own devices and do not take any interest in their activities. Even so, as the film progresses, there is a marked shift towards disintegration that culminates with the destruction of the father figure in both cases. As Jim Sheridan states, such a downfall is reflective of that of an entire society: "the father figure becomes a kind of decimated symbol when you have a crushed culture. Once you destroy the father figure, the figure of authority, then you haven't got a society" (quoted in Coffey 2013, 185). In this sense, it is impossible to overlook the abrupt death of Mickybo's father at the hand of the opposing sectarian group which marks the breakdown of the entire family and, as the Catholic mother suggests to young Jonjo when she sends him away to his own neighbourhood, the destruction of the private sphere results in lack of stability and security at the level of the entire region: "Jonjo: Looking for Mickybo, missus. Mickybo's Ma: He's not here, son. Nobody's here [...] I'm sitting here without a slice of bread and the man I love is in the bloody ground. [...] Mickybo's gone. There's nothing for you down here now, son. Nowhere is safe. So... go back to your own."

In turn, Jonjo's nuclear family is dismantled through the father's symbolic death in the eyes of the young boy. The first-hand witnessing of the father's affair and the ensuing separation leave him in search for a father figure and, as opposed to Mickybo, he finds it in his mother: "when Jonjo's Ma visits the same ice cream parlour previously frequented by his Da, in the first time we observe her character outside of a domestic setting, the female character is literally reclaiming space and autonomy from the male" (Pugh-Cook 2019, 56). It is perhaps this newly found stability given by the mother occupying the role of the father, which, coupled with Jonjo leaving Belfast, allows the now-adult narrator to settle in Australia and become a father himself, as shown in the photograph of his picture-perfect family that is in alignment with the Peace Process cinematic vision of an

optimistic ending. However, in the final scenes of the film, the adult Mickybo is found solitary, in what seems to be the same bar that his father was murdered in and despite the letter's explicit mention of peace and hope regarding the situation of Northern Ireland, the Catholic man is not depicted as a potential father and, in his case, the divided family and the lack of paternal authority can only cast shadows upon the future of the city that he has chosen to remain in.

Conclusion

Both *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* tackle the Northern Irish Troubles through children's playful perspectives and while they feature comic, light-hearted moments of endearing tenderness that celebrate the innocence of childhood and its imaginative beauty, the Troubles are never out of sight and multiple divisions self-consciously cut through the fairy-tale surface. My interest has lain in assessing the commitment that these two artistic productions have with respect to either the traditional Troubles paradigm or Peace Process cinema, as envisioned by critics John Hill and Fiona Coffey, through an analysis of multiple types of division.

The first division that I have considered is the sectarian one between Protestants and Catholics. At a visual level, the play between black and white and colour, as well as the splitting of cinematic frames work to aesthetically reinforce the antagonistic discourse at the root of the Northern Irish struggle and prompts the viewers to remember that this is a context in which the pressure of taking sides is ever present. As they come around to this new reality, Buddy and Jonjo present an original Protestant take on the conflict that is transformed into a game of guessing names and living locations. While it is evident that all three boys have to be taught how to discriminate against the other group in order to fit in, *Belfast* shows difference of opinion within the same community while maintaining a one-sided focus on Protestants that does not leave space for any Catholic insight, whereas Terry Loane's film offers equal attention to both communities and cinematically bridges the historical gap between the two.

John Hill's division between metaphysics and politics, with the former overtaking the latter as far as classic Troubles films are concerned, has proven to be valid in both cases, as the wilful elusion of the political context, along with a spatial sense of imprisonment, plunge the films into the metaphysical fatalism of a decontextualized city that is engulfed in an irrational violence from whose imprisonment the only way out is emigration. In terms of the division between

heroes and villains – revealed most evidently through familial depictions and metacinematic games – as well as the line between victims and perpetrators, the criteria that inform them are no longer based on sectarian identity, but rather on the rift between the private and the public spheres and that between childhood and adulthood, both of which are ultimately based on the traditional "man of peace" versus "man of violence" distinction. There is no call for justice or punishment, but *Mickybo and Me* has proven to be more resistant to clear-cut categorizations, whereas *Belfast* lends itself to rather unambiguous constructions that close the filmic text and dictate where viewers' sympathies should lie, which is reminiscent of old Troubles films that structure themselves around binary systems.

Last, but not least, both Kenneth Branagh's and Terry Loane's films ultimately embrace a pessimistic ending that goes beyond and against the positive, escapist and often light-hearted perspective of their children protagonists, revealing the disruption of precious relationships and the disintegration of the family unit. Friendships across the barricades exist in both films and they all end in separation; despite one being smoother and more playful and the other more abrupt and violent, they both elicit a great sense of loss. In *Belfast*, the head of the family, the grandfather, dies and, despite the father's insistent promotion of non-violence, dialogue and love, the city remains a place of division, departure and desolation rendered through the final diegetic image of the grandmother who is painfully left behind, while in *Mickybo and Me*, the end of the boys' friendship and the dissolution entailed by the physical and symbolic deaths of their fathers similarly associate the region with a sense of hopelessness that a belated letter and a photograph of peace in Australia do little to rectify.

Although both films take as historic background the beginning of the Troubles in Belfast, they also overtly acquire a twenty-first century, presentist perspective that makes it possible for them to cast a playful retrospective gaze at the conflict and find levity and playful entertainment amidst violence. *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* may be very similar at the level of content and, at first sight, they are undoubtably post-2000 Peace Process films, but upon closer analysis, their characteristics reveal that neither of them may be unproblematically placed within this category. If Terry Loane's film insists upon multiplicity in representation, openness and ambiguity in the interpretation of heroes/villains and victims/perpetrators, it also avoids politics and signals what seems to be an inevitable renewal of the cycle of violence that goes against the optimism required out of peace-oriented cinematic productions. In a similar vein, yet even more decidedly turned towards tradition, Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* subverts its

commitment to the Peace Process genre by relying upon Troubles tropes that cover the dialogue of peace of soft father-figures underneath the film's singularity of perspective, the metaphysical fatalism that takes precedence over politics, the essentialist distinction between the peaceful and the violent Irishman, the binary dictation of viewers' sympathies and the painful but necessary separations.

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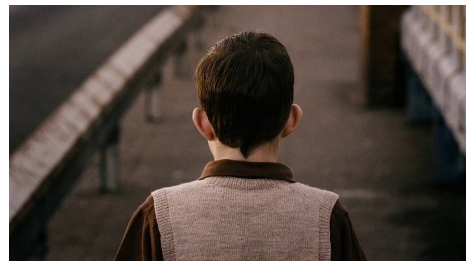
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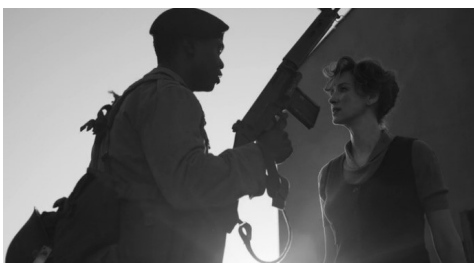
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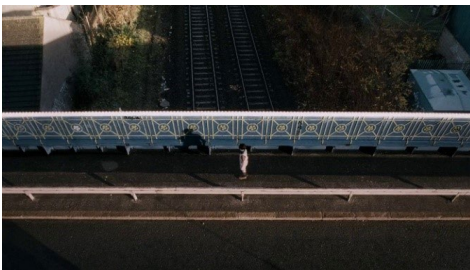
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A Metamodernist Utopia: The Neo-Romantic Sense and Sensibility of the *Bridgerton* Series

Anamarija Šporčič

University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)
E-mail: anamarija.sporcic@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract. The paper addresses the cultural paradigm of metamodernism as conceived by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010). Ontologically, metamodernism is perceived as oscillating between the modern and the postmodern, whereby the tools of postmodernism (such as irony, sarcasm, parataxis, deconstruction, scepticism and nihilism) are employed to counter (but not obliterate) modernist naivety, aspiration and enthusiasm. This oscillation results in what the above authors have termed "informed naivety," a phrase denoting a state of wilful pragmatic idealism that allows for the imagining of impossible possibilities. Vermeulen and van den Akker's two key observations about the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism in contemporary art are discussed in this paper, namely the (re)appearance of sensibilities corresponding to those of Romanticism and the (re)emergence of utopian desires, in an attempt at a metamodernist analysis of the Netflix adaptation of the *Bridgerton* book series, aimed primarily at elucidating its popularity as one of the most watched programmes of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: metamodernism, utopia, Neo-Romanticism, informed naivety, Bridgerton.

Introduction

Streaming services and content platforms have become increasingly popular over the past ten years and some also evolved into production companies that generate their own content. At the forefront of this revolution in visual media consumption is Netflix, Inc., an American company that, according to statista.com (see Stoll 2022), boasted 192.95 million paid subscribers as of the second quarter of 2020 and is available in almost every country across the globe. With the global Covid-19 pandemic confining people to their homes, demand for online entertainment increased (see e.g. Ofcom's *Media Nations 2020* report) and services such as Netflix benefitted greatly. According to BBC News from

October 2020, the "firm reported a record $790 million in quarterly profit, as revenue increased more than expected to $6.4bn" (Sherman 2020), cementing the company's dominance among subscription-based video streaming services.

On Christmas Day 2020, Netflix premiered the first season of *Bridgerton*, a series created by Chris Van Dusen and Shonda Rhimes, which quickly became its most watched content in 76 countries, reaching a viewership of 82 million households that saw it either partly or in its entirety (Andreeva 2021). In spite of Netflix's problematic 2019 change in methodology when it comes to their audience metric (the company having switched from previously counting 70 percent of an item viewed as a "view," as opposed to the two minutes of viewing that constitute a "view" present; see: McClintock 2020, Coates 2020), and the fact that their viewing figures are not verified by a third party, the numbers presented are nevertheless impressive and exceed Netflix's own four-week projection (that the company issued ten days into the series' run) by about 19 million (Andreeva 2021). *Bridgerton* thus very quickly became one of the most watched programmes of the Covid-19 pandemic and even though its success was later eclipsed by other series (see e.g. Bean 2021), *Bridgerton*'s perplexing popularity is worthy of further investigation in several directions. In the present article, I shall be focusing on the idea that the series appears to exhibit metamodernist characteristics that could help shed light on an emerging sensibility that is likely to replace postmodernism as the cultural dominant, with postmodernism no longer being able to offer a satisfying response to the crises of the contemporary world.

"Why Settle for a Duke When You Can Have a Prince?"

Netflix's *Bridgerton* is based on American author Julia Quinn's novel series of the same name, with nine books published between 2000 and 2013. The novels themselves are typical historical romances set in London during the Regency era, each book following one of the eight alphabetically named siblings of the upper class Bridgerton family in their pursuit of romance and the loves of their lives. The ninth and final instalment, called *The Bridgertons: Happily Ever After* (2013), is a collection of so-called "second epilogues" to all the previously published storylines, as well as an additional story about the family's widowed matriarch Violet Bridgerton. Netflix has thus far only released the first season of *Bridgerton*, which consists of eight episodes and is based on the novel *The Duke and I* (2000), but has renewed the series for a second season in January 2021 and, additionally, for a third and fourth season in the spring of the same year (Kanter 2021).

Quinn was already a best-selling author prior to the success of the Netflix series, having won the Romance Writers of America Award in 2017 and her books regularly ranking on the *New York Times* bestseller list, yet the novels are fairly typical representations of the Austen-inspired historical romance genre and do not exhibit many of the characteristics that I wish to discuss here, therefore I shall primarily be focusing on the televised version. While the Netflix adaptation does stay true to the plot, the characters (with some additions and subtractions) and the wit of the original, with the viewer also being informed at the beginning of the first episode that the story is supposedly set in London of 1813, it is very clear that the makers of the series wanted, as Chris Van Dusen put it, "to make the show reflect the world that we live [in] today" and also desired "modern audiences to be able to relate to it" (Jean-Phillippe 2020).

This has led to some interesting choices in terms of structuring the narrative, but the most striking change was the fact that the creators opted for so-called colour-blind casting, i.e. not settling on a character's race before choosing the actor for a specific role. The result was a racially diverse cast, which inevitably led to several multiracial relationships, not least between the two protagonists of the first season, the white Daphne Bridgerton (played by Phoebe Dynevor) and the black Simon Basset, the Duke of Hastings (played by Regé-Jean Page). Other multiracial relationships include the real-life white British king George III, whose queen consort Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Sterlitz is played by the Guyanese-British black actress Golda Rosheuvel, with the character never actually appearing in the novels themselves in any capacity whatsoever. The idea for casting the Queen as a black woman may be a combination of two factors, namely the fact that the real Queen Charlotte was rumoured to have been mixed race (a speculation that resurfaced in the media after Prince Harry's engagement to Meghan Markle in 2017, see e.g. Brown 2017 or Blakemore 2018), and the fact that the televised version of *Bridgerton* uses the monarch's relationship with a black woman as an explanation for the racial equality that we witness in the world of Netflix's *Bridgerton.* Interestingly, the question of race is only addressed once in the entire first season, when Lady Danbury (played by the black actress Adjoa Andoh), a good friend of Simon's late mother, explains that black and white people used to belong to separate societies and were divided by colour until the king fell in love with a black woman, adding that "love, Your Grace, conquers all." Racism therefore effectively ceases to be an issue, with black characters presented as equal members of the British aristocracy that partake in all of its activities, from being presented at court as debutantes to competing for suitable love matches during

"the season." Colour-blind casting was certainly a novel choice for a period drama and enabled the creators to also venture into the realm of fantasy and utopia in fields other than race, ensuring that the lack of historical accuracy is seen by the viewers as a choice rather than a series of *faux pas* on the part of the creators.

While some critics find the series problematic for fear that the "Netflix generation has lost its grip on history," as it "doesn't take much to swing the balance of historical knowledge further and further away from the truth" (Strimpel 2021), others see colour-blind casting as a great opportunity for casting diversity, but stress that "continued colorblindness after casting can result in the perpetuation of stereotypes, however unintended" (Luders-Manuel 2021). Luders-Manuel draws our attention to Marina Thompson (played by mixed race actress Ruby Barker), a character whose fate in the novels is considerably more tragic than that on screen, and yet "her storyline closely mirrors the stereotyped role of the 'tragic mulatta,' a popular trope in abolitionist fiction" that was often used "to garner sympathy from white readers" (2021). Marina Thompson is the distant cousin of another prominent family called the Featheringtons, is a member of the upper middle class rural gentry and is sent to London to live with her relatives. It is later revealed that she is pregnant and therefore sentenced to "a sensationally tragic courtship season, used as a counter to Daphne's chastity and innocence and as a cautionary tale to the other young debutantes" (Luders-Manuel 2021).

Other considerable deviations from historically accurate portrayal abound, among the more prominent being the lack of poverty on the seemingly immaculate streets of London (with the exception of one short and aesthetically non-traumatic scene), costumes that do not seem to make more than one appearance per piece of clothing, and the behaviour of characters that is often closer to how we would expect people to react to certain situations nowadays, as opposed to the early 19th century.

Bridgerton does, however, generally follow in the tradition of period romances, with the rather unoriginal storylines, the shallow dialogue and the constant pursuit of yearning for true love. Instead of content that has come to be known as "something for the dads," the show unashamedly targets female and gay audiences by, for example, brimming with largely unnecessary footage of the Duke of Hasting's glistening torso during boxing matches – the sport only having become a hobby of the Duke's in the series as the character exhibits no such interest in the novels. So why is it that this vacuous, gaudy, "expensive assemblage of clichés that smacks of the American's-eye view of Britain's aristocratic past" (Strimpel 2021) and appears to be a product of some strange, if seemingly well-intentioned,

historical revisionism, resonated so much with audiences around the world in the midst of a global pandemic?

Enter Metamodernism

According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, postmodernism has run its course and "lost its sway on contemporary aesthetics and culture" (2015, 56). Similar observations have been put forth by many other scholars (see e.g. Eshelman 2008, Kirby 2009, Toth 2010 and Nealon 2012), including some previously at the forefront of research into postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon (2002) or Ihab Hassan (2003). Although postmodern(ist) legacy in the form of various discursive and ideological approaches continues to inform contemporary artistic and cultural production, recent decades have seen postmodernism decline and wane as the cultural dominant, giving way to an emergent, if presently still elusive, post-postmodernist sensibility. Many attempts have already been made to try and make sense of the multitude of changes and developments that have occurred in the last two decades and could no longer be suitably critically appraised or understood through the prism of postmodern discourse. These propositions have been branded as various -isms , such as altermodernism, hypermodernism, digimodernism, remodernism, automodernism, renewalism, performatism and metamodernism, to name but the most prominent ones, and tend to focus on different aspects of art and popular culture. It is currently too early to predict which, if any "of these movements will develop into a fully-fledged school of thought of the magnitude that the postmodern had" (Rudrum and Stavris 2015, xxvii), as there is as yet no consensus on what exactly is to (or has) replace(d) postmodernism. These attempts, however, nevertheless represent important starting points to analysing the contemporary social situation and related newly emerging sensibilities.

   In their influential 2010 paper, *Notes on Metamodernism*, Vermeulen and van den Akker attempt to identify and articulate a new cultural sentiment within a framework sufficiently flexible to accommodate the various ongoing developments of our age. Luke Turner, another key proponent of metamodernism and author of *The Metamodernist Manifesto*, notes that for the generations brought up in the 1980s and 1990s, "postmodern irony and cynicism is a default setting, something ingrained in us" that is now nevertheless being countered with "a yearning for meaning – for sincere and constructive progression and expression" (2015). In other words, with our existence very much "characterized by a deepening of the

neoliberalization of the institutional constellations surrounding (a hence purer form of) capitalism" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 57), in combination with a multitude of crises (be they ecological, financial, political, or even medical in nature), there is a growing desire and need for contemporary culture to go beyond "deconstruction, irony, pastiche, relativism, nihilism, and the rejection of grand narratives" (Turner 2015) that defined postmodernism. Instead of cynical judgements and a constant sense of doom emanating from postmodernist ideas such as Jameson's "senses of the end" (1991, 1) or Fukuyama's "End of History" (1992, xii), metamodernism proposes a re-introduction of optimism, collaboration, "sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism" (Turner 2015).

Rather than re-invoking modernism in its original form or rejecting postmodernism altogether, a key concept of metamodernism appears to be that of oscillation between the two. Metamodernism, therefore, does not completely negate what it is trying to surpass, nor does it attempt to simply replace one set of elements by (re)introducing others. Instead, it aims to articulate the present condition by ontologically continuously shifting, repositioning and negotiating between the modern and the postmodern, history and ahistoricity, sincerity and irony, optimism and pessimism, "hope and melancholy, [...] naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 6) and so forth. Whatever the poles, which do not necessarily represent binary opposites and of which there may be many, the tensions between them cause the pendulum to swing incessantly, constantly being pulled back and forth due to neither/none of the options being intrinsically better, optimal or even necessarily the ultimate one, thereby creating the metamodern moment. Vermeulen and van den Akker describe metamodernism as a moment of radical doubt, of "constantly shifting and repositioning between [...] the innumerable poles, before ultimately having to choose, despite knowing it may not be the best choice" (Southward 2018, 78–79).

Neo-Romanticism and Informed Naivety

Proponents argue that metamodernism is "most clearly, yet not exclusively, expressed by the neoromantic turn of late" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 1) and propose "a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage" (Turner 2011) as one of the ways of understanding the new sensibility. Much

like postmodernism, Romanticism has many ambiguous, vague and sometimes conflicting definitions. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010, 8) turn to Romanticism as identified by Isaiah Berlin, who saw it as a collection of co-existing binaries such as "unity and multiplicity," "beauty and ugliness," "art for its own sake and art as instrument of social salvation," "strength and weakness," "individualism and collectivism," "purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death" (all 2001, 18). Such understanding of Romanticism allows for an interpretation of Neo-Romanticism as a key element of the emerging metamodernist sensibility, since Vermeulen and van den Akker propose that "the Romantic attitude can be defined precisely by its oscillation between these opposite poles" (2010, 8) as observed by Berlin. They then proceed to narrow this down to the (perhaps somewhat too) general notion of "the Romantic as oscillating between attempt and failure" or "a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony," claiming that it is this very oscillating movement that leads to the hesitation from which "the Romantic inclination toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny stem, aesthetic categories lingering between projection and perception, form and the unformable, coherence and chaos, corruption and innocence" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 8).

This brings us once again to the metamodernist use of oscillation as a key tool in dealing with the postmodern legacy of contemporary ontological dissatisfaction and general state of nihilism. The imperative of having to make one choice while being persistently drawn to others leads to what metamodernists have termed "infomed naivety," which Vermeulen and van den Akker also describe as "pragmatic idealism" (2010, 5) and Turner as "a moderate fanaticism" (2015), with all perceiving it as going beyond (yet still taking into account) the modern fanaticism or naivety, as well as postmodern apathy and scepticism. Informed naivety (and especially its occurrence in the context of Neo-Romanticism) may sound as somewhat reminiscent of the great Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's concept of "willing suspension of disbelief," yet informed naivety differs from it substantially in that its main goal is not merely the facilitation of escapism but providing a methodology that enables an examination of various alternatives. In contrast to the postmodernist resignation and dystopian acceptance of all attempts as futile, but also in partial opposition to modernist enthusiasm, informed naivety represents a situation in which "two opposing or alternative ideological positions […] that in some way negate one another, are sought to be occupied simultaneously" (Southward 2018, 78) as one attempts to "turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized"

(Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 8), yet still attempting to "attain some sort of transcendent position, *as if* such a thing were within our grasp" (Turner 2015). The Neo-Romantic sensibility of metamodernism therefore attempts to be both ironic and sincere at the same time without one eliminating or diminishing the other, although without the two necessarily co-existing in a balanced state.

Bridgerton is an interesting example of the metamodernist understanding of Romanticism, yet not (solely) because the story itself is set in (a version of) the Romantic period, although it does exhibit a myriad of typical Romantic traits, such as obsession with childlike innocence, emphasis on individuality, the positioning of emotion above reason, devotion to love and beauty and so on. Yet the key elements linking it to metamodernism do not lie in its setting as such, but in its easily discernible oscillation between irony and sincerity or the previously mentioned modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony (as introduced by Mul 1999 [1990], 25). The creators of the series were well aware that they were not filming a traditional historical romance and they convey that in many different, occasionally deliberately ironic ways, from conscious colour-blind casting to distinctly period-inappropriate choice of wardrobe colours and models, as well as opting for classical renditions of popular contemporary songs (such as Nirvana's *Stay Away* or Taylor Swift's *Wildest Dreams*) as the accompanying score. *Bridgerton* simultaneously reinforces and challenges the traditional tropes of the genre, the above-mentioned deviations being a clear signal to the viewer that the content they are watching is determined to come across as more progressive than anticipated, yet also (knowingly) failing to fulfil that goal. The viewer is constantly being pulled back into the 19th century reality of misogyny, gender and class inequality that continues to flourish in spite of many of the key characters (e.g. Queen Charlotte, Lady Danbury and the mysterious Lady Whistledown) being powerful females and the male leads perhaps exhibiting more gentleness and emotion than are to be expected in more traditional incarnations of the genre. And that is exactly what Vermeulen and van den Akker's New Romanticism focuses on, "the swing between attempt and failure" and "the idea of failure in spite of itself" (Southward 2018, 80), with Bridgeron behaving *as if* certain more pleasing aspects of it (such as complete racial equality) were a viable option and at the same time being fully aware that they are not.

The Return of Utopia

In addition to a sensibility not unlike that of Romanticism, another stand-out element to recur throughout the (as yet relatively slim) body of metamodernist research is the pronounced presence of utopian desires. Over the course of the last two decades, many scholars have observed signs of re-emergence and reappraisal of utopia in a variety of contemporary cultural milieux, be it in performance art or architecture (e.g. Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015 or Turner 2015), film (e.g. MacDowell 2017) or literature (e.g. Southward 2018). Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that "the utopian turn is part and parcel of the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism that took place in the 2000s" (2015, 55) and view it as a tool in trying to generate feelings of sincerity, community and hope. These goals also represent one of the major differences between the postmodernist and metamodernist understanding of utopia, with the latter aiming for re-, rather that de-construction. Postmodernism may have accepted utopia to an extent as a platform for exploration of societal and other changes, but rejected it as a "blueprint for the future" because it does not conceive of it as a "politically radical process of ongoing critique" (Wagner-Lawlor 2017, 234), but rather understands it as a static and final ideological construction that is naïve of anyone to anticipate and should therefore be viewed with cynicism. Utopia in postmodernism "was avoided as something suspiciously totalitarian while it morphed into its generic "dystopian" cousin (in cyberpunk, for instance) or turned into debris after the operations of deconstruction" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 57).

Metamodernism takes these considerations on board, "reappropriates conventions associated with postmodernism" and "redirects and resignifies them towards new horizons" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 60), therefore attempting to rehabilitate utopia by focusing on its role in the process of (re) imagining (im)possibilities with a renewed idealism much more typical of modernism. The importance of utopia as a tool in the search for alternative possibilities, rather than an ideological end goal has, of course, been noted before. Wagner-Lawlor turns to two authors who emphasize the importance of utopia's plasticity more than one hundred years apart, with Oscar Wilde observing in his 1891 essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* that "progress is the realization of Utopias" (1910, 27) and Jeanette Winterson, in her essay *Art Objects*, noting that (as paraphrased by Wagner-Lawlor) "without the possibility of difference and change, utopia tends toward the fascistic or the dictatorial. A process utopia requires possibility, awaiting" (Wagner-Lawlor 2017, 234).

The recurrence and reimagining of utopian desires is also not an unexpected consequence of living in uncertain times in general, with the Covid-19 pandemic contributing the proverbial cherry on top of the cake of pre-existing political and economic instability. The social and economic tendencies behind the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism (that can very generally be summed up as intensification of neoliberalism or a shift from what Jameson (1991 [1984]) termed late capitalism to what has come to be labelled as global capitalism) appear to have also significantly contributed to the millennial generation in particular feeling that "today's deal is not the deal they signed up for during the postmodern years" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 58). According to Turner, "we have witnessed the emergence of a palpable collective desire for change" (2015) in recent decades, and consequently utopia "as a trope, individual desire or collective fantasy – is once more, and increasingly, visible and noticeable across artistic practices" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015, 57).

While the awareness of utopia as a tool has been previously noted and the re-emergence of utopia is also not an unexpected companion of turbulent times, metamodernist utopia differs from its predecessors in the awareness of its own limitations, as we witness a "yearning for utopias, *despite* their futile nature" (Turner 2015, emphasis added). Turner notes that there is a desire for "sincere and constructive progression and expression" (2015) present in contemporary society, meaning that the re-emergence of utopia is not to be disregarded as mere wishful thinking, but perceived as part of a new narrative of longing and belief. Even if a certain goal, for example complete racial or gender equality, can never truly be achieved, metamodernism treats all goals *as if* they were achievable. The combination of modern(ist) naivety and postmodern(ist) scepticism inspired "the metamodern discourse [to] consciously commit […] to an impossible possibility" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 5) and therefore progress for the sake of progression, move for the purpose of moving, attempt for the sake of attempting, regardless of potential failures that it may recognize as unavoidable. A metamodernist utopia is not an existent perfect society, but rather a facilitator of longing that may (or may not) help in exploring alternatives to the existent state, a notion that can also be detected in the first season of the *Bridgerton* series.

Bridgerton as a Metamodernist Utopia

Utopia fits in well with the metamodern idea of oscillation precisely because it is an inherently contradictory phenomenon.[1] With Western societies increasingly characterized by diversity, the various desires, tendencies and politics expressed cannot all be satisfied concurrently as at least some are likely to conflict (Sargent 2010, 21) or be mutually exclusive. The *Bridgerton* series does not necessarily portray this in the sense of its utopian elements of racial equality being in conflict with or juxtaposed against any kind of utopian (or rather, dystopian) representation of racism. The setting, however, is a version of the British Georgian period and the creators use that to highlight the injustice of how the realization of a utopian state in one sense (arguably complete racial equality) does not necessarily bring about a utopian resolution of similar issues (such as, for example, lack of gender equality) that remain much more firmly embedded within the walls of historical accuracy. It does, however, invoke another essential component of metamodernism – hope.

While marrying history and fantasy and creating a utopian society of sorts, the creators intentionally do not do away with all the injustices of the actual Regency period. With racial equality seemingly achieved and consequently almost completely brushed aside, the focus then turns to the characters trying to realize their own dreams and desires, most of them in some way tied to societal expectations. The first season of the series offers a colourful array of otherwise rather flat and not entirely developed characters conveniently representing the "remaining" societal issues of the day and, indeed, the present. The inferior position of women, for example, is still necessary in order for the storyline to progress. This includes Daphne's protective brother Anthony (Jonathan Bailey), who has to give his permission for Daphne to marry, as well as countless examples of supposed chivalry where damsels in distress are rescued by gentlemen, their honour fought

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1   There is already confusion surrounding its very etymology, with the word utopia (famously coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 by combining the Greek words *ou* and *topos*) translating to 'nowhere' or 'no place,' but with some later suggesting that the word actually derives from a combination of *eu* and *topos*, meaning 'a good place' or 'healthy place.' The latter has been disputed by many scholars (see e.g. Carey 2000), although More himself pointed out the similarities between utopia and eutopia in his seminal text and eutopia is, arguably, closer to what is understood as utopia today. The original use of the word to mean any non-existent society therefore quickly evolved and acquired the prerequisite for this society to be significantly better than contemporary society (Sargent 2005, 11), leading to the need for the introduction of an expression to denote a non-existent bad society – dystopia. In her article on Aldous Huxley, Margaret Atwood even suggests that More may have treated the expression as a pun and himself thought of utopia as "a good place that doesn't exist" (2007).

for with fists. As was genuinely the case, women's reputations could be ruined by mere rumours, not to mention unwanted pregnancies out of wedlock, and their knowledge about sexual matters is virtually non-existent before marriage.

In order to somewhat make up for this outburst of historical accuracy and swing the oscillating pendulum back in the direction of utopian yearning, several characters are introduced that portray strong, independent women who, at least to some extent, defy the rules of society. Among them we can find Dowager Viscountess Violet Bridgerton (Ruth Gemmell), the wise widowed matriarch who continues to hold some power over family matters in spite of the fact that her eldest son and Viscount Anthony is the lawful head of the family, as well as heir to the family title and estate. One of the daughters, Eloise (Claudia Jessie), seems strangely out of place in 1813 London with her brazen behaviour of a modern teenager and rebellious proto-feminist ideas. She is an intelligent and well-read woman who does not wish to make her societal debut or marry, but strives for an education instead. The character is obviously meant to embody the struggle for gender equality with her insistence on intellectual improvement over finding a suitable husband, the only meaningful task for a young lady in the eyes of Georgian society.

Other examples of characters battling societal prejudice *en route* to happiness include Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan), Eloise's best friend, who is the token overlooked, overweight girl suffering from unrequited love, while her sisters, Philipa (Harriet Cains) and Prudence (Bessie Carter), struggle to find a husband due to their family's financial difficulties. The Featheringtons' distant relative Marina Thompson (Ruby Barker) is a pregnant yet unmarried damsel in distress who is also in desperate need of a spouse and the aforementioned Anthony Bridgerton is having a long-term affair with a woman of a lower social standing.

Benedict Bridgerton, the artistic and possibly homosexual brother, is another case in point. The creators have even been accused of "queerbaiting" (see White 2020 and Meszaros 2021) after prominently featuring gay sex scenes in the trailer but then only including one minor queer character whose presence had no particular relevance to the storyline in the first season. According to Meszaros, "*Bridgerton*'s inclusion of gay characters ends up feeling performative, disappointing and truly like queerbaiting" (2021). While it can hardly be considered a significant contribution to the history of queer cinema, it does tick a box, one of many the show appears to have on their list. Ironically, all the portrayals of Otherness somehow lose any potential they may have had for meaningful representation and become token appearances overshadowed by the main storyline of two perfect human specimens and their fairytale love affair.

However, based on the denouement with regard to race, the viewer cannot but be optimistic that the above-mentioned societal obstacles to happiness will one day also be overcome, just like racism appears to have magically disappeared. The creators of the series intentionally make it seem incredibly simple, as if they were sending a message to the viewers in the best tradition of postmodernist cynicism, telling us how ironically little it could take to eradicate racism, yet also accompanying this sentiment with modernist enthusiasm, naivety and a sense of hope that swings the pendulum away from postmodernist meaninglessness.

In spite of their troublesome social position, inspiring strong women overcoming various hurdles are a staple of the series and another set of symbols for hope of a different future. A prominent case in point, in addition to Eloise and Violet, is Queen Charlotte, who appears to be ruling the country herself as her husband experienced bouts of physical and mental illness, which in reality resulted in the appointment of the royal couple's eldest son as Prince Regent in 1811. Instead of the fifteen children that the actual queen gave birth to during her lifetime, Netflix prefers to surround her and her ladies-in-waiting with fluffy Pomeranians (which the real Queen Charlotte was, indeed, fond of) that better match the lavish backdrop of courtly life as imagined by Van Dusen and Rhimes.

Even though the viewer may be (and likely is) entirely aware of the contemporary as well as 19th century state of affairs with regard to equality in terms of gender, race or sexual orientation, *Bridgerton* does provide that minute glimpse of possibility that is necessary to kick-start the oscillation between our utopian desires and dystopian fears, the ember that sparks in us the desire to attempt in spite of anticipating failure we perceive as certain. To a postmodern mind such augmentation of history as witnessed in *Bridgerton* may seem like a futile exercise, but to the metamodernist this futility coexists within the moment of radical doubt alongside a sincere desire and yearning for change, essentially leading to the viewer experiencing what Vermeulen and van den Akker have termed "informed naivety."

Conclusion

The *Bridgerton* series, which my postmodern-oriented mind initially cynically perceived as nothing more than an annoying gimmick for the historically illiterate, has therefore revealed itself to be a potential example of an emerging cultural dominant that seems to place much more emphasis on humanity, hope and empathy than its predecessor. Living in a world of perpetual crises, with

Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine only the latest additions, we should perhaps not be surprised that a desire for change is making us rethink and reshape our postmodern penchant for irony, sarcasm, deconstruction and general nihilism. While occasionally vague in their argumentation, Vermeulen and van den Akker correctly observe that trends and tendencies that can no longer be satisfactorily explained within the confines of the postmodern are likely to "express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse" (2010, 2).

The above observation fits in well with the characteristics detectable in *Bridgerton*, which is at the same time a traditional period drama series (and sometimes even an exaggerated parody thereof) and a vehicle for distinctly modern sentiments, as well as timeless wishes, desires and yearnings of humanity. The latter are partly conveyed through deliberately controversial choices by the series creators, most notably colour-blind casting that enabled them to imagine a racism-free early 19th century London. This particular decision was always going to come under fire, which is why it was essential that other historical inaccuracies (such as the clothes, the music, the proto-feminist characters, etc.) be included and presented with a degree of self-irony, yet with all of them also falling within the metamodern epistemology of "as if." For "metamodern irony is intrinsically linked to desire" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 10), as opposed to postmodern apathy, and Bridgerton thus taps into the key component of metamodernism, that of oscillation.

Neither metamodernism nor *Bridgerton* propose any kind of definite utopian vision, but focus on the yearning for (a never-to-be-reached) utopia instead by offering glimpses of hope. Interestingly, opting for colour-blind casting enabled the creators of the series to highlight the problem of racism by eliminating it from a fictional setting, but consequently also bringing attention to it in reality, as well as enabling actors of colour to take on roles they would not usually be offered to play. The *Bridgerton* pendulum can therefore be found oscillating in more directions and ways than we could possibly list here, and its metamodernist potential could certainly be seen as one of the reasons for the immense popularity of the series that has, at least for a short while, replaced doomscrolling during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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The Goddess, Daenerys Targaryen and Me Too Values

Sharon Khalifa-Gueta
University of Haifa (Israel)
E-mail: skhali18@campus.haifa.ac.il

Abstract. In this article the author interprets the image of Daenerys Targaryen from the HBO television series, *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) as an allegory for the Me Too movement and as a symbolic depiction of the concepts of women regaining their power. She follows the connection between the emerging visualization of Daenerys with the tiny dragons and ancient depictions of Goddesses and dragons, and connects this motif to feminist scholars who researched the revival of feminine language in the 1970s and the 1980s of the 20th century. The article also suggests that the nudity of women depicted in fantastic art, particularly in images with women and dragons, are not necessarily titillating but representative of the early feminist stage of women seeking a symbolic power figure. The author also contrasts Daenerys's visualization with those images, suggesting how she demonstrates the evolution of the motif in light of the changing focal points of feminist movements. Daenerys's image, she suggests, reflects one of the central issues of the Me Too phenomenon – considering the female body as a sanctuary, which even if exposed and suggestive, is dangerous and forbidden to touch.

Keywords: Daenerys Targaryen, Goddess, Me Too, Dragons, *Game of Thrones.*

The so-called Me Too movement has revolutionized norms regarding behaviour toward women, particularly in work environments. But it also upholds values that retain the feminine language. In several of her articles, Julia Kristeva stated how feminine language is more present in art as a non-verbal language (Kristeva and Goldhammer 1985). This study suggests that the image of Daenerys Targaryen (Khaleesi), a key figure in the HBO television series *Game of Thrones* (2011–19), written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, adapted from George R. R. Martin's book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (see Martin 1996), represents far older concepts of the Great Mother Goddess and embodies the values of the Me Too revolution.

In the last episode of the first season of *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys Targaryen goes through a metamorphosis (Martin 1996, 798–807; Benioff and Weiss 2011, 1.10.40–49). Daenerys's husband, Khal Drogo, has just died, and she has lost her unborn baby. His cremation is arranged in the form of two circles of fire. Daenerys's wedding gift – three ancient dragon-eggs – are placed on Drogo's pyre, and the witch Mirri Maz Duur, who intentionally did not save his life, screams in the background, as she burns alive with him. Suddenly, Daenerys begins to walk into the fire, allegedly desperate and longing to join her dead husband. When the fire subsides and a new day breaks, we discover Daenerys possesses her ancestors' powers and has not been harmed by the fire, and the three baby dragons have magically hatched from the eggs thought dead. [Figs. 1–3.]

Prior to this moment, Daenerys was a foreign wife sold into marriage by her brother, and a descendant of a lost civilization. In this fiery moment, she is transformed into "the mother of dragons" and a force to be reckoned with, to whom all of her *Dothraki* tribe bow. Her imperviousness to fire and her contribution to the birth of three baby dragons relate to an ancient structure that signifies power and domination, and completely changes her character and our attitude towards her. This moment has a profound effect on the audience's perception of her: she instantly changes from a queen who attained her position by marriage and who is part of a barbarian tribe of little importance to a force to be reckoned with, a powerful figure worthy of the coveted Iron Throne that was taken from her ancestors. In my article *Mother of Dragons* (Khalifa-Gueta 2022) I outline the visual motif of "the woman and the dragon" in Western history and the origin of the image of Daenerys in the iconography of the motif of the woman and the dragon. In this article, I maintain that women and dragons encounters, of which there are hundreds of artworks throughout history, are almost always positive (Schubart 2016, 120; see also Khalifa-Gueta, forthcoming). In this essay, I compare Daenerys's visualization in this scene with the iconography of Great Goddesses with dragons in order to show their common inherent meaning. I also connect this visual motif and its inherited meaning with some of the values of the Me Too movement, suggesting that it is engaged in a continuing dialogue between past and present. My investigation of three millennia of Mediterranean and Western European art anchors this article and establishes the structure of the motif of "a woman and a dragon." The motif is a separate branch of, but emanates from the dragon-slayer topos and requires different analytical methods.[1]

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1 For studies on the dragon-slayer topos, see Batto (1992), Watkins (2001), Delacampagne and Delacampagne (2003), Evans (2008), Ogden (2013a; 2013b), Arnold (2018).

The Metamorphosis Scene: Description versus Image

When George R. R. Martin wrote *A Song of Ice and Fire*, he was not only cognizant of other fantasy literature but also familiar with the visual tradition of the motif in question. Although a consensus has been established among writers of fantasy literature that the medieval period is its greatest reference, almost all fantasy literature treats women differently than the manner in which they were treated during the Middle Ages (Carroll 2018, Bynum 1987, Dinshaw and Wallace 2003). Female protagonists in the fantasy genre, particularly those in *Game of Thrones*, are differentiated from medieval women in so many ways: the former are active, opinionated, free to move about outdoors, and are not regarded as ignorant and replaceable wombs. Martin's description of Daenerys as her brother's property to be sold is nonetheless a relatively accurate mirroring of the social structure of several medieval norms and values. In the metamorphosis scene, Martin exceeds the limits of patriarchal social structure, since being unharmed by fire and mothering dragons elevates Daenerys to a significantly higher level in the social hierarchy, even that of Goddess-like. Martin links Daenerys with a scheme of powerful women, sometimes disturbingly powerful for androcentric cultures, this iconography also alludes to stereotypes of dangerous women and destructive female monsters. By that he links her figure to the motif of the woman and the dragon's multiple aspects.

The textual description of Daenerys after Khal-Drago's cremation and Daenerys walking into the fire is different from the on-screen one. The text informs us that Daenerys's hair was not resistant to the fire like the rest of her body and was burned completely off her head. Hair is a symbol of identity and strength throughout women's history. An ancient Greek bride would have her hair cut as a symbol of the surrendering of her familial identity. Khal Drogo's long hair is a symbol of male heroism and ascendancy akin to the long, flowing hair of Heracles and biblical Samson, which makes them look fearsome in battle and is their source of strength (Levine 1995, 82–88). Mythological descriptions of women with long and flowing hair indicate them to be witches or virgins, such as the description of Medea Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, loosening her hair when consulting the dragons and the agents of the night to create a potion of death and rejuvenation (Ovid 1998, 7:183–190). Martin's decision to burn Daenerys's hair symbolizes a metamorphosis – she is indeed going through a transformation of identity, and like an ancient bride, must shed her previous identity. Daenerys's loss of her hair also removes her as far as possible from the connotations of witches, as Schubart

asserts. The witch herself is being burned away, physically and metaphorically, as the cremation ceremony takes place (Schubart 2016, 120–122).

Visualizing Daenerys with long, floating hair is to stress her femininity, but at the same time it stresses how dangerous she can be. Images of women with flowing hair and a dragon symbolize voluptuousness and seduction, but are also related to the commonly popular medieval and early modern images of Saint Margaret, seated inside the dragon she summoned with the power of her prayer [Fig. 4]. The theme of fertility and infertility re-emerges in this scenario, when after losing her unborn human baby, Daenerys becomes the "mother of dragons," giving miraculous and grotesque birth to the three ancient eggs. This, again, reconnects to Saint Margaret: a virgin saint protector over childbirth rituals and imaged as delivering herself from the creature's belly (De Voragine 2012, 93; Dresvina 2016). Saint Margaret's iconography follows images of great fertility goddesses with dragons as symbolizing birth, death and rejuvenation.

In Martin's novel, the mother of dragons is described breastfeeding her dragons: "the cream-and-gold dragon was suckling at her left breast, the green-and-bronze at the right" (Martin 1996, 806). This image follows the iconography of Cleopatra from the Western Middle Ages and Early Modernity. Cleopatra VII Philopator (69–30 BC) was the last in the pharaonic dynasty and formed an alliance with Mark Antony (83–30 BC), who was at the time the most prosperous and decorated Roman warlord and expected to succeed Julius Caesar. Defeated in battle by Octavian, Antony committed suicide, after which Cleopatra did the same. She is remembered throughout Western history as an evil, seductive opportunist (Curran 2011; Geronimus 2006, 61–64, also fig. 41). Her iconography shows a serpent attached to each of her breasts [Fig. 5]. In Cleopatra's case, this image symbolizes her death, because she committed suicide with snake bites. However, she is portrayed very much alive in this iconography, as if she were breastfeeding the serpents, as Daenerys does in Martin's book, bringing a dualistic meaning into play. Cleopatra's breastfeeding iconography follows the iconography of Great Mother Goddesses in the shape of serpents feeding a King or a God, or holding a serpent in each hand. The description of Daenerys breastfeeding the dragons symbolizes the impending new life, new hope, and a new identity for her.

Presenting Daenerys naked, with floating silver hair and holding dragons, is part of Fantastic art's long iconographical tradition of erotic women reclaiming their power and reuniting with the dragon – a reception of the iconography of the Great Goddess (Hardwick 2003; Martindale and Thomas 2006; Hardwick and Stray 2008). This image, I contend, implies appreciation of the female body

and ecstatic elevation of the female character to the level of sainthood and goddesshood. This scene presents one tiny dragon in Daenerys's arms, another on her shoulders, and a third climbing up her thigh [Figs. 2–3]. Although she is naked, her stable and balanced standing pose does not allude to eroticism; there is nothing in her image that arouses the emotions of lust or titillation. Although she appears fragile and her dragons are tiny, she is transformed in the viewers' minds into a power figure. She stands covered with ash like a Phoenix rising from ashes to reclaim its golden glory. The Dothraki crowd instantly bows down to her, suggesting that seeing her with tiny dragons instantly places her outside the patriarchal order in which they grew up, and associates her with a structure of power and domination. Thus, the writer, director, and audience of this series harnesses the visual scheme of women with dragons, with its overtones of power and fertility, to create a climax in this scene.

The Great Goddess and the Dragon Iconography

I have analysed images of female figures with dragons from the Greco-Roman era to the Italian Renaissance era and have found that dragons, which originated from and were often referred to interchangeably with serpents (Khalifa-Gueta 2018), were not perceived as evil in antiquity, yet male mythological characters usually find themselves combatting them. When we look at the syntagma "man and dragon" and paradigmatically change "man" to "woman," a different signified emerges – women do not fight dragons!

The mythological structure of women with dragons relates to their striving for a union that is holy, which sprang from the fundamental connection between Great Goddess images and that of dragons, even from prehistoric eras. The Neolithic terracotta statue found in Ur [Fig. 6] is only one example of a variety of feminine *anguipedian* – part human part dragon being – found in Mesopotamia and the southern Europe (Neumann 1955; Gimbutas 1982, 112).

I contend that the dragon was a mythological analogy for the Great Mother Goddess, since many Great Goddesses metamorphosize into dragons or are imaged as anguipedian (also known as *dracontopede*). The Egyptian Great Goddess Hathor is a good example. Hathor, known even from the pre-dynastic era, is usually depicted as the cow Goddess. She is central and of cardinal importance in Egyptian mythology throughout the eras, and is particularly worshipped in a burial context, because she is considered the earth-womb where the dead incubate and are reborn in the afterlife. If she is not properly worshipped, she

metamorphosizes into Sakmet, the lioness Goddess of destruction and plagues – savagely destroying everything in her path. Another metamorphosis of Hathor is the cobra Uraeus that guards the Pharaohs and adorns the crown on every Pharaoh's head [Fig. 7]. Wadjet (Weret–Hekau) and Isis [Fig. 8] are other godly manifestations that sprang from her figure and were also usually depicted as anguipedian or as holding serpents in their hands. The Mesopotamian Tiamat is herself a dragoness. Astar and the Minoan Goddesses are other examples of Great Goddesses depicted as holding serpents in their hands (Troy 1986, 21–25, 53–61; Johnson 1990; Marinatos 1993, 148, 157–159, 222–223, 276–279, 292; Roberts 1995; Lesko 1999, 69–76; Lapatin 2002, 60–90; Trčová-Flamee 2003).

The Greek statue of Athena *Parthenos* presents her with her attribute serpent – the *oikouros ophis* – a real serpent worshipped in the temple on the Acropolis in Athens and believed to be a metamorphosis of the goddess herself [Fig. 9]. Athena is also depicted as riding a chariot driven by dragons, as are Demeter/Ceres and her ambassador Triptolemos [Fig. 10]. The iconography of Hygieia, the goddess of health, depicts her feeding a holy serpent from a sacrificial plate called a *patera* [Fig. 11], as depicted in a Roman marble statue from the first century AD, which is a copy of a third century BC Greek statue. This iconography is also evident in Firminus Pupius's *Vesta* statue dated to 140–150 AD [Fig. 12] and a first century AD marble statue of *Bona Dea* (the Good Goddess) [Fig. 13], and is typical of other Great Goddesses (Herodotus 2008, 6:60; Lucian of Samosata 1913–1967, 7:358–65:2. Ogden 2013a, 204–205; Bowden 2010, 26–48).[2]

Every dragon has a mother; Gaia is either the mother or grandmother of these creatures. Repentance to her is required after killing a dragon – even Apollo was exiled from his temple at Delphi for several months every year to atone for the slaying of Python (Varro 2014, 7:17; Hesychios 1953–1966, fr. 54.T1134. Holland 1933, 201–207; Fontenrose 1980, 374–377). In the *Homeric Hymns to Apollo* Hera is recognized as the mother of Typhon, who gave him to the dragoness Python to raise (*The Homeric Hymns* 2003, 3: 242–276, 3: 375–387. Fontenrose 1980, 70–93). Echidna is herself a dragoness and mother of several dragons (Ogden 2013b, 13–18).

The presentation of images of Great Goddesses as communicating, collaborating or fused with dragons was such a fundamental mental image in antiquity that led Christian art to adopt this iconography for the biblical great mother Eve, presented as conversing with the dragon in the Eden myth, which is also sometimes depicted as an anguipedian [Fig. 14] (Joines 1967, 68–145; Hoffeld 1968; Johnston 2000, 20–23). Mary, the mother of Christ, is also represented with

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2   On snake cults, see Ogden (2013a, 347–382).

the dragon, but is usually depicted as standing on it to indicate her victory over it (Dunlop 2002; Brown 2017).

Thus, it is evident that Western society sustained the mental image of a great feminine power that itself is manifested in the images of dragons or shown in a collaborative and combined image of a female goddess with a dragon. All the goddesses mentioned are considered as Mother Goddesses, presiding over the fertility of the land and of humans. They are usually depicted standing firmly on both feet and not in *contra-posto* (unbalanced and unequal pose) or in motion, but steady and firm, such as Athena *Parthenos* [Fig. 8] or Mary, to symbolize them as a pillar that supports the temple (Parthenon) or the church (Brown 2017, 28, 30–32).

Reception of the Great Goddess with the Dragon

This iconography of the Great Goddess was revived in modern fantasy art paintings of the 1970s–1980s, which repeatedly imaged women with dragons. The two figures, lady and beast, are usually posed in a collaborative and peaceful interaction and are sometimes even fused, as in paintings such as Boris Vallejo's *Flight of the Dragons* [Fig. 15], Julie Bell's *Golden Lover* [Fig. 16], and Rowena Morrill's *Vision Tarot* [Fig. 17] (Sackmann 1986). Some would say the women are titillating, and therefore conclude that fantasy art is a popular artform of a male-dominated culture that serves the demand for the erotic, bordering on pornographic, and so cannot be considered fine art (Layne 1986). I maintain that although valid in some cases, this is not the only perspective from which to analyse these paintings. It is especially important in this case to consider the artists' perspective. An example is Boris Vallejo's foreword for his book of illustrations *Mirage* (1982), in which he describes in detail how editors and clients asked him to censor the eroticism of his artworks, labelling them "indecent." He contends that his images manifest love to the human body and identifies erotica as an important motif. The female artists Julie Bell and Rowena Morrill evince equal enthusiasm for eroticizing women with dragons.[3] Thus, titillation may not have been the artist's goal. Since this iconography has an element that seeks to elevate and promote women, I suggest here that eroticism has a significant role in stressing the power of this female archetype and adoration towards her

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3   Rowena Morrill: Artworks. *Arthive: https://arthive.com/artists/64732~Rowena_Morrill/works/ type:painting.* Last accessed 22. 09. 2022.

(see Vallejo and Vallejo 1982, Foreword).[4] Moreover, I maintain that the nudity presented in the on-screen image of Daenerys Targaryen aims to stress precisely those aspects.

This artistic movement was contemporaneous with a feminist agenda that emerged at the time, best exemplified by Hélène Cixous's manifest *Le rire de la Méduse* (*Medusa's Laughter*) that perceives women as being severed from their Great Goddess powers, once part of women's identity, and following that severance women were oppressed and subjugated (Cixous 1975; Rountree 1999). Medusa is also considered a dragoness in antiquity, and a great Mother Goddess severed of her powers. Another example is Julia Kristeva's claim that feminine language is a nonverbal one, infused with feelings and suppressed issues (Kristeva 1982; Kristeva and Goldhammer 1985). I see the images of women united with dragons in these fantasy art paintings as a visualization of women reclaiming their ancestral strength and reuniting with their god-like qualities. This neo-classical (or rather neo-Baroque) iconography recalls ancient Great-Goddess iconology that presents the naked female body with the same adoration we encounter in Greco-Roman art towards the masculine body (Bonfante 1989). The naked female body is transformed into a sanctuary (*locus sanctus*) guarded by the most powerful beast; adversarial to men but allied with women. Their beautiful and seductive appearance may be pleasing to the eye, but they are forbidden fruits.

In the *Game of Thrones* television production, Daenerys is imaged according to the fantasy art genre, visually and conceptually structured as another link in the long chain of the "the woman and the dragon" motif (only a small portion of which is presented here). She is a female protagonist whose instant metamorphosis grants her *apotheosis*, elevation to the gods. At the beginning of season one, she played her part within the patriarchal social structure: being sold into marriage, raped, and subordinated. Her union with the dragons undermines this social structure and raises her status within the hierarchy so greatly that she actually changes the social structure around her. She becomes a semi-goddess, a guarded sanctuary no one dares to take by force, a source of life and rejuvenation, and the resumption of an ancestral force.

Another issue that needs to be discussed is the masculinized female. Fantasy artists reacted to the blurred borders between masculinity and femininity. In the 1960s, feminist revolutionaries "burned bras" (n.a. 2018, *BBC*), which became a

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4   For the quantity of erotic women's images of Julie Bell, see *Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell: Official Fantasy Art Website of Boris and Julie*, *https://www.borisjulie.com/product-category/prints/ julie-prints/*. Last accessed 22. 09. 2022.

metaphor for eliminating restrictive female clothing. It became socially acceptable and even fashionable for women to style themselves more androgynously: they cut their hair short and later even added shoulder pads to their manly suits, giving the female silhouette a masculine, broad-shouldered appearance. In response, fantasy artists created strong, masculine female protagonists [Figs. 15–17]. They did not, however, give their women male anatomy, as Michelangelo did, but used female body builders as models. These artistic manifestations mirrored social norms reflecting that a woman is perceived as strong if she adopts a masculine attitude, or, in other words, defeminizes herself.

In contrast, Daenerys's images in her metamorphosis and other scenes from season one reflect the twenty-first-century approach to the concept of a powerful woman. Her appearance is of a fragile, very young, and not-quite-mature woman. She is petite and her sand-coloured silky dress emphasizes her feminine curves, stressing her anti-masculine appearance. When her clothes are incinerated in the fire, she is revealed as a woman without strong muscles, and her hair remains long. Choosing to present her figure that way highlights her femininity. The paradox remains that she is shown small, naked, fragile and giving birth – the most feminine act a woman can perform – yet the manifestation of her union with the power symbol of the dragon forces the viewer to accept binary concepts about her. Her figure is strong yet fragile, exposed to the viewer and maybe even erotic but not open to being touched, matriarchal within patriarchy, utopian and dystopian. She is not a woman who adopts masculine behaviour and appearance (as Brienne of Tarth and Cersei Lannister do later in the series), but a totally feminine force that comes to challenge masculine power and becomes united with the ancient sanctity of females.

The Power of the Goddess and Its Meaning

Daenerys is imaged as a reception of Great Mother Goddesses; standing firmly and equally on both her feet and attributed with three dragons. But this reception is not only visual, it is also full of meaning. At this point I would like to connect Daenerys's image to the subtext and concepts embedded in the Me Too movement. Many women who are leaders in their fields have declared the masculine wrongdoing they had to endure in order to approach their field of interest and be able to climb the hierarchical ladder. See for example Alyssa Milano's statement from October 15, 2017, on her blog: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Dorking 2017).

Such statements have illuminated a conceptual gap between the commonly held belief in the new moral attitude towards women in contemporary global societies, and the common objectification and diminishment of the female body. One of the Me Too aims, in other words, was a global message that a woman being beautiful, seductive, and even exposed, does not obviate her consent (Ohlheiser 2017; Frye 2018; Edwards, Dockterman, and Sweetland 2018; Rogers 2018). I suggest that presenting a voluptuous woman together with a dragon at her side sends the exact message of the Me Too movement: one can look but cannot touch. Daenerys's image manifests concretely the thin line between objectifying women and titillation, on the one hand, and a message of power and danger demanding respect, on the other. Daenerys reflects danger and power that direct the viewer's feelings toward admiration and elevation of women. The re-evaluation of her figure by the viewers not only instigated a re-evaluation of the medievalist social structure of Westeros but also motivated the viewer to re-evaluate stereotypes of the vulnerability and helplessness of women in general.

Her character's trajectory is analogous to the Me Too revolution. Women in the past acted within and climbed the hierarchal ladder of the patriarchal social structure in which they lived and worked. At the inception moment of Me Too, these women had come to a point that they felt strong enough and empowered by their great numbers and empathy in social media to undermine patriarchal norms, changing the structure itself. They enacted the change by claiming that sexual harassment of women, in every field of occupation and at every social level, is wrong. They particularly stressed the fact that if a woman looks sexual and seductive, this by no means indicates consent. This new approach is particularly aimed against the "blaming the victim" line of defence in rape trials.

Presenting Daenerys naked, maybe even erotic, with floating hair and with dragons climbing up her thigh and shoulder, symbolizes her feminine reunion with the element of the earth – the Great Mother Goddess. Before this scene she had almost no power and had even lost the little hope for power she had with the death of Khal Drogo. Yet in entering the fiery maze, as if entering the womb of the Goddess, she sheds her old self and is reborn as a woman united with the forces of genesis, a pillar of the earth herself, a Goddess. She transforms from a socially vulnerable and powerless being into a force to recognize. Her power is emblemized in the image of the dragon. This scene manifests the transformation of women from being subordinated to a patriarchal order, to women who become united with their primaeval power and can choose to carve their own new path toward a new order. In her new pose, even if projecting what might accrue to

some as erotic, she is no longer permitted for sexual abuse but is guarded and manifest power and danger.

What was demonstrated before with the figure of Hathor is also true to almost all Great Goddesses – the dualist nature. A Great Goddess is a creator of life and of rejuvenation, but is also a messenger of death and destruction. The example of Hathor that turns into Sakmet, the Goddess of the plague, who destroys everything in her path, sustains the dualist nature of the Great Goddess. Another example is Demeter who grants life to the land, but in her sorrow the land becomes arid. The balance and stability of Daenerys's image and her acceptance of her metamorphosis shed light on the meaning of her image as directly allied with the Me Too, implying the concept of a woman who is at peace with her own body and sexuality, and with several, sometimes contradictory aspects of her persona, her past and future, her darkness and light, her fragility and power, and her ability to bring life out of death. The power hiding inside of her has suddenly exploded in the form of dragons. At this moment she poses the ultimate threat to the patriarchy of Westeros. But her power is constructed as positive and feminine in contrast to the Westeros's destructive and terrorizing masculine domination. Daenerys's power is based in genesis, re-emergence from ash, and the ability to give birth, although, as is later elucidated, she too has destructive powers like other Great Mother Goddesses. She is the master of her faith and is to never again be sexualized to be offered as assistance for men.

The paradox is that, at the moment Daenerys emerges from the fire, the dragons are tiny – they can harm and pose danger to no one – so the transformation actually occurs in the mind of the viewer. Like Saint Margaret, Daenerys outwardly materialized her inner self, and created a magical being that was assumed to have vanished from the world. The connection with the figure of Mary is not only through the dragon, which Mary is sometimes presented trampling under her feet (Cohen 2008, 255–256), but also through the famous star that decorated the sky soon after Jesus was born, leading the way for the Magi to come. The Star of Bethlehem alludes to the red star that hung in the sky for a long time in Martin's book *A Clash of Kings* (Matthew 2.1–12. Martin 1998, chapters: 1–13. Trexler 1997). It is interesting to note that throughout Western Christianity, Christ himself was often allegorized as a dragon, making Mary also a mother of a dragon (Kessler 2009).

These multiple disparate aspects underpinning this image cause a transformative reaction in the viewer/the reader for her character. They are forced to expand their intellectual approach toward a character with oppositional features and undergo a metamorphosis themselves, re-evaluating their judgments and rethinking their

categorization of her figure. This metamorphosis disrupts the viewers' established mindset and necessitates a re-evaluation of their attitudes, a moment so typical of Martin's series.

Thus, what can be considered as the postfeminist aspect of Daenerys's metamorphosis is suggested here to be a concept transformed from antiquity and Renaissance art. The fact that her single image can signify multiple, even contradictory aspects, is suggested here to relate to the recipient of the Great Goddess. This scene possesses various contradictory aspects: death and birth, destruction and creation, witchcraft and miracles (both intervention into the natural order, one a manipulation of faith and the other a godly intervention), great feminine power and fragility, and the inherited binary connotation of dragons as good and evil. Multiple concepts and a contradictory nature are embedded in the iconography of the Great Goddess, initiating power, danger, honour, and admiration in the mind of the beholder.

To conclude, both Martin and the HBO directors and scriptwriters of *The Game of Thrones* were reacting to the conceptual motif of "the woman and the dragon" and, whether consciously or otherwise, harness the iconographic tradition of the Great Goddess and the dragon to convey meanings. The ancient motif of "the woman and the dragon" has been embedded with binary concepts of holiness, healing, and power, along with negative concepts of destruction, witchcraft, and temptation. The brief outline of the motif here focused solely on Great Goddesses, but is much more elaborated, Daenerys's image can be further discussed in accordance with it. Furthermore, fantastic visual artists of the 20th century apply reception of ancient concepts of the motif and inject into it changing attitudes toward women in their own time. These concepts have been suggested as both positive and negative, and manifest the ability to insert multiple meanings into an image. The image of Daenerys, from both George R. R. Martin's series of books and the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, is thus the recipient of this long and diverse tradition, operating within the structure this motif has carved over the years. Ultimately Daenerys is a woman who challenges her surrounding patriarchal social structure and embodies both positive and negative binary qualities, making her a perfect example of disparate strategies of postfeminist thinking and a visual manifestation of the Me Too revolution.

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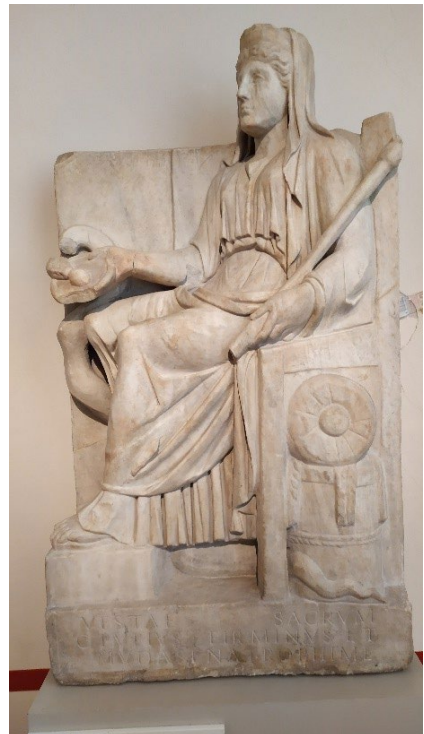
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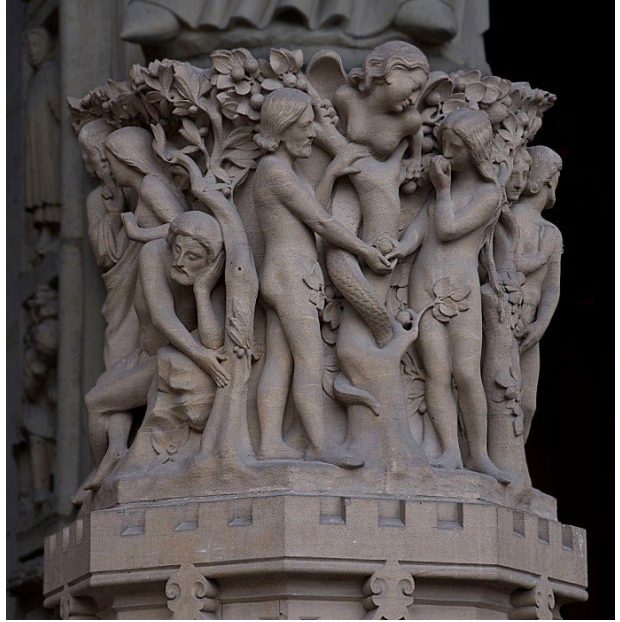
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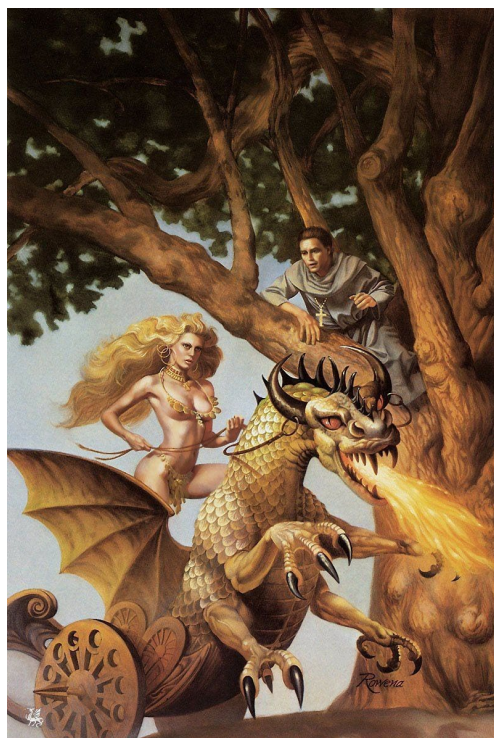
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